

DEVELOPING COMPETITIVE INTEGRATED TOURISM PRODUCTS

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Abstract

This study is an updated analysis of the tourism industry as one of the fastest growing industries on indicators of economic and social activity in Bulgaria. The perspectives and the specialization of the country in tourism are outlined. The resource potential and the diversity of tourism products in the Rhodope Mountain have been analyzed in order to identify trends and possibilities to make tourism a leading sector for economic development in the region. The benefits that tourism brings to the region have also been explored. Sustainable alternative tourism is highlighted as a source of diversification for the regional economy. Basically this tourism minimizes the damages to the environment and culture, contributes to the conservation of natural and cultural heritage and helps for the preservation of the identity and traditions of the local population. The sustainable tourism optimizes the visitors' satisfaction, increases the economic growth period and achieves a balance between economic growth, prosperity and a clean environment. It has been proved the necessary to be developed niche tourism products which meet the requirements of the present market characteristics in the EU and the current demands and preferences of Bulgarian and foreign tourists, visiting the region of Smolyan and the Rhodopes. Different possibilities have been searched to create products which are appreciable in quality, viability and investment potential, corresponding to hardly accessible mountainous terrain, they are created for. In the study a specific methodology has been applied for differentiating competitive integrated tourism products in mountain regions (following the example of Smolyan region) by classification of the regional tourism characteristics – a major factor for marking the destination. Particular emphasis is placed on the preservation of cultural identity and traditions in the creation of tourism products and services, on tourist attractions, animation and unique natural resources of the region.

Keywords: *sustainable tourism, regional development, competitive integrated products*

Introduction

In recent years tourism has grown into the global economy and the trends indicate that will continue. Simultaneously tourism destinations are beginning to realize the benefits that tourism brings to a region: stimulates investment in infrastructure, supports regional development, creates new jobs etc. In 2006, the European Commission adopted a Communication titled 'A renewed EU tourism policy: towards a stronger partnership for European tourism'. It addressed a range of challenges that will shape tourism in the coming years, including Europe's ageing population, growing external competition, consumer demand for more specialized tourism, and the need to develop more sustainable and environmentally-friendly tourism practices. It was followed in October 2007 by another Communication, titled 'Agenda for a sustainable and competitive European tourism', which proposed actions in relation to the sustainable management of destinations, the integration of sustainability concerns by businesses, and the awareness of sustainability issues among tourists. Communication 'Europe, the world's No 1 tourist destination – a new political framework for tourism in Europe' was adopted by the European Commission in June 2010. This Communication seeks to encourage a coordinated approach for initiatives linked to tourism and defined a new framework for actions to increase the competitiveness of tourism and its capacity for sustainable growth. It proposed a number of European or multinational initiatives – including a consolidation of the socioeconomic knowledge base for tourism – aimed at achieving these objectives (European Commission, Eurostat, 2011).

In the context of leading European tourism policy, sustainable alternative tourism is an important sector for diversification of the European economy as well as the Bulgarian regional economy. Basically this tourism minimizes the damages to the environment and culture, contributes to the conservation of natural and cultural heritage and helps for the preservation of the identity and traditions of the local population. It has been proved by the practice, the necessary to be developed niche tourism products which meet the requirements of the present market characteristics in the EU and the current demands and preferences of Bulgarian and foreign tourists. The development of tourism products for alternative tourism should be based on an understanding of market characteristics, behavior and preferences of tourists and the possibilities for the creation of products to be evaluated on their relevance and investment potential of a region which they are created for (Shopova & Arabska, 2013).

The present study analyzes the tourism resources in the Smolyan region in order to maximize socio and economic benefits to local communities through effective sustainable management and minimizing the negative anthropogenic influence. The sustainable competitive alternative tourism includes the natural resources protection, pollution reducing and conservation of biodiversity, ecosystems and landscapes (WTO). Tourism is recognized as a leading sector for socio-economic development of Smolyan district. Development of an exemplary methodology for differentiation of tourism in the region through competitive integrated products supports this goal. National tourism specifics are a major factor marking the destination – authenticity and tradition when tourism products and services are being created with an emphasis on tourist attractions, animation and unique products for a region. The methodology application would allow updated analysis of the resource availability, as well as

the strengths and weaknesses of the resources provision for creation of competitive integrated tourism products on a regional level. The study includes the following components: assessment of the tourism potential of the area; a quantitative analysis of existing tourism resources; municipalities identification that need further development of current tourism products or development of new tourism product; development of methodological sequence of steps when competitive integrated tourism products are created, along the lines of Smolyan district. This publication is not intended to be exhaustive due to the huge volume of information that affects. Rather draws guidelines that would assist all stakeholders to develop the tourism sector through alternative forms of tourism that are both market-oriented and environmentally friendly.

Materials and Methods

Smolyan is one of 28 districts in Bulgaria with a population of 121,752 people (according to NSI, 2011). It is located in South-Central Bulgaria. The District consists of 10 municipalities- Banite, Borino, Devin, Dospat, Zlatograd, Madan, Nedelino, Rudozem, Smolyan and Chepelare. Although Smolyan region has a wide range of natural and anthropogenic recreation resources and is the most prominent part of the tourist area in the Western Rhodopes, tourism development in the district is not enough competitive and does not meet the potential and opportunities that has. This is a result of several reasons like the remoteness of the area and difficult accessibility, poor tourism promotion in the country and abroad, the lack of direct transport links with Greece, insufficient quality of the tourism services, failure to use all opportunities for alternative forms of tourism etc. Also people, employed in the tourism industry, do not develop their professional skills in response to the rapidly changing requirements in the field of tourism supply and service. Smolyan district is not presented widely in the international tourism market. The major tourist destination for foreign tourists in the area is Pamporovo ski resort. Practically another segment of the tourism market in the region is not enough developed. Almost all sectors of the national economy are presented in the regional level: agriculture, forestry, including logging, hunting and fishing, mining and processing industry, and construction. All branches of the service sector are covered. General economic conditions in the Smolyan region are relatively worse than average in the country. There are indirect signs of gray and black economy in the region (Grigorova& Mareva, 2013). Integrated approach in the tourism sector in the area has emphasized the need for strategic and tactical alternatives for development. For the development of competitive tourism products it is necessary a better understanding of the nature of the tourism product whether a new product is created or an existing one is improved (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1 Tourism product (Smolyan district)

Organizations' competitiveness is a result of knowledge of the product creation process and its investment potential by comparing direct and cost competitors in the market that immediately indicates their ability to meet customers' needs in specific products or services. According to Porter (1982), competitiveness is a function of the industry's attractiveness and the relative competitive position of the organization.

Smolyan region has preserved environment that is one of the specific benefits and the other is the availability of natural resources. The region is characterized by middle to high mountainous terrain, but it is different for each municipality. The average altitude of the area ranges from 600 to 2191 m, which reflects on its overall socio-economic, urban and infrastructure development. Mountain climate prevails which in the southeastern part of the region becomes Mediterranean. Usually there are mild and snowy winters and cool summers. Figure 2 provides an overview of the industries structure in the regional economy. The highest share has the foreign investment in tourism and in particular –hotels and restaurants.

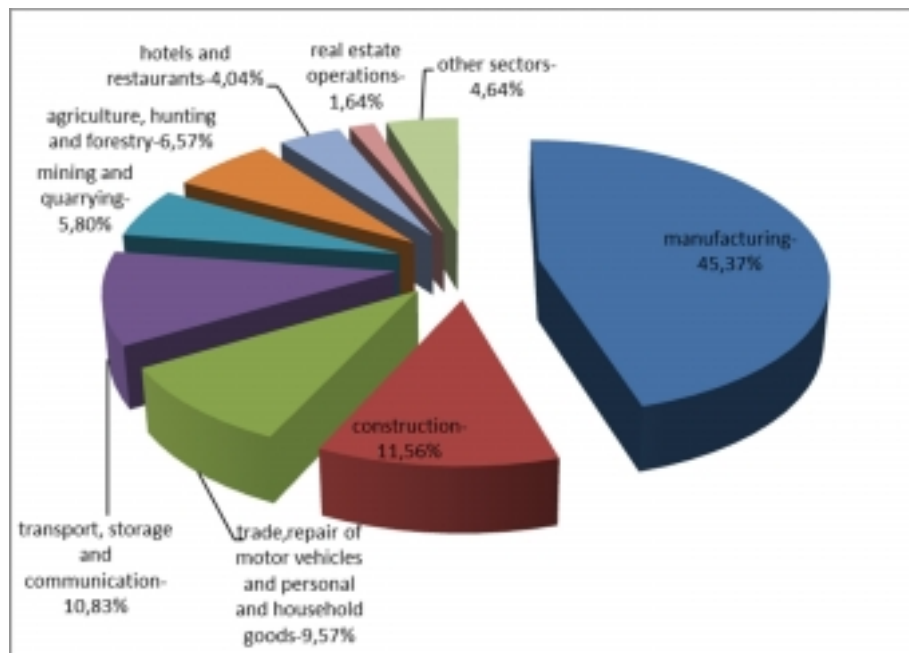


Fig.2 Industry structure in Smolyan region
(source: Strategy for development of Smolyan region 2005-2015)

Municipalities in the territory of Smolyan district define tourism as a priority sector for economic development. This is due to the diversity of natural resources, territorial differentiation, relative nature conservation and increasingly overlapped environmentally friendly industries, rich cultural heritage, availability of demographic resources and also preserving hospitality traditions. Development of sustainable tourism in the region is directly dependent on the concerted efforts of all stakeholders to create a competitive integrated tourism product that is unique for the region (Fig. 3, source: Grigorova& Mareva, 2013).

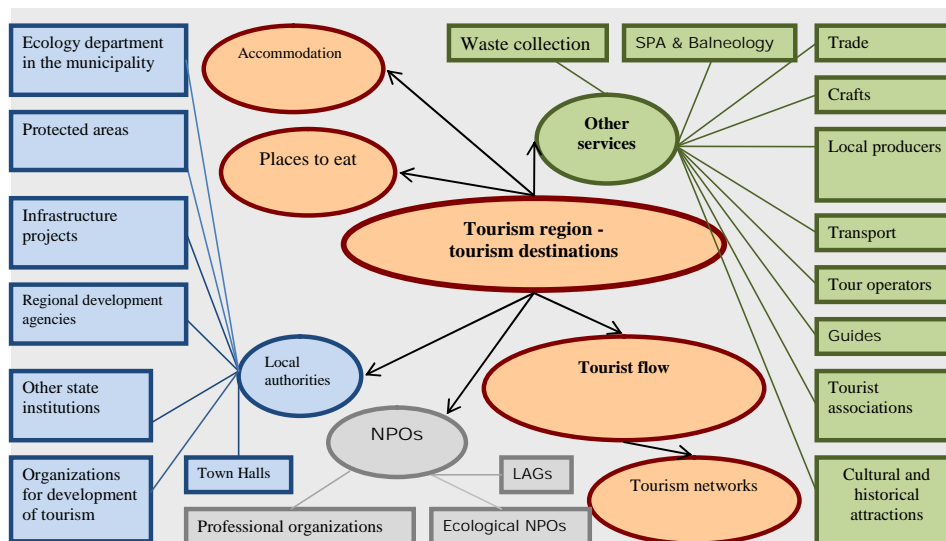


Fig.3 Stakeholders in tourism

The strategy for tourism development in Smolyan region is an attempt to create a model of partnership and cooperation of local authorities, state institutions, cultural and educational institutions, businesses and NGOs. In the working process a culture of behavior is created and communication on a public level by all participants in the process. Implementation of the Strategy for tourism development can lead to an increase in the share of the tourism industry

in the local economy, boosting the development of tourism-related industries, crafts and productions, increasing profitability of tourism enterprises and incomes.

In Smolyan are developed basic macro niches such as rural tourism (Shiroka laka, Nedelino), eco-tourism (Borino, Smolyan) and SPA tourism (Devin, Banite) and a dominant seasonal share has also winter tourism, which is mainly associated with the Pamporovo ski resort and Chepelare town. There are opportunities to develop niche tourism products in the area of cultural, ecological, route-cognitive tourism, mountain hiking, ethnic, culinary, ornithology, speleology, extreme, photo tourism, and fishing etc. in different municipalities and integrated tourism products in the region. But so far, they are not sufficiently developed. Separate additional services such as cycling, walking tour on environmental trails, visit a protected area or a reserve are offered as an additional service to the basic package - mostly rural and spa tourism.

Smolyan Municipality has great potential and unspent resources to develop year-round tourism. The segments of the tourism supply outside the winter season haven't been adequately developed yet. Conditions that favor the development of alternative forms of tourism are varied topography, the presence of extensive forests, rivers, lakes, caves, nature reserves, cultural heritage, preserved traditions and folklore. Tourism infrastructure is underdeveloped except in the villages of Shiroka laka, Stoikite, Momchilovci and Mogilitza. Rural and ecological tourism is mainly practiced and also micro niches of the event and festival tourism. Examples: Every first Sunday of March Shiroka laka hosts an annual Mummies Festival called "Pesponedelnik"; gathering herbs is offered as an attraction in Momchilovtsi as part of the service package of weekend tourism or rural tourism; ecotrails and bike paths near the village of Shiroka laka are 10: one of these is the trail - village of Shiroka laka – area Prevala – hut "Smolyanski ezera" (Smolyan Lakes), lasting 4 hours. The route starts from the village center towards Pamporovo. Walk along the forest road on the right bank of the river Oslen. In the beginning of the route the natural landmark "Letnata gora" (Summer Forest) is located which is a protected area in order to preserve the ancient fir and spruce forest. Along the way there are several springs - fountains and suitable places for relaxation, passing through beautiful areas of Livaditsa, Kabata, Prevala i Kriva reka. The trail runs along one of the Smolyan lakes and ends at the hut "Smolyanski ezera". Unfortunately favorable for summer recreation areas are using chaotic and unorganized. The unique natural beauty and rich cultural heritage are a prerequisite for the development of year-round tourism.

Banite Municipality has very good parameters in terms of environment - there are no significant polluters of the air, water and soil. A priority in the development of Banite Municipality is balneology treatment and tourism. The available natural conditions - clean nature, warm mineral water spring, rich flora and fauna, mild climate and varied relief – are all preconditions for development of various types of tourism - balneology, rural, fishing and hunting, extreme, etc. The constructed facilities include: balneology treatment complex with the Specialized Hospital for Rehabilitation, private family hotels, guest houses, rest homes and huts; established tourism routes for hiking and cycling. Opportunities for establishing new recreation areas exist in the following: Loukova Polyana locality, Chestoka locality, Yazovira locality, summer houses areas in Glogino, Bossilkovo and Krastatitsa etc. The network of tourism and eco-trails connects the population centers in the municipality to natural and cultural sights in it - Dyavolskia Most (a bridge), Svoboda peak, etc.

Borino Municipality has specific natural and anthropogenic resources that can be integrated with alternative forms of tourism. The region is ecologically clean, with unspoiled nature and biodiversity - a valuable resource for the development of ecological tourism. The varied terrain and cave formations are an attraction that is typical for the region and offer conditions for the development of cognitive and speleological tourism. Specialized types of tourism such as herbs gathering, ethno tourism and others can be organized too. There is a tendency to

increase the customers' awareness of resources, potential and new tourism products of the region. Generally Borino municipality has an opportunity to develop three macro niches as ecological, mountain and rural tourism and many micro niches such as ornithology, speleology, culinary, extreme tourism, etc. simultaneously diversifying single tourism product of the region, but there is also an opportunity for concentration of own niche products. The favorable climate and resources leads to a development of promotional mix of the region to uniform load of tourist resources. In the recent years, there is an increase in accommodation facilities to be able to meet the growing number of tourists in the region (Shopova& Grigorova, 2013).

The most valuable asset of the **Devin municipality** is the forests. Forestland covers 74% of the territory of the municipality and helps reproducing ecological environment for the development of organic farming and ecotourism. The municipality has exceedingly diverse flora and fauna. The northern slopes of the mountains are covered with spruce, fir and beech forests and the southern ones - with Scots and common pines, oaks, hornbeams, birches, sycamores, white firs, etc. The area is the breeding ground for quails, does, deer, wild goats, hazel-hens, grouses, mouflons, etc., and the rivers are abundant in fish, mainly mountain trout. The Municipality of Devin is extremely rich in natural sights and spots such as gorges, caves, rock formations, protected areas and nature reserves with endemic plants and animal species. The protected area "Trigrad Gorge" covers the most picturesque part of the river canyon with sheer walls up to 300 meters, areas that are close to each other hanging over the road, blocking the sky. One of the landmarks of the Trigrad Gorge is the cave "Dyavolsko garlo" (Devil's Throat). The waters of the Trigradska River cut their way through the cave and form 12 underground waterfalls - the largest of which has a height of 42 m /one of the highest in Europe/ and then reappears after 530 meters as impetuous karst spring. Extremely attractive place for tourists is the protected area "Chairite" - landslide lakes, ancient forest and hay meadows, located at 1600 meters altitude. Here are some exceptional natural phenomena: Prevaletniyat kamak which is a natural stone arch over 10 meters high, "Pijanata gora" (drunk forest) with trees, strangely distorted and inclined by landslides layers upon which they grow. Another unique natural phenomenon in the region is the seven landslide lakes, saved from the Quaternary period. The mineral springs are valuable for the development of spa and balneological tourism too. The preserved environment, the diverse relief, the mild climate, the picturesque landscape and the existence of curative mineral springs make the municipality suitable for many forms of modern tourism -ethnographic tourism, ecotourism, rural, hunting, fishing, archeological, and cultural and balneology tourism.

Dospat Municipality has an image of a destination with preserved nature, rich in biodiversity, various events, activities and opportunities for active recreation. In the area well developed are rural tourism - connected with the establishment of a network of guest houses in the villages within the municipality and development and marketing of specific products and services, and ecological tourism - related to the development of specialized infrastructure, services and products for monitoring natural phenomena, protected areas, ecosystems, plants, birds and animals. There are also conditions for sports, adventure and conference tourism. The municipality is implementing a project for "Trout fishing". Till 2020, the fisheries areas "High Western Rhodopes: Batak - Devin - Dospat" has to be economically growing, inland alpine territory, specializing in the production of trout and a leading destination in Bulgaria to catch trout on the basis of a synergy between sustainable use of unique natural resources of the area, biodiversity restoration and conservation of the ichthyofauna in natural and artificial aquatic ecosystems, production and processing of trout that adds value to the sector and the fishing area and also develops the fishing tourism. The municipality has a very high potential for the development of alternative types of tourism, which has so far remained unused. According to the expert report on the analysis of this sector, the tourism business at the

municipality's territory has no established traditions and experience to work with tour operators (www.dospat.bg). Eco-path construction, connecting Dospat with Gella village, has been initiated. The eco-path will pass by the Yagodinska cave, the Trigrad gorge and Moursalitsa locality. Further on, a cycling path is going to be built, and also a part of Dospat Dam Lake will be designated for water sports such as canoeing, rowing, jet riding, amateur boats and water skiing, as well as fishing and hunting. There is an idea of building a ski slope, because there are favorable conditions for it.

Nedelino Municipality relies on the development of rural tourism. Organized tourist groups have already started coming to cover the route Ardino – Nedelino - Zlatograd. There are no specialized tourist facilities, however all houses may offer accommodation and rent rooms. Forests are a strategic reserve of almost all activities in the municipality that are important for the development of the local economy- tourism, logging and wood processing, hunting and fishing, cultivation and processing of medicinal herbs, mushrooms and berries. Nedelino region is unique for its traditional folklore heritage.

Zlatograd municipality offers great opportunities for rural and eco - tourism. Unique nature, which combines clean mountain air, water resource, mountain and rock massif, remarkably preserved biodiversity, virgin nature habitats of many protected plants and animals are one of the largest resources of the area. The municipality has built nature trails and bike lanes: for example, Eco trail “Sveta Nedelya” (“Holy Sunday”; Zlatograd - Chapel “St. Nedelya”); Eco trail “Eco-echo” (Zlatograd - villa “Belotex”) that runs along the protected tree “Vekovniya kesten” (*Castanea sativa*), 278 years - the oldest in the district of Smolyan; The bike lane “Dam Zlatograd” is 2 km long, starting from Zlatograd, near the Roman bridge (monument) and runs entirely on an asphalt road. The bike lane “Zlatograd – St. Nedelya -Startsevo-Thracian sanctuary - “Belite kamani” (White Stones) is 8 km long and it passes in an open farm road, leads to villa “Belotex” and then continue to the village of Startsevo and reaches Thracian sanctuary “Belite kamani”. Another attraction in the area is the ostrich farm in the village of Startsevo. Here visitors can learn interesting facts about the birds and can try specialties from ostrich meat or eggs. An interesting combination of eco and fishing tourism offers the “Yagnevo” complex, Ivaylovgrad dam, river Varbitsa. A subject of cultural tourism can be other places located within the municipality or neighboring municipalities. In the “White Stones” locality above the village of Startsevo there is the largest shrine dedicated to the Sun God (Ivanova et al., 2012).

Among the main attractions of the **Madan municipality** are the Crystal Hall “Rhodope crystal” that holds 581 mineral specimen and is a member of the International Association of Mineralogical Museums; Roman bridges along the rivers Madanska, Hadzhiyska and Batanska; rock phenomenon “Konska glava” (Horse head); cave-museum “Sharenka”(party-colored). The area “Gabata” (sponge) is a solid rock with a small cave in which was found pottery pieces from different eras. Following the path in the rock massif the Thracian mines can be reached, which were discovered primitive tools for extraction of ore and clay lamps. Nearby can be seen the rock Rimpapa -50 m high, resembling a man in a cloak. It is suitable for rock climbing. Behind it can be seen remains from an ancient village, where traces of clay pipe were found. The municipality has opportunities to develop ecotourism, rural tourism, hunting, hiking and motorcycling, rock and speleological tourism.

Rudozem municipality has a potential for development of different types of tourism, such as mountainous, rural, folklore, cycling, horse riding, extreme tourism, hunting, fishing, eco-tourism, cultural tourism and others. The nature and cultural heritage are conducive to the establishing of Vacation villages in the villages of Polyana, Ribnitsa, Ravninata, Chepintsi and others. In some localities a unique diversity of animal and plant species has been preserved, such as those in Mochoura village and Plovdivtzi village. At present, tourism is underdeveloped as an economic activity in the municipality.

Chepelare Municipality has a well-developed network of thematic routes. Within the municipality the recreational tourist and sports facilities are concentrated in the town of Chepelare and Pamporovo. The emphasis on winter sports is a result of standing tradition and the existing resources. The municipality is a particularly suitable tourist destination for young people and children. It can be also used for training top corporate management and government officials in teambuilding. There are conditions for religious tourism and the municipality has experience in this respect. The rock formations and the caves, together with the existing Museum of Karst in the Rhodopes Mountain, make the area a center of spelunking.

The above resource characteristics of the municipalities in the region of Smolyan are not exhausted, but they provide a clear picture of the tourism potential of the area. According to Singh (2010) market is adept at adaptation and intelligent reproduction. Figure 4 is adapted to the needs of the present study following the example that the author gave. He also talked about the so-called sub-niches that can be developed and added to the basic tourist package. For example in the region of Smolyan: acquiring culinary skills while tourist is staying in a farmhouse; business meetings and conferences in non-traditional environments; diversifying the transit tourism, with several hours of downtime, lined with tourist services and products, etc.

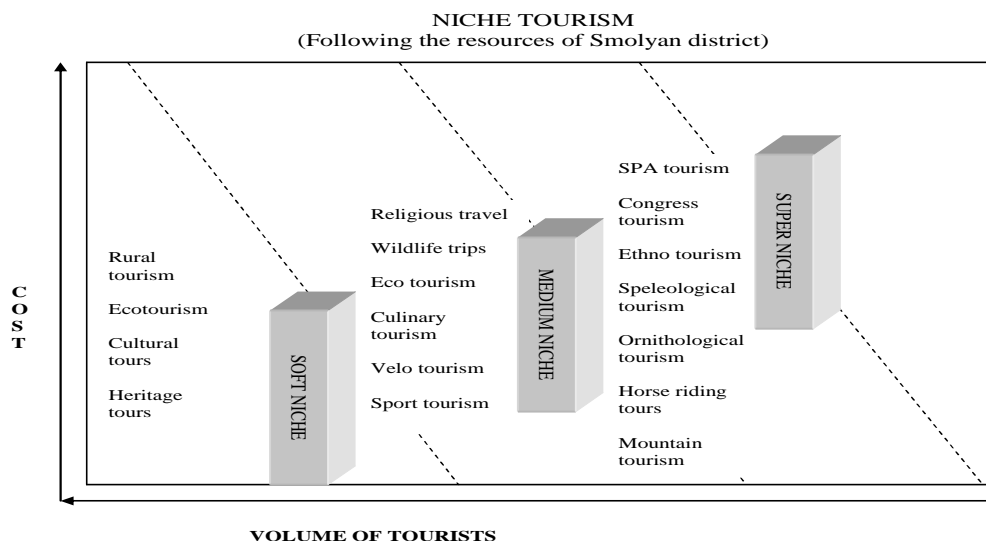


Fig.4 Presentation of the niches for alternative tourism in Smolyan district

Generally development of a methodology for identification and evaluation of tourism resources based on a region characteristic would support the improvement of action plans at regional /local level, and the strategies for integrated development of tourism in the area. The main stages are planning and preparation activities, conducting operations and reporting the results. Preparation includes a working team, engagement, defining the interested parties, setting goals and objectives, schedule of activities and allocation of responsibilities, and communication. The second stage includes functional analysis of the current situation and giving some conclusions and recommendations. The final stage of each methodology should give the finished product to the possible implementation and the team is responsible for the applicability of the displayed recommendations and goals.

According to Masip (2006) the process to create products is complex and it requires the existence of a management organization that should lead, coordinate, structure, develop and implement the process. It will also be necessary that all the different issues related to the process of product creation are coordinated to be able to guarantee its success, always taking

into account the economic perspective, social development and protection of the environment. The author also stated that there are five different areas and the result is the stimulation of tourist consumption in a destination: *initial stage* - existence of a motivation to travel; *basis* - resources and attractions are the basis of a destination; *creation process* - it requires not only the existence or creation of infrastructures, facilities and services but also the development of specific activities or experiences. The result of the process can be seen as the tourism supply of a destination; *communication* - once tourism supply is created, there will be functional and emotional benefits that can be communicated to markets and target audiences through the creation of an image and the correct positioning. The values provided by the product should also be communicated and promoted to stimulate consumption; *result* - the consumption of tourism products in a destination.

In this case, the development of competitive integrated tourism products along the lines of Smolyan district, the following steps could be used:

1. *Determination of local tourism resources*
2. *Determination of resources with new tourism potential* - the main reason for tourists to visit a destination: **a).** natural resources; **b).** anthropogenic resources; **c).** cultural attractions; modern and traditional culture; **d).** attractions - focus on them, seeking their natural or thematic grouping; **e).** activities.
3. *Recommendations to develop products in destinations* - combining the specific characteristics of the product to the market segment: **a).** possibilities of the region to attract tourists with its uniqueness, even for activities that can be performed in other popular destinations; **b).** quality –a complex category that covers both consumer attitudes (price-quality) and the level of resources protection; **c).** authenticity - community-based tourism; **d).** uniqueness - a package of tourism products, offering new experiences for the customer.
4. *Stages of product development:* **a).** initial stage - idea generation, concept development, marketing strategy; **b).** business Analysis - forecasting the product success; **c).** development and testing of the product; **d).** commercialization - the correct positioning of the product determines its future perception.
5. *Competitive advantage and competition analysis:* **a).** following the examples of good practice; **b).** identifying the competitors; **c).** using the competitive advantage.
6. *Marketing and Advertising:* **a).** orientated to the consumer; **b).** an individual approach; **c).** resources and attractions to be easily accessible, etc.
7. *Innovative approaches:* **a).** market Approach; **b).** market segmentation
8. *Management of the tourism product* - an integrated approach: **a).** sustainable tourism products and **b).** stakeholders;

Conclusions and Recommendations

Based on the example of Smolyan district and the exemplary methodology the following conclusions can be made: the development of new eco-tourism routes, fulfilling the criteria for sustainable and responsible tourism, is one of the mechanisms for the successful management of areas with unique natural resources and specific landscape, which contributes to the conservation of biodiversity, ecosystems and scenery, and also can contribute to local community development. Their importance as a specialized tourism product has been already evaluated during the International Ecotourism Forum, held in Sofia in 2003, “Ecotourism - Naturally Bulgaria”.

The concept of sustainable tourism development is attracting more and more the business in Bulgaria, focusing on the balance that must be reached between tourism and other real and potential activities - tourism that is developing in a specific territory in such manner and on

such a scale that remains viable for long periods of time without damaging or changing the environment (social and natural), and contributing to the successful development of all other activities and processes. Very significant and important is the monitoring of tourism development that aims proper planning and forecasting to enable adequate and timely responses before some negative impacts appeared, causing permanent damage to the tourist destination. Monitoring is one of the weaknesses of the Bulgarian tourism and this reflects in its sustainable development. Therefore, the proposed methodology contributes to the sustainable tourism development.

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