

TOURIST ATTRACTIVENESS OF RAMSAR WETLANDS. CASE STUDY: LAKES OF CHAMPAGNE HUMIDE (FRANCE) AND COMANA NATURAL PARK (ROMANIA)

Luc Florent¹, Gabriela Toroimac²

¹Groupe ESC TROYES, Troyes, France, *luc.florent@get-mail.fr*

²University of Bucharest, Faculty of Geography, Bucharest, Romania, *gabriela_toroimac@yahoo.com*

Abstract-

It is difficult to understand what contributes to tourist attractiveness of a territory. Labels have an important role, because they guarantee the quality of destination. Even if several labels have a different initial function, they may turn into important elements of tourism advertising, like in the cases of UNESCO and Natural Park labels. Besides these highly promoted labels, there are others less known by the general public, but prestigious for professionals, like the Ramsar label. Ramsar label is related to the homonymous convention signed in 1971; Ramsar List includes wetlands considered of international importance for waterfowl at any season and also in term of ecology, botany, zoology, limnology and hydrology. Tourism scientific literature ignores the attractiveness of the Ramsar label. Therefore the main goal of our paper is to analyse the Ramsar label as an element of tourist attractiveness. Our study is conducted on two Ramsar wetlands: Lakes of Champagnes Humide in France and Comana Natural Park in Romania. Our contribution relies on exploratory questionnaires, focused on tourists' motivation for choosing these destinations; the questions concern mainly their perception of nature protection and conservation, recognition of environmental protection labels, main reason of their journey, their interest for leisure activities, and the distance from their place of residence. Nature protection and conservation is perceived as important by 83% of the interrogated tourists. Therefore 31% of the questioned French tourists and 5% of the Romanian tourist declare to have taken into account the status of protection before choosing their destination. Only 17% of the French tourists and 5% of Romanian tourists are familiarised with Ramsar label, which seems to be rather unknown to the general public; tourist know what is being protected inside the two areas (wetlands and, especially, waterfowl), but they don't associate it to the Ramsar label. Tourists are mostly attracted by leisure activities. The two areas are attractive at a regional or national scale and they are practically unknown on the international level despite their prestigious Ramsar label. This situation may be explained by the restrictiveness of the Ramsar label which concern only one ecosystem and the lack of communication regarding this label. Therefore, we suggest that communication activities on this label need to be boosted in order to increase tourism frequentation, which would require another management to continue to preserve the site.

Keywords: tourist attractiveness, labeling, wetlands, Ramsar label.

1. INTRODUCTION

It is difficult to understand what contributes to tourist attractiveness of a territory, because there is a big part of subjectivity in the choice of destination of holidays or leisure activities. It was already shown that the purpose of the journey, the partners, the period of the year, the available budget and the prices, the weather and the information sources are taken into account (Frochot and Legohérel, 2007); blending all these elements, possible destinations aren't numerous, less than 7 according to Moutinho (1987). The choice of a destination is also based on the image of a territory (Pike, 2002; Wlamsey and Young, 1998), which depend on several variables, material or immaterial.

This image is rather in the tourist's imagination and not necessarily in reality (de Grandpré, 2007). Facing a varied offer, the tourist looks for elements of quality assurance, like labels. Labels concern various products, which historically, certify their quality and reassure consumers (Chameroy and Chandon, 2010). Apparently they have a favourable impact on consumers, thus they become a market strategy (Chameroy and Chandon, 2010). It's the same for the choice of a tourist destination: label reassures tourists. We saw this particularly with the UNESCO label (Florent 2011).

Consequently, they may increase tourism frequentation because they contribute to the reputation of the territory. Their capacity to attract depends on their reputation, on their credibility and on the importance and the development of their networks (Valceschini, 1999; Charles and Thouément, 2007). It is the case of the UNESCO label, which has an international reputation, give an international attractiveness to the

patrimony (Charles and Thouément, 2007; Florent 2011). Several labels are specific for tourism domain; it is the case of Michelin for restaurants. This is true for some label of environmental protection. For example, the label "National Park" is a certification of environmental performance for a region (Junge 2002). "National Park" reflects the image of a protected environment, unspoiled nature and protection of traditional ways of life that attracts tourists. If the original function of the national park was to preserve the environment, today they have become tourist destinations, attracting 44% of tourists visiting a protected area in France (Cremer-Schulte and Dissart 2010) and an increasingly number of tourists in Romania (Dumitraş 2011).

Besides these highly promoted labels, there are others less known by the general public, but prestigious for professionals. It is the case of Ramsar. Ramsar label is related to the homonymous convention signed at Ramsar in Iran on February 2nd, 1971. This agreement encourages local and regional actions and international cooperation for wetlands' preservation and for rational use of their resources. Ramsar wetlands are considered of international importance for waterfowl at any season and also in term of ecology, botany, zoology, limnology and hydrology (UNESCO, 1971). This label is even more prestigious, because it is the only one referring to a particular ecosystem, dispersed in various natural environments all over the Planet. These wetlands benefit from a sustainable management, binding local/regional development and ecological preservation.

There are different types of labels (Larceneux 2003). The Ramsar label may be termed "label awards" (Chameroy and Chandon 2010) which is issued by the professional sector, backed by the government. This is not necessarily a guarantee but this type of label can reassure tourists on the quality of the "product". One who chooses to visit an area labeled Ramsar, should find a natural preserved wetland ensure the conservation of birds.

In this general framework, the main goal of our paper is to analyse the Ramsar label as an element of tourist attractiveness: does tourists choose their destination based mainly on this label or they have other reasons also? In order to answer to this question, our study is founded on a motivational exploratory survey, conducted on Ramsar wetlands.

2. STUDY AREA

This paper focuses on two Ramsar sites, rather different in term of position, area, origins and date of inscription on Ramsar List: the Lakes of Champagne Humide (Aube, Marne and Haute-Marne Counties, France) and Natural Park of Comana (Giurgiu County, Romania).

The lakes of Champagne Humide form the largest Ramsar site in France (255 800 ha). The site corresponds to a wide clayey depression and includes 4 reservoirs, 70 ponds and 300 marshes (forest marshes and meadow marshes), several rivers and channels. In the Middle Ages, it was a large swampy area that the monks transformed in order to inhabit it; they created more than 200 ponds for agricultural drainage and fishing. In the 20th century the reservoirs of Champagne were built-up in order to regulate Seine River's flow, to increase its minimum water level during drought periods and to protect Paris against floods: the reservoir of Orient on Seine River in 1966, the reservoir of Der on Marne River in 1974, the reservoirs of Amance and Temple on Aube River in 1990. Their functionality amplified also the wetland biodiversity in the area. Being located on birds' migratory corridor, the lakes of Champagne Humide receive annually 200 000 birds (half of the population of *Grus grus* of Europe); they shelter also 13 species of amphibians, 23 species of fish, 63 species of mammals... For this reason, this site is on Ramsar List since 1991 and it is also a Natural Regional Park (NRP), a Natural Reserve and a special area for protection in Natura 2000 network. For tourist purposes, birds' observation points were installed; paths for wildlife interpretation were set up and an educational pole on environment was created. This area is frequented by 1.5 million of tourists every year for birds' observation (especially in autumn) and several activities like motorboat racing on Amance and Der Lakes, windsurf and activities not motorized on Orient Lake, bathing, hiking, bicycle touring, golf, cruise, air activities, fishing...

Natural Park of Comana (24963 ha) incorporates the marsh of Comana (4.7%), salty grounds prone to periodic flooding (1.2%), forest areas (39.1%) and grasslands, agricultural grounds and built-up areas (55%) (Administratia Parcului Natural Comana, 2007). Its biodiversity includes: 1300 species of plants, 10 species of amphibians, 9 species of reptiles, 31 species of fishes, 157 species of birds, 2 species of bats and 36 species of mammals. The marsh of Comana is located in the floodplain of anastomosed Neajlov River (6.5 m³/s), where the slope is low and the groundwater is near the surface. In the second half of the 20th century, it bearded processes of narrowing and silting due to agricultural drainage, deforestations and

intensive pasture which enhanced the erosion (Dan, 2012). The wetland habitat was also modified by exploitation of gravels and sands and by pollution. Consequently, the increase of marsh's area is the objective of an ecological reconstruction project, which authorizes the inundation of Neajlov River's floodplain by human actions (Peicea, 2011). The protection status of this area has a long history: 1) in 1954, it was implemented the Comana forest natural reserve (which protected forested areas and also floral species as *Convallaria majalis*, *Paeonia peregrina*, *Ruscus acculeatus*); 2) in 2005, it was created the Natural Park of Comana; 3) in 2007, it became a special protection area for birds, as a component of Natura 2000 network; 4) in 2011, it was registered on Ramsar List. Since the acquirement of this protection status, tourist development is stimulated. At present, there are placards (educational and for direction), paths crossing the forest, alleys and footbridges entering the marsh, bird observation points; it is possible to rent boats by making a preliminary reservation and by paying a tax; two guesthouses can receive approximately 60 tourists by night; although camping tents are allowed, there are no specific arrangements. The Natural Park of Comana is located at approximately 45 minutes by car from the center of Bucharest (30 km) and 30 minutes from the center of Giurgiu; it is also accessible by railroad (55 minutes from Giurgiu). The Natural Park of Comana receives annually approximately 20 000 tourists (number for 2008 according to Administratia Parcului Natural Comana, 2011).

3. METHODS: EXPLORATORY SURVEY

In order to find out which elements attract tourists in these two wetlands (Lakes of Champagne Humide and Natural Park of Comana), we choose to construct and conduct questionnaires. For our study, this method has two important advantages: 1) it allows us to get directly tourists' opinions, car there is no precise statistics concerning tourism in Ramsar sites; 2) it consists in standardized questions, which makes easy the comparison between the two rather different study areas.

The survey focuses on tourists' motivation for choosing these destinations. Questions concern mainly their perception of nature protection and conservation, recognition of environmental protection labels, main reason of their journey, their interest for leisure activities, and the distance from their place of residence. The majority of the questions are closed-ended in order to easily quantify the answers, especially because the study areas are rather different.

The survey is based on a non-probabilistic model, because there isn't a reference population; the visitors were questioned on random meetings; thus, the survey is considered to be exploratory. The mode of administration was paper-and-pencil, the items being presented on paper. The survey was conducted in spring 2012; this period was chosen in order to benefit from school holydays and important frequentation; it is also the period of birds' reproduction, favorable to the presence of avifauna lovers. Despite the large area of the two sites, the questionnaires were concentrates in only few perimeters, well arranged for receiving tourists and, thus, considered important for tourism frequentation.

We questioned 150 persons; the sample of visitors has a good socio-demographic distribution: 58% men, 30% less than 30 years, 50% between 30-60 years and 20 % more than 60 years. All the tourists interviewed in the neighborhoods of the Lakes of Champagne Humide have the French nationality; therefore we'll refer to them as French tourists. All the tourists questioned in Natural Park of Comana have the Romanian nationality; therefore we'll refer to them as Romanian tourists.

4. RESULTS

Our first question concerned the knowledge of the protected nature of the sites visited. The area of Comana and Champagne lakes have multiple protection measures. They benefits from Ramsar label, both are regional parks, have nature reserve status, and are on the list of Natura 2000 network. It appears from reading the survey results that visitors know they are in an area of nature conservation: 68% in France, 83% in Romania. The fact that the park entrance fee of Comana explain that Romanians tourists better identify these protection areas.

Another contribution of the survey: all labels don't have the same reputation. Thus, the majority of site visitors know that they visit a NRP (90% for the Champagne lakes, 100% for Comana). NRP is the name

most publicized, benefiting from the largest promotional campaign. However it's clear that the RAMSAR designation is unknown to the public: only 17% for the French tourists, only 5% for Romanian tourists. This can be explained easily by the communication on Ramsar sites. No information is given about them inside the park and it takes just a few lines on the websites to find out.

It shows that nature conservation is an important factor for 83% of tourists questioned and it plays a role in the choice of tourist destination for 43% of respondents. The only way for tourists to know that the area they choose for their leisure is protected, are the labels of protection. This confirms that labels play an important role in tourist attractiveness. A significant proportion of respondents came to our sites because they are natural regional parks. This is not the only reason, but it should not be overlooked. Other factors seem to play an important role like the proximity to the place of residence. Our two territories mainly attract day-trippers, visitors who stay less than 24 hours on the site: only a third of tourists in France and 5% in Romania. The opportunity to practice recreational activities is important as well. Thus the respondents came essentially to spend time in a natural environment and practice physical activity. The hiking is the main activity of visitors: 61% for Champagne Lake, 44% for Comana. Cycling is also practiced due to cycling facilities in place. In both cases, these sports are an opportunity to observe the flora and fauna. These are rarely the main reason for coming.

Tourists we met were generally satisfied with their visit and a great majority of them plans to return. This is an important answer because word of mouth is an important medium in tourism. If visitors have a positive image of the site, they will promote it in their environment and generate new visits. In both cases, nearly 50% of visitors came on the recommendation of a friend or family member. Internet has also become a fundamental means of communication

5. DISCUSSIONS

Our results are interesting for several elements.

- Labels of nature conservation are not well known to tourists: if the NRP label seems to be known, the Ramsar label remains anonymous. Visitors are aware that the site they visit is a natural site and it needs protection, but they don't make the link between protection and label.
- The protected feature of the place has a role in the destination choice for many visitors. It should be pushed in the communication to create a positive image of the territory and increase the attractiveness of the site. But it is not the only factor of choice: the opportunity to practice and play activities and the place of residence also take a big part.

Why is the Ramsar label less known than the NRP label. One could put forward their influence, but Ramsar label is international while NRP is national and do not exist everywhere. It would be normal that the label of wetland protection to be better known than the regional parks, but this is not the case. We could also think about their date of creation because backvaluation can influence knowledge, but in France and Romania, both labels were introduced at the same times. Two factors explain the low awareness of the Ramsar classification:

- The first is the fact that the Ramsar label concerns an only one type of ecosystem, wetlands, while the regional parks concern very different kind of spaces. Then tourists can choose according to their needs or expectations.
- The second is to look at communication. The Ramsar label is absolutely not identified by visitors. Very few people know it exists and its functions. In Romania and France, neither NRP communicate on the Ramsar label. They refer to it on their website, but very briefly. On the website of the park Comana, only the logo appears. On the site of the lakes of Champagne, there are three lines that briefly explain the function of the Ramsar label. But in the recreation area no sign refers to the Ramsar label. It is very different for NRP: all signs of the region refer to it. It is therefore impossible to miss.

Through these conclusions, we concur with the work of Cremer-Schulte and Dissart (2010), who had already shown the role of NRP in tourism development; the NRP label is identified as a guarantee of quality and as sure to find a protected area. The environmental protection labels are a factor of attractiveness. It is likely that a better communication on the Ramsar label would increase protected areas frequentation. Lovers of birds may be particularly interested in identifying Ramsar sites. Recall that Ramsar sites are areas that play an ecological function, a botanic function, a zoological function, a major hydrological function for wildlife conservation. They are internationally recognized. The nature tourists are sure to find a natural protected area enjoying wildlife and unique flora. As much as the quest for nature has become a major source of tourist travel, Ramsar areas are promised to a great future. A frequentation increase would then require

another management to continue to preserve the site. We strongly recommend promoting the Ramsar areas, in situ and on websites and other communication media. If there are risks to increase the frequentation, it may also be beneficial in terms of economic benefits that could be used to protect the area. It costs money to enter the Comana Park but according to our survey, 86% of respondents find it normal. So there is no problem with the establishment of an environmental tax for site management.

83% of tourists say that nature conservation is important for them. 43% of tourists came to our sites because they were protected. So we can consider that the nature protection is generating travel. But if this data is important it is not the only factor of choice. We have seen that the proximity of the residence and the opportunity of diverse and varied leisure also weighed. We hypothesize that an isolated and protected site with no leisure activities will not attract tourists. From there, we believe that a protected site must be equipped to receive tourists. This requires parking lots, picnic areas, hiking trails or the possibility of water and boating activity. The success of Comana areas and lakes of Champagne is in their proximity to urban areas, in their protection and in the diversity of activities offered. We therefore consider that the communication on the protection of the site must be made before, during and after the arrival of tourists. We join in this Leiper (1990) which stated that the tourist is confronted with markers before his departure (Generating marker), while on travel (transit marker) and finally in situ (continuous marker).

However our work has a number of limits. The main one is the period during which the survey was conducted. Indeed, we have conducted our investigation outside the birds' migration period and at the end of the breeding season. It is likely that the same survey submitted in the autumn or early spring may have demonstrated a better knowledge of the Ramsar label. We can think that tourists traveling to watch birds (and there are many in Champagne wetlands) better know the Ramsar label since it indicates the nesting areas and passage birds.

There is also the small size of our sample; this is why we consider our investigation as exploratory. It provides guidance but deserves to be reproduced on a larger period, on a larger sample and a greatest number of territories.

6. CONCLUSION

The literature review and this first approach can nevertheless prove the interest is further research on the label and tourism. There is indeed behind this, economic, ecological and sociological interest and therefore development of territories questions. Some Ramsar areas are already extremely popular with tourists. One example is the bay of Mont Saint-Michel or the delta of the Camargue in France, the Danube Delta in Romania and the Kakadu region in Australia. Tourism development can cause a number of environmental problems. It is difficult to reconcile environmental protection and tourism development, but we do not oppose them. The Ramsar sites have an educational interest and must be open to tourists. However, it must manage them to preserve them. Communication on their fragility is an important part to educate visitors.

7. REFERENCES

- Administratia Parcului Natural Comana (2007), *Planul de Management al Parcului Natural Comana*, available on <http://comanaparc.ro/docum/continut.pdf>
- Administratia Parcului Natural Comana (2011), *Strategie de vizitare a Parcului Natural Comana*, available on http://comanaparc.ro/docum/Strategia_vizitare.pdf
- Chameroy, F., Chandon, J.L. (2010), Les labels de qualité ont-ils des effets sur le comportement d'achat du consommateur ?, *Communication pour le 9e congrès des tendances du marketing en Europe*, available on <http://www.cergam.org/fileadmin/files/cerog/wp/885.pdf>
- Cremer-Schulte, D., Dissart, J.C. (2010), *Estimating the effect of Regional Nature Parks in France*, available on http://www.psd-r-a.fr/documents/Amen/Resultats%202008_2011/Axe%204/12.%20Cremer-Schulte%20D.,%20Dissart%20J.-C.%202010-08,%20%20Comm.%20ERSA,%2026p..pdf
- Dan, R. (2012), *Planning and implementing Green Infrastructure on a regional level. Case study - projet example from Romania*, available on http://reverse.aquitaine.eu/IMG/pdf/surf_romania_example_28032011.pdf

- De Grandpré, F. (2007), Attraites, attractions et produits touristiques. Trois concepts distincts dans le contexte d'un développement touristique régional, *TEOROS*, Dossier Été: 12-18.
- Dumitraș, D.E. (2011), Analysis of general and specific characteristics of Romanian National and Natural Parks, *Lucrări științifice*, Universitatea de Științe Agricole și Medicină Veterinară a Banatului, Seria 1, Management Agricol, 13(2): 351-356.
- Charles, E., Thouément, H., (2007), Le label territorial, facteur d'attractivité touristique. Une étude appliquée à la Bretagne, *TEOROS*, Dossier Été: 33-38.
- Florent, L. (2011), L'utilisation du label UNESCO dans la communication touristique. Entre choix et contrainte, *TEOROS*, 30(2) : 17-27.
- Frochot, I., Legohérel P. (2007), *Le marketing du tourisme*, Editions Dunod, Paris: 276p.
- Junge, A.L (2002), *La nature comme attraction touristique. Parc nationaux en Suisse*, Séminaire de géographie économique, Université de Lausanne, Lausanne : 27p.
- Larceneux, F. (2003), « Segmentation des signes de qualité : labels expérientiels et labels techniques », *Décisions Marketing*, janvier mars, vol. 29, p. 35-46.
- Leiper, N. (1990), *Tourist Attraction Systems*, Annals of Tourism Research, no 17, p. 367-384.
- Moutinho, L. (1987), Consumer Behavior in Tourism, *European Journal of Marketing*, 21(10): 5-44.
- Peicea, D. (2011), *Reconstructia ecologica a Baltii COmana – Judetul Giurgiu. Cod SMIS – CSNR 6725*, available on www.posmediu.ro
- Pike, S. (2002), Destination image analysis: a review of 142 papers from 1973 to 2000, *Tourism Management*, 23(5): 541-549.
- UNESCO (1971), *Convention on Wetlands of International Importance Especially as Waterfowl Habitat*, available on http://www.ramsar.org/cda/en/ramsar-documents-texts/main/ramsar/1-31-38_4000_0
- Valceschini, E. (1999), Les signaux de qualité crédibles sur le marché agro-alimentaire : certifications officielles et marques, dans Lagrange L. (edit.), *Signes officiels de qualité et développement agricole*, Institut national de la recherche agronomique / INRA-Economica: 147-166.
- Walmsley, D.J., Young M. (1998), Evaluative image and tourism, the use of personal constructs to describe the structure of destination images, *Journal of Travel Research*, Winter: 65-69.