



Analysis of Tourists' Perception of the "Danube Delta" Biosphere Reserve

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ABSTRACT

The paper focuses on the Romanian space included in the Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve, which, unlike the pre-socialist period, is in a broad process of development based on sustainable principles. The purpose of this paper was to analyze the perception of Romanian tourists on tourist attractions and the importance of actors' involvement in the protection and conservation of the Danube Delta, including for the benefit of ecotourism, through a questionnaire-based survey. It is mentioned that the information collected from the field was included for a more complete picture of the situation in the analysis space. At the moment, the study can be considered a tool for analyzing the results, especially since some of the respondents come from the university environment and with studies focused on the environment.

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1. Introduction

The Danube Delta, like other deltaic systems vulnerable to natural and anthropogenic changes, has come to the attention of the academic and research world and international non-governmental organizations. Thus, the Danube Delta obtained the status of World Heritage Site (like the Po Delta, Saloum Delta, and Okavango Delta), UNESCO Biosphere Reserve in 1991 [1, 2, 3], following which changes were made in the management policies applied to the Danube Delta. This situation occurred after the replacement of the political regime in 1989, when Romania (to which approximately 80% of the surface of the Danube Delta belongs, the rest belonging to Ukraine) [4] passed from a dictatorial political regime to a democratic and social one.

In this context, traditional methods of exploiting the resources of the Danube Delta have become incompatible with the new environmental conservation and protection policies.

Thus, new management policies have led to the limitation of the practice of traditional economic activities (such as fishing and animal husbandry), to regulations in various fields, especially in fishing, to complex measures and the application of nature-based solutions to develop a nature-based economy, depending on the characteristics of the area and the local population. And the ecotourism has become an opportunity in the sustainable development of the delta area. In this sense, the Danube Delta is part of the adaptation process of changing deltaic systems worldwide [5].

2. Tourist survey and data analysis methodology

Data for the research were collected through a questionnaire-based survey administered to the Romanian population, with the questionnaire written in Romanian. A convenience sampling method was utilized. To determine eligibility for participation, a filter question was employed: "Have you ever been a tourist in the Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve?" Out of the 405 completed surveys collected via social networks between January and February 2024, 289 responses were validated. Among these, 71.3% of respondents answered "yes," indicating their interest in the Danube Delta as a tourist destination. The remaining respondents (27.4%) were not currently interested but did not rule out the possibility of future interest. The questionnaire comprised two parts. The first part collected socio-demographic information, including gender, age, current residence, education level, and the nature of studies (focusing on environmental sciences or other fields). The second part consisted of 18 items (labeled ST1-ST18) regarding the importance of various preferences related to tourism (as shown in Table 2) and included multiple-choice questions about the frequency of trips and average length of stay. Respondents assessed the importance of these preferences on a Likert scale related to tourist attractions and the involvement of actors in protecting and preserving the Danube Delta for the development of ecotourism. The collected data were analyzed using both descriptive and

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inferential statistical methods. The normality of the data was assessed using the Shapiro-Wilk test, which indicated all significance levels were less than 0.05—demonstrating that none of the variables in this study followed a normal distribution. Consequently, the non-parametric Mann-Whitney test was utilized to determine significant differences in tourists' perceptions of the importance of criteria based on socio-demographic characteristics. Data analysis was performed using SPSS Statistics for Windows, version 23.0.

3. The results of the tourist survey

According to the attached table (Table no. 1), the situation of the responses is: high values are held by the female group, the group between 30 - 69 years old, those with higher education and focused on natural sciences/environment.

Table 1. Socio-demographic characteristics of respondents

Characteristic	Category	n	%
Gender	Female	163	56.40
	Male	126	43.60
Age	18-29 years old	139	48.09
	30-69 years old	150	51.91
Current residence	Urban	227	78.54
	Rural	62	21.46
Completed studies	High school and post-high school	85	29.41
	University and postgraduate	204	70.59
Nature of studies completed	Sciences focused on nature / environment	168	58.13
	Other sciences (economics, social etc.)	121	41.87

The respondents evaluated on a Likert scale the preferences related to the importance of tourist attractions, and the involvement of actors in protection and conservation (Table no. 2).

The respondents had the following frequency of trips to the Danube Delta in the last 10 years:

- ✧ once - 52.00%;
- ✧ 2 times - 17.64%;
- ✧ 3 times - 12.80%;
- ✧ more than four times - 13.84%,
- ✧ 4 times - the rest.

And the average length of stay was: 1-2 nights - 32.53%;3-4 nights - 35.98%;5 nights and over - 16.95%; the rest at night.

Table 2. The importance of tourist motivations related to tourist attractions and the importance of actors' involvement in the conservation of the Danube Delta

	Statements	Scale (%)					MEAN	SD
		1	2	3	4	5		
The importance of the motivations of tourist attractions	Flora and fauna (ST1)	0.00	0.00	2.08	21.80	76.12	4.74	0.48
	Traditional activities (fishing, hunting) (ST2)	1.04	3.11	12.11	35.64	48.10	4.27	0.99
	Local cuisine (ST3)	0.00	0.69	9.34	36.33	53.63	4.43	0.76
	Beach, sun and sea (ST4)	1.73	2.08	15.57	35.99	44.64	4.20	1.05
	Water rides (ST5)	0.00	1.38	4.15	25.95	68.51	4.62	0.65
	Outdoor walks (ST6)	0.35	0.35	6.57	26.99	65.74	4.57	0.68
	Rest and relaxation (ST7)	0.35	0.35	5.54	19.72	74.05	4.67	0.63
	Cultural heritage (ST8)	0.35	2.08	9.34	31.49	56.75	4.42	0.84
	Recreational sports and sports resources (ST9)	4.15	7.27	28.72	33.56	26.30	3.71	1.48
The importance of actors' involvement in the conservation of the Danube Delta	Government (ST10)	14.53	5.88	12.46	16.26	50.87	3.83	1.47
	Non-governmental organizations/associations (ST11)	13.15	9.69	17.65	26.99	32.53	3.56	1.40
	Town halls and local councils (ST12)	12.11	4.15	14.19	12.11	57.44	3.99	1.41
	Environmental experts (ST13)	14.19	4.50	10.38	19.03	51.90	3.90	1.44
	University education institutions (ST14)	9.00	14.88	19.72	22.84	33.56	3.57	1.35
	Mass- media (ST15)	12.11	6.92	16.96	20.76	43.25	3.76	1.38
	Communities and volunteering (ST16)	9.00	12.46	14.88	27.34	36.33	3.70	1.32
	Tourists (ST17)	10.73	7.61	16.96	18.69	46.02	3.82	1.37
	Department of Tourist and Environmental Police (ST18)	1.04	1.04	2.08	17.65	78.20	4.71	0.66

The analysis of the Likert Scale assessment of the importance of tourist attractions shows high importance scores (average > 4) for most of the statements (ST1-ST8) (Table no. 2). Statistically significant values for p-values were obtained for certain socio-demographic characteristics (Table no. 3)

Table 3. Results of the Mann-Whitney U test of socio-demographic characteristics and importance of the motivations of tourist attractions

Characteristic	Category	ST1	ST2	ST3	ST4	ST5	ST6	ST7	ST8	ST9
Gender	Female	4.72	4.19	4.42	4.15	4.58	4.55	4.60	4.39	3.48
	Male	4.76	4.37	4.44	4.25	4.66	4.61	4.75	4.47	3.99
	p-value	0.549	0.285	0.741	0.276	0.435	0.617	0.147	0.704	0.000
Age	18-39 years old	4.70	4.32	4.37	4.22	4.58	4.62	4.69	4.32	3.91
	> 40 years old	4.78	4.21	4.49	4.17	4.65	4.53	4.65	4.52	3.52
	p-value	0.190	0.638	0.303	0.582	0.373	0.285	0.509	0.046	0.003
Current residence	Urban	4.72	4.23	4.40	4.15	4.60	4.56	4.65	4.38	3.63
	Rural	4.81	4.40	4.53	4.35	4.66	4.63	4.74	4.56	4.00
	p-value	0.447	0.238	0.226	0.091	0.810	0.674	0.342	0.129	0.015
Completed studies	High and post-high schools	4.67	4.38	4.36	4.20	4.56	4.58	4.65	4.22	3.93
	Undergraduate and postgraduate	4.77	4.22	4.46	4.20	4.64	4.57	4.68	4.50	3.61
	p-value	0.208	0.230	0.562	0.728	0.674	0.764	0.873	0.026	0.012
Nature of studies	Nature/environmental sciences	4.76	4.21	4.45	4.15	4.63	4.54	4.66	4.52	3.57
	Other sciences	4.71	4.34	4.40	4.26	4.60	4.63	4.68	4.29	3.89
	p-value	0.516	0.412	0.788	0.294	0.696	0.271	0.728	0.037	0.009
Notes:		P<0.05	P < 0.01							

The term "cultural heritage" (ST8) was more favored by respondents over 40 years old, showing a significance level of p=0.046. Additionally, the level of education (p=0.026) and the field of study (p=0.037) were notable factors, with individuals holding university degrees and those studying nature or environmental subjects giving higher scores (4.52). Interestingly, tourists with these specific educational backgrounds had differing preferences concerning the nature of their studies.

The results emphasize the importance of both the material and immaterial cultural heritage of the Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve, as well as the vulnerability of these groups to their cultural environment. Tourism motivations have evolved from experiences that solely focused on direct interaction with nature and wildlife in protected natural areas. Some studies underline the significance of cultural tourism within these protected areas, demonstrating progress in sustainable development theory through the enhancement of socio-cultural values, as seen in Denmark. Additionally, they discuss the impact of rural tourism and ecotourism development policies [6, 7, 8, 9].

An exceptional contribution to the communities of Ukrainians (referred to as "hahol") and Russian-Lipovians has been made by women, particularly older women, who are seen as key figures in cultural tourism. They have actively engaged in local activities and inspired the younger generation. Unlike in 1991, the development of tourism now allows for more frequent wearing of traditional costumes and greater participation in various tourist events, whether local, regional, or national.

For example, vocal groups and artistic formations from rural areas, such as the "Ciornee More" Women's Choir [10] from Sfântu Gheorghe, the "Rusalka" Choir [11] from Mila 23, and the "Rebalka" Vocal Group [12] from Crișan, exemplify adaptation to sustainable local development through the expression of their rich history and by preparing the younger generation for change. During discussions with the "Ciornee More" Group from Sfântu Gheorghe about their involvement in tourism-related activities, members highlighted a growing interest in preserving and defending traditions. They noted that their activities provide an easy source of income, especially for older women, and that their contributions are recognized and respected within the community. Additionally, some studies have helped enrich the cultural tourist heritage by suggesting ways to leverage the potential of the entire heritage. These suggestions include the tourism-driven exploration of archaeological sites [13], ecological restoration [14, 15], and the identification of tourist routes and villages that showcase local customs and traditions [16, 17].

In the case of the last group, although respondents have different tourist preferences compared to the nature of their studies, they still do not stray too far from these interests. They maintain a strong connection to nature, which serves as a supporting backdrop for cultural tourism, emphasizing their experiences in destinations that are natural and protected areas. In this context, it appears that tourist motivation mediates the relationship between tourist experience and destination loyalty, as highlighted in several studies [18, 19, 20].

The statement "recreational sports and sports resources" (ST9) suggests that each characteristic's p-value is significant. The values related to gender indicate a greater appreciation for sports among male tourists ($p=0.000$, score 3.99). Additionally, the residential environment component shows a significant difference ($p=0.015$) between rural (score 4.00) and urban tourists (score 3.63). This higher appreciation among the rural group may be attributed to their proximity to nature, their living environment, and the routine satisfaction of curiosity and pleasure through various activities and resources. In contrast, respondents with high school and post-high school education find sports activities (ST9, $p=0.012$) appealing, particularly those who have studied other sciences (ST9, $p=0.009$). The latter group seems to view nature and sports as a refuge, valuing them more than their formal studies. Regarding age, sports-related tourist attractions are particularly significant for individuals under 40 years old (ST9, $p=0.003$). In contrast, those over 40 tend to be more attracted to cultural heritage components (ST8, $p=0.046$). This difference might be influenced by physical condition and cultural factors, as indicated in another study [21]. The Biosphere Reserve is recognized as a destination where the connection between tourism and sports is evident. It offers opportunities for people to reconnect with nature while enjoying sports activities, similar to other natural areas. The region's high natural potential, including the Danube arms and canals, lakes, and the Black Sea, has fostered the development of various sports activities for relaxation and recreation. Many of these activities, such as sport fishing, kayaking, and swimming in designated areas, are easy to practice with family and friends. However, the exploitation of recreational sports resources and the promotion of sports tourism must always be guided by scientific planning and an emphasis on ecological protection [22, 23].

In the case of the Danube Delta, local communities currently do not perceive tourists as a threat to their recreational opportunities and cultural identity, in contrast to some natural areas like New Zealand [24] where such concerns have emerged. In this region, the connection between tourism and the resident population—through accommodations, cultural activities, boat trips, and more—is viewed as beneficial [25] providing a significant source of income for both women and men involved in these activities.

Respondents assessed the importance of various actors' involvement in the conservation of the Danube Delta using a Likert scale. The analysis revealed average scores ranging from 3.57 to 3.90 for all statements (ST10-ST18) as shown in Table 2. The research findings regarding age indicate that respondents over 40 showed a particularly high appreciation for the involvement of different entities (see Table 4). Specifically, they valued the role of the government (ST10, $p=0.014$), non-governmental organizations/associations (ST11, $p=0.027$), universities (ST14, $p=0.008$), community engagement and volunteering (ST16, $p=0.044$), and the Department of Tourist and Environmental Police (ST18, $p=0.032$). In contrast, tourists with a focus on nature and the environment perceived the issue differently. They believed that involvement should extend to more stakeholders, including the government (ST10, $p=0.000$), non-governmental organizations/associations (ST11, $p=0.001$), universities (ST14, $p=0.001$), local authorities (ST12, $p=0.004$), the Department of Tourist and Environmental Police (ST18, $p=0.004$), environmental experts (ST13, $p=0.014$), and the media (ST15, $p=0.049$).

Table 4. Results of the Mann-Whitney U test of socio-demographic characteristics and the importance of actors' involvement in the conservation of the Danube Delta

Characteristic	Category	ST10	ST11	ST12	ST13	ST14	ST15	ST16	ST17	S18
Gender	Female	3.88	3.56	3.98	3.93	3.59	3.79	3.72	3.89	4.77
	Male	3.76	3.56	3.99	3.86	3.55	3.72	3.67	3.72	4.63
	p-value	0.280	0.904	0.757	0.478	0.826	0.352	0.453	0.258	0.095
Age	18-29 years old	3.67	3.40	3.91	3.87	3.38	3.65	3.58	3.67	4.62
	30-69 years old	3.98	3.71	4.05	3.93	3.75	3.86	3.81	3.95	4.79
	p-value	0.014	0.027	0.131	0.389	0.008	0.093	0.044	0.077	0.032
Current residence	Urban	3.89	3.66	4.04	3.96	3.60	3.82	3.73	3.84	4.73
	Rural	3.60	3.21	3.79	3.66	3.47	3.55	3.56	3.73	4.63
	p-value	0.134	0.049	0.271	0.289	0.555	0.230	0.575	0.881	0.204
Completed studies	High and post-high schools	3.65	3.36	3.89	3.92	3.36	3.64	3.72	3.66	4.54
	Undergraduate and postgraduate	3.91	3.64	4.02	3.89	3.66	3.81	3.69	3.88	4.78
	p-value	0.069	0.049	0.124	0.764	0.089	0.155	0.136	0.051	0.032
Nature of studies	Nature/environmental sciences	4.08	3.77	4.15	4.06	3.79	3.88	3.79	3.96	4.80
	Other sciences	3.48	3.26	3.75	3.68	3.26	3.60	3.57	3.62	4.59
	p-value	0.00	0.001	0.004	0.014	0.001	0.049	0.136	0.051	0.004
Notes:		P<0.05	P < 0.01							

The results related to the statement "non-governmental organizations/associations" show that respondents from urban areas have a greater appreciation (ST11, $p=0.049$). Additionally, individuals with higher education levels tend to express a better appreciation. For the statement regarding the Tourist and

Environmental Police Department (ST18, p=0.032), all respondents with higher education provided a positive assessment. There is a clear need for a greater involvement of stakeholders in the protection and conservation of the Danube Delta. Many respondents possess higher education, some with studies focused on nature and the environment. However, their coordinated and ongoing efforts to implement sustainable management policies are essential, with the central authority serving as the primary actor. In the context of ecotourism, Romania's development strategy for the years 2019-2030 emphasizes the importance of professional management. This strategy aims to include all stakeholders involved in tourism development in the decision-making process. A study on rural tourism in Europe, which includes Romania, identified government initiatives and local community participation as key factors for change in the tourism sector [26]

Efforts are great for linking socio-economic development with the environment, and the actors must find and apply the solutions.

The specialized literature came up with some suggestions for the Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve, against the background of the lack of adequate policy coordination between government institutions and the different sectors of activity, such as:

- ❖ the establishment in the municipality of Tulcea of a regional center for sustainable mobility (of tourists and residents) in the Danube Delta to increase the mobility management capacity of the local and regional authorities [27]
- ❖ using tourism impact models as planning instruments in its management, such as the one for the town of Sfântu Gheorghe [28]
- ❖ development of cognitive maps based on scenarios for sound management of visitor flows [29];
- ❖ approach to a sustainable architecture model with contemporary living standards, preserving the specificity of the landscape and increasing the value of the built estate [30]

The decision-makers (especially the county and local administration) should consider the best solutions presented in the scientific literature and apply them to the extent they lend themselves to this space.

4. Conclusion

The results of the study highlight various aspects of the Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve. When it comes to tourist attractions, cultural heritage, and sports resources were identified as the most important factors by the respondents. A diverse set of preferences was observed depending on the level of education and age of the respondents.

Respondents over 40 years of age and those with university degrees considered cultural heritage attractions more important, while younger tourists (under 40) and those with high school or post-high school education, as well as male respondents and those from rural areas, preferred various sports activities, especially water sports.

The data collected from the field suggest that local elders and women from ethnic groups play a significant role in the development of intangible cultural tourism. They have made considerable efforts to enhance their visibility on the cultural tourism scene, both locally and at regional and national levels. As a result of these tourism resources, local development has accelerated, leaving a lasting positive impact. I recommend that decision-makers, especially at the county and local levels, consider the best solutions based on impact assessment studies and sustainable planning found in specialized literature.

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