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Sustainable development and tourism: towards quality growth

Committee Opinion¹

Committee on the Environment, Agriculture and Local and Regional Affairs

Rapporteur: Ms Carina OHLSSON, Sweden, Socialist Group

A. Conclusions of the committee

1. The Committee on the Environment, Agriculture and Local and Regional Affairs would like to thank Mr Mendes Bota for the excellent report he drew up for the Committee on Economic Affairs and Development. The report is very well documented and it tackles the most important issues linked to tourism, *inter alia*, the rise of tourism markets in central and eastern European countries, the link between tourism and local communities, the economic but also the environmental benchmarks for balanced tourism growth, the “carrying capacity” of tourist sites in protected areas and in coastal zones, congestion management and spatial planning, the relationship between tourism and climate change, etc.

B. Explanatory memorandum, by Mrs Ohlsson

1. The Committee on the Environment, Agriculture and Local and Regional Affairs would like to focus its opinion on a topic less developed in the report, that is to say rural tourism.

2. Rural tourism is an aspect of particular concern for the Committee on the Environment, Agriculture and Local and Regional Affairs, as it represents a link between its main fields of interest. The report of the Committee on Economic Affairs and Development already stresses (in paragraph 4) the importance of tourism to the development of regions and in particular its role in “stimulating local infrastructure improvements and the preservation of employment in areas of rural decline or undergoing rural regeneration”. It also stresses that “sustainable development offers a forward looking approach that can help local communities to make the best of tourism and development”.

3. The Committee on the Environment, Agriculture and Local and Regional Affairs fully supports this point of view and underlines that rural tourism creates a clear winwin situation for the tourists themselves, for the hosts in the countryside (both inhabitants and local authorities) and for the rural environment and agriculture as well, the only requisite being respect of the principles of sustainable development.

4. The number of tourists involved today in rural tourism has increased significantly in the last decades and tourism has developed in all types of countryside instead of being limited to areas of exceptional scenic beauty. In its broader concept, rural tourism now includes 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. It covers not only farm tourism or agritourism (which is generally what rural tourism means for most people), but also special interest nature holidays, touring in rural areas and residential tourism. The services offered nowadays include, besides accommodation, different events, local festivities and activities, outdoor recreation, educational visits for children, production and sale of handicrafts and agricultural products.

1. See [Doc. 11539](#) presented by the Committee on Economic Affairs and Development.



5. However, the term “rural tourism” has different meanings in different countries. In France and in the United Kingdom, as in Finland, rural tourism usually means renting out cottages to visitors or providing catering services in the countryside. In Hungary, a special term of “village tourism” exists, indicating that only activities and services provided in villages are included in this kind of tourism. In Slovenia, the most important form of rural tourism is tourism at family farms, where guests stay either with the farmer family or in a guest house, but visiting farms to have a meal and explore the farmyard is also popular. In the Netherlands, rural tourism means especially camping on the farm, with most farm services being linked to route-bound activities such as cycling, walking or horse-riding. In Greece, the main provision of rural tourism is bed and breakfast with accommodation in traditionally furnished rooms and with traditional breakfasts often based on home-made products. In Poland, a country with vast forests, a specific form of tourism is proposed to people willing to spend their holidays in guest rooms in forest-located houses.

6. Rural tourism, when done properly, can indeed contribute to important increases for the income of farmers and enable rural communities to finance infrastructure investments, which would lead to a more prosperous agriculture and related industries. However, if not well organised, in accordance with the size and the characteristics of the host rural areas, tourism might also endanger the environment – in its larger meaning – and harm the cultural identity of the hosts.

7. Rural tourism could be a real tool for the sustainable development of the rural areas, if it is used in a responsible manner, which means, in this case, keeping the balance between the legitimate quest for increased incomes for locals and profits for travel agencies, on one side, and the preservation of the quality of the hosting area, by protecting the heritage and by contributing to the conservation of the rural environment (so that tourism can stay a perennial activity), on the other side. If properly managed, rural tourism has the potential to increase the viability of less developed regions and, at the same time, to decrease the stress induced by mass tourism to the most popular tourist areas, by offering alternative holiday destinations (for example, making a number of tourists move from crowded coastal areas to inland regions).

8. The characteristics of European tourist areas vary enormously, with some harmful consequences coming from poorly managed tourism: inappropriate architectural planning (buildings that do not integrate in the landscape and/or where there are simply too many for a given area); soil erosion due to deforestation and excessive skiing; human-induced forest fires, etc. If not correctly managed, rural tourism can therefore have its own particularly harmful effects: tourists being usually most attracted by the industrially least developed regions, and those being regions particularly sensitive to human interference, increased stress due to tourism (or changes induced by adaptation to tourists' wishes) may change or irreversibly damage the rural landscape and the natural and cultural values of a given region.

9. The local and regional authorities can play an important role in developing environmentally friendly rural tourism by promoting, at their level, the principle of sustainable development in any activity related to tourism – and to rural tourism in particular.

C. Amendments to the draft recommendation proposed by the committee

Amendment A (to the draft recommendation)

In paragraph 9, after the words “If state authorities and international institutions are primarily responsible for providing political commitment and policies conducive to sustainability in tourism” add the words “, local and regional authorities are responsible as well for the promotion of an environmentally-friendly tourism in their respective areas”. Then continue as follows: “The contribution of the private sector ...”.

Amendment B (to the draft recommendation)

After paragraph 12.1.9, add a new paragraph reading as follows:

“promote rural tourism, in particular in less developed regions, by using incentives – including of a financial nature – to stimulate the inhabitants of those regions to consider developing tourism as a possible secondary income;”

Amendment C (to the draft recommendation)

In paragraph 12.1.12, replace the text in brackets with the following: “(the young, the elderly, families, repeat/experienced visitors and especially the handicapped, who have specific needs and for whom lack of adequate infrastructures can discourage them from travelling as tourists)”.

Amendment D (to the draft recommendation)

After paragraph 13.3, add a new paragraph reading as follows:

“encourage local and regional authorities to promote rural tourism, while fully respecting the principle of sustainable development;”.

Reporting committee: Committee on Economic Affairs and Development.

Committees for opinion: Committee on Culture, Science and Education and Committee on the Environment, Agriculture and Local and Regional Affairs.

Reference to committee: [Doc. 11069](#) and Reference No. 3290 of 22 January 2007 and Reference No. 3316 of 16 March 2007.

Opinion approved by the committee on 27 March 2008. See 18th Sitting, 18 April 2008 (adoption of the draft recommendation, as amended); and [Recommendation 1835](#)).