

WE FORGOT TO PAY ATTENTION TO ORDINARY TOURISM! A CALL TO REVISE THE RESEARCH AGENDA FOR RURAL TOURISM

Prof. Serge SCHMITZ* and Prof. Dominique CROZAT**

*Laplec, University of Liege, S.Schmitz@ulg.ac.be

**ART-Dev, University of Montpellier 3, dominique.crozat@univ-montp3.fr

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Many rural areas want to develop tourism considering the alleged benefits for the local community. Tourism is considered to boost the local economic development increasing the possibilities of employment, improve the provision of goods and services, contribute to local heritage protection and finally maintain or attract population in remote areas. Currently numerous rural administrative units believe they could become a successful tourist destination because of their authenticity, their local heritage, the welcome of their inhabitants, the richness of their landscape or their food and beverage specialities. They dream of solving several social and economic issues through the development of tourist activities. However, many projects fail due especially to the lack of market analysis and marketing approach. On the other hand, we observe a worldwide trend of segmentation of the tourism market. Tourist products aim to attract a target population, preferably tourists who will spend a lot of money and reinforce the self-esteem of the destination, excluding for instance backpackers or campers. However, is this possible everywhere? Experiences show that this strategy could be very costly for a low reward.

Most of the destinations claim uniqueness even if they accommodate for a broader public with very standard services. Indeed, what is the difference between a tropical beach in the Philippines, in the Dominican Republic or even in the subtropical complex of a European or North American city? New tourist products are created and copy pasted at different places. For instance, when looking at the attractions offered in the Languedoc (France) or in Wallonia (Belgium), we found several products (draisine on old railways, rafting, mini-zoo, butterfly garden etc.) which exist in both regions and also in several other destinations. Except the idea of being in another location, services and attractions are mainly very similar. Even if Coca-Cola tastes slightly different around the world, it remains Coca-Cola.

This paper aims to suggest a new research agenda for rural tourism, including for a smiling future for the countryside, in reversing the current trend to distinguish the destination, to aim at supersegmentation of tourism and to target a cultural, elitist, tourism. Indeed most tourist activities can be done and are done in a relative vicinity, by ordinary tourists aiming to have a good time. Moreover, the countryside does not always offer extraordinary sights that attract people from the whole continent. We argue that there should be a place and more attention for

ordinary tourism development. By ordinary tourism, we do not mean mass tourism but just the fact that some people spent a few days away from home. We do not want to reject the appealing concepts of cultural tourism, ecotourism, adventure tourism, ethnic tourism, gastronomic tourism, farm tourism and so on. We just want to be realistic and call to rethink the importance of ordinary tourism and its current challenges: facing new ways of traveling (e.g. Low cost), of buying vacation (e-commerce), of enjoying holidays (more frequently/with friends, alone or with the family/ being active or passive).

The ordinary countryside may offer a relative quietness, another perception of time and seasons, open spaces... Instead of focusing on niche tourism and niche attractions, which should attract people of hundreds of kilometres around, the paper underlines more realistic perspectives for tourism and recreation development in the ordinary countryside. These open spaces, agricultural areas and “natural” landscapes may welcome tourists, coming especially from the vicinity, all the year round, without huge infrastructure and radical changes for a break from the urban life to rest, breathe, share time with friends and family, meet local “wise” people. Scholars and developers should pay more attention to these neglected but promising tourism activities.