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## **EDUCATION IN ECOLOGICAL TOURISM AND THE USE OF ECOLOGICAL EDUCATIONAL PATHS**

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### **Abstract:**

Bulgaria is an unexplored and attractive tourist destination offering diverse and matchless opportunities in tourist activities. One opportunity could be the ecologically tourism based on natural sightseeing tours and visiting beautiful sites, experiencing customs and rites. Tourism can preserve the environment as well help rise locals' standard of living. Introducing ecological educational paths (with correctly defined goals), helps achieve new knowledge, foster already taught ideas in school and acquire new skills. Well educated and theoretically prepared specialists who are united in the idea of “correct tourism” and by sending clear messages can help give a lift to Bulgarian ecological tourism.

*Key words:* ecological tourism, educative ecological paths, education, knowledge, skills.

### **INTRODUCTION**

People working in the sphere of tourism are getting more and more involved into ecological problems. These problems are closely related to the results of their economical activities because protecting nature from tourism sets up very serious questions on the sustainable development of tourist industry. A recent survey led by UNIEP/IE shows that the most important resource to boost incomes from tourism appears to be the environment. Further, when these incomes are invested in those regions, they create an economic base which could help preserve the natural ecosystems.

Modern ecological tourist policy aims at searching and developing new branches of tourism that tend to establish harmony with nature and reach an equilibrium between the specific interests of local people and tourist activities. Ecological tourism is one of these varieties. Tourist organizations and travel agencies as well their clients show a

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new approach towards nature. Ecotourism in its ideal form combines philosophy, activity, development policy, and new approach to environmental issues.

Ecotourism appears to be an interdisciplinary tendency that ensures the interrelationship between tourist interests, environmental protection and keeping traditions and culture alive. There is a substantial difference between tourist agents who offer traditional routes through nature, and the organizers of ecological visits. Those mentioned first do not have any obligations in protecting nature – they just offer visits to interesting places and show traditions and customs. The second group of agencies invest large amounts of financial means in order to preserve and protect wild nature as well support local people (very generally said) in the long run.

There are many definitions by different authors and organizations of what ecological tourism is. Table 1 presents some definitions by western authors (Ledovskikh, E.Yu. et al. 2002)

**Table 1**

N	Author, year	Definition
1	Ziffer, 1989	Ecotourism is a complex concept closely related to the effective use and preservation of biodiversity to our future generations. It is planning and managing tourist activities where along with tourists' interests public goals should be put into practice.
2	Evans-Pritchard, D. and Salazar, S., 1992	Well-planned and organised tourist activities comprise of enjoying nature and the satisfaction to realize how human beings understand interrelationships in nature. These human activities do not harm the environment we live in. They contribute to the preservation of nature, support and keep protect it, create economic opportunities, etc. – real ecotourism brings justice for people and nature.
3	Ceballos-Lascurain, 1993	Ecological tourism is “a responsible journey amidst the environment and relatively well preserved territories. Its goal is to study and enjoy nature and cultural sites, and this journey helps preserve nature. These journeys exercise a soft impact on the environment, thus ensuring an active participation of locals in social and economic activities, and whose advantages locals benefit most of”.
4	Valentine, P., 1993	Ecotourism : <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• exists in relatively preserved territories;</li> <li>• does not affect the environment or worsen its natural properties;</li> <li>• contributes to the preservation and management of natural territories;</li> <li>• can be adequately and competently managed.</li> </ul>
5	Lindberg, K., 1998	Ecotourism is sustainable and nature-oriented tourism and recreation.
6	Fennell, D., 1999	Ecotourism is an ecologically sustainable form of common tourism, oriented towards life forms of wild nature with cognitive features. The organization applies to ethical norms in such way that ecotourism's impact on environment, consumption and costs are minimal, and it is oriented to cover local needs. This form of tourism is to be found in protected territories and contributes to their sustainable preservation.
7	Ross, S. and Wall, G., 1999	Ecotourism can protect nature and its development. It includes positive interrelationships between tourist activities, biodiversity, and locals by making use of organizational and managerial means.
8	Weaver, D.B., 1999	Ecotourism includes three main criteria: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• flora, fauna, and geological formations appear to be the main</li> </ul>

		<p>landmarks which attract tourists;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• understanding the cultural environment comes as next main component;</li> <li>• tourists' activities make soft impact on the physical and cultural environment in the regions to be visited.</li> </ul> <p>Ecotourism should be brought into connection with the term sustainable tourism. This means that it should not exceed the recreational possibilities of the regions and be acceptable for locals in order to support their standard of living.</p>
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Ecotourism is an important detail in the sustainable development of natural territories. In most definitions of ecotourism, the putting down of negative impacts on nature and cultural environment is a main goal along with exercising economic efforts aiming at preserving nature. Other means include ecological and educational activities.

Bulgaria shows optimal conditions for the development of ecological tourism thanks to its diverse natural and geographical structure, to its incredible diversity of geological and geomorphic formations, to the rich flora and fauna, specific landscapes, rich history and culture. This entity is very attractive to ecological tourism. On the other hand protected areas in Bulgaria (national parks, reservations, protected landmarks, etc.) can ensure an ecological coziness to ecotourists.

Enlarging the scope of ecological tourism brings a significant enlargement of new territories. In some cases, this is at the expense of regions with extremely fragile nature whose protection requires new and more substantial efforts and larger financial means (See the example of Natura 2000). Further, on this enlargement contradicts to local peoples' interests who of course want to obtain a larger share from other forms of mass tourism.

The main principles (Ledovskikh et al., 2002) of ecotourism include:

- every visit is closely connected to understanding live nature and to local habits and cultures;
- reduction of the negative impact of ecological, social, and cultural origin in order to obtain an ecologically sustainable environment;
- co-operation in order to protect nature and local social and cultural environment;
- ecological education and training;
- engaging local people in order that they obtain financial advantages from tourist activities as well creating stimuli to protect nature;
- including economic activities into the sustainable development of the visited regions.

Mountains are regions, too, which offer various opportunities to ecological tourism. Zhetchev & Stoilov (1999) classify Bulgarian mountaneous regions as: a) regions with relatively good opportunities for ecological tourism; b) as mountains with good opportunities; and c) as mountains with best opportunities.

From this point of view – negative impact on the environment caused by mass tourism and hindering its development, we can point out the following consequences:

- decrease of natural resources resulting from ineffective development and setting false goals in the region's infrastructure and inadequate protective regime of the territory;
- degradation as a result of inappropriate tourist movements in a certain region;

- pollution and contamination caused by the vast tourist flows due to increase of economic interests of locals.

In order to eliminate or diminish the negative impact of tourism on nature, and to exclude negative ecological features, there are a great number of methods and measures which can help manage the ecological effect of tourism. One possibility is to establish ecological paths (ecopaths) aiming at enlarging recreational options by simultaneously exercising minimal negative impact on nature. Tourists in the system of ecological tourism use these ecopaths.

The development of ecological tourism demands from its members a high grade of ecological culture and awareness. There are a great number of NGOs like the Russian Organization for Right Ecotourism, which follow these set of goals. Its members include students and schoolchildren. One of their goals is the preservation of traditions along with educating younger participants. The Neophyt Rilsky SouthWest University of Blagoevgrad and especially the Faculty of Economics are offering a specialized course in Village and Ecological Tourism to their students.

The implementation of a larger number of educational measures reduces the negative impact of tourism on the environment, or it can lead even to its elimination. Modern informational means can contribute to the explication of how to improve, implement, and better explain educational aims and goals. D.L. Armand (1969) points out some features:

- The kindergarten should be a starting point where one can begin with these activities.
- School curricula should include topics on protection of nature (in geography classes);
- The lack of educated instructors and professional guides in tourism could be overcome when universities and faculties start offering such courses;
- Tourists (in general terms) should become aware of the fact that they can enjoy pure nature and local culture if their positive attitude were amended with information of the most diverse kind (brochures, leaflets, historical information, etc.)
- Specially trained personnel (rangers, firefighters, medical personal, cleaners, etc., should take care of the tourist destinations (national parks, reservations, protected territories, etc.) ;
- A tough regime for visitors in reservation zones should be applied.

Information and advertisement are very important for ecological tourism. The system can be enlarged by using printing materials on how to improve nature preservation. Films, leaflets and brochures can inform the public about the essence, goals, aims and problems of ecological tourism and how to implement these means into practice. A very useful example is the UK where a leaflet called "A guide on how to preserve nature" is distributed among tourists providing useful information on the needs and methods of ecological behaviour in nature.

From a theoretical point of view, a large number of problems with relation to ecological tourism are treated in the works of Y. Veselinov and M. Toshkov (1979), V.P. Tchizhova et all. (1981), I. Kandilarov (1983), Z. Kostova (1987, 1992), V. Stoilov (1984), D. Stoilov and V. Zhetchev (1998), etc.

The term "training path" appears for the first time in the US in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when the ranger Benton McKay proposed a path for pedestrians be established in the Appalachian Mountains. The idea of "educational tourism" was

presented in Bansko on the Conference on preservation and reproduction of environment (1995). Ecological tourism is tourism amidst nature, practiced by tourist with the aim to be acquainted with natural beauties and to build up passion and responsible attitude towards nature. For this reason, it is more appropriate to call this tourism “educational ecological tourism”. Participants could be schoolboys and schoolgirls as well students with interests in ecological problems. This kind of ecological and educational tourism can be realized by means of the so-called “educational ecological paths”.

P. Petrov and A. Kiselkova (1998) state the first definition of an ecological path. In the following years this term is enlarged and used many times – there are definitions like: “The ecopath is a path for pedestrians in an unspoiled environment which is a specific form for its protection by regulating the tourists’ flows and its ecologically-friendly management”.

There should be pure and unspoiled nature, through which this ecopath runs, and tourist should take care of nature – this special requirement should always be taken into consideration. The paths in the mountains do not offer any convenient means for walking or wandering because there are many eroded sections, parts with dense vegetation, scree, rockslides, water barriers, etc. Foreign experience (Russia, Czech Republic, and Slovakia) along with ours requires and points out that development activities are needed which of course do not have any impact on natural environment (V. Ponomarenko et al., 1984).

Ecological tourism does not depend on tourists’ nature-friendly behaviour only; it depends on the well-organised environment in zones in national and natural parks for short- and long-term recreation. Here we can use the term ecologically suitable tourist landscape where discreet development is applied in order to meet certain tourist’s expectations, and the feeling that they are amid nature and in an environment, they are searching for by escaping from urbanization.

The ecological educational path (EEP) is a marked path, which runs through nature, and where ecological education and training with students could be conducted (Tchizhova, V. P. et al., 1981).

V. Ponomarenko et al. 1984 puts the stress on protective education, e.g. to develop passion for nature, to take care of nature, and to feel individually responsible for the consequences.

These kinds of paths are widely used for educational purposes in countries with high level of environmental protection awareness like the UK, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Russia, Estland and others. The terms used for such paths are called “scientific paths, educational natural paths, educational and cognitive paths”, or even “educational ecological paths”. These paths run through the most interesting, typical and unique parts of nature, and they follow specialized goals.

The educational ecological path should contribute to the acquisition of a certain scope of knowledge, and at the same time it should build up in tourists a passion for nature and that they feel responsible for its preservation. There are two main requirements for an ecological path:

- Attractive to tourists; and
- Informative – e.g. to respond to cognitive needs.

All in one – the path should run through such a zone, which can offer tourists a variety of landscapes, different kinds of woods, geological formations, and other natural parts typical for a certain region (Tchizhova V.P. et al., 1981).

In order to gain more attractiveness, the educational ecological paths should provide for some watching places from where to watch characteristic landscapes, if possible - archeological sites with excavations, historical landmarks, small hamlets, etc. Here are some criteria on how and where to establish an educational ecological path:

- The route should run through the most remarkable sites which are of scientific, esthetic and informational importance – rock and geological formations, ancient trees and forests, historical, archeological, ethnographic sites of interest, etc.;
- The route should run far away from fragile places, habitats, or objects.

Thus creating ecological educational paths in frequently visited regions the visitors can acquire a large amount of knowledge on how they can more effectively preserve nature and the environment.

The Pirin, Rila, Vitosha, and Strandja Mountains offer a large number of educational ecological paths. The Western part and the Middle part of the Rhodopa Mountains can offer to students interesting routes and places, too. A special feature is to properly mark the path, to select a suitable route, to place signs and display panels, to prepare informational leaflets and brochures, etc. In the course of the paths, the instructor should be able to draw the attention of the visitors (students, tourists) on natural phenomena, unique formations, typical species (flora and fauna), etc. as well explain the interrelationship between them. The instructor should point out the negative consequences on nature – pollution, implications due to forest fires, automobile traffic outside border zones, etc. The main goal – raising high the awareness in preserving natural richness – should be perceived by all possible means. In ecological tourism the prepared and educated tourist matters, not the number of tourists.

Students should be well acquainted with rules on how to wander in the mountains and be made familiar with ecological tourist requirements. A small leaflet where precautions are listed would be of great help to all participants – general rules of behaviour in the mountains, how to deal with fire, vegetation preservation measures, picking up herbs, fruits, and mushrooms, preservation of wells, keeping silent, etc.

A well-prepared and fruitful visit needs good organization and a clear set up of goals and aims. Students gain new knowledge on the ecological paths when they visit a chosen area which suits the requirements as studied in the classroom. Most frequently, this happens in the form of a conversation on the watching place. Here students gain specific skills in

- Organization and discipline – moving around in groups, at a slow pace, no loud conversations or cries, no touches at walls, etc.;
- Industry – students can remove dry branches, gather litter from the ground, repair panels, signs, or birds' coops, etc.
- How to distinct between poisonous and eatable mushrooms, pick up plants or herbs, etc.;
- Prevent fires in the woods – they are acquainted with different rules, etc.

To mark a visit to the nature as ecological, the result should be an improvement in preserving the environment. Ecological tourists improve nature's features, and not the number of tourists counts but the results of these visits. Planning and organization of tourist visits into the nature is of extreme importance.

## CONCLUSION

Ecotourism means wise and sustainable tourism. Ecotourism counts on tourists' motivation to rest reasonably in nature, to take care of natural resources and to minimize harmful impacts on the environment taking into consideration the ecological, cultural and economical aspects during such visits. A very special feature of ecological tourism is that it stimulates, provokes and satisfies natural needs to cope with nature. This way of behaviour helps preserve nature by avoiding negative impacts caused by tourists and travel agencies on a cultural level, and it helps boost the social and economical development of the regions.

Despite given favorable conditions, ecological tourism in Bulgaria is still underdeveloped. It is important that the people involved in this branch be better educated. Educational institutions should offer more specialized courses to students, travel agencies, and guides. In schools ecological education should become part of the curriculum, and implementation of ecological educational paths should become regular practice.

Society can (and even must) help integrate scientific approaches into practice. Partnership and mutual understanding is needed between institutions of higher education, tourism colleges, and other institutions where tourist cadres are educated and trained. To implement this formula into practice an interrelationship and balance between ecological, economical, and social interests must be established, or in other words – a correct tourism should be created.

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