

Strategic Planning and Marketing of Rural Tourism in Western Odisha

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Abstract

Rural tourism is an increasingly important activity for the country's economy. It is being used as a development strategy to improve the social and economic well being of people in rural areas. Rural Tourism includes an enormous range of activities, natural or manmade attractions, amenities and facilities, transportation, marketing and information systems. Rural tourism is very diverse and fragmented in terms of operational structures, activities, markets and operating environments. Benefits of rural tourism have been expressed as employment growth and broadening a region's economic base, repopulation, social improvement, and revitalization of local craft. In the contemporary world, an increasing number of enterprises, including rural tourism businesses, employ marketing methods and knowledge in their activities. Rural tourism has an exclusive link with nature. For this reason its services became very popular. Its development can be furthered by the right marketing system. In the article, the author highlights the strategic measures for rural tourism development in Western Odisha.

Introduction

Rural Tourism is an old and new phenomenon at the same time. Interest in countryside recreation started to grow in the 19th century as a recreation to

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beat the stress of the increasing urbanization and industrialization. The rural scene was admired by poets and artists. However, the rural tourism of our era is different: the number of tourists involved has increased significantly and tourism has developed in all types of countrysides instead of being limited to areas of exceptional scenic beauty.

"Rural tourism is the tourism which takes place in the countryside" (Lane 1994). "It is a range of activities, services and amenities provided by farmers and rural people to attract tourists to their area in order to generate extra income for their businesses" (Gannon, 1988)

Briefly rural tourism is a form of tourism taking place in rural areas or settlements and provides employment and income to local population. Through it seems to be simple to define rural tourism as "tourism that takes place in the countryside", this definition does not include the complexity of the activity and the different forms and meanings developed in different countries. According to the broader definition, "rural tourism includes a range of activities, service and amenity provided by former and rural people to attract tourist to their area in order to generate extra income for their business", (Gannon, 1988, in the Kloeze, 1994). If this broader concept is accepted, rural tourism covers not only farm tourism or agri-tourism (which is generally what rural tourism means for most people), but also special interest nature holidays, touring in rural areas and residential tourism, and the services include besides accommodation, events, festivities, outdoor recreation, and production and sale of handicrafts and agricultural products.

The Concept of Rural Tourism

Rural tourism is a multifaceted activity. It is not just farm based tourism. It includes farm-based holidays but also comprises special interest nature holidays, eco-tourism, walking, climbing, adventure sports, health tourism, hunting, angling, educational travel, art and heritage tourism and in some areas ethnic tourism (Bramwell and Lane, 1994.)

Lack of studies on Rural Tourism is compounded further by absence of commonly accepted definition as to what constitute rural tourism. Sometimes rural tourism is equated with farm tourism. (Oppermann, 1996). Some authors include outdoor recreation and tourism in National Parks and wilderness area into rural tourism (Ladki, 1993) excludes them.

Looking at the supply side, rural tourism can be understood in three different ways:

- a) Rural tourism is perceived as "working class tourism". It depicts the image of a poor man's holiday, with stays with a local resident in a rural area.
- b) Rural tourism is associated with a particular form of accommodation, as well as with the option of undertaking specific activities.
- c) Rural tourism is defined as a type of holiday where the place of stay is on a farm, and the organized activities are connected with and around the farm. In this case, rural tourism is limited to farm tourism or agri-tourism (Greffe, 1994).

People travel to rural areas because of the characteristics of rural areas such as rural lifestyle, music and dance, fairs and festivals, art and handicrafts, remoteness and solitude, peace and quiet, natural beauties, and adventure.

Significance of Rural Tourism

Rural Tourism becomes significant as it is viewed as a means to address rural economic decline. The economic benefits of rural tourism to farmers became a predominant matter. The economic benefits of rural tourism have been expressed as employment growth and broadening a region's economic base. New businesses may be attracted to the area, offering employment which may not have been possible otherwise. The diversification of employment and products can occur through the creation of new markets for agricultural

products. Increased demand for rural services and products may enable economic stabilization. Further, revenue is generated when visitors spend money and through tourism-dedicated taxes. Rural tourism offers a market to small businesses that otherwise would not exist, giving economic benefits to businesses both directly and indirectly. Rural tourism also encourages small scale business development, thus promoting higher economic multipliers. Lastly, it also contributes to social improvement.

Literature Review

Rural tourism is not altogether a new phenomenon. Interest in the country side recreation started to grow towards the end of the eighteenth century as a reaction to the stress of the increasing urbanization and industrialization. The nature and the countryside became the "gaze" of tourists (Urry, 1990) and influenced poets and artists. However, its growth and development is due to technological advance, the availability of free time and the increase in disposal income (Sharpley, 1996).

However, the rural tourism of the eighties, the nineties and our era is different. The number of tourists involved has increased significantly, the range of activities and types of rural holidays has continued to expand, and tourism has developed in all types of countrysides instead of being limited to areas of exceptional scenic beauty (Knudson, 1985).

Rural tourism is increasingly viewed as a tool for improving economic and social conditions in rural areas. Rural tourism is a growing industry and can lead to changes in lifestyle, higher levels of disposable income, car ownership, and second holiday/weekend break markets (Alexander & McKenna, 1998). Increasingly, in the 1990s there has been a growth of new types of tourists in rural spaces, with behaviour patterns clearly different from the homecoming motivation of traditional rural tourism (Perales, 2002).

Long and Nuckolls (1994) suggest four key factors in organizing resources for rural tourism planning, leadership, education, planning strategies that fit the local situation, and access to technical information and expertise (Page & Getz, 1997). There is a growing amount of literature that specifies the importance of taking a community focus and the importance of community involvement in tourism development (Roberts & Hall, 2001, citing Richards & Hall, 2000; Murphy, 1993; 1985; 1998; Taylor, 1995; Bramwell et al., 1996). Sensitive social integration is vital for rural tourism initiatives (Hall, 2000). A community approach to decision-making helps to ensure that traditional lifestyles and community values are respected (Campbell, 1999, citing Carter, 1994; Wild, 1994).

Objectives of the Study

With the growing importance of rural tourism and the thrust given by the government to promote tourism, the study attempts to understand the concept of rural tourism, identify the rural tourism resources of Western Orissa, find out the marketing and promotional aspects of rural tourism, and recommend suitable strategies for planning and development of tourism in Western Orissa.

Research Methodology

The research methodology involved both the desk research and the field research which was widely used to understand the concept of rural tourism and the various aspects leading to the planning and development of rural tourism in Western Odisha.

For the field research, interview and discussions were also held with the local people and the officials of different districts of western Odisha in order to identify the developmental issues and planning strategies to be undertaken for marketing rural tourism in western Orissa. The subject being vast, the study was limited to Sundargarh, Sambalpur, Jharsuguda, Nuapada and Baragarh districts of Western Odisha.

Rural Tourism in western Odisha: An Overview

India is probably the only country that offers various categories of tourism. These include heritage tourism, adventure tourism, medical tourism, spiritual tourism, and beach tourism.

Tourists have to explore India - choose the locales of their choice, and see what each state has to offer. They have to lose themselves in the wonder that is India. Meander through lands steeped in chivalry and pageantry that begin before recorded history. They must explore modern cities but also the rural areas which have much more to offer for the tourists.

Rural areas in India have always featured prominently in the development of tourism and leisure. In contemporary times, the countryside continues to form an important tourist destination. The appeal of the countryside as a holiday destination is complex, linked to opportunities for a variety of sports and activities, peace and quiet, nature and traditional ways of life. The countryside symbolizes a lost "golden age". It contains everything that urban areas lack.

Located on the East coast of India by the Bay of Bengal, Odisha is a paradise for tourists. If we talk about the tourism potential of Odisha, it is 'too vast and too diverse' to be summarized into any article in a magazine or a newspaper. Be it the wonderful wildlife or the vast coastline interspersed with breathtaking sites or the temples or the beautiful hills hiding myriad unexplored treasure troves that could even make the stones sigh. Imagine the serene ghats where the dawn get saturated by the morning dew or an early drizzle maturing to full-fledged downpour, turning the landscape of Koraput into picture postcards. And the evenings in the hills paint a collage, like a dreamer's eyelashes. It all sounds like a world in itself and imagine a journey into this paradise during the right seasons, which can always add a new facet to a visitor's visual repertoire.

Keeping in mind the tourism potential, the government decided to streamline and spread its activities not only to coastal districts but also to Western Odisha where tourist spots are fascinating.

Places of natural beauty are in abundance in Western Orissa. The natural stream and forest resources at Harisankar in Bolangir move the heart of the tourists. Equally Nrusinghanath presents a panoramic view. The deity of Nrusinghanath sitting in the shape of a half-human and half-lion form tearing apart Hiranyakasipu against the backdrop of a stream is a scene to witness. Of course, now-a-days, both the Department and Corporation have swung into action to create infrastructural facilities for the tourists. Apart from those two natural spots, Kalahandi district is endowed with a wealth of forests with rare species of black tigers, a natural water fall at Rabandar and a host of temples situated on the peak of hills at Bhawanipatna. These are also places of tourist importance. The Patala ganga spot at Nuapara District is also a place of attraction for tourists. Ushakothi, Hirakud and Budrama in Sambalpur district attract the attention of tourists. Similarly, the Khandadhar waterfall in Sundargarh district is also a tourist spot. The Mahanadi and the Tel river in Suvarnapur district present beautiful natural scenes and the confluence of the two rivers present a memorable sight.

Rural Tourism Resources of Western Odisha

Table 1. Districtwise Rural Tourism Resources

Districts	Rural Tourism Resources
Sundargarh	<p>Vedavyasa: Vedavyasa is the confluence of the river Sankara and river Koel. It is 8 kms from Rourkela. This place is Legendarily associated with Maharshi Vedavyasa, the author of the epic Mahabharat. There is a Shiva temple at Vedavyasa.</p> <p>Manikmoda: There are beautiful historic rocks paintings in the cave .The paintings are of animals, birds, humans, hunting scene. This natural cave has water resources in it.</p>

	<p>Manindra Dam: It is situated at a distance of 32 kms. from Rourkela. Boating on the river Sankha is of another attraction.</p> <p>Ghogar: An ideal picnic spot, 43 kms from Sundargarh on the river Ib.</p> <p>Khandadhar: Khandadhar waterfall is located in the forest of Sundargarh.</p> <p>Darjeeng: A beautiful picnic spot surrounded by blue mountains, springs and dense forest.</p>
Sambalpur	<p>Ushakothi Wildlife Sanctuary: Located at a distance of approximately 22 km from the Sambalpur district serves as the natural habitat of tigers, leopards and sambars</p> <p>Chiplima: Chiplima is a popular picnic spot, located 37 km from Sambalpur district. It has a livestock Breeding Farm and Agricultural Farm.</p> <p>Kandhara: Sambalpur also boasts of a pilgrimage-cum-sightseeing spot, Kandhara, 78 Kms. from Sambalpur in Rairakhol Sub-Division. It is the birthplace of Poet Bhima Bhoi, the great founder of Mahima Dharma.</p>
Jharsuguda	<p>Vikramkhol (Bikramkhol): Vikramkhol is a cave containing pre-historic, un deciphered pictographic inscriptions.</p> <p>Ruins of Hill Forts of Ulapgarh: On the Jharsuguda-Belpahar Road at a distance of 21 kms. from Jharsuguda there is a village known as Lajkura. In the vicinity there is a hill known as "Maheswar Pahad" where the remains of an old holy fort attracts the attention of historians, researchers and tourists.</p> <p>Ramchandi - An ancient Shaktipitha: This important place of 'Shakti Worship' is located 10 kms away from Jharsuguda town inside a cave.</p>

	<p>Koilighugar water fall (Lakhanpur): The Koilighugar water fall is situated 55 kms away from Jharsuguda in the Lakhanpur block near the village Kushmelbahal.</p>
Nuapada	<p>Patalganga: It is a nice spot in the bosom of nature with a perennial spring, the water of which is considered as sacred as that of the holy Ganges</p> <p>Yogimath: Cave paintings of the Neolithic age are found at Yogimath. The paintings on the rock surface are distinctly drawn in Indian red, which include bull cow.</p> <p>Patora: On the bank of the river Jonk is a place of uncommon scenic charm. Engirdled on all sides by green hills.</p> <p>Saliha: Popularly known as 'Saliagarh' where the people of Khariar estate united in 1930 and protested against the taxation on the tenants of the Estate.</p>
Baragarh	<p>Nrusinghnath: Nrusinghnath is situated at a distance of 110 Kms from Bargarh. It is Hindu pilgrimage spot.</p> <p>Gansdhamardan: In the Tretaya Yug (the Silver Age), Jambavan (the unerring counselor of Ram) had suggested Vir Hanuman to bring Bisalyakarani before dawn, so that Laxman would rise back to life. It is also the home of more than 5000 rare medicinal herbs</p> <p>Ambabhona: The village is situated in the north-west of Bargarh, 40 Kms north of Bargarh. This village was a fortified place in the days of the Chauhan Rajas of Sambalpur and the remains of the old fort are still in existence.</p> <p>Bhatli: A village in Bargarh sub-division, 19 Kms north of Bargarh on the Bargarh-Ambabhona road. There is a beautiful modern temple dedicated to Dadhi Vamana Vishnu.</p>

	<p>Panimura: A village 40 Kms from Bargarh, was the hub of various activities during the freedom movement. The entire village was committed to the Khadi and freedom movement of Gandhiji.</p> <p>Sohela: A village in Padampur sub-division situated 26 Kms. west of Bargarh. A good deal of trade in food grain is carried on here.</p>
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The other resources of Western Orissa that attract the tourists to rural areas are:

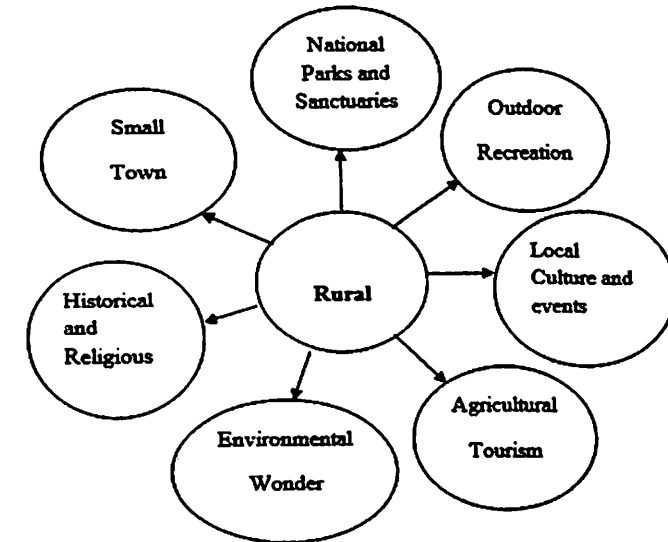
Art and Culture: The Kosal region is culturally influenced by several different cults and religions. Its history dates back to the Mahabharat and Buddhist period. Folk songs and dances of this area have been revived and recognized during the last quarter century, from Danda (Danda Yatra and Danda Nata), which is considered to be one of the oldest forms of variety entertainment in India, to the modern Krushnaguru Bhajan, a type of folk lyrics and songs. Sambalpuri language songs are quite popular throughout Odisha.

Festivals: Popular festivals of this region are *Nuakhai Gundikhaae*, *Bhaye juintiaa*, *Po juintiaa*, *Poos poonee*, *Pooraa uaans*, *Sital sasthi*, and *Dhanu yaatraa*.

The Tribes and their Culture: Major tribes are *Sahara (Sabar)*, *Kurmee*, *Kandh*, *Paraja*, *Bhatra*, *Bhuiyan*, *Kohl*, and *Munda*, *Santhal*.

So, within the rural tourism demand drivers that play an important part in generating trip to rural tourism areas in Western Odisha can be represented as:

Figure 1. Demand Drivers for Rural Tourism



Marketing of Rural Tourism

Looking into the benefits which all the stakeholders can derive in rural tourism one needs to work on the issue of marketing of rural tourism. According to Kotler et.al. (2002) any place that is able to clearly communicate its distinctiveness can compete in tourism, as long as it consistently offers something attractive and remains accessible. But there is a need for rural tourism to be differentiated from mainstream tourism, eco-tourism and geo-tourism, and the context of rural tourism challenges the 'traditional' approach to marketing (Roberts & Hall, 2004).

Branding has become a central element of tourism destinations, with image being the singular most significant element of a brand, which needs to be very seriously considered in the context of rural tourism. Therefore, it is important to look at the images presented by mass media and consider how they relate to tourism in general and more

specifically in rural tourism (Beeton, Sue, 2004). Though the basics of marketing would not change in rural tourism, the fact that rural tourism would have a niche appeal rather than a mass appeal needs to be taken into consideration while deciding on a marketing plan for rural tourism. The fact that it requires niche marketing approaches also make it important that one gives due consideration to the issue of communicating to these niche customers who might not be accessible through the mainstream communication channels. Thus, marketing of rural tourism is more challenging compared with marketing of mainstream tourism.

Strategy Conception for Rural Tourism Marketing

Whilst solving the problems of rural tourism development, it is very important to prepare an optimal marketing strategy. The uniqueness of strategy lies in the fact that in each organization, the combination of competence, skills, values and resources is different. In the process of strategy formulation, different authors (Chandler, 1962; Ainioo, 1993; Porter, 2003; Jucevieius, 1998) distinguish four main factors exerting an impact on strategy selection, which are the resources, environment-stipulated potential, the value orientation of leaders, and social responsibility. Stipulated by these factors the organization formulates its aims, strategy and policy. The solution for the limited and low organizational resources can be co-operation of all interested groups: rural tourism entrepreneurs, local population and other businessmen, tourism agencies, local government, and tourism information centres. Advantages of co-operation can be as follows: first, net economic returns to members (including patronage refunds) are always an important and sometimes dominant motive. Second, producers of commodities frequently seek assurance that there will be market for these commodities as far ahead as they contemplate investments. Third, farmers may seek some sort of channel leadership or countervailing power through their cooperatives. Fourth, farmers may regard their co-operative as a means to sustain and expand the demand for their commodity (Rhodes, 1972). Also, co-operation can

help to accumulate financial resources for the investments and to sell social problems in the region. By creating economic disparities between tourist destinations and the economies that surround them, the expansionary influences of tourism also create pressures for population growth through migration to fill jobs linked directly or indirectly to tourism (Taylor J. E., Dyer G. A.2003).

Strategic Measures for Rural tourism Development in Western Odisha

Even though the Government of Odisha has identified few places for promoting rural tourism in Western Odisha, no proper action plans has been formulated for their development. Following are a few recommended strategic measures that have been developed based upon the study that can be implemented for the development of tourism in the Western Odisha

Strategy: Build the Brand/Reposition Rural Tourism

1. Develop rural tourism branding/positioning: Create a specific image of the Western Odisha rural tourism travel experience. The brand should work to create consumer awareness and stand on its own as a product and travel experience. Leverage the rural tourism brand into existing OTDC (Orissa Tourism Development Corporation) advertising to create specific awareness and education for potential visitors
 - Develop marketing programmes that utilize rural tourism to celebrate Western Odisha at the local/regional level, including highlighting each of Western Odisha's rural areas and promoting local festivals and attractions.
 - Develop co-op promotion (air, lodging, rental car companies, attractions and destinations) focusing on rural tourism.

2. Promote rural Western Odisha's existing venues, events, cultural heritage sites and recreational facilities to increase visitation to rural areas: Continue to promote rural Western Odisha's existing venues, events, cultural heritage sites and recreational facilities and what differentiates them from other urban destinations. Draw attention to rural destinations/activities as a desired component of a visit to Western Odisha.
 - Develop segmented sales sheets or backgrounders for target segments such as cultural, heritage, museums, arts and handicraft within rural Odisha. Distribution of information on the OTDC (Orissa Tourism Development Corporation) website and sharing with media, feature writers or at trade shows.
 - Highlight rural areas of Western Odisha throughout all components of promotional campaign.
 - Continue to develop content and itineraries for the OTDC (Orissa Tourism Development Corporation) website to ensure all venue and facility information is up-to-date and professionally promote each region's rural destinations and assets including the western region with the goal of driving visitation.
 - Continue representing rural Western Odisha at Pow Wow, travel industry trade shows, on FAM trips and with media. Develop content ideas for OTDC (Orissa Tourism Development Corporation) media relations, with the goal of producing press releases dedicated to rural tourism.

Strategy: Research

1. Implement specific rural tourism research: Develop a base of research that is focused on rural tourism, its visitors and travel spending, to fully market rural tourism to domestic and international markets. Review current research in an effort to

identify research opportunities to collect rural tourism data in western Odisha.

- Implement the first-ever visitor profile study in rural Western Odisha and utilize research to identify the highest opportunity markets for rural tourism. Identify specific motivation of travellers to visit rural tourism activities and destinations.
- Work with OTDC (Orissa Tourism Development Corporation) Marketing Advisory Committee to showcase rural tourism.
- Integrate rural products into all initiatives.
- Provide rural tourism destinations of rural areas in Western Odisha with data to assist in developing their own strategic marketing plans.
- Directly involve the Western Orissa Rural development council and the local tourism industry in research and specific tourism performance evaluation efforts. Assist in determining Return on Investment (ROI). Evaluate programme research.
- Communicate to tourism stakeholders via communication mechanisms to increase rural tourism market knowledge and positively influence marketing efforts.

Strategy: Technology

1. Promote the use of technology in marketing rural tourism travel within Western Odisha: Aggressively promote sophisticated packaging and promotion of rural destinations online. Technology is critical factor in the future success of reaching targeted visitor segments by communicating emotional and functional benefits more cost-effectively and efficiently.

- Ongoing development and management of rural tourism content on the OTDC website.
- Collect appropriate web-based data in an effort to develop and cultivate rural niche markets.
- Implement better website measurements to identify areas of improvement, user behaviour and how to maximize usability to derive desired results (e.g., cultural heritage assets and links to area attractions and partners).
- Encourage industry members throughout Western Odisha to enhance their websites and link to the OTDC (Odisha Tourism Development Corporation) site.
- Investigate new technology and online practices to showcase and promote rural destinations, such as virtual tours of the rural regional assets.
- Continually work to incorporate technology into all rural tourism programmes and marketing initiatives.

Strategy: Partnership Collaboration/Cultural Heritage/ Western Odisha Information Centres

1. Educate consumers about the available attractions, historical/cultural exhibits, facilities and the full extent of the destination and encourage them to extend their stays: Work with partners to provide clear and concise information about a region's attractions, lodging and other tourist amenities. Visitor information is an integral component of the rural regional marketing process, and is crucial to both potential visitors and those already here. Comprehensive information for visitors is also very important to help position an area as a legitimate visitor destination.
 - Assess where and how rural tourism programmes might play a strategic role in the development of visitor information kiosks or supplementing in-market visitor information in high-traffic areas.

- Work with the Odisha State Road Transport Corporation to disseminate visitor Information using highway rest areas. These rest areas could possibly share visitor information efforts.

2. Build community through collaboration and partnerships: Preserve, protect, interpret and promote Western Odisha's rural assets through rural regional partnerships. Showcase the depth and breadth of rural Western Odisha with regard to agriculture, cultural assets and historical sites, while focusing on building unique rural assets in both larger areas with small rural components) and more overall rural communities.

- Work with rural tourism partners to develop and promote specific tourism concepts, geo- tourism and eco-tourism.
- Educate stakeholders about the value of collaboration.
- Communicate the emotional and functional benefits of rural tourism and support points of differentiation in every rural tourism area of Western Orissa.

Strategy: Funding

Examine expanding the Rural Tourism Programme and seek additional funding where appropriate to support rural regional efforts: Rural tourism needs to seek out and find potential new funding sources, including co-operative and public sector sources.

- Establish a platform to solicit sponsorships from tourism benefactors by continually building organizational credibility. Clarify how sponsors will make those decisions and develop the information with which sponsors can make informed decisions, as well as a way to track ROI.
- Identify potential sources of new funding; include state-wide sponsorships and other elements of the tourism industry, specifically retail and restaurant co-op opportunities.

Conclusion

If the rural areas are to be sustainable, there must be the appropriate financial sources and revenues. That, however, requires employment opportunities in the agriculture sector, and these opportunities must be relevant to the specific features of the region. Sustainable development is based on the idea of "Think globally and act locally".

The main focus on development of rural tourism in Western Odisha must be proper planning leading to development-based activities, co-operation, and maximal use of local resources, including local community. Strategic documents of rural Western regions should have a wide reach; should be used as tools for discussion about the main problems and solutions, should reflect strategies of local entrepreneurs. It is the only way to realize the strategies of individual entrepreneurs, as well as entrepreneurs in rural tourism. Even though it may be true that rural tourism is not as economically attractive as most other sectors, in the end it contributes to the protection of the demographic structure of rural areas and supports the specific cultural heritage and environment.

The question whether it is only financial resources needed and the income gathered from job availability comes up. Next and equally important sources are social capital, social network. These relate to co-operation and relations among people. Economic benefits alone are not the strategic asset of rural areas, but it is rather the hope for the "romantic" side of life. Nevertheless, for the strategic development of rural areas, it is necessary to have small enterprises and to support them in their innovativeness.

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