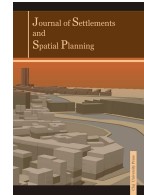




Centre for Research on Settlements and Urbanism

Journal of Settlements and Spatial Planning

Journal homepage: <http://jssp.reviste.ubbcluj.ro>



Present and Future of Rural Tourism in the Basin of Tarcău River

Ioana VIERU¹

¹ Babeş-Bolyai University, Faculty of Geography, Cluj-Napoca, ROMANIA

E-mail: ioana.vieru@ubbcluj.ro

Keywords: *Tarcău basin, rural tourism, dual profile mountain resort, tourist infrastructure*

ABSTRACT

Though the landscape recommends Tarcău basin as an area with fairly high tourist potential, tourism has only timidly developed. The low promotion, its limited accessibility and position in the proximity of the already acknowledged tourist areas of Bicăz and Bistriţa valleys, the economic profile focused on timber exploitation, the lack of interest shown by the authorities in the past etc, have reduced the tourist phenomenon to isolated attempts initiated by guesthouses' owners, that tried to exploit the rural and mountainous aspects of Tarcău basin. The increasing number of secondary residences that appeared in the last few years joined them into promoting rural tourism in Tarcău area. Exploring the economic development possibilities the authorities regarded tourism as a viable one, and initiated a master plan to reshape the commune into a dual profile mountain resort. Financial resources limited the plan's implementation considering also that the first problem they have to face is the poor or inexistent infrastructure, the creation of urban facilities becoming thus main priority.

1. INTRODUCTION

Aiming to render the dynamics of the tourist phenomenon in Tarcău's basin, considering both its potential and current forms of capitalization, but also the possible development forms, an analysis was performed, which revealed the drawbacks in rural tourism's evolution, resulting from various factors: natural constraints, financial resources, administration, infrastructure etc. Located in the central range of the Eastern Carpathians, in Tarcău Mountains, Tarcău's hydrographic basin covers an area of 392 km².

Relief's configuration influences the structure of the hydrographic network, the parallel mountain ranges, oriented south to north, determining the main rivers flow in the same direction, while the tributaries cut transverse valleys. Under the influence of dominating rocks (sandstones and argillaceous schists) the altitudes vary from 400m to 1664 m, fragmentation reaches high values whereas the most frequent slopes

declivity ranges from 16° to 30°. From an administrative point of view, the basin overlaps the territory of Tarcău commune, only some sectors of the interfluvial areas being divided between the commune of Tarcău and the neighbouring ones. It covers five of the commune's six villages (Tarcău, Cazaci, Brateş, Schitu Tarcău and Ardeluţa; Straja village is attributed to the basin of Bistriţa river), that are mainly concentrated on the valley of the main river.

The villages in Tarcău basin are typical mountain villages, which have scattered structure and linear shape determined by the limited width of valleys. The human pressure, considered from the point of view of the territory occupied by the residential area, is fairly reduced, thus only 1.66% of the basin total area being residential. The low population's density of only 8.8 inhabitants per km² (according to 2001-2006 statistical evidence), confirms it, the human influence being more important if the economic activities performed in the area are analysed.

2. MATERIAL AND METHOD

The methodology of this paper includes bibliographic research, comprising also the analysis of the local authorities' tourist development plan and investment projects, and field work consisting of interviews at the main pensions, in situ observation and identification of locations with tourist value. The main results have been synthesized in a SWOT analysis.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Basin of Tarcău River is appreciated for 3 main elements in what tourist activities are concerned: its landscape's value, its tonic-stimulative climate, and the possibilities of practicing winter and extreme sports and for its game.

Lithologic features determine some of relief characteristics, the presence of different types of sandstones with various hardness, resulting in particular shapes, among which the following are important: deep and narrow valleys with gorges-like sectors, as it appears in the case of Tărcuța, Bolovăniș, Brateș, Ața, Murgoci, Cichiva and Răchitiș tributaries, waterfalls (Bolovăniș, 12m), rapids that appear frequently in the areas where Fusaru sandstones come to light in the flood plain of Tarcău or of its tributaries, isolated rocks ("the soldier" at Răchitiș) and steep walls (Murgoci-Veverița, Ardeluța-Gura Goșman, Ardeluța-Gura Răchitiș).

The local climate favours any tourist activities, no matter the season. During summer, the fairly low values of average air temperatures of the hottest months, reaching only 16-18°C, the reduced cloudiness and rainfall in the months of August and September, recommend the period of July-September as being the best interval to visit Tarcău basin. The practice of winter sports, benefits both from the long number of days with snow cover, (that varies from 80 – 90 days at altitudes below 600 m, to 100 - 120 days for altitudes of 900 – 1000 m and to 130 - 150 days on the high peaks) and slopes' declivity. Also due to more numerous clear sky days and high visibility, December and January are the most favourable winter months if sports practice in Tarcău basin is considered. Despite these positive aspects, no skiing or sleighing slopes exist, and the trekking trails are poorly marked.

The hydrographic network in numbers indicates 33 km for Tarcău River, with 16 main tributaries, 8 on each side, cumulating together 158.5 km. However, none of the basin's river can be used for practicing water sports like rafting, kayak or canoeing, the configuration of the river bed, the flow and water's speed preventing it. Still, some narrow and deep sectors of the valleys can be used for activities like climbing, rope jump and flying fox.

The dominant type of vegetation, with almost 90% cover is forest, both pure coniferous forests and

mixed with beech, the first dominating at altitudes above 900 m. Pastures appear as enclaves in forested areas or at higher altitudes than the coniferous forests; they include both endemic and rare species. There are two nature reserves created to protect both flora and fauna in Tarcău's basin, covering an area of 205 hectares in the southern part of the basin: "the Forest reserve of Goșman" protecting 175 hectares of natural arboretum of spruce and beech (mixed with some elm, hazel tree and sycamore) aged 140-260 years and "the Game reserve of Brateș", a forested area of about 30 hectares inhabited by wood grouse. Also, the local species of spruce (*Picea abies*), due to its particular features (long and winding branches), has been included in the list of natural monuments as the "spruce of Tarcău". The presence of such a large mass of coniferous trees also influences air's quality, the high concentration of negative ions being appreciated for their healing properties in case of lung diseases and affections of the breathing system.

The local fauna is represented by a wide range of species of birds, fish and mammals, offering the possibility for both hunting (particularly bear and stag) and fishing, as well as for educational activities like bird watching.

Benefiting from the opportunities the area's natural features offer, a daring project was initiated around Brateș village, "Tarcău Adventure Park", in which case, with the help of qualified staff and equipment, tourists can enjoy rappel, rope jumping, rope course, climbing, paragliding, hiking, trekking, mountain biking, treasure hunt and paintball. Currently, due to the problems encountered by the Green Line, the guesthouse that assured the lodging and was closed in 2009, the project was suspended, but it should be reinitiated in the spring of 2011, in a more extended version, this time including activities in Bucovina, Bicz Gorges, Iași, Ceahlău Mountains and Brașov, besides the ones in Tarcău.

The cultural heritage of the Tarcău area is mainly represented by religious items, one monastery and three hermitages being present in the area. Tarcău Monastery, the most important of them, declared historical monument of national importance, consists of a wooden church built around 1833 out of ash tree, an atypical belfry, with a "Russian onion" shaped roof, and a few monk cells, all built in the 19th century. The three hermitages, were all built in wood, between 1990 and 2000, two of them (Saint Daniil Sihu's Hermitage, Saint Elijah's Hermitage) are located in secluded areas, 25 km away from the main road and villages, in the western part of the basin.

In 2003, Iulia Hălăucescu, "the Lady of the water colours" who was born in Tarcău, has donated 120 paintings and a small personal collection of old pottery to the local community of Tarcău. Thus, "Iulia Hălăucescu Museum of Art" was created, the only museum in Tarcău basin. However, the museum's

visitors are mainly reduced to the artist's friends and family, tourists not showing any interest towards it. The reasons may lay in its location in the confluence area, the guesthouses and trekking trails being placed deeper into the valley, the poor advertising, the unspecialized tourist not being aware of what it might host, or the profile of the tourist visiting Tarcău area mostly at week-ends. Tourists from the neighbouring areas predominate, and those considering it just a stopover location, looking for a breath of mountain fresh air.

In what the traditional customs are concerned, they are poorly preserved, the local outfits being rarely worn, only by the aged population with the occasion of religious celebrations, this way tourists having the possibility to experience traditional singing and dancing only during winter holidays.

Although fairly unknown to the large public, Tarcău area has been often praised in literature for its natural beauty by novelists like Alexandru Valhuță, Calistrat Hogaș and Mihail Sadoveanu. Trying to emphasize this aspect, the local community uses the literature characters as promoting figures for the area, as is the case of Vitoria Lipan, the main character of Sadoveanu's novel "Baltagu", later considered one of the most important feminine figures in Romanian literature. Her name was already given to one street of Cazaci village, to an inn and a restaurant, the reconstruction of her legendary path involving a visit to Tarcău area.

Besides adventure tourism, recreational tourism is the most frequented, along with the cultural one, with accent to religious tourism though to a lesser extent. Whether aware or not of what types of tourism they might practice, all the activities performed in Tarcău basin may be included to the category of rural tourism.

Rural tourism benefits from the specificity of the rural space, corroborated with the interest for natural land shown by the tourists and by the recreational possibilities this environment can offer. Rural tourism is often mistakenly identified with agrotourism; the latter implies the sum of activities available in a farm or a specialized guesthouse that includes besides accommodation, producing some of the products used in preparing the food served to the tourist at the premises (including, depending on the case, also vegetables growing and/or animal breeding) initiation of the tourist in traditional household activities, horse riding, fishing.

Rural tourism is a complex activity, not exclusively based on the villager's household, but also on the active holiday spent in a natural environment, with the possibility to practice activities like hiking, cycling, horse riding, hunting, fishing and educational trips. Therefore, rural tourism includes agrotourism, and does not limit itself to it. Depending on the main focus of the tourist, it may be divided into five categories: cultural, recreational, healing, sports and

religious [2]. Tarcău's basin has all the elements necessary to develop true rural tourism. Although with timid attempts materialized in the existing facilities, rural tourism is not properly performed in the area. Tarcău is just a stopover destination, mostly frequented at week-ends, often predominating tourists from the neighbouring areas. Its limited acknowledgement as a tourist destination is also reflected in the evolution of nights spent by the tourists in the area, decreasing dramatically in the last 2 years, resulting in the closure of the most complex guesthouse Linia Verde [*Green Line*] in 2009.

The existing *tourist infrastructure* requires improvements in many respects; using elements of urban infrastructure that do not exist or are poorly implemented, the development of tourism may also imply its modernization.

The investments made in accommodation facilities, consist in renovating and/or in extending the old parents house, or in building new pensions. Officially, only 3 guesthouses and 2 chalets are officially registered, although the number of secondary residences that function as private homes and offer accommodation exceeds them. The two chalets, Ardeluța and Goșman, though with accommodation and camping facilities, are not opened to the public, the first being administrated by the Ministry of Defence whereas the latter by the Forestry Department of Brateș. The 3 guesthouses, of „Frasin”, „Perla Tarcăului” and „Linia Verde” can provide lodgings for about 70 persons, and offer additional catering services, parking, internet, outdoor barbeque, organizing of corporate events, garden, ecologic mini-farm and greenhouse at Frasin guesthouse. Linia Verde is the most complex one, the accommodation being offered either in 2 large chalets, with double or triple rooms, or in small one room individual chalets; along the above mentioned facilities it also has a table tennis room, indoor pool, asphalted sports court, ATVs, snow mobile, sledges and horses.

The transport infrastructure has a crucial role in tourism development and maybe the most important role in the case of Tarcău basin. Tarcău River is a right side tributary of Bistrița River, and its basin's link to the rest of the country is done only by the confluence area. Both the national road 15 that links Moldova to Transylvania on the route Bacău-Piatra-Neamț-Bicaz-Gheorgheni-Toplița and railway no. 500 linking Moldova to Bucharest are partially set on Bistrița valley, and cross Tarcău commune. Inside the basin of Tarcău, the communal road 135 links the 5 villages to the national road. Out of its 23 km, only 16 km were modernized in 2004; the secondary roads that mainly follow the valleys of its tributaries have never been asphalted, most of them being primarily forest roads, since timber exploitation is the main activity in the area. The major problem for the transport infrastructure in Tarcău's basin is the fact that the road was built on the river's inferior terraces, and since the

flood plain or those of the tributaries have not been consolidated, and at every major rain fall that may result in flood, sections of the roads are affected. Along with the lateral erosion, heavy traffic implied by the extensive forest exploitations has led to temporary interruption of traffic, the access in the basin being done only from north to south on the communal road 135.

Therefore, the junction area between the national road and the communal one plays an important role in promoting Tarcău's basin, considering the high number of persons that use the national road, proper signalling of the recreational and cultural offer of Tarcău basin in that area, would increase the number of potential tourists.

One of the disadvantages of the villages in Tarcău's basin is that none of them benefits from water or gas supply system, sewage or garbage disposal areas. Fortunately, the natural resources partially compensate for the lack of those facilities, a lot of spring ensuring the necessary water for the population, it being pumped or stored in wells, and wood being used for heating; only 30% of households are connected to the water system of SC Forestar SA, the main economic unit of the area.

Still, the lack of sewage and proper garbage collection systems may result in pollution of waters, wastewater being directly spilled into the rivers; garbage is often deposited in improper conditions, important quantities often ending up in the rivers, thus causing pollution of both water and soil. Much more, even though all the villages get access to the telephone fixed line (landline), the mobile phone network is available only for Tarcău and Cazaci village, and partially for Brateş village.

The SWOT analysis synthesized better both the advantages of Tarcău as a tourist destination and the drawbacks of its future development.

Considering the national strategy for tourism development focusing on the development of mountain resorts and rural tourism and becoming aware of Tarcău basin's potential, the local public authorities have also developed a master plan to be implemented between 2007 and 2013, in order to increase tourism's role in the local economy.

The plan implies the creation of a dual profile mountain resort, structured on three poles:

- the first pole, outside the basin but within the commune administrative area, along Bistrița river offering facilities for transit tourists;

- the second pole, around the confluence area of Tarcău and Bistrița rivers, meant to promote Tarcău's valley, along with offering accommodation and other services to the transiting tourists. It overlaps the centre of the commune, where the tourist information centre and the recreational park (completed in August 2011) were supposed to be built. The tourist information centre should benefit from its position on

the national road 15 and promote not only Tarcău area but also Ceahlău and Hangu communes, both with mountainous relief located on the northern part of Izvorul Muntelui Lake. Within the basin of Tarcău the stress should be put on "Iulia Hălăuceanu Museum of Art" that would benefit from a better promotion.

- the third pole, is to be developed around the villages of Brateş and Ardeleuța, with accommodation infrastructure and sports and leisure facilities. A three-star hotel, chalet and holiday village, a two-star hotel and chalet should complete the current lodging options; for each of them boarding facilities are to be created, plus extra four specialised units. The major investment to be done to increase the area's attractiveness is the skiing and sleighing domain around Brateş village.

Along with the local values, the authorities want to emphasize the multiple possibilities the area offers, promoting not only the valley of Tarcău river, but also the neighbouring ones; the proximity of Piatra-Neamț city with its cultural facilities, of Bicz valley with its main attractions such as Bicz Gorges, Red Lake and Bistrița valley with Izvorul Muntelui Lake, and Ceahlău Mountains, being an advantage for the commune of Tarcău, wherever the interest point may be, the tourist being able to choose to be accommodated in Tarcău.

Areas like this often suffer from being in the shadow of already famous and frequented tourist areas; it is difficult to raise Tarcău valley to the level of popularity in order to compete with Bicz or Bistrița valleys.

Basically, its main advantage at the moment is exactly the fairly unspoiled environment and the absence of mass tourism facilities that, even though is seen as a drawback, prove that Romanian tourists are usually looking for comfort.

The local authorities' master plan intends to transform it into a dual profile mountain resort, that does not necessarily mean an encouragement for rural tourism, although the architecture of the local mountain village is supposed to be preserved and the recreational aspect emphasized. However, the increasing number of secondary residences that also offer tourist services have already partially changed the traditional architecture of Tarcău.

In addition, as favourable as it may be for the economy of the settlement, it results in having a series of impacts, primarily affecting the environment, and secondly the population. If for the latter the impact may be considered to be positive, by facilitating professional upgrading and determining mentality mutation as a result of the interaction with various types of tourists, for the environment, the main threat that will not necessarily be prevented is the pollution of air, water, soil, flora and fauna.

Therefore the future of rural tourism depends mainly on the financial aspect, whether we refer to the implication of the local population, or of the public

authorities. Thus, in order to avoid chaotic tourist development that often ends up in low income, both local community and authorities should agree on the area's profile to be created and respected by any individual interested in involving himself in it.

Considering the authorities' legal possibilities to absorb funds their advantage should be wisely used in order to improve the community's living standard and economy but not to spoil its mountain rural identity.

Table 1. SWOT analysis for the tourist activity in Tarcău basin.

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
<p>Valuable mountainous landscape, picturesque scenery, high density of coniferous forest cover, long lasting snow cover Important game resources, developing hunting and fishing activities and bird watching</p> <p>Favourable tonic-stimulating local climate</p> <p>Presence of protected areas: Forest Reserve of Goşman, Game reserve of Brateş and the spruce of Tarcău Elements of cultural heritage: The Monastery of Tarcău, monument of national importance, 3 hermitages, "Iulia Hălăucescu" Museum of Art</p> <p>Accessible both by car (partly modernized road) and train; location transited by the road that links Moldova to Transylvania and the railway linking Moldova to Bucharest</p> <p>Access to telephone network, internet and mobile telephone</p> <p>Guesthouses and private houses with central heating and their own water system</p> <p>A whole range of services offered in guesthouses: accommodation, board and entertaining activities Increasing attractiveness of the area to increase the number of secondary residences Alternatives offered by the neighbouring areas in what cultural and sports activities are concerned</p>	<p>Tourist infrastructure not properly developed; too little number of guesthouses and restaurants</p> <p>Absence of a tourist information centre to promote the area</p> <p>Not enough encouragement from the public authorities to develop tourism activities; Tarcău commune is not yet recognized as a mountain resort and not promoted as a tourist area</p> <p>Absence of qualified staff</p> <p>Absence of water and gas supply system, sewage system and waste management resulting in pollution of existing waters and soils</p> <p>Only 70% of the main road is modernized, the secondary ones being in poor conditions; in case of floods, the main road is seriously damaged, the flood plain of Tarcău not being consolidated; the road is also affected by the heavy traffic resulting from the forest exploitation</p> <p>Limited access to mobile network (Brateş, Schitu Tarcău, and Ardeluţa villages have partial or no network coverage)</p> <p>Absence of public facilities for entertainment, sports, ski and sleigh slopes etc.; absence or inappropriate parking and camping facilities, marking of tourist paths</p> <p>Nature reserves not appropriately promoted and marked</p> <p>Inappropriate street lighting</p> <p>Absence of parks and pedestrian alleys</p> <p>Poor quality of means of transport (trains and buses); far from the airport, rather difficult access for tourists travelling by plane</p>
OPPORTUNITIES	THREATS
<p>Possibility to perform touristic activities all year round and to diversify them (adventure tourism, hunting, fishing, discovery tourism, scientific tourism, winter sports, pilgrimage)</p> <p>Development of eco- tourism (the presence of nature reserves, fairly unspoiled mountain area, traditional agriculture) and agrotourism</p> <p>Extending the agricultural activities, obtaining a certain outcome from selling bio-products to the tourists</p> <p>Improving the quality of services and transport infrastructure</p> <p>Creating special facilities for the transitory tourists: restaurants, motels, cafés, parking places etc.</p> <p>Developing facilities for sports activities, mainly for winter sports</p> <p>Accessing external funding to develop projects</p>	<p>Extreme development of tourism can affect the area, by exceeding its capacity</p> <p>Pollution of the environment, especially soil and water</p> <p>Interfering with the originality and authenticity of local inhabitants if the tourist pressure becomes too high; reducing interest for developing traditional handicrafts</p>

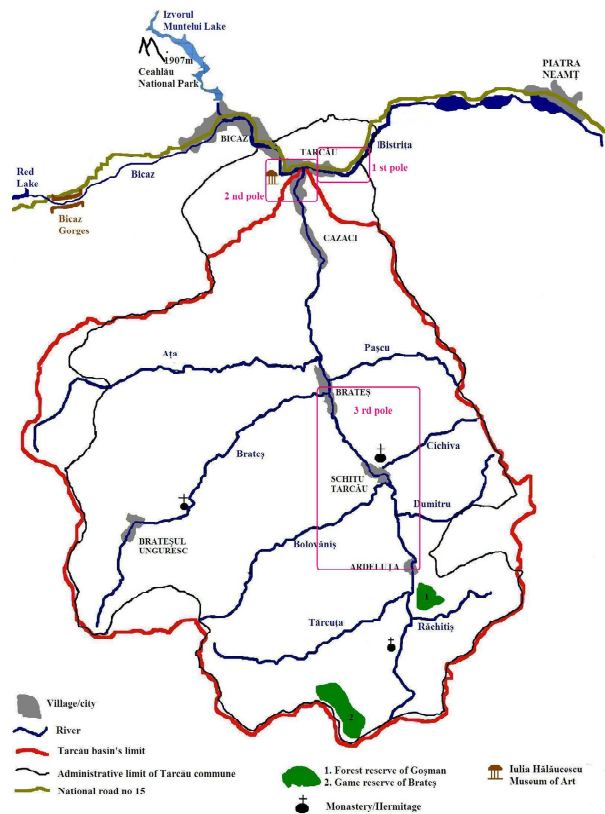


Fig. 1. Tarcău's basin and the location of the 3 poles of the development master plan.

4. CONCLUSION

Transforming Tarcău in a dual-profile mountain resort is a goal the authorities intended to attain by 2013; the only project that has been finalized is the recreational park in the centre of the commune, and the only other project that received funding yet is the tourist information centre; thus, investments should be done outside the basin of Tarcău but aiming to promote it. Although the tourist information centre is required irrespective of future development plans, the second most important issue that should be dealt with is the improvement of infrastructure, professional tourist activities imposing the existence of water supply system, sewage and waste management system. The poor promotion of the area and its rather limited accessibility have determined a low touristic exploitation, the commune of Tarcău being just a stopover or week-end destination.

The current situation reduces the interest in investing in this field, complaints arising about the little support the authorities give to the existing accommodation structures.

Currently in an incipient phase, rural tourism in Tarcău basin, is not the economic activity to induce important economic growth since it cannot generate constant high incomes, mainly because it has important competition from the neighbouring areas (especially Bicaz and Bistrița valleys) and from the urban centres that have already a developed tourist infrastructure (Piatra-Neamț); also, it offers incomplete services, with a poor infrastructure and a certain level of isolation. Whether the development plan will ever be materialized, it has better chances than rural tourism to generate continuous income to the local budget.

5. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Paper funded by Ph.D. scholarship, Project co-financed by the SECTORAL OPERATIONAL PROGRAM FOR HUMAN RESOURCES DEVELOPMENT 2007 – 2013. *Investing in people!* Priority Axis 1. "Education and training in support for growth and development of a knowledge based society" Key area of intervention 1.5: Doctoral and post-doctoral programs in support of research. Contract no. POSDRU/88/1.5/S/60185 – "INNOVATIVE DOCTORAL STUDIES IN A KNOWLEDGE BASED SOCIETY", Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania.

REFERENCES

- [1] **Benedek, J., Dezsi, Ș.** (2006), *Analiza socio-teritorială a turismului rural din Romania din perspectiva dezvoltării regionale și locale*, Presa Universitară Clujeană
- [2] **Petrea, Rodica, Petrea, D.** (2001), *Turism rural*, Presa Universitară Clujeană.
- [3] *** (2007), *Master plan pentru dezvoltarea turismului în comuna Tarcău, județul Neamț, 2007-2013*, (2007) realizat de Sc InfaSt Srl, Piatra Neamț, pentru Primăria și Consiliul Local al comunei Tarcău.
- [4] *** (2008), *Reactualizare plan urbanistic general comuna Tarcău, județul Neamț*, (2008), realizat de Sc Arcadis TGH S A, Iași pentru Primăria și Consiliul Local al comunei Tarcău.
- [5] *** (2010), *Proiect pentru înființarea Centrului Local de Informare și Promovare a comunei Tarcău*, realizat de Sc A&D Project Consulting SRL, Piatra-Neamț pentru Primăria și Consiliul Local al comunei Tarcău.
- [6] www.adventure-park.ro
- [7] www.mdrl.ro