

## Research Article

### THE DEVELOPMENT OF ECOTOURISM - SOUTH-WEST OLTENIA REGION

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Received 22th July 2021; Accepted 25th August 2021; Published online 30th September 2021

#### ABSTRACT

In the context of the recent Covid-19 pandemic, the development of ecotourism is one of the real opportunities that the immediate future offers to the South-West Oltenia region. The existing facilities, the competitiveness of prices, the analysis of tourist hospitality facilities (accommodation, food for tourism, spa treatment) recommend the South-West Oltenia Region as an attractive tourist destination, but at the same time the necessary action of all those involved in tourism will have to focus on the services offered which are supposed to be of the highest quality (comparable to other development regions) and the maintenance of an attractive environment. When the environment and tourism coexist in homogeneity, the natural environment benefits from tourism (and vice versa!). The importance of this reciprocal relationship is also reflected in the positive actions of conservation and enhancement of the cultural tourism heritage, but we should not forget the destructive actions of some tourism activities, such as: the use of environmental components (water, air, soil, flora, terrestrial ecosystems, aquatic ecosystems, etc.) for recreational purposes, by means of an irrational, often brutal human intervention on the natural resources. To this goal, sustainable tourism is and will be in harmony with the environment and the population, so that its development is to their benefit and not to their detriment. Sustainable development must focus on the use of renewable and non-renewable resources to meet the needs and aspirations of one generation, without compromising meeting the needs and aspirations of the future generations.

**Keywords:** ecotourism, region, tourism, sustainable, tourism potential.

#### INTRODUCTION

According to the California Legislature, ecotourism is a form of travel whose primary objective is to enjoy the beauty of a region's natural landscapes and cultural displays while minimizing the potential negative impacts of leisure travel. Popescu I., Barbu C., Gribincea A. (2007) state that "ecotourism is a tourism based on nature and traditional culture that involves a knowledge and interpretation of the natural and man-made environment that is intended to be managed in an ecological and sustainable way". Nicolae Ion. (2015) states that "ecotourism is any form of sustainable tourism that has as main motivation the respect, use and conservation of nature, its biodiversity, local traditions regarding the use of human resources in the areas of interest". Ecotourism is defined by him as "responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, supports the well-being of local people and involves interpretation and education". The International Ecotourism Society defines ecotourism as "a form of responsible tourism that contributes to the conservation of a natural environment while ensuring the well-being or development of local communities". The concept of ecotourism was defined at the National Seminar on Ecotourism, organised by the Canadian Expert Council on the Environment (CEAC) in 1991. The event brought together representatives from government, universities, conservation groups and tourism operators, and concluded that "ecotourism is a travel experience that highlights nature, contributing to the conservation of ecosystems, representing the integrity of host communities". Mazilu Mirela (2004) states that "any ecosystem performs three functions":

- Energetic;
- Circulation of matter;
- Self-regulation (self-preservation).

In conclusion, the ecosystem is the structural and functional unit of the ecosphere. It is the ecosystem that determines a particular structure, determining the exercise of the three functions. The natural and semi-natural ecosystems are the main components of the natural capital that provides the resources and services that underpin sustainable socio-economic development. Hall and Kinnaird (1996) analyse the aspects of ecotourism in Eastern European countries, with the Danube Delta as an example. The authors point out that in 1991 the European Trust for Natural and Cultural Heritage was established in Prague with the aim of inventorying and conserving natural and cultural values in the countries that formed the militarised border between the two political systems. In 1990, the World Wildlife Fund (WWF, Washington), under the editorship of Boo, E., published a book on "Ecotourism: the Potentials and Pitfalls". In 1992, Smith and Eadington publish a book entitled "Tourism Alternatives" which also features ecotourism. Ecotourism partly overlaps with the concept of "sustainable tourism" as it emerged at the International Conference on Sustainable Tourism in Iceland and Small States held in Malta on the 18th-20th of November 1993 (Pikner, 1993) or at the conference of the Royal Geographical Society (another field with which tourism is strongly intertwined) held on the 6th of October (Sisman, 1993). In English literature the notion appears either as "eco-tourism" (Steele, 1993) or as "ecotourism", and is associated with nature conservation and protection, for example in Micronesia (Valentine, 1993). According to the specialist Hector Ceballon-Lascrain, who is credited with introducing the term ecotourism, it is "a journey to peaceful and uncontaminated natural areas with the specific objective of studying, admiring and enjoying landscapes, their animals and plants as well as any cultural events (both ancient and current) taking place in these areas". Mazilu M. (2007) states that "the world is constantly changing and transformations in the field of social, economic and political values are taking place during the longest period of economic stagnation that many countries in the developed world are going through: continuous industrial development has led to a strong impact on the environment". It is in tourism's interest to be active in the issue of sustainable development and to work in

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cooperation with other industries to ensure the quality of its resource base and its survival. Ecotourism has the following profile (TIES Global Ecotourism Fact Sheet, 2006):

- It is experimental;
- It is educated;
- It is an opinion leader;
- It has substantial financial resources;
- It is the most important source of information when travelling.

A long-term approach favours the development of the tourism industry rather than simply looking to stabilise or reorient the market to new opportunities. Communities and operators need to build strong relationships to ensure the continued prosperity of the tourism industry, these relationships need to be established between the private sector, local, governments and other interest groups (Coroş Monica Maria, Gică Oana Adriana., 2016). 2002 was a year of major significance for tourism. Alongside its declaration as the International Year of Mountains, 2002 was also the International Year of Ecotourism. As such, ecotourism - an essential component of sustainable development - was marked by two events of major importance for ecotourism worldwide, namely the International Conference (January 2002, New York) which had the merit of laying the theoretical and methodological foundations of ecotourism and the World Ecotourism Summit (Canada - Quebec, May 2002).

## METHODS

In the article "Ecotourism Development - South-West Oltenia Region" the following methods were used:

- literature review;
- cartographic processing in ArcGIS software;
- Microsoft Excel;
- graphical method;
- observation method.

The ArcGIS program is a tool that allows, from various sources, the acquisition, organisation, analysis, combination and presentation of localized information on a given map (geographical location, mapping of elements of natural tourist potential, location of elements of tourist attractiveness) etc. Sustainable tourism enables the development of tourism and recreational activities in a country, region or tourist destination, taking into account the basic principles of sustainable development, showing respect for the environment, for people and for the local economy and culture of the tourist host region.

Among the positive effects of tourism, Figure 1 should be mentioned.



Fig. 1 The positive effects of sustainable tourism

Sustainable tourism is a goal, it must be understood that any type of development that includes tourism development gives rise to certain changes in an area/region. However, these changes must be kept within acceptable limits so that the goal of sustainability is achieved. Sustainable tourism can best be achieved through careful planning, development and appropriate management of the tourism sector based on coherent principles and strategies. Strategy means being different and must be characterised by: market needs and trends, product distribution methods, natural resources used, profit and products offered. Thus, in addition to these characteristics of a strategy, we must also take into account the focus on services, market segments, final consumer and geographical areas targeted in order to implement a coherent and effective strategy. Therefore, from my point of view, the strategy must include the following components: organisation, planning, change, ideas, goals and focus on customers/tourists. In 2009, the National Institute for Research and Development in Tourism developed the National Strategy for the Development of Ecotourism in Romania (Phase I and Phase II), with the Ministry of Tourism as beneficiary. Phase I was published in September 2009 and it is entitled "Ecotourism experience at national and international level" and comprises three chapters, namely Ecotourism - the main form of sustainable tourism, International experience in ecotourism and Ecotourism in Romania - the current situation (Tudorache D, 2009).

Phase II was published in November 2009 and it is called "The Strategic Plan for the Development of Ecotourism in Romania" and comprises two chapters, the Strategic Plan for the Development of Ecotourism and the Realisation, Implementation and Monitoring of the Strategy.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The article aimed to provide a pertinent diagnosis of the main forms of ecotourism that can be practised (agrotourism, rural tourism, ecotourism), especially after the Covid-19 pandemic, as being the safest forms of ecotourism. Tourism represents a huge opportunity at regional, local and national level for developing the economy, increasing the number of jobs, improving tourism infrastructure, practicing various forms of ecotourism, increasing the number of tourist arrivals but also for promoting tourism in the South-West Oltenia region and creating a positive image.

Agrotourism allows to make the most of the accommodation available on the peasant farm, adequately prepared and arranged for receiving guests, providing services for serving meals and for other complementary activities, such as leisure activities, fishing, horse riding, etc. Rural tourism is a form of tourism focused on destinations in rural areas with a functional accommodation facility and other heterogeneous services. Rural tourism takes different forms of stay with a varied range of motivations (hiking, winter sports, traditions and customs).

Ecotourism is also known as 'green' or 'soft' tourism. Ecotourism is very diverse, it can combine the characteristics of extreme tourism and a leisurely walk, it is a specific type of leisure.

The South-West Oltenia region mainly comprises the traditional counties that formed the basis of the political and administrative entity of Romania - Oltenia. The current territorial unity is given by the similarity of the counties of Mehedinți, Gorj, Dolj, Olt and Vâlcea (fig.2).

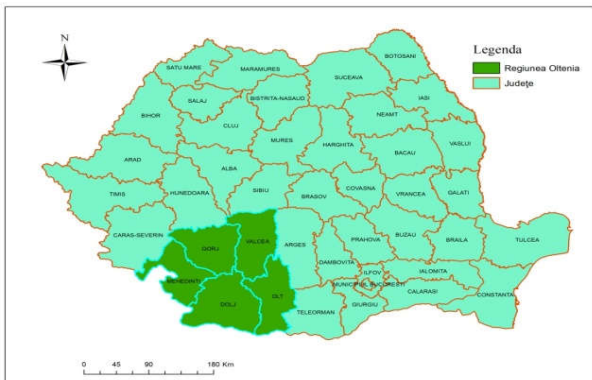


Fig. 2. Location of the South-West Oltenia Region in the national context

Source: ArcGIS data processing  
<http://geo-spatial.org/vechi/download/?pg=4>

The region is characterized by a varied relief (fig. 3), including the southern slopes of the Parâng, Vâlcan, Godeanu, Mehedinți Mountains as well as the Getic Piedmont and the western part of the Romanian Plain. South-West Oltenia is a development region of Romania, created in 1998.

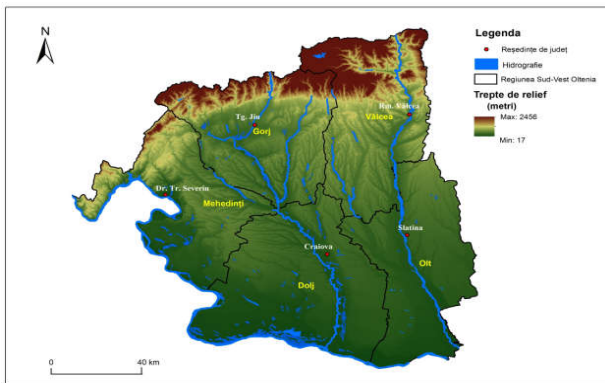


Fig. 3. Natural framework of the South-West Oltenia Region

Source: ArcGIS data processing  
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The main function of the region is the coordination of regional development projects and the absorption of funds from the European Union. The South-West Oltenia Region has an area of 29,212 km<sup>2</sup> and a population of 2,330,792 inhabitants.

From an administrative point of view, the South-West Oltenia region is composed of:

- 40 cities, including 11 municipalities;
- 408 communes;
- 2066 villages;

From an agricultural point of view, the southern counties also score close potential indicators, Mehedinți County holds about 2.5% of the agricultural production in the country, Gorj - 1.6%, Dolj - 4.1%, Olt - 2.3%, and Vâlcea - 2.2%. The counties of the region also occupy an important place in tourism activities, holding valuable testimonies of scientific cultural heritage. Ecotourism is seen as a new form of tourism that should contribute to both nature conservation and local community development, as a form of alternative tourism, ecotourism emerged, like the others, as a consequence of widespread dissatisfaction with conventional forms of tourism. At present, the South-West Oltenia Region includes four national parks and two natural parks (fig. 4).

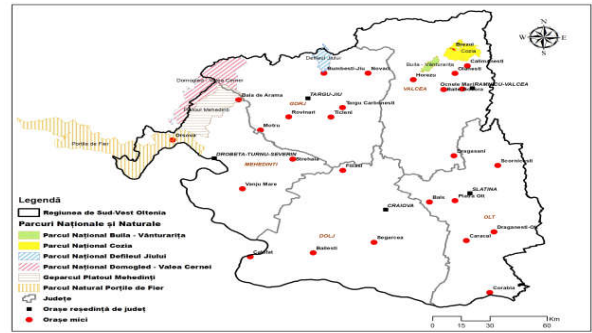


Fig. 4. National and natural parks in the South-West Oltenia Region

Source: ArcGIS data processing  
<http://www.mmediu.ro/articol/date-gis/434>;  
<http://geo-spatial.org/vechi/download/?pg=4>.

Ecotourism implies - in its practice - the carrying out of both tourist activities (welcoming tourists in tourist reception facilities, accommodation, overnight stays, etc.) and economic activities in a pleasant, unpolluted environment with attractive and unspoiled landscapes. Within the natural and national parks, various forms of tourism specific to the mountain area can be practised: walking tourist trails, observing fauna and flora, photographing landscapes, caving, etc. In the territory of the five counties of the South-West Oltenia Region, there are numerous special protection areas for birds (SPAs) and sites of community importance (SCIs) (fig. 5).

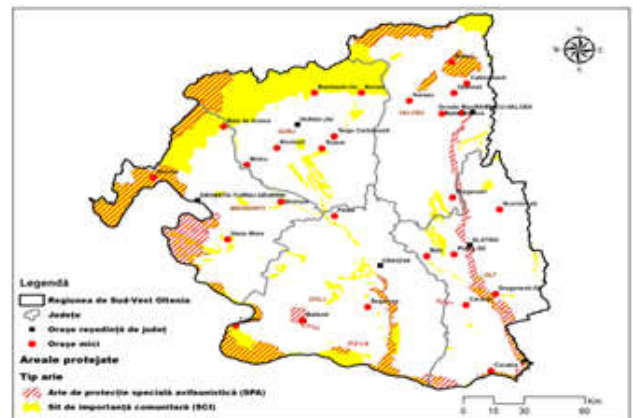


Fig. 5. Special protection areas for birds and animals and sites of community importance in the South-West Oltenia Region

Source: ArcGIS data processing  
<http://www.mmediu.ro/articol/date-gis/434>;  
<http://geo-spatial.org/vechi/download/?pg=4>.

The practice of ecotourism requires the protection of protected areas or zones (fig. 6), which are intended for studying, visiting, admiring, recreational activities and not destroying these natural habitats. As an organised form of public use of the territory of protected areas, ecotourism does not exclude the existence of an infrastructure and of flows of people with different cultures, values and needs for ecotourism in the South-West Oltenia Region. European biodiversity indicators (Nature, European Commission, 2010):

- the status and evolution of biodiversity components;
- threats to biodiversity;
- integrity, goods and services of the ecosystem;
- sustainable use.



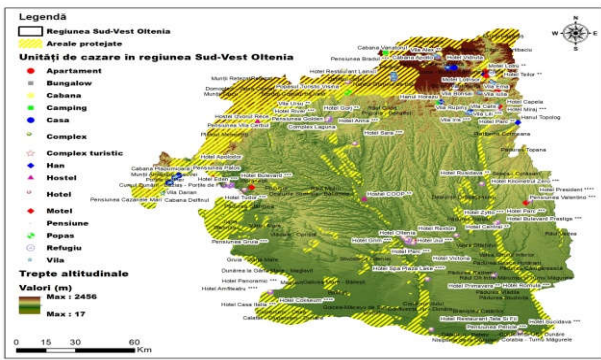


Fig. 6. Protected areas in relation to tourist facilities of the South-West Oltenia Region

Source: ArcGIS data processing <http://geo-spatial.org/vechi/download/?pg=4>

In the South-West Region, tourism can create important partnerships between foreign investors and local investors (those who produce traditional products in their own households), but also between local entrepreneurs. Ecotourism activity, in addition to being anchored in the area of sustainability, works alongside the economic integration and generates development strategies necessary to support the transition. The real meaning of ecotourism includes the modernisation of infrastructure, the forms and types of tourism that are practised, the degree and possibility of tourist development, the analysis of tourist facilities (accommodation, food, leisure, etc.), sustainable rural-urban tourism development. Moreover, it must be clearly understood that appropriate legislative measures are also needed to preserve and protect the biodiversity of fragile ecosystems and natural areas. Enhancing and promoting the natural environment for tourism is one of the fundamental pillars of ecotourism.

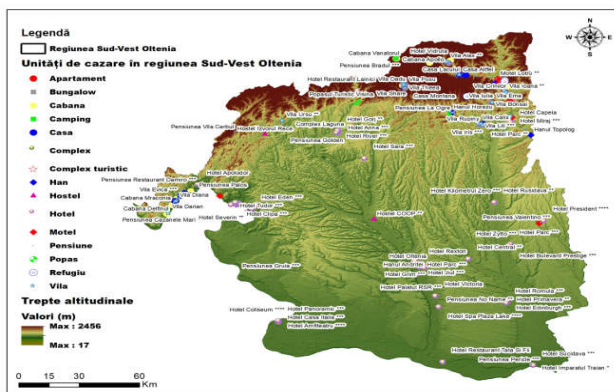


Fig. 7. Location of tourist accommodation facilities in South-West Oltenia Region

Source: ArcGIS data processing <http://geo-spatial.org/vechi/download/?pg=4>

Forms of ecotourism practiced in each county of the South-West Oltenia Region: Rural tourism - this form of tourism is practised in Mehedinți and Gorj counties, offering a wide range of tourist services through segments of the local population who do not practice agriculture. Basically, it highlights authentic natural and man-made landscapes, local cultural forms and crafts, handicrafts and traditions, etc. In recent years, rural tourism has been expanding, and appropriate management is needed for the balanced development of rural areas. This form of ecotourism is currently practiced in Dolj and Olt counties by people who want to move to the countryside, having houses or properties in these localities and need to actively participate in their management, as well as by urban people settled for several generations in the city and who feel the need to spend a few hours in weekends in the open unpolluted air. One solution in

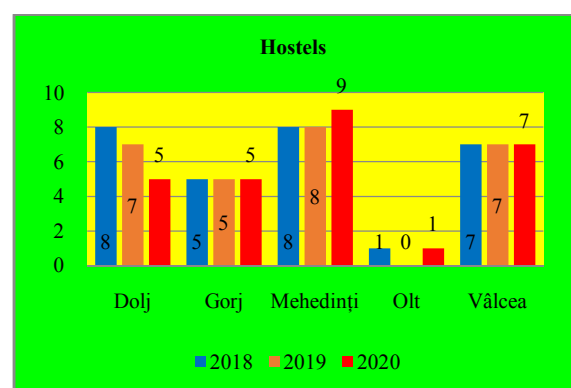
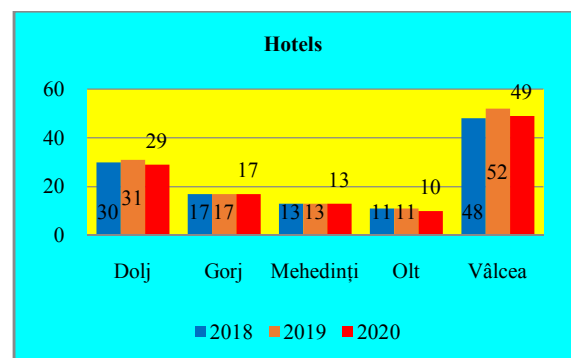
identifying businesses that truly practice ecotourism or other forms of sustainable tourism is certification. This is a way of certifying that an activity or product meets certain standards (Hornoiu, Remus., I. 2009). Agrotourism - aims to develop tourism in rural areas, in the heart of the Romanian village, in close cooperation with the local/regional and national economy, linking tourism with other branches of the economy and especially with agriculture. Mountain tourism - is practiced in Vâlcea county, it is characterized by the practice of winter sports (based on the existence of a ski area), favoured by altitudes of over 1500-2000 m, high duration of snow cover, location of slopes, etc. Mountain hiking tourism and mountaineering, are stimulated by the presence of spectacular geographical landscapes, the variety of ecosystems, the components of glacial and karst relief, flora and fauna of the region and the complexity of tourist accommodation facilities. Mountain ecotourism can be defined as "that form of tourism that does not degrade the natural and cultural environment of mountain regions, that creates economic, social and environmental benefits for local communities and that provides a high-quality experience for visitors to such areas".

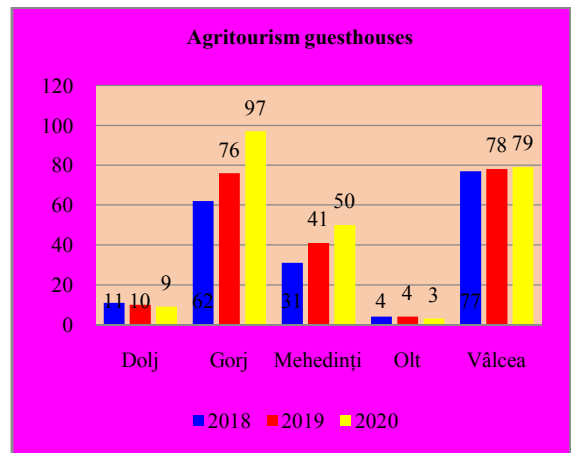
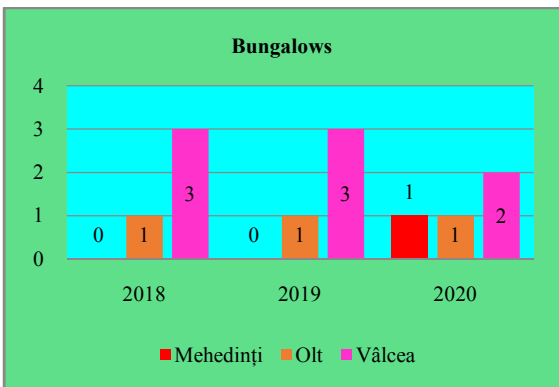
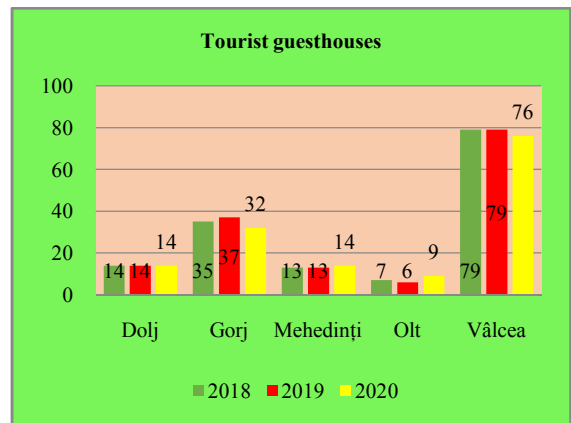
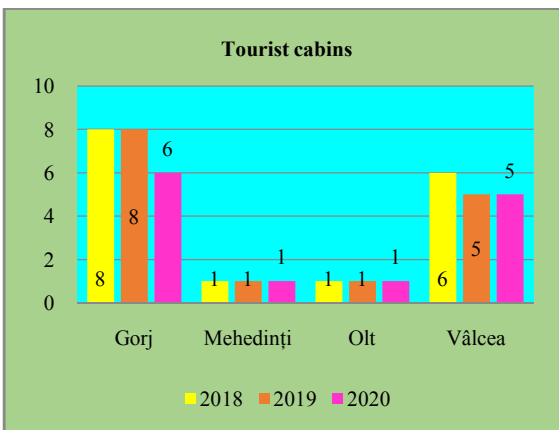
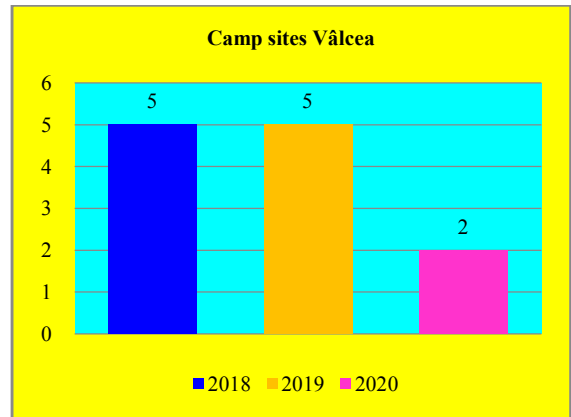
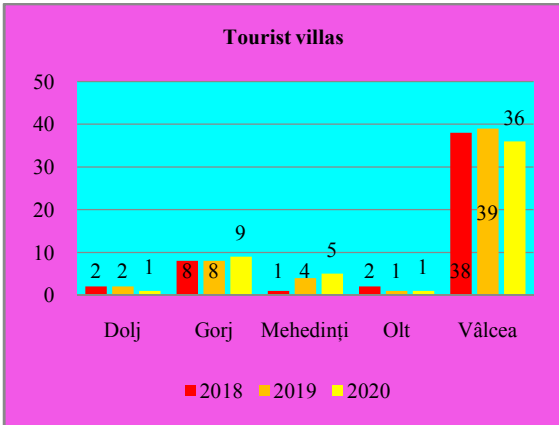
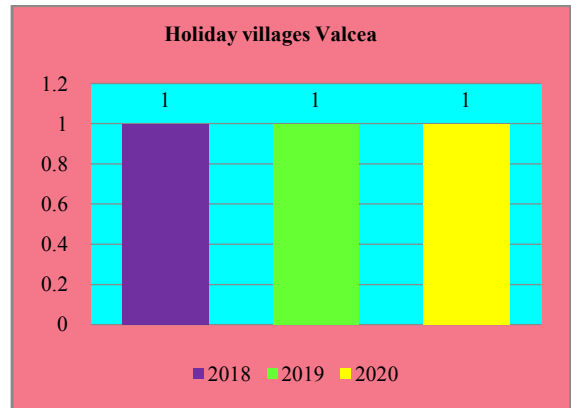
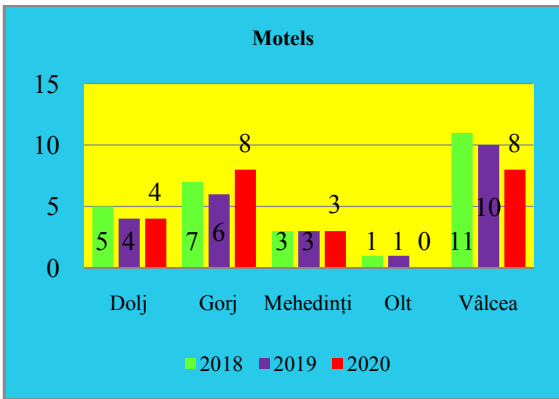
### CONCLUSIONS

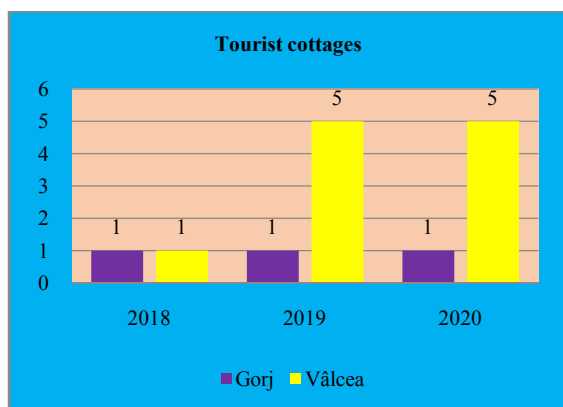
The continuation of the work of educating in the spirit of ecotourism and sustainable tourism must be achieved through the development of environmental awareness of the population, expressing feelings of love and respect for nature, landscapes, historical sites, monuments of art and architecture throughout history. The relationship between tourism and the environment is an irrevocable one and, as a result, the practice of ecotourism can ensure that tourism resources are properly valued and used. Consequently, ecotourism can lead to positive environmental impacts for the development of sustainable and value-added tourism. Finally, we can state with certainty that, through this article, we have aimed to promote ecotourism and specific forms of ecotourism practice, to locate the most important protected areas, national and natural parks in the South-West Oltenia Region.

### Annexes

Tourist accommodation units by type of tourist accommodation facilities of the South-West Oltenia Region







Source: insse.ro data processing

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