

The Transnational Hiking Trail *via carpatica*: A Concept for the Sustainable Development of the Carpathians

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Abstract The *via carpatica* will one day connect seven European countries, and it will be a model for sustainable mountain tourism. It creates new jobs, promotes an ecologically compatible landscape and infrastructure development, and enables comprehensive possibilities for arranging leisure time activities, international encounters, natural experiences and the maintenance and further enhancement of the regional cultural heritage.

1 The Vision of a *via carpatica*

A traversal on the transnational hiking trail of the Carpathian bend, *via carpatica*, is certainly a vision today. Although single sections of the Carpathian mountain bend are more or less well developed, a continuous route with paths and huts along the mountain bend is still lacking. For this reason, the creation of a transnational hiking trail, which runs through seven countries of this European mountain region, is of far reaching importance. The idea behind *via carpatica*, consists of developing and promoting this European mountain region with a sustainable social and ecologically compatible tourist concept, the core of which is hiking tourism.

The *via carpatica* according to the vision will one day connect seven European countries and it could be a general model for sustainable mountain tourism: It will create new jobs, promote an ecologically compatible landscape and infrastructure development and enable comprehensive possibilities for arranging leisure time activities, international encounters, natural experiences and the maintenance and further enhancement of the regional cultural heritage.

Our investigations in the Carpathian project developed within the INTERREG IIB/CADSES programme show that there is a strong need for further development

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in sustainable tourism, in particular for hiking tourism in the individual countries of the Carpathian bend. Sustainable hiking tourism may strengthen the local added value and create a balance to the loss of traditional economy (VASICA 2009). We therefore will present some of the expected effects of the sustainable development of the tourism sector. In conclusion, we want to outline the first steps for implementing the concept of *via carpatica*.

2 Results and Consequences of the Development of the Transnational Hiking Trail *via carpatica*

Looking at the results of the inventory of tourism infrastructure and main local stakeholders in the Romanian Carpathians, carried out by ISF München in 2006, numerous positive developments will result in the Carpathian region with the development of *via carpatica* on the basis of a sustainable tourism concept (VASICA 2009). Hereby growth potentials will be promoted as a result of hiking tourism, e.g. new economic and social perspectives will be created which will prevent further migration from the mountain areas. If this is successful, then mountain tourism will make an important political contribution by preventing forced migration throughout Europe with all its related negative consequences for the migrants themselves as well as for the receiving countries to which the migrants flee. This could lead to a model of transnational regional development in which a steady balance would be created between globalisation (here understood as an external use of the resources of mountain regions, among other things, by tourism) and the economic self-sufficiency. Along with it there would be space for independent regional development and identities.

2.1 Development of Economy and Employment

Traditional economic sectors in the mountain regions, particularly agriculture (including sheep farming) are frequently no longer able to compete, despite of their high quality. As long as there are no new work perspectives or ways to earn an income, the migration of the residents from the Carpathians is the consequence. Therefore new qualification concepts should be developed as well as employment fields.

By the development of *via carpatica* many new economical stimuli with the corresponding effects on the employment will be generated, especially in services: maintenance of paths; management of huts; accommodation and stores in the valleys; public traffic; information, advice and support for hikers and mountaineers. By this new work and training perspectives will be created for the local population. They completely replace the precarious fields of work, improving and stabilising the economical base of the mountain regions.

In consequence of this development, the local and regional economy would be strengthened without making it dependent of the financial and decision-making power of big investors. It is based on available structures and increases these as required; it enables enterprises (e.g. inns) to be again profitable which otherwise would have no future without this development. It also enables new usage of abandoned facilities (such as work or forest paths). The necessary investments could be arranged in a way that avoids foreign dependencies.

The added value and the effects on the employment will work locally and inure to the benefit of the local people. Certainly this will contribute to reduce the unintended migration flows.

2.2 Development of the Region and the Regional Culture

A sustainable form of tourism leads to a revaluation of the rural space. Not only new employment opportunities in the service sector will be created which are directly attributed to tourism, but also other activities. The development of *via carpatica* requires the ideas and imagination of the regional stakeholders, as well as design and development. Moreover, the residents themselves should “reexplore” their region before they make it approachable for strangers. The “rediscovery” of the natural, cultural, economic and social resources of one’s own region strengthens stakeholders’ regional identity and increases their independent ability to act. In this context the danger of transfiguration of the regional history is not to underestimate (Bätzing 1991).

Thus the *via carpatica* is not to be measured just in terms of economical success, but also on the ability of maintaining this success and reactivating the local culture in a comprehensive sense.

2.3 Networking

Until now in the Carpathian region there have hardly been any cross-national approaches towards regional development. One reason for this is attributed to the isolation of the countries of this region, which emerged from the political situation in the past, but still continues with the political upheaval since 1990.

The Carpathian Convention is a first and politically powerful attempt to create the framework for a close co-operation among all the Carpathian countries. With this convention the agreement under international law depicts an important basis for supranational activities for the future.

With a transnational hiking trail through the Carpathians international networks can already be developed and implemented. The planning and carrying out of a European project for the creation of *via carpatica* would mark the beginning of necessary networking among the project partners involved and also signify the co-operative efforts of the local and regional stakeholders.

3 Proceeding in the Construction of a *via carpatica*

At the moment there are no solid transnational structures for the installation of a *via carpatica*, although there are stakeholders on a national level, who work for the development of a *via carpatica* in their region. There is also a spontaneous international coordination. Therefore the planning of the building of a *via carpatica* is still programmatic, such as to transfer the general principles of a sustainable development and the experiences with other mountain long distance trails like the French GTA (Grande Traversée des Alpes) and the Italian *gta* (grande traversata delle alpi).

With the construction of the *via carpatica*, the principle should be that the paths and huts as well as the partners in the regions concerned should be completely reliant on the structures available, which should be further developed (bottom-up-approach). Thus the *via carpatica* will emerge step by step, depending on the stage of development of current structures in the individual regions. Numerous sections will be created with individual institutions responsible (NGOs, communes, regional administrations). This will also lead to an independent character of individual sections (variety in unity).

If these goals, results and impacts were achieved, mountain tourists one day would be able to hike on marked paths over the ridges and crests of the Carpathians, from the Danube back to the Danube. They would find a hut in the evening, where they could spend the night and get something to eat, and infrastructure in the valleys that provides an easier access to the mountains. They would find route descriptions and get information on the Internet. And all this will be made possible by the efforts made by the resident population, which in turn will also help to secure jobs. This will be an important contribution to the stabilisation of this beautiful European mountain region.

References

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