

RURAL TOURISM IN A FUNCTION OF SUSTAINABLE RURAL DEVELOPMENT: EXAMPLES OF GOOD PRACTICE IN SERBIA¹

Gordana Radović¹, Jonel Subić² Boris Kuzman³

¹Institute of Agricultural Economics, Belgrade, Serbia,
email: gordana_r@iep.bg.ac.rs

²Institute of Agricultural Economics, Belgrade, Serbia,
email: jonel_s@iep.bg.ac.rs

³Institute of Agricultural Economics, Belgrade, Serbia,
email: boris_k@iep.bg.ac.rs

ABSTRACT:

Rural tourism is an activity that has great economic importance for the growth of living standards of residents in rural areas, as well as for the development of rural economies. However, in addition to positive economic effects, this activity can also have negative effects. They primarily refer to the harmful impact on the environment due to large tourist traffic. Bearing in mind the above, it is necessary to develop rural tourism in a sustainable way. The aim of the paper is to analyze the current development of rural tourism in the Republic of Serbia, as well as to present examples of good practice.

Keywords: rural tourism, sustainable rural development, examples of good practice, Republic of Serbia

¹Paper is a part of research financed by the MSTDI RS, agreed in decision no. 451-03-136/2025-03/200009 from 04.02.2025.

1. INTRODUCTION

In addition to agriculture, as the oldest economic activity, additional non-agricultural activities have also developed in rural areas over time. These are activities that are causally related to agriculture. Within them, the most important non-agricultural activity is rural tourism. Rural tourism is a common name for all forms of tourism that can take place in rural areas.

According to the definition of rural tourism, adopted by the Council of Europe in 1986 and accepted at the level of the European Union, "the term rural tourism is used in cases where rural culture is a key component of the offered tourist product" [7], [1].

The Council of Europe defines rural tourism from the aspect that this activity includes all activities that can be realized in rural areas. These are: hiking, activities on the water, in the air, as well as various sports activities. Also, the activities carried out within the framework of rural tourism include familiarization with production processes in agricultural production, cultural, gastronomic, as well as activities of a health nature [7]. The specificity of rural tourism is that there is direct contact between the guest (tourist) and the host. Through this activity, it is necessary that tourists "be given the opportunity to participate in the daily activities, traditions and lifestyle of the local population" [3].

Some authors [13] define rural tourism as a segment of multifunctional agriculture. The cited authors link the development of rural tourism to: natural, demographic, infrastructural, and financial resources. They also emphasize the importance of state financial support for the development of rural tourism, with the aim of rural and regional development. The economic importance of rural tourism lies in the increase in the employment of the rural population, as well as in the growth of their income.

The authors [4] point out that it is not unusual that today agricultural farms can generate higher incomes from tourism than from agriculture. Rural tourism also has a positive impact on the development of the local and national economy, based on the multiplied effect of tourism. Also, this activity significantly affects the reduction of migration from rural to urban areas.

In addition to positive economic effects, rural tourism can also have negative economic effects. Negative economic effects of rural tourism

occur if, due to high tourist traffic, there is an increase in costs for the conservation of natural resources and the environment. Also, insufficient utilisation of tourism capacity. This is a very common case in rural tourism, given that tourist demand is seasonal (it is highest in the period from April to October). The above causes lead to the ecological and economic unsustainability of rural tourism development. And the development strategy of rural tourism should be based on ecological, economic and social sustainability [11].

Sustainable development of rural tourism is of particular importance given the limited resources for its development [15]. Rural tourism plays a key role in the sustainable development of traditional villages [16]. Sustainable development of rural tourism is part of integrated rural development. Integrated rural development is defined as "a modern concept that represents the complex development of a specific rural area based on available natural, material, infrastructural and human resources that are managed with due attention to preserving the balance of man and nature" [6].

Sustainable development of rural tourism is most often viewed from the perspective of ecological sustainability, or environmental protection. Environmental protection and biodiversity, as well as the fight against climate change, are the core goals of the long-term planning document of the European Union "The European Green Deal" [2]. With the same goal, the United Nations adopted the document – Sustainable Development Goals [14]. Within the framework of the document "Serbia and Agenda 2030", four strategic goals of sustainable development have been defined: (1) economic growth; (2) human resource development; (3) environment and climate; (4) institutions and finance [12].

All of the above has a direct impact on the sustainable development of rural tourism, as well as on the sustainable development of agriculture, given that there is a direct connection between the development of rural tourism and the development of agriculture. The aim of the paper is to analyze the current development of rural tourism, as well as to present examples of good practice of sustainable development of rural tourism in the Republic of Serbia. The paper uses desk research, descriptive, as well as analysis and synthesis methods.

2. DEVELOPMENT OF RURAL TOURISM IN SERBIA

Rural tourism began to develop more intensively in Europe in the 1970s, as part of rural development strategies and in line with the need to preserve rural areas from depopulation. The development of rural tourism is a long-term process. France today has the largest rural tourism offer in Europe (the largest number of beds), but it took this country 50 years to reach its current level of development.

Rural tourism in Serbia also began to develop spontaneously in the 1970s, in the village of Devići, in the municipality of Ivanjica. This was the beginning of the development of rural tourism not only in the Republic of Serbia, but also in the entire Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia [5]. According to the results of the 2023 Agricultural Census, a total of 880 agricultural holdings were engaged in rural tourism. The regional distribution of these farms is shown in Chart 1 (Fig. 1).

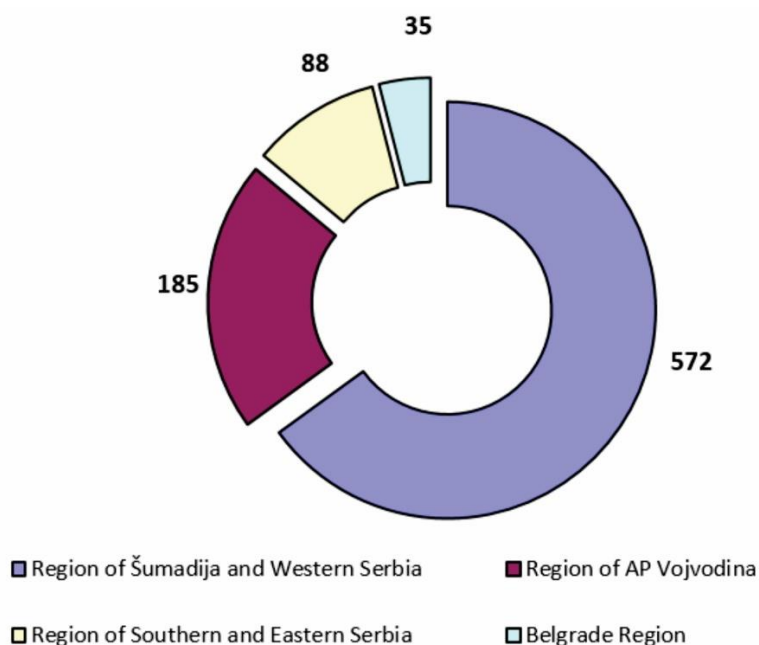


Fig. 1. Regional distribution of agricultural holdings engaged in tourism in Serbia in 2023

Source: [17].

Based on the data shown in Chart 1 (Fig. 1), it can be concluded that the regional distribution of agricultural holdings engaged in rural tourism is quite uneven. The even development of rural tourism is significant precisely for the purpose of uniform rural and regional development [8].

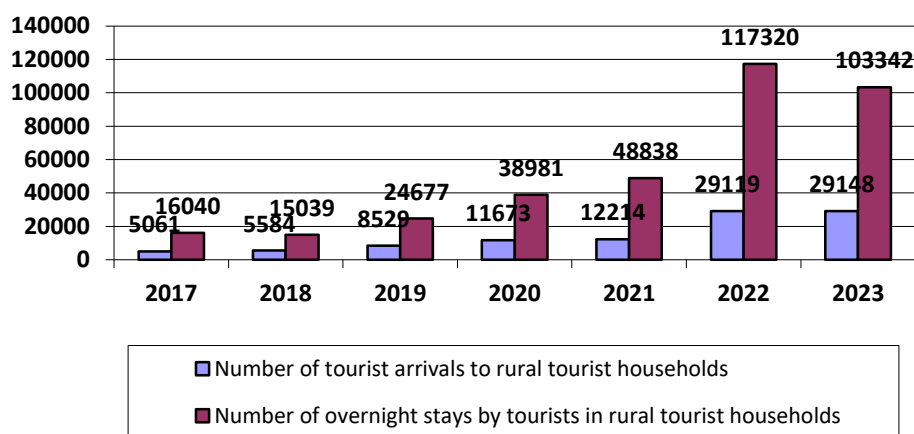


Fig. 2. Number of tourist arrivals and overnight stays in rural tourist households in 2017-2023

Source: [10].

When analyzing the number of tourist arrivals and overnight stays in rural tourist households, a significant increase can be noted, especially in the number of overnight stays in the period 2017-2022, while in 2023 a 12% decrease was recorded compared to the previous year (Fig. 2).

According to the results of the research [9], the problems in the development of rural tourism in the Republic of Serbia are the same as today, and they are: (a) lack of funding sources for the development of all elements of the tourist offer, lack of a Rural Tourism Register and defined standards; (b) inconsistency of rural tourism entities defined by the Law on Tourism with the current state of practice; (c) insufficient supply of tourist content and underdevelopment of infrastructure and tourist signage; (d) insufficient engagement of travel agencies in the sale of rural tourism products; (e) insufficient association and specialization of service providers, as well as their education. Today we would like to especially highlight the problem of sustainable development of rural tourism due to the increasing tourist traffic in rural areas.

3. EXAMPLES OF GOOD PRACTICE

The rural tourist household in Sopotnica (Prijepolje municipality) has been engaged in rural tourism since 1995. The household is located near the waterfalls of the Sopotnica River, which the hosts say "brought" the first guests – hikers who stayed in the eco-camp by the river. This rural tourist household initiated the establishment of the Association "Center for Sustainable Development - Sopotnica" with the aim of sustainable development of agriculture and tourism. In addition to overnight stays, the tourist offer also includes catering facilities, which are based on homemade food from their own agricultural production. The tourist season lasts all year round. The tourist attractions on offer include: rafting on the Lim River, enjoying the natural beauty of the Sopotnica River waterfalls, visiting the Mileševa Monastery, the "Tičije Polje" ethnographic museum, as well as the possibility of walking, hiking, cycling, etc.

Rokin Salaš – an area of the Ludaško Jezero Special Nature Reserve. The farm was named after the Hungarian word "roka", which means fox, which used to be abundant in this area. The farm has existed for 170 years, and since 1987 it has been owned by the current owners. They renovated the farm in 1993 and restored its original appearance. Today, the farm houses a three-part house, more than a century old, which is a protected immovable cultural asset. Rokin Salaš is also a protected cultural monument. The tourist offer of Rokin Salaš can be called: eco-agritourism, given that it also features agricultural production. The guests at the farm are mainly primary and secondary school students, for whom lectures on the importance of environmental protection and biodiversity are organized at Rokin Salaš.

House on Orlova stena, village of Komarani (municipality of Nova Varoš). The household is located at an altitude of 1,200 meters, near the Special Nature Reserve "Uvac", which is a natural asset of the First Category and is home to 104 species of birds. The most important ones include the griffon vulture, one of the two remaining species of vultures that nest in the territory of the Republic of Serbia today. The household has been engaged in agromithological tourism since 1996. The beginning of tourism was not planned, but a coincidence, and the first guests came to observe the griffon vulture. This rural tourist household is the first categorized in the municipality of Nova Varoš, and it is also engaged in rural tourism and agriculture (livestock breeding). The rich menu features homemade food, and especially stands out the exceptionally high-quality kajmak and the specialty of this region - buckwheat pie. Tourist attractions include: griffon vulture watching, boating on Lake Uvac, fishing, hunting and mountaineering.

4. CONCLUSION

Rural tourism has been developing in the Republic of Serbia for the past five decades, but the increase in tourist demand has been pronounced since 2020, that is, since the so-called "corona period". Since that year, there has been an increase in tourist traffic, especially the number of overnight stays by tourists. When analyzing the offer, that is, the number of agricultural farms engaged in rural tourism as an additional activity, it can be concluded that this number is still negligible, if it is compared to the total number of agricultural farms. The paper presents examples of good practice, which developed this activity based on personal initiative and entrepreneurship. In order to increase the representation of rural tourism, it is necessary to define a development strategy through which the problems in the current realization of this activity would be solved.

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