

**”LUCIAN BLAGA” UNIVERSITY OF
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DOCTORAL SCHOOL**

***Implementation of quality management at eco-tour
operators***

ABSTRACT OF THE DOCTORAL THESIS

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Keywords: management, tourism, efficiency, ecotouristic potential, sustainable development, ecotourism, optimal capacity of reception, sustainable territory planning, ecotouristic operators, certification system, eco-label, environmental performance, quality, quality standards, quality planning, quality assurance, quality control, quality improvement, customer orientation, quality management system.

ABSTRACT

The doctoral thesis entitled "*Implementation of quality management at eco-tour operators,*" approaches a fairly new issue on quality-oriented management practices in companies that are providing ecotourism products.

The motivation from which we started in addressing this research theme is given by the fact that currently society is going through a period marked by major changes caused by global environmental problems and environmental pressures, which requires as necessary to promote tourism forms whose environmental impact is very low, generally known as "green tourism", "ecological tourism", "ecotourism".

Romania has a rich ecotourism potential, so the development and promotion of this form of tourism finds in our country all the "material" support that it needs. This is not enough to determine tourists to purchase sustainable travel products, environmentally friendly, given that nationally, one of the major issues currently facing the tourism industry – and implicitly ecotourism – is manufacturing and commercialization of products non-compliant with the requirements of users in terms of quality. However, this shortcoming can be overcome by orienting the policy and objectives of each organization in the quality field, in other words by implementing quality management.

Thus, this research brings important contributions in an area of great interest on ecotourism and quality management, starting from the observation that the development of this market niche relies on the existence of products whose quality is globally certified.

At the same time, specialized practice and theory show that the continuous improvement of tourism and ecotourism offer must be a constant concern of tour operators, becoming an imperative step in achieving performance, whether that performance is viewed in terms of maximizing the profit or obtaining a high satisfaction among tourists.

Therefore, *the scientific relevance of this doctoral thesis* is given by the following:

- ✓ the spread that took the ecotourism sector in the contemporary period, the international market of ecotourism has developed with 10-12% annually, the fastest growth in the world tourism sector;
- ✓ the complexity and dynamism of the tourism sector in general, ecotourism in particular, determined by the inter-relationship with the environment;

- ✓ the competitive environment in which the eco-tour operators activates, focused on customer satisfaction, which involves the operationalization of an efficient quality management system.

This framework has led to the formulation of the **general objective** of this doctoral thesis, *which aims to assess the possibilities of implementing the quality management at eco-tour operators*, but also to the development of the following **research hypotheses**:

- **H1:** There is an upward trend of interest from tourists to purchase ecotourism products in the analyzed period;
- **H2:** Tourist guesthouses that have implemented a quality management system are preferred into a greater extent by travel agencies and tourists to those who have not followed this approach;
- **H3:** There are significant differences in quality-oriented management efforts within the travel agencies from Sibiu and Hunedoara and those in tourist guesthouses from Mărginimea Sibiului and Țara Hațegului;
- **H4:** There are differences between the travel agencies from Sibiu and Hunedoara and tourist guesthouses from Mărginimea Sibiului and Țara Hațegului reported at the possibility of implementing the quality management.

The actuality of the research theme is evidenced by the interest of a growing number of tourists to purchase travel products from units whose service quality management system combines with environmental performance.

In this regard, relating to **the current state of knowledge in the field of research**, we can mention that although ecotourism is a widespread phenomenon that causes a significant impact on the economy, empirical research related to the quality management at eco-tour operators are reduced.

Thus, the international studies in the field, have focused mainly on the following aspects:

- ❖ ***the necessity of customer orientation of the tour operators***. Globally, the tourism market – and implicitly ecotourism – is characterized by a intense increasingly competition, which requires managers of various tourist establishments to pay more attention to customer orientation in their action and desire to achieve profit

maximization and growth rate market. Thus, customer orientation, as a quality management principle, significantly influences controlling and shaping the customer's preferences and expectations (Di Mascio, 2010¹; Ariffin&Maghzi, 2012²; Guchait *et al.*, 2012³).

- ❖ ***the importance of the quality management.*** The specialized literature abounds in studies highlighting that tourism units are implementing the quality management system because as a result of this approach they are obtaining the quality improvement of tourism products and services, achieving the desired economic performance and creating a positive image in the marketplace (Claver-Cortés *et al.*, 2006⁴; Claver-Cortés *et al.*, 2008⁵; Tari *et al.*, 2010; Wang *et al.*, 2012⁶);
- ❖ ***the influence of ecotourism and sustainable tourism certification on environmental performance, economic and socio-cultural aspects of tourism products*** (Honey:2002⁷; Font: 2002⁸; Blumer: 2007⁹; Eriksen: 2007¹⁰).

Under these circumstances, ***the originality and innovative character of this doctoral thesis*** arise from this gaps of specialized literature, concretized in the fact that our scientific approach provides an overview both on quality-oriented management practices within eco-tour operators

¹ Rita Di Mascio, The service models of frontline employees, *Journal of Marketing*, Num. 74, (July), 2010, pp. 63-80

² Ahmad Azmi Ariffin, Atefeh Maghzi, A preliminary study on customer expectation of hotel hospitality: Influences of personal and hotel factors, *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, Vol. 31, Num.1, 2012, pp. 191-198

³ Priyanko Guchait, *et al.*, Error management at different organizational levels-frontline, manager, and company, *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, Vol.31, Num. 1, 2012, pp. 12-22

⁴Enrique Claver-Cortés, *et al.*, Does quality impact on hotel performance?, *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, Vol. 18, Num. 4, 2006, pp. 350-358

⁵Enrique Claver-Cortés, *et al.*, TQM, managerial factors and performance in the Spanish hotel industry, *Industrial Management & Data Systems*, Vol. 108, Num. 2, 2008, pp. 228-244.

⁶Chun H. Wang, *et al.*, Total quality management, market orientation and hotel performance: The moderating effects of external environmental factors, *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, Vol. 31, Num. 1, 2012, pp. 119-129

⁷ Martha Honey, *Ecotourism and Certification: Setting standards in practice*. Island Press, Washington D.C., 2002, p.37

⁸Xavier Font, Environmental certification in tourism and hospitality: progress, process and prospects, *Tourism Management*, Elsevier Ltd., Num. 23, 2002, pp. 197-205

⁹Andrei Blumer, *Ecotourism certification in Romania – a tool for nature conservation and responsible marketing*. Scientific paper Global tourism Conference Oslo, Norway, 2007

¹⁰ Jan Eriksen, *Blue Flag and Green key Eco-labels*, scientific paper Global tourism Conference 2007, Oslo, Norway

and on the environmental dimension of existing management in these units, namely the ecological criteria used in the current activity.

Thus, for the hypothesis testing and achieving of a balanced contextual approach, the doctoral thesis has been divided into six chapters, summarized below.

Chapter 1 begins with the synthesizing of tourism definitions and approaches in a evolutionary context and continues with the identification of tourism management particularities.

Firms with tourism activity are mostly small and medium companies being characterized by flexibility, adaptability to change and rapid decision-making, which outlines a favorable framework for exercising management processes and functions. At the same time, all of these characteristics offers some specificity to the management functions, thus in the first chapter of this doctoral thesis are presented also the particularities of foresight, organization, coordination, entrainment and control-assessment in the tourism company.

The last part of the chapter deals with the issue of management efficiency in the tourism company. In this regard we can mention the following: the efficiency of tourism activity can be measured as the ratio between effect and effort; the socio-economic effects of tourism include: cultural-educational level formation, intellectual growth yields, increase in net income.

Chapter 2 deals with the structure and role of the various associations and organizations in organizing, coordinating and developing national and international tourism in general and ecotourism in particular. In this regard were assessed both their activities – to improve the quality, to provide specialized assistance, to represent the interests of stakeholders – as well as the way in which the issue of ecotourism is reflected in the strategies of tourism organizing and development.

The analysis was performed both from the perspective of the associations with direct role in promoting and developing ecotourism, as well as of the supporting organizations that provide a favorable framework for the operationalization of the programs developed by various associations through education and training of the workforce employed in tourism.

Also, in order to understand the quality-oriented management practices within eco-tour operators it was necessary to present the general framework of tourism activity in Romania. In this direction, we conducted an analysis of the macroeconomic, mezzoeconomic and microeconomic perspective of tourism in order to identify the tendencies and perspectives within this sector of activity.

Chapter 3 aims at presenting the concepts that lead to a nuanced analysis of ecotourism as the main manifestation of sustainable tourism. Thus, on the one hand was presented the international experience in the organization and development of ecotourism, and on the other hand have been identified the main coordinates of ecotourism activity in Romania, which required the assessment of ecotourism potential and specific material basis, respectively the presentation of the units certified as eco-guesthouses.

Ecotourism is becoming, for some potentially regions one of the factors that ensures a high quality of life and the well-being of local communities, representing an engine of progress. The chapter highlights that Romania has a valuable ecotourism potential that can be valorized by adopting an efficient management in the process of the sustainable development of a destination. In this direction management ensures a high level of quality for ecotourism products, but also a balance between protection and valorisation of the tourism resources.

Chapter 4 aims to clarify at theoretical level the items belonging to the sphere of tour operators management, respectively the specific methods of conducting the travel agencies activity, the structure management of a hotel etc.

The tourism industry is unlike any other, and any manager in this area has numerous contacts with the client and plan complex activities in the department that coordinates and therefore must have some special managerial skills. Thus, tour operators need to know the best practices, in other words, to use general and specific management methods identified in the literature, in order to produce and sell, under conditions of efficiency and effectiveness, a wide range of tourism products .

In this regard, in addition to presenting the management of the units with tourist accommodation functions and travel agencies, the chapter highlights the importance of tour operators in the economy.

Chapter 5 consists in a well-supported argument justifying the need for the orientation of eco-tour operators to the models defined by the international quality standard ISO: 9001. Thus, within the chapter has been clarified at the theoretical level the concept of quality in tourism and analyzed the particularities that quality management, as an object of management science, has in tourism. Not least has been highlighted the relationship between quality management and ecotourism certification by emphasizing – based on existing studies in the literature of specialty

– the interest of tourists to purchase products from tourist facilities whose quality management system combined with environmental performance .

Chapter 6 consists of the applied research aimed at evaluating the possibilities for implementing the quality management at the units from Sibiu and Hunedoara that provides ecotourism products. The research purpose was to highlight the interest of eco-tour operators on quality management systems, but also the level of the ISO: 9001 implementation. At the same time, the chapter presents an approach from the tourists perspective based on the need to implement the quality management at eco-tour operators, because in this sector of the economy the quality can *be judged on the extent to which the service received meets the customer's expectations.*

Under these circumstances, the objectives considered in the empirical study were the following:

- testing and validation of the quantitative tool used (questionnaire);
- evaluation of the guesthouses from Mărginimea Sibiului and Țara Hațegului from the perspective of the administrators orientated efforts to fulfill certain criteria specific to eco-guesthouses;
- identification of quality-oriented management practices used by eco-tour operators and which contribute significantly to the development of services according to customer needs and expectations in terms of quality;
- research hypothesis testing.

To establish the sampling basis were used the statistical data provided by the National Tourism Authority – *The list of the classified units with tourists accommodation functions* and *The list of the licensed travel agencies* – with the specification that the guesthouses were chosen from the localities belonging to the Mărginimea Sibiului and Țara Hațegului, two areas with a rich ecotourism potential.

Thus the sample size was set at 157 observation units, at a maximum error of 5% and a confidence level of 95%.

To analyze the data obtained from the research questionnaire, we used the IT programs: SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) and Microsoft Office Excel. At the same time, to achieve the objectives and research hypothesis testing we used the following analysis models:

- ✓ the descriptive analysis of data for a better understanding of the management practices used by eco-tour operators included in the sample;
- ✓ linear regression was used to make the prediction for 2014 on the share of ecotourism products that will be purchased;
- ✓ Chi-square test to determine on the one hand the possible correlations between socio-demographic characteristics of tourists and localities chosen as the destination for holidays, and on the other hand the correlation between the percentage of tourists and the chosen area.

Finally through the *conclusions and proposals*, resuming the hypotheses and analyzes from which we started, we emphasize the personal contributions and importance of the research theme both for tourism companies that participated in the study and for national decision makers, because it can be a scientific guidance in the implementation of quality management at eco-tour operators.

Thus, at the theoretical level the main contributions of our scientific approach are directed towards the knowledge of the chosen research domain, and covers the following:

- *defining and clarifying the basic concepts of ecotourism.* To understand the unfolding framework of quality management at eco-tour operators, we considered necessary to analyze and clarify the general framework of ecotourism. In this respect we focused on presenting the general concepts of sustainable development, ecotourism, optimum reception capacity, sustainable territory planning, ecotourism potential. We also clarified at the methodological level the necessary measures to be taken by tour operators in order to perform a business in the ecotourism sector. Not least, starting from the experts findings in the field, the present research provides the author's vision of the conditions which an offer should fulfill in order to be considered a ecotourism offer.
- *clarifying at the methodological level the characteristics of quality management in tourism.* In this direction were highlighted the main elements that revolve around quality management, respectively quality policy, quality standards, quality culture, quality assessment methods in tourism. All these issues were presented in order to

emphasize that eco-tour operators should exercise their activity through a leading process that include a continuous concern for quality.

➤ *developing a theoretical model that allows eco-tour operators to improve their organization effectiveness in terms of quality and environmental performance.*

Therefore, in our vision achieving quality ecotourism products involves the following steps:

- ***integrating quality in management operations.*** The existence of a quality policy demonstrates firm commitment regarding: targets able to satisfy customer requirements and simultaneously causes employees to participate in quality improvement activities. In this regard, in addition to quality objectives should be established the resources needed to achieve the planned level of quality.
- ***adoption of a management system able to meet the objectives specified in the company's quality policy, and to ensure compliance with the principles of ecotourism.*** This stage involves the managerial efforts orientation towards: minimizing environmental damage (periodic monitoring of water and energy consumption, waste reduction, environmental protection and development to provide recreation for tourists, obtaining energy through solar panels etc.) and cultural (socio-cultural heritage conservation) as well as maximizing the benefits of the communities located around or in the natural area where ecotourism program operates (eco-tour operators can contribute with a certain percentage of the profit to *finance the management projects that ensure sustainable development of community*, thus some of the money are returning into the local community).
- ***maximizing the ecotourist satisfaction.*** The level of satisfaction should be measured periodically using a questionnaire research, which will include questions that allow evaluating the quality of the tourism experience and implicitly the identification of changes occurred in the customer's expectations and requirements. Therefore, the tourist is involved in the quality achievement process by offering its vision in a range of issues such as: courtesy of employees, the existence of customer information services, promptness in

serving process etc. In this regard, eco-tour operators should encourage clients to express their grievances by including in the questionnaire several open questions, where they can specify the actions or components of the tourism product which led to a dissatisfaction after consumption, or explicitly inviting tourists to lodge a complaint when the quality level does not meet their expectations. This step will determine *the quality policy redesign and implicitly the quality level of the ecotourism product, ensuring continuous improvement in accordance with consumer's preferences.*

At the applicative level, the contributions are reflected in the results obtained by the undertaken research, the most significant of these will be present in the following paragraphs.

In this respect it should be noted that there is a common point of view on the criteria that a guesthouse should fulfill in order to be considered a eco-guesthouse, as follows:

- 52.7% of pension administrators and 62.9% of agencies managers believe that a eco-guesthouse is that in which the menu is made up of organic products, environmental pollution is reduced, heat is based on environmentally friendly technologies and waste is sorted and recycled;
- 45.2% of administrators and 37.1% of managers claim that the pension in which the menu consists of organic products can be considered a eco-guesthouse;
- 34.4% of administrators and 33.9% of managers declares that an important criteria for a eco-guesthouse is the reduced environmental pollution.

Also, the analysis of data obtained from the questionnaire research reveals that both the surveyed pensions as well as those that travel agencies collaborates, fulfill some of the eco-guesthouse specific criteria, and the interest of tourists to purchase ecotourism products has increased significantly in the period analyzed, estimating that the increase trend will continue in 2014.

Thus, the first hypothesis (H1) considered in our scientific approach: ***There is an upward trend of interest from tourists to purchase ecotourism products in the analyzed period***, was tested by the descriptive analysis of observation data and highlighting the fact that the period between 2009-2013 was marked by a significant increase in the number of tourists who purchased ecotourism products, resulting the development of this small industries also in

Romania, mainly in the two areas Mărginimea Sibiului and Țara Hațegului Sibiu – whose ecotourism potential is recognized by the profile associations. In addition by using the Chi-square test we showed that the number of tourists influence the chosen area as a holiday destination and that between the two areas analyzed Mărginimea Sibiului and Țara Hațegului there are significant differences in the share of ecotourism products purchased.

Moreover, the travel agencies managers' opinion, which in a proportion of 54.8% said that *an essential criteria in choosing collaborators, is the implementation by them of a quality management system*, as well as the tourists (68.3 %) who said that if they had to choose between two pensions, they would choose a pension that has implemented a quality management system, confirms the second hypothesis of our research **(H2): *Tourist guesthouses that have implemented a quality management system are preferred into a greater extent by travel agencies and tourists to those who have not followed this approach.***

Regarding the quality-oriented management practices within the surveyed eco-tour operators we can mention that 72.6% of the pension administrators and 90.3% of the agencies managers are seeking to improve the quality of the offered and rendered products; 62.1% of the pension administrators and 54.8% of the agencies managers are considering the quality assurance; 24.2% of pensions and 14.5% of agencies are performing the quality control; and the quality planning is performed by 22.1% of administrators and 21% of managers. In addition, 55.8% of pensions and 66.1% of agencies are focusing on meeting the customer's needs and expectations through the established quality procedures; 47.4% of pensions and 27.4% of agencies on the environmental protection; 45.3% of pensions and 62.9% of agencies on the involvement of all employees in quality improvement activities.

Important to note in this context is that there are significant differences between the two categories of operators when it comes to the quality management specific documents used in the current activity of the company. Thus, only 33.68% of the surveyed pensions use such documents, predominantly documentary procedures (96.6%), and to a lesser extent the quality plan (13.8%). Unlike pensions, 69.35% of the surveyed agencies are using quality system specific documents. Interesting is that the same as in pensions most used documents relating to quality are the documentary procedures (88.4%), followed by quality plan (44.2%), quality manual (9.3%) and documentary statement (4.3%), indicating that the last two documents are not used not even on a small amount of the pensions from Mărginimea Sibiului and Țara Hațegului.

Under these conditions, it was partially confirmed the third hypothesis (H3): *There are significant differences in quality-oriented management efforts within the travel agencies from Sibiu and Hunedoara and those in tourist guesthouses from Mărginimea Sibiului and Țara Hațegului.*

The descriptive analysis research data shows that the majority of respondents have not implemented a quality management system, only 3.18% of the surveyed operators have implemented ISO: 9001. Between the operators that have implemented the quality management system, three are tour operators agencies and two are guesthouses, which have benefited from this approach in a proportion of 80%, by effective monitoring and improving of tourism services quality.

At the same time, for most of surveyed agencies (71%) the implementation of a quality management system represents an opportunity. Quite different things stand as regards to the surveyed pensions which in a proportion of 51.6% consider this approach a variant devoid of interest. But pension administrators do not exclude this possibility in the future, more than 37.9% of them said that they would implement ISO: 9001 because they see it as an opportunity. Differences between the travel agencies managers' opinion and pensions administrators also exist regarding the intake of tourists due to implementation of quality management.

Thus, it was tested also the fourth hypothesis (H4): *There are differences between the travel agencies from Sibiu and Hunedoara and tourist guesthouses from Mărginimea Sibiului and Țara Hațegului reported at the possibility of implementing the quality management.*

In these circumstances, the descriptive analysis of data that tested the hypotheses that underlying this thesis shows that eco-tour operators understand and carry out a number of ISO:9001 specific practices, more than that they regard the implementation of quality management as an investment, being concerned about customer satisfaction and improving the organization effectiveness. However there is a higher possibility of implementing the quality management at surveyed travel agencies compared to pensions who participated in the study, which can be explained by the characteristics of the international standard ISO:9001, excessive documentation and the costs involved by such an approach.

The final part of the thesis "*Implementation of quality management at eco-tour operators*" is the starting point for future research in this area, which implies the need for an extensive

research at the level of the units that are providing ecotourism products. In this respect, it can be mentioned the following research perspectives:

- expansion of empirical research within a region or at national level, so it can include a larger number of eco-tour operators in order to generalize the results;
- applying the questionnaire after a certain period to observe the evolutions recorded at the eco-tour operators level from the perspective of the implementation of the quality management;
- carrying out an future analysis which will include the impact assessment of the implemetation of the model defined by ISO: 9001 on the performance of eco-tour operators, taking into account both the economic and financial indicators as well as non-financial indicators.

Consequently, the implementation of quality management at eco-tour operators has a significant importance to the current economic environment, which is why in this thesis we wanted to bring added value to the theoretical and practical level. By the multitude of concepts analyzed, but also through our field research we believe that we have succeeded fulfilling the goals and bring a contribution at fundamental research level.

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