

GREEN TOURIST DESTINATIONS IN THE FUNCTION OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: THE CASE STUDY OF CLIMATIC SITE ZLATIBOR

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Abstract

This paper presents the case study of Zlatibor as a successful green tourist destination. Thanks to the private initiative of small households, this Serbian mountain has become attractive for domestic and foreign visitors enjoying traditional food and craft products. Moreover, in 2019, policy makers of the Republic of Serbia recognized the importance of Zlatibor for the development of sustainable tourism granting it the status of the climatic site, enabling government incentives for potential investors in the hotel industry. In 2023, these private and public initiatives resulted in including Zlatibor in 100 world top green destinations.

Key Words: *climatic site, green tourist destination, ecological sustainability, government incentives, Zlatibor*

JEL classification: *Z32, Q56, Q58*

Introduction

Green tourist destinations are the future of tourism. They offer visitors a unique experience while protecting the environment and supporting the local economy. According to Popesku (2011), ecological sustainability is, in addition to social, cultural and economic sustainability, one of the essential forms of sustainability for achieving sustainable tourism. The aim of the study is to show and analyze the active role of the local self-government unit in supporting the association of small households, which represents one of the factors of sustainable development of green

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destinations. In the first part of the paper, the concept of green tourist destinations will be clarified. The climatic site Zlatibor represents a green tourist destination in the Republic of Serbia. The explanation on the basis of which the mountain Zlatibor received the status of climatic site and what such status means to potential investors will be presented in the second part of the paper. The development of a green tourist destination is also influenced by the local community. Creamery „Naša Zlatka” represents one of the positive examples of cooperation and association of individuals and the local community, which we will deal with in the last part of the paper.

The concept of green tourist destinations

According to UNWTO (2024), sustainable tourism should:

- „Make optimal use of environmental resources that constitute a key element in tourism development, maintaining essential ecological processes and helping to conserve natural heritage and biodiversity.
- Respect the socio-cultural authenticity of host communities, conserve their built and living cultural heritage and traditional values, and contribute to inter-cultural understanding and tolerance.
- Ensure viable, long-term economic operations, providing socio-economic benefits to all stakeholders that are fairly distributed, including stable employment and income-earning opportunities and social services to host communities, and contributing to poverty alleviation.”

Sustainable tourism is based on sustainable development, which, in addition to improving the standard of living of the local community and economic development, also affects awareness of the importance of the environment and its preservation. Precisely because of this, modern tourists are showing an increasing interest in green tourist destinations that offer positive experiences to visitors in natural and cultural resources while taking care of their preservation (Ivanović et al., 2016). Tourism has become a global phenomenon and due to its massiveness, i.e. due to the rapid increase in the number of tourists visiting certain tourist destinations, the topic of developing green destinations has become a necessity today (Furqan et al., 2010).

One of the definitions of ecotourism is given by The International Ecotourism Society (2015), which reads „responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of the local

people and involves interpretation and education”. Visitors to green tourism destinations can enjoy local culture and ecology and can learn how to minimize their environmental impact during their stay. These destinations offer food and drinks that are environmentally friendly and produced by local producers using ingredients obtained on the territory of the destination itself. Considering that an increasing number of tourists are interested in visiting and enjoying green destinations, the market for the sale of local food products is increasing.

Climatic site „Mountain Zlatibor”

In accordance with Article 2, paragraph 1, item 8 of the Regulation on determining the criteria for awarding incentives to attract direct investments in the hotel accommodation services sector („Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia”, no. 33/2019, 42/2019, 18/2022 and 103/2023), the climatic site represents an area that „thanks to favorable climatic conditions and the presence of healing factors has a particularly beneficial effect on people's health”. Healing factors that abound in climatic sites can be water, gas or healing mud. In order for an area to have the status of a climatic site, it is necessary that, in addition to the healing factor, it also has facilities where visitors, with the help of professional staff, will use the healing factor in the correct way. There are 19 climatic sites in Serbia, namely:

„Bogutovac Spa” near Bogutovac; „Obrenovac Spa” near Obrenovac; „Kuršumlija Spa” near Kuršumlija; „Zvonačka Spa” near Babušnica; „Ribarska Spa” near Kruševac; „Prolom Spa” near Kuršumlija, „Radaljska Spa” near Mali Zvornik; „Novosadska Spa” near Novi Sad; „Spa Junaković” near Apatin; „Nikolićevo” near Zaječar; „Suva česma” near Prokuplje; „Šarbanovac” near Bor; „Miljkovac” near Niš; „Rgoška Spa” near Knjaževac; „Bobovik” near Vladimirovci; „Dubje” near Bogatić; „Mountain Divčibare” near Valjevo; „Mountain Zlatibor” near Čajetina and „Mountain Rudnik” near Čajetina.

All listed climatic sites are included in the annex to the cited Regulation, which was adopted on the basis of the Law on Investments („Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia“, no. 89/2015 and 95/2018) and which is the basis for awarding incentives to investors who opt for investing in the hotel accommodation service sector in spas and climatic sites.

The Specialized Hospital for Thyroid Diseases and Metabolic Diseases „Zlatibor” is located on the territory of the climatic site „Mountain

Zlatibor”, which is a health facility specialized in rehabilitation after treatment in accordance with the Regulation on the Plan of the Network of Health Care Institutions („Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia”, no. 5/2020, 11/2020, 52/2020, 88/2020, 62/2021, 69/2021, 74/2021 and 95/2021) and has 70 beds. This specialized hospital was founded in 2006 based on the Decision of the Government of the Republic of Serbia on the establishment of the Specialized Hospital for Thyroid Diseases and Metabolic Diseases „Zlatibor”, Čajetina, as a legal successor of the Institute for Thyroid Gland and Metabolism – Zlatibor („Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia“, No. 51/2006). This institution deals with „diagnostics and therapy of thyroid gland disorders, diagnostics and therapy of cardiovascular diseases, osteoporosis diagnostics, therapy of children and adolescent obesity, diagnostics and therapy of skeletal joint system” (Special hospital for thyroid gland and metabolism diseases Zlatibor, 2024) and represents the scientific base of the Medical Faculty of the University of Belgrade.

The climatic site „Mountain Zlatibor” has clean and dry air and healing water. The area of Zlatibor Mountain is considered an air spa due to the collision of continental and Mediterranean air currents. This „rose of winds” accelerates the treatment of thyroid gland, lung and heart diseases and anemia, and sources of medicinal water are distributed throughout the mountain (Tourist organization Zlatibor, 2024). In order to make the best possible use of the healing factor, it is necessary to build accommodation facilities for the accommodation of tourists and patients who use their stay on Zlatibor Mountain to improve or preserve their health. The Republic of Serbia has recognized the importance of spa and climatic sites and their unused economic potential, so it has created a legal framework that encourages investment in them.

Investors who decide to invest in new or revitalization of existing accommodation facilities can receive incentives from the state after concluding an agreement on the allocation of incentives with the Ministry of Economy, based on the Regulation on determining the criteria for awarding incentives to attract direct investments in the hotel accommodation services sector. The use of these incentives is conditioned by a minimum investment value of two million euros and the creation of jobs for at least 30 new employees for an indefinite period connected to the investment project.

The Ministry of Economy publishes data on incentives that have been granted. From 2018 until today, three contracts have been signed on the allocation of incentives for investments in the territory of the climatic site „Mountain Zlatibor”, namely:

- The agreement on the allocation of incentive funds with Annex 1 dated October 29, 2018, which was concluded between the Ministry of Economy and the Company for the production of chocolate, candies and pastries Pionir d.o.o. Belgrade (after status changes: Tourism and hospitality company ALCO GROUP HOTELI D.O.O. BELGRADE - Čukarica) due to the award of incentives for the construction of the Hotel „Tornik Zlatibor” (Ministry of Economy, 2018). The value of the awarded incentives is EUR 1,131,005.20, i.e. the beneficiary was granted 20% of justified investment costs in fixed assets in the name of incentives. The minimum planned value of investment in fixed assets is EUR 5,655,026.00. Also, the same contract provides for the employment of at least 77 new workers for an indefinite period.
- The agreement on the allocation of incentive funds dated June 8, 2021, which was concluded between the Ministry of Economy and the company „TM HOSPITALITY DOO BELGRADE-VOŽDOVAC” due to the allocation of incentives for the construction of a five-star hotel in the municipality of Čajetina (Ministry of Economy, 2021). The value of the awarded incentives is EUR 2,126,840.00, that is, the beneficiary was granted 20.00% of the justified investment costs in fixed assets. The minimum planned value of investment in fixed assets is EUR 10,634,200.00. Also, the same contract foresees employment of at least 72 new workers for an indefinite period.
- The agreement on the allocation of incentive funds dated October 11, 2021, which was concluded between the Ministry of Economy and the economic company „Economic Society for Tourism and Hospitality ALCO GROUP HOTELI D.O.O. BELGRADE - Čukarica” due to the award of incentives for the construction of an apartment building and additional facilities of the Hotel „Tornik Zlatibor” (Ministry of Economy, 2021a). The value of the awarded incentives is EUR 1,392,840.00, that is, the beneficiary was granted 20.00% of justified investment costs in fixed assets. The minimum planned value of investment in fixed assets is EUR 6,964,200.00. Also, the same contract foresees employment of at least 72 new workers for an indefinite period.

Investing in accommodation facilities and enabling a greater number of tourists to stay at the destination leads to new investments and the

development of business activities of rural population. Namely, food producers from the territory of the climatic site and surrounding areas participate in meeting tourist needs.

Zlatibor among the world's green tourist destinations

The arrival of a larger number of tourists staying, in addition to the existing ones, in new accommodation facilities that were built with the help of state incentives, created the need for the production of a larger amount of food that will be offered to visitors in tourist facilities.

Small milk producers could not cope independently with the decrease in the price of milk and with large milk collectors. In order not to give up milk production and reduce livestock, small producers joined together under the responsibility of the Municipality of Čajetina. Also, in this way, small milk producers became recognizable to customers, preserving the reputation of traditional dairy products.

One of the successful examples reaching consumers of small producers who joined together under the roof of the Municipality of Čajetina, is the Creamery „Naša Zlatka”. Namely, in 2011, the Municipality of Čajetina founded the company „Zlatiborski eko agrar” with the aim of promoting the rural economy of Zlatibor. Ministry of European Integration of the Republic of Serbia recognized the importance of the promotion of rural small businesses of the Zlatibor Mountain and competed for the EU project „From Hills to Dairies”. This project has been accepted for financing as one of five supported projects under the third call for proposals of the Serbia-Montenegro Cross-Border Cooperation Program published in 2015. The project worth EUR175,000 has been implemented by the Municipality of Čajetina and „Zlatiborski eko agrar” in partnership with municipalities Plav and Andrijevica in Montenegro. The project started in September 2016 and ran until February 2018. The project was approved for funding as one of the development projects with a strong economic component. The goal of the project implemented in Serbia has been explained as the maximization of the capacity of natural resources and stock-farming as well as traditional activities of the Municipality of Čajetina (EU in Serbia, 2017).

The realization of the first phase of the project „From Hills to Dairies” in Serbia included the reconstruction and adaption of the cattle market in Kriva Reka in Zlatibor. In 2017, within the realization of this project

phase, modern equipment for the production of cheese and cream was installed in the „Naša Zlatka” Creamery in Kriva Reka (Agency for Economic Register, 2017). The installed equipment enabled the „Naša Zlatka” Creamery to produce cheese and cream respecting the highest standards of food safety and quality and to register as a small business firm. The second phase of the project realization included „a brand positioning promotional campaign, aimed primarily at hotels and restaurants in Zlatibor as well as specialised traditional products retail shops.” (EU in Serbia, 2017).

The Creamery „Naša Zlatka” is capable of processing 1,500 liters of milk per day. Traditional Zlatibor cheese and cream are obtained from milk collected from registered farms in the territory of the local administrative unit of Čajetina. In this way, „help and support is provided to small local producers. Along with the growth of dairies, their production is also to be strengthening” (Zlatiborski eko agrar, 2024).

The Creamery „Naša Zlatka” protected small milk producers and „built up a distribution including hotels and restaurants in Zlatibor region and ensured that locals and tourists have the opportunity to enjoy the products” (Green Destinations Stories, 2023). The local self-government recognized the need for association, while other participants in tourism, such as the Tourist Organization Zlatibor, helped promote the new brand „Naša Zlatka” (Tourist Organization Zlatibor, 2017).

The importance of the Creamery „Naša Zlatka” was also recognized by the non-profit organization „Green Destinations”, which was founded in the Netherlands in 2014. The goal of establishing this organization has been to improve the sustainable development of destinations and participants in tourism (Green Destinations, 2024). Namely, this organization conducts the Green Destinations Top 100 Stories competition. The winners are recognized for their achievements in the development of sustainable tourism. When they are chosen, in addition to recognition, the participants get the opportunity to have their success stories visible outside the borders of their country.

The Tourist Organization Zlatibor started cooperation with the world organization „Green Destinations” at the Tourism Fair in Berlin in 2020, with the intention that Zlatibor, as the most visited mountain in Serbia, enters the race for the prestigious certificate. Considering the commitment of the Municipality of Čajetina to become the first ecological local

administrative unit in Serbia, this represented an exceptional opportunity for Zlatibor to stand out as a green destination.

In 2023, the climatic site of Zlatibor competed for the prestigious award of the word organization „Green Destinations” with its Story about the Creamery „Naša Zlatka” and managed to be included in the top 100 stories. In order to win, the contestants have been supposed to pass the first step, which is to prove that they are making efforts to develop sustainable tourism. The second step has been the submission of a good practice story. Zlatibor as a tourist destination satisfied the first criterion, and to satisfy the second criterion, the Story about the Creamery „Naša Zlatka” was chosen in the Thriving Communities category. Thus, the Story about the Creamery „Naša Zlatka” became one of the Green Destinations Top 100 Stories for 2023. Also, thanks to the success of the Story of the Creamery „Naša Zlatka”, Zlatibor Mountain became one of the world top 100 green destinations.

Conclusion

The project of the Creamery „Naša Zlatka” represents a good practice of association of small producers and their excellent cooperation with the local community. Thanks to the efforts of people from the green tourist destination of Zlatibor Mountain who advocate for the development of sustainable tourism, this tourist destination is the bearer of the prestigious achievement, which is the participation in Green Destinations Top 100 Stories for 2023. In this way, not only the climatic site of Zlatibor was promoted as a green tourist destination, but also Serbia as a country with great untapped economic potential in green tourist destinations. The importance of the development of this destination has also been recognized by the state, allowing potential investors incentives for direct investment in hotel facilities in the climatic site „Mountain Zlatibor”. The limitations of the conducted research are reflected in the explanation of only one successful example of cooperation between the local community and the local administrative unit. It is precisely in this limitation that possible directions for further research are hidden. Namely, the conducted research can serve as an inspiration for researchers to find similar examples from practice by analyzing which recommendations would be given to individuals and units of local self-governments for associations that lead to the sustainable development of green destinations.

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