

A VIRTUAL ECO-TOURISTIC VILLAGE FOR THE BALKAN REGION

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Abstract. This paper presents the design and development of a pilot virtual ecotourism village in the Balkan region. Local wars and conflicts created environmental, social, economic and cultural problems. Ecotourism generates the avenue, which will be used to protect and conserve the biodiversity and natural resources that draw visitors to a particular site. The aim of this work is not only to activate the local people but also to stimulate the international community about the required environmental protection and the development needs of this area. The design of this village is not based only on creating a virtual travel to natural areas and to understand the culture and natural history of the environment but also to take care and to show how to avoid not to alter the ecosystem integrity and to exhibit the economic beneficial opportunities that comes from the conservation of the resources. Consequently it will inspire people to explore sustainable solutions by providing up-to-day information on all aspects of sustainable living and by delivering courses that will help to turn people's ideas into reality.

Keywords: virtual tourism, ecotourism, ecotourism activities.

AIMS AND BACKGROUND

The software development in this study is based on the systems development life cycle (SDLC) that contains five distinct phases¹⁻⁴. These phases are systems planning, analysis, design, implementation and operations support.

A brief study of the existing situation of ecotourism in the Balkan region has been done, about the existing ecotourism areas in Balkans, their structure, organisation and operation. There are areas where ecotourism is taking place but they are like isolated islands and there is a need to present them in an integrated form.

There are three sections that requires integration in order to preserve the important natural features and unique habitats, which otherwise would have been at risk of disappearing (Figs 1-4), to demonstrate the need for visitor management, in order to protect the resources from excessive human impacts and to show the needs of local people living inside or near the areas "put aside" for protection.

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Fig. 1. Map of the Balkans

This virtual ecotourism village will serve as a link between the Balkan area and ecotourism requirements so it will demonstrate local persons need, tourism management and ecotourism requirements. An application program that will facilitate all their requirements is tedious, needs a very long time in order to be completed and its cost is too high and requires to clarify the objectives and to narrow to propose and to gather and record the facts of the existing areas and to design a data

base with all the gathered information.

The whole Balkan area is going to be presented as one village divided in sections and either films or picture static or animated one will be designed. Observations took place in some areas in Greece where ecotourism has been already developed. In these areas the buildings and the landscape design is in harmony with the surrounded environment.

During the last five years the Greek Ministry of Agriculture⁵ is responsible for the ecotourism development and supports it in rural and low income. The areas, which are marked on the map of Greece, are the areas where efforts of setting up ecotourism have already been started to operate. In these areas there are places or flats for rent, traditional family business, traditional restaurants with local food, sport courts, recreation centres, art crafts and local products.

According to the literature review not only in Greece but in other Balkan countries, too, the national policy about ecotourism basically promotes its economic aspects more than its environmental issues. For example, in the site of ecotourism of the Ministry of Agriculture there was no information about environmental problems of these rural areas. The case of Nestos river in Greece where information about this river is in the Living Lake Organization site⁶ (the Living

Lakes partnership initially was sponsored by the German Environmental Fund and the Global Nature Fund) is a common case in this area. Of course, there are laws and President Decrees about environmental protection but responsibilities are distributed among different Ministries and consequently it is very difficult to have a clear picture about the current situation. There are similar cases in the other Balkan countries, too.



Fig. 2. Greek ecotourism map

APPLICATION DESCRIPTION

The Balkan ecotourism virtual village will be one village with general information of all the Balkan region and information for each country separately. This information centre will act as a reference and information place for the func-



Fig. 3. Greek traditional bread

tions – values of the area, as a mechanism for the promotion of information and awareness and as a mechanism for the implementation of guided-tour programmes, ecotourism and other special actions.

The objective is to facilitate the implementation with information-awareness activities of the existing situation or of what are being planned for these areas.

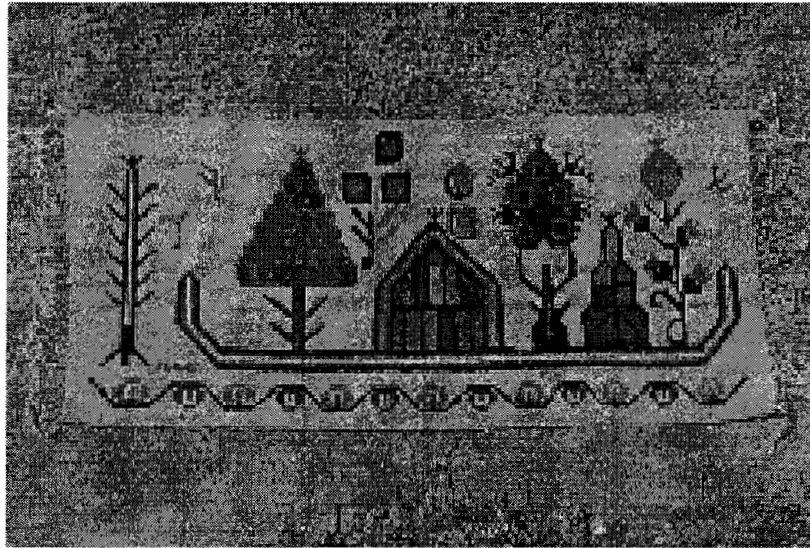


Fig. 4. Greek traditional carpet

The application presentation contains a map of the region where the selected locations were connected through a database. First it will present the common cultural activities of the region and then the individual ones of each area. The contents of the database are:

- General view of the Balkan region, common activities and requirements;
- Location: country, area, flora and fauna, population, culture, people occupation;
- Legislative acts that form strategic frameworks;
- L. 2204/1994, ratification of the international convention on biodiversity;
- Directive 92/43/EC on the protection of natural ecosystems and wild fauna and endemic flora;
- Directive 79/409/EC on the conservation of wild birds;
- Regulation 2078/92 of the Council of the European Communities concerning agricultural production methods that are compatible with the requirements of the protection of the environment and the conservation of the natural territory;
- Source of financing for biodiversity conservation, especially in legally protected areas;
- Economic justification for protected areas;
- Economic alternatives for local people to reduce exploitation on protected areas and wildlands and wildlife resources;
- Constituency-building which promotes biodiversity conservation;
- An impact for private biodiversity conservation efforts.

The used software is Geographic Information Systems G.I.S. – ARCVIEW 3.2 where on the map of the Balkans the known areas are marked with information about each place.

CONCLUSIONS

Undoubtedly, it should become common consciousness that this strategy, just like any other socio-economic and environmental protection strategy, may prove fruitful only provided the majority of Balkan citizens endorses it as a real collective necessity, and a personal responsibility as well.

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