CREATIVE TOURISM AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT IN CROATIA

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ABSTRACT

Today’s tourism is experiencing continuous growth caused by constant changes and the development of tourist needs. The reason for this is adapting to the needs and new demands of contemporary tourists who want to participate in every activity and learn about other cultures, ways of life and art practices. Creativity has always been a strong engine of human activities. In the areas of low socioeconomic status, its role is even more important for developing a lifestyle that is more authentic for rural area inhabitants. Creative tourism considers active participation in local creative activities, such as gastronomy workshops, harvests, learning traditional dances, songs and many more cultural elements. In order to keep a traditional lifestyle and keeping locals in their motherland, new management models should be brought together, including various sectors: tourism, culture, ethnology, spatial planning and agronomy. In a dynamic tourist market, with small investments, it is possible to create a competitive advantage based on the authenticity of a particular destination. This article presents a managing model on the example of Etnoland Dalmatia at the hinterland of Dalmatia, Croatia, and the changes that have been made in that area.

Keywords: creative tourism, management of tourist destination, rural development, Republic of Croatia

1. INTRODUCTION

The challenges that the last economics crisis has brought to Croatia, such as strong structural problems (e.g. big rate of unemployment, devastated industries), are the most visible in rural areas of Croatia. In order to solve the existing problems, those areas must think about new models which would help them in regeneration and development. In the past years, tourism has been a strong engine that moves Croatian economics. Being complemented with a big potential of cultural sector, it can provide a wide range of solutions for economics and social problems. Starting from connecting communities and revitalising local culture, it can contribute to developing social capital, increase innovation, interest in investments and give new approaches to learning. Speaking of culture, there was a strong force in touristic demands aimed at intercultural experiences (for instance: visiting cultural events, museums, monuments) but complete touristic development full of traditional tourist attractions is not enough to satisfy the needs of contemporary tourists. Today’s tourists are looking for new and entertaining experiences in which they will participate in order to learn a foreign language, traditions, gastronomy and history of a place where they came. Sightseeing is no longer seen as valuable but learning by participating is strongly wanted. Because of mass reproduction of cultural attractions and events that no longer satisfy the needs, many regions are rethinking new models and strategies for their development. More and more of them are trying to add additional value with diversity and animation of tourists, which includes creativity. Today, creativity is seen as a source of innovation and it represents discovering authentic locations through participating in all the activities of a community.
According to the theoretical framework and practical examples, creative tourism is travel directed toward an engaged and authentic experience, with participative learning in the arts, heritage, or special character of a place, and it provides a connection with those who reside in this place and create this living culture (UNESCO: Creative Cities Network, 2006). Based on this definition, we can determine the benefits of creative tourism for both - participants and the locals. Developing creative potential, getting closer to people, learning and making emotional and social bond, preservation of heritage are the benefits from the social perspective (Richards, 2012.). In the matter of rural development, some of the benefits are keeping family farms that provide local food alive, extending manufacturing possibilities, providing working places and making business conditions more positive, bigger tax and surtax contributions. Working in these terms, there is a special synergy coming to life and making space for new opportunities, growth and development: individual, social and economic.

2. CREATIVITY IN CROATIA – A THING OR A MYTH?

While in more developed countries (such as Australia, UK and France who are known for being a “cradle” of creativity), creative tourism is being well known specific form of tourism, in Croatia its breakthrough is still on hold. In the past ten years, on the foreign markets, the created supply enables visitors to develop their creative potentials through participating in all kind of activities. The terminology followed these changes so today we use the term participants rather than those consumerism-oriented phrases such as consumers, buyers or visitors. The core of these changes is the content of today’s products (experiences). The focus has been put on a feeling and experience that is connected with the interpretation of values of a certain culture. Before, the focus was the object of interpretation, today, it is the audience that is the target. To be able to make a connection with a specific audience, heritage managers so as experience developers and designers, have to choose the right type of media to communicate. According to the Cultural Tourism Action Plan made by Institute for Tourism (2015.), by making a national strategy of cultural tourism, the idea about cultural/ creative tourism as independent touristic product for which the market and interest exists, became more popular. Another reason for perceiving this as an important sector is its multiplication effect of benefits for developing tourism, economic and social revitalisation. Other documents were accepted and put into action that represent a foundation for systematic and organized growth and development of touristic supply of this kind. A few of theorists and practitioners from Croatia (Daniela Angelina Jelinčić, Ana Žuvela, Elena Rudan) researched this subject matter through different forms of examination and came across similar conclusions. Jelinčić and Žuvela in their paper Facing the Challenge? Creative Tourism in Croatia (2012.) questioned the presence of creative tourism in two big touristic cities in Croatia: Zagreb and Dubrovnik. Their results were quite surprising; from 100 touristic agencies in Dubrovnik only one of them offered creative tourism experiences, for instance: local embroidery, folk singing and dancing. Zagreb, who has the biggest concentration of cultural and creative industries in the country (in the first row they are: music, film, architecture, theatre, design and dance), is not using its resources for branding and profit making. In the past years, some efforts were made in this sector. The local government, so as creative entrepreneurs and museum workers, made continuous efforts to make creativity a desirable skill that turns all the other important resources. The cultural sector became more aware of its own potential, creative workers and public started to understand these concepts and accept them and its development became a matter on all levels. Unfortunately, these cases are usually known in the bigger cities than in rural areas. Rudan (2012.) says that, towards making a creative touristic product, destination management is needed to run the entire tourism development. It should manage the activities that happen in the destination, provide continuity and quality of development, include locals in making and realisation of the offer, connect
tourism and cultural sector, ensure networking and education to associations, institutions and other relevant stakeholders that can be of great importance for the success.

2.1. Features of Croatian’s rural territory
With a rich, valuable, natural resources Croatia is one of the countries in the EU with the most kept environment. Good geographical position and three different types of climate have positively affected diversity of vegetable and wildlife. Unfortunately, rural areas are poorly inhabited and the trend of moving to more urban centres has been growing constantly. Because of this, population in Croatia has a dotted structure in rural and traffic-isolated parts such as Lika, Gorski kotar, islands and lately Slavonija. In the other hand, regions of the biggest cities in Croatia (Zagreb, Split, Rijeka) are having growth in population so their density is increasing. Demographic changes have been made under a strong pressure of destabilising factors (war and its aftermaths), transition problems in all matters of social and economic life. The biggest problems are losing government protection, destroyed infrastructure, decrease of production and productivity and in the end – losing competitiveness on the global market. (Čavrak, 2003.) Not recovering from all of it, exodus of a young and vital population is a shared problem in many rural areas. There is plethora of other problems caused by this. For example, contaminated and unkempt environment that is starting to worry many countries in the EU. Big social problems are noticeable in high social transfers to the habitants in those areas which is inactive in labour market. It represents big costs for the government and it makes entrepreneurs demotivated to take any business actions in those places (Čavrak, 2003.). These situations are leading generations of their inheritors addicted to poverty, leaving a big rate of unemployment for the country that is fighting crises for the last decade. Based on these acknowledgements, integral development is needed in order to keep habitants in their motherland and to make them aware of the possibilities that are existing. Contemporary need of stopping demographical and economical decrease of Croatian village so as solving accumulated problems and bad management, are listing rural development question in the first row of priorities of todays and future economic development of Croatia (Čavrak, 2003.). Putting together natural and heritage resources, creativity and tourism, a complete new scenery can be made. With those valuable factors, many activities can be established and bring working places, social security, perspective, prosperity and highly wanted recovery of Croatian rural areas.

2.2. New models of sustainable development (and what creativity has to do with it)
Today, we prefer to think that the word crisis is something negative and hard to get out from. Rather than that, we could use it to describe a moment where we need to take an important decision such as thinking about rural areas as places of regeneration with comparative and competitive advantages that could make a major breakthrough on the touristic market. This belief is based on contemporary needs and lifestyle of today’s consumers. After the last big economic crisis from 2008., research (EUROS RSCG) shown that consumers became more objective, responsible and more aware so they require the same from the suppliers. They do not want to take things fast anymore and they search for anything that is authentic and natural in order to experience culture of one society the best way possible. Goal of this movement is sustainable development of all segments of society. Based on this, we can highlight a few important today’s trends: (1) high demand for untouched natural places, (2) interest for cultural events and places with cultural heritage where they can learn about local culture, but not through touristized events but from carefully designed, full of life and authentic events, (3) interest for healthy, organic food (The Institute for Tourism, 2015.). These needs are not being satisfied yet so there are large market opportunities where rural area habitants can start their business take off. Many rural areas in Croatia have everything that is needed for sustainable development: building and architecture traditions, craft skills, traditional art crafts, traditional songs and
dances, gastronomy gems (Čavrak, 2003.) All of these preserved tradition elements that could be brought together in one cultural-touristic product that is involving participants and “asking” them to discover Croatian culture. According to Richards (2002.), creative tourism includes a wide range of activities such as music, drama, languages, gastronomy, and they have major advantages that can relate to rural development. Creativity is making added value much easier because of its rareness; hence creative tourism can develop faster than any other kind of tourism because destinations can innovate their products keeping their position above the others. Creativity is a process and it can be renewable, creativity is mobile and doesn’t stick to other cultural resources. In addition to this, creative tourism can bring recognition and better market position especially to those places with a lack of cultural heritage. There are several reasons why rural areas should accept this new model (Rudan 2012., according to Richards 2002.): (1) tourism requires investments in infrastructure that are often expensive, but most of them are bringing benefits to the local community and the business sector, (2) doing tourism activities and their promotion on other places is branding the area that helps economic improvement, (3) people that moved away will start to come back once they see their own interest, moving out will be stopped or slowed down, (4) growth of economic activities that are somehow related to the tourism (traffic companies, receptive facilities, special tours), (5) developing contents for attracting tourists will change mind of business people and managers thinking that it is suitable for working and living, (6) having tourists and promoting local culture positively affects habitant’s pride, makes them keep their traditions and beliefs better.

3. BIG IMPACT OF A SMALL SECTOR – CROATIAN EXAMPLE
One of the most visited tourist attractions in the hinterland of Dalmatia is Etnoland Dalmati. Its name could tell that it is rural tourism-based, but in fact it is so much more than that. This is an example of the first thematic park of this kind in Croatia. Through personal experience, participants can meet the life of Dalmatian hinterland as it once was: its traditions, folk dance, gastronomy and the way of life. The story behind it is likely extraordinary. Born in Germany with Croatian roots, this entrepreneur decided to bring back the life to this vacant land. Based near the city of Drniš (in Šibenik-Knin County), whose population decreased in half during a period of twenty years (1991. there was 14.773 inhabitants while in 2011. only 7.498), its role is getting bigger and bigger. Starting from the fact that it is employing habitants from that rural area, to the fact that they take care for more than 40.000 visitors in one year. The economic effect is seen in the financial inflows of the company (a profit of 267 thousand euros per year), city of Drniš through local taxes and the people who earn from selling local products or offer the apartment service. Social benefits are numerous; from maintaining local culture alive, teaching new generations of local kids about their culture, developing social capital, sense of a place, and making a strong connection to the Šibenik-Knin County identity. Knowing their target market and the trends that are spreading, Etnoland Dalmati is servicing the food from local farmers in order to please the demand of healthy organic food that the new generations are asking for. It is not the only example of creation that they have done; noticing the changes of being fed up with *touristized events*, they created authentic experience of a traditional folk dance, presentation of the whole complex and eating the specialties from the region. Etnoland Dalmati has really thought of everything – it is the first example of a solar power plant in Šibenik-Knin County and the first one that had an electrical car. They go for sustainability or nothing, pleasing all the goals of cultural-creative tourism: pleased participants, clean and protected nature, and economical benefits. Recognizing their good projects, they got financial support several times from the EU programme aimed at reginal development and Croatian Ministry of Entrepreneurship and Crafts. Not only that they recognized their efforts: Etnoland Dalmati got many awards and prizes for the best touristic supply in the county and Croatia
4. CONCLUSION
Because of globalisation and hyper-consume society that is equalizing all of the cultural forms, the need of authentic, unique and different destination is showing like an antithesis to the mass tourism. Tourists no longer want to walk on the beaten tracks, they desire creative approach in the interpretation of a cultural attraction and the destination overall. Creative tourism is requiring optimal destination management and integration of all stakeholders in order to make content that will please contemporary tourist’s needs. Research show that Croatia has all the needed resources that could be valorised in touristic purposes. Croatia’s rural areas have good predispositions for having a wide range of cultural and creative experiences. Rich cultural heritage: traditions, traditional crafts, singing and dancing is just one of the reasons why to invest and develop this type of tourism. It helps local community to care more about its identity, it is having a big influence on employment, learning and making a social cohesion. The shown example supports these facts.

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