



# THE TRENDS OF RURAL TOURISM RESEARCH IN THE PAST FIFTEEN YEARS

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## Abstract:

Considerable attention has been devoted to rural tourism in the scientific tourism literature over the last decades. The countryside is undergoing continuous change, as well as rural tourism and scientific research covering its various aspects. The purpose of this study is to track changes that rural tourism research has undergone. The author analysed research papers published by major international tourism journals in the past fifteen years with the aim to determine the actuality and proportion of the topic of rural tourism. By categorizing the studies on rural tourism published by these journals into different topic areas, the aim of the author was not only to identify the recurring themes and sophistication of the chosen methodologies, but also to look for the unanswered questions concerning rural tourism research.

## Key words:

rural tourism,  
scientific research,  
methodology,  
rural tourism research.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The academic study of rural tourism is a relatively recent phenomenon and therefore, this field has undergone rapid changes in the domain of research topics, focus of the studies and the methodologies used. The countryside is in a constant state of change, as well as rural tourism and scientific research covering its various aspects. The purpose of this study is to track changes of the scientific literature on rural tourism and identify the main research themes addressed by the authors. The author analysed research papers published by major international tourism journals and other major international journals dealing with the issue of rural tourism. The following criteria were considered when choosing the appropriate journals: the international nature of the journal, its connection with rural tourism, its global coverage and availability on sciencedirect.com. Five of the selected journals are international journals focusing on academic research in tourism: *Annals of Tourism Research*, *Tourism Management*, *Tourism Management Perspectives*, *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management*, *Journal of Destination Marketing & Management*. Each of the above-mentioned international tourism journals assumes an interdisciplinary and integrative approach and strives towards achieving the balance between the theory and practice. While *Annals* is dedicated to developing theoretical constructs, the other four journals are more concerned with planning, management and tourism and travel marketing.

The other three journals have different concerns, but each of them has an interdisciplinary nature and global coverage. The main concern of the *Land Use Policy* is the social, economic, political, legal, physical and planning aspect of urban and rural land use. The *Journal of Rural Studies* is concerned with the analysis of contemporary rural societies, economies, cultures and lifestyles. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences* is an international journal that publishes conference proceedings with an emphasis on any area of the social and behavioural sciences or arts and humanities.

The definition of rural tourism is not consensual in the international scientific literature. Defining rural tourism is difficult as the notion of rurality is controversial on its own, and rural areas can often be differentiated from urban areas with difficulty. Some suggest that rural tourism should include all tourism activities developed in a rural area, *i.e.* each form of tourism that is not rural should be considered rural tourism. Others suggest that rural tourism is identical with farm tourism or agritourism. Lane (1994:14) suggests that rural tourism in its purest form is not just located in rural areas, but it is rural in its functions, *i.e.* it is "built upon the rural world's special features of small-scale enterprise, open space, contact with nature and the natural world, heritage, 'traditional' societies and 'traditional' practises". Moreover, it is rural in its scale, which means that is usually small-scale, and traditional in its character, connected with locals, controlled by locals or locally and with the aim to ensure long term wellbeing of the area. (Lane, 1994). In

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the present article, the author has chosen the research papers that meet Lane's definition of the pure form of rural tourism.

Out of the research papers published in 8 journals in the period between 2001 and 2015 (up to present), the author has selected those where rural tourism is the main topic. Research papers that mention rural tourism but are not primarily concerned with it were omitted. There were 102 research papers that meet the chosen definition and the above-mentioned criteria. The main purpose of the analysis was to categorize research papers into different topic areas, determine whether they are written from a supply or demand point of view or both, and to find the most important beneficiaries of the studies and geographical location of the study areas. As managing tourism impact plays a crucial role in the rural tourism development, the author examined the extent to which the issue of sustainability is dealt with.

## 2. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Out of 102 analysed research papers, 3 do not have a specified study area, as they are literary reviews of international scientific literature (Shen *et al.*, 2008; Prabhakaran *et al.*, 2014) and provide a framework for some aspects of rural tourism, e.g. framework for destination management and marketing organisations (Adeyinka-Ojo *et al.*, 2014). Moreover, 97.06% of research papers are addressed to a specific study area that can be one destination or comparison of 2 destinations, a larger region, a state of a federal country or a country. Table No 1 shows the proportion to which the research papers study the different areas. Most of the research papers (40.18%) are dedicated to the analysis of larger regions determined either geographically (e.g. the Lake District (Sharpley & Jepson, 2010)) or administratively (e.g. Maramures County, Romania (Cosma *et al.*, 2014)). Their extension can vary from smaller areas (El Alto Palancia, Spain) (Yagüe Perales, 2002) to larger counties (Wuyuan, China) (Zhou, 2014). In 29.41% of cases, the study area comprises the whole country or the whole state. These studies can include the economic analysis of rural tourism of the given country in general (e.g. the rural development of Lithuania is determined using economic factors and calculations. (Snieška *et al.*, 2014)) or they can describe a marketing strategy for the industry of a country (Chen *et al.*, 2013). In 22.47% of cases, the studied area comprises one single destination or the comparison of two adjacent destinations. The research papers dedicated to a single destination can describe the best practise village of a given country, such as Fundata village in Romania (Bălan & Burghilea, 2015), they can be dedicated to tourism sustainability within a certain destination, such as the traditional village of Pancasari in Bali (Dewi, 2014) and among many other topics they can be the case studies with different main themes (e.g. Clarke *et al.* 2001; Morales *et al.*, 2004; Haven-Tang & Jones, 2012; Komppula, 2014). Yinga and Zhou (2007) compare the case of cultural rural tourism in two adjacent villages in rural China, while Ghasemi and Hamzah (2014) aim to investigate the appropriateness of tourism paradigms developed in rural areas from the point of view of the main stakeholders in two villages of Lower Kinabatangan, Malaysia.

Table No. 1. The proportion to which research papers examine different areas

		%
1 or 2 destinations	27	26.47
Whole country	30	29.41
Region	42	41.18
Not specified	3	2.94
Summa	102	100

Table No. 2 indicates that Europe's predominance is obvious, as most of the studied regions are located in European countries (54.55%). Asian countries are the second most popular according to rural tourism research (31.31%). The international rural tourism research map of South America (1.1), Australia (1.1) and Africa (2.2), remain white compared to other continents.

Table No. 2. The proportion to which research papers examine rural regions of the continents

		%
Africa	2	2.02
Asia	31	31.31
Australia	1	1.01
Europe	54	54.55
North America	10	10.10
South America	1	1.01
Summa	99	100

Fig No. 1 even more clearly indicates the predominant countries in the academic study of rural tourism, where Spain, the United Kingdom, China, Malaysia and the United States dominate.

As Table No. 3 indicates, most of the studies are dedicated to the supply side of tourism (76.5%) thus providing the analysis of the settlements, destinations, entrepreneurs and locals. The topics vary on a large scale from sustainability issues to destination branding, quality measurement, transportation issues, rural development *etc.* The demand side studies (17.65%) concentrate on typical activities and preferences of rural tourists. The characterization of rural tourists is a recurring theme in the observed period (e.g. Pilar *et al.*, 2004; Park & Yoon, 2009; Farmaki, 2012, Bela *et al.*, 2015). In 5.88% of cases, both the supply and the demand side are integrated in research papers. Some of these papers consider the perceptions of many different stakeholders (e.g. Farmaki, 2006; Byrda *et al.*, 2009; Saxena & Brian Ilbery, 2010).

Table No. 3. The proportion of demand and supply side literature between 2001-2015 and 2011-2015

		%
2001-2015	both	5.88
	demand	17.65
	supply	76.47
2011-2015	both	0.00
	demand	18.33
	supply	81.67

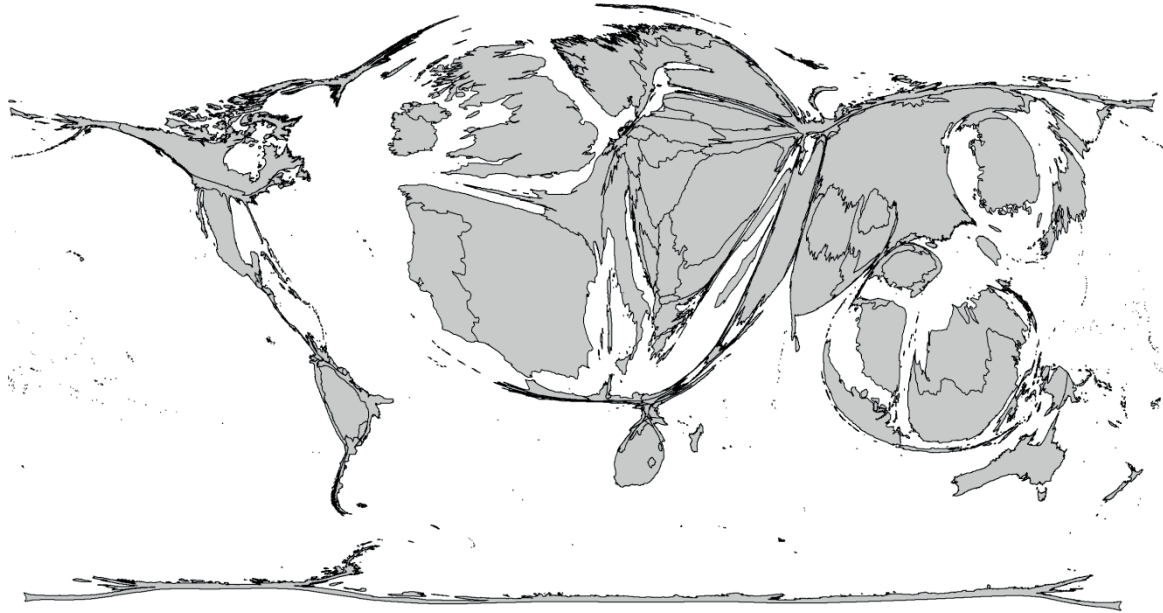


Figure No. 1

Besides determining whether the research papers are dedicated to the supply or demand- side of tourism, the author also (18,63%) identified who or what is in the centre of the studies: the tourists, who trigger the tourists activity (18,63%), the locals who are mostly affected by the tourist activity (31.37%), the entrepreneurs (8.82%) engaged in rural tourism activity, the destination itself (20.59%), development (10.78%) of rural tourism as seen by stakeholders not directly involved in tourism, the policy (0.98%), the rural tourism events (0.98) or the literary reviews in case of theoretic research papers (2.94%). The perspectives of the residents have been in the focus of the studies in the tourism impact literature of the 21st century. This is reflected by the fact that the highest percentage of studies has been dedicated to the inhabitants of rural tourism villages. In most cases, the residents' perception and attitudes concerning the effects of tourism have been analysed. Cui and Ryan (2011) compare the urban and rural residents of the perceived impacts of change induced by tourism in rural China, whereas Park and Stokowski compare rural tourism places under different growth levels in terms of crime effects (2009). The gender differences in understanding the attitudes of locals towards rural tourism and community involvement in it also appear (Petrzelka *et al.*, 2005). Steven Deller (2010) investigates the role of tourism in changing poverty rates in rural settlements of the USA. Community conflict management linked to tourism in South Korea is analysed by Park *et al.* (2012). Silva and Leal (2015) explored the connection between rural tourism and the national identity of residents, while Ghanian *et al.* (2014) analysed the satisfaction of residents to assess their commitment and attitude towards rural tourism in Oraman County, Iran. The analysis of the attitude of residents towards rural tourism has been a recurring and global theme in the past 15 years. Interestingly enough, each research paper with a multiple perspective approach *i.e.*, that takes into consideration or compares different views of all key stakeholders involved in rural tourism (residents, operators, tourists, policy makers and farmers), was written in the period between 2006 and 2010.

By exploring the research papers published in 8 international scientific journals, the author identified the main research themes shown in Table No. 4, just like the percentage in which they appear in the past fifteen years and in the past five years. The theme that appears in most cases is related to development and competitiveness. Namely, 21.57% of research papers were dedicated to **development** or rural tourism or development and restructuring of the rural area interested in tourism. Over the past five years, the theme has slightly lost its importance. Liu (2006) investigates the development of tourism focusing on the rural capacity to absorb tourism in Kedah, Malaysia, while Nepal (2007) analyses the processes of growth and development of rural settlements affected by tourism. Su (2011) carried out research on the special role of rural tourism in China's rural socio-economic regeneration. Baležentis *et al.* (2012) discuss the future challenges of rural tourism development in Lithuania, while Gavrilă-Paven (2015) looks for a way to stimulate economic development that offers an alternative to the agricultural dependence of the community.

The second most popular theme (13.73%) is **the impact of tourism** that is strongly interrelated with sustainability issues. The topic has become even more popular in the past five years (13.73%). Tourism can exert environmental, social and economic impact on rural settlements. Nepal's (2008) research paper is dedicated to environmental impact of rural tourism, as it analyses energy consumption patterns in tourist lodges in the Annapurna region, just like Valdivia and Barbieri's (2014) research that conceptualized agritourism as a climate change adaptation strategy which can supplement agricultural incomes and sustain rural livelihoods in Andean Altiplano, Bolivia. The social impact of rural tourism is addressed in Park *et al.*'s (2012) research carried out in South Korea. Byrda *et al.* (2009) compare the differences between stakeholders in the way they perceive the impact of tourism on rural communities. The visual impact of rural tourism is addressed by Jeong *et al.* (2015), describing a new methodology to predict and assess the visual impacts of second homes.



The two themes, namely **Tourism impact studies** and studies addressed to **Livelihood, human capital and local identity** slightly overlap, as the livelihood and wellbeing of residents is one of the social impacts of rural tourism. Namely, 13.73% of the studied research papers have the perspectives of residents as their central theme, discussing issues related to livelihood and wellbeing of the locals, to local identity and issues interrelated with human capital. Biddulph (2015) investigates the livelihoods in the rural periphery of a tourism boom village, concluding that tourism had little or no impact on the livelihood of the locals and that tourism related employment was at low risk and low return labour migration of some of the residents. Falak *et al.* (2014) aim to develop the framework for repositioning of rural tourism through assuming community approach. Ghasemi and Hamzah (2014) want to find out what motivates the locals to choose the appropriate tourism paradigm in their regions, as well as in two villages of Lower Kinabatangan, Malaysia. Accordingly, Iorio and Corsale (2010) found out that rural tourism had a positive effect on the lives of the selected entrepreneurs in rural Romania, who talked about positive experiences. The author found out two studies on identity. The first one investigates the possible impact of diversification and transformation of farming into tourism on social identity of farmers (Berit & Haugen, 2011), whereas the other one explores the connection between rural tourism and national identity (Silva & Leal, 2015). The studies on human capital and livelihood and identity of locals have become even more important in the past five years, as a period in which 16.67% of research papers have been dedicated to issues interrelated with residents.

The interest in **tourists**, their characterization and segmentation have remained constant throughout the examined 15 years (8.82%). Some of the studies concentrated on tourists have as their primary purpose segmentation and profiling of motivation of rural tourists in South Korea (Park & Yoon, 2009), Finland (Pesonen & Komppula, 2010), Cyprus (Farmaki, 2012), Taiwan (Chen *et al.*, 2013), and Gambia (Rid *et al.*, 2014). François Bel and co-authors (2015) carried out the activity-based segmentation of visitors' stays in three rural regions of France, while Lourdes Molera *et al.* (2007) provide a better understanding of the demand for rural tourism through market segmentation analysis. Frochot (2005) provides a deeper insight into the profiles of rural tourists in two Scottish locations in her exploratory study. Pilar *et al.* (2005) determine the tourists' profiles that correspond to different types of rural tourism accommodation. Yagüe Perale (2002) determines the features that characterize a new tourist class, they call modern rural tourism. Correia Loureiro (2012) goes deeper into the human psyche by exploring the effects of experience economy on place attachment and behavioural intentions through emotions and memory.

The rural tourism marketing has gained considerable importance in the past five years, with 11.67% of studies dealing with destination branding or destination image. A few such examples are as follows: Zhou (2014) identifies a set of themes found in the destination image of Wuyuan, China, Adeyinka-Ojo (2014) attempts to shed more light on destination management and marketing organisations (DMMOs) in the context of rural tourism, Cosma *et al.* (2014) analyze marketing innovations implemented in rural tourism companies in Romania, while Lee *et al.* (2015) ex-

amine the position of branding processes of two non-profit organizations engaged in promoting rural development.

**Quality Measurement, quality management** and satisfaction of visitors is another important topic (5.88%) that shows that the benefits of rural tourists are gaining more and more importance (*e.g.* Albacete-Sáez *et al.*, 2007; Hernández Maestro *et al.*, 2007; Devesa *et al.*, 2010; Polo Peña *et al.*, 2013; Kastenholtz *et al.*, 2012). Other recurring themes comprise **rural cultural tourism** (4.9%) (*e.g.* MacDonald & Jolliffe, 2003; Royo-Vela, 2004; Morales Cano & Mysyk, 2004; Bitsani & Kavoura, 2014), **comparison of rural and urban tourism** from different perspectives (3.92%) (*e.g.* Weaver & Lawton, 2001; Thompson, 2004; Cui & Ryan, 2011; Yang *et al.* 2014) and **Integrated Rural Tourism** management (3.92%) (Saxena, 2008; Saxena & Ilbery, 2010; Panyik *et al.*, 2011; Lee, 2013).

Table No. 4. The main research themes

	2001-2015 %	2001-2005 %
Agritourism	0.98	1.67
Authenticity	0.98	1.67
Tourists (characterization, segmentation, needs)	8.82	8.33
Development and competitiveness (Rural development and restructuring, the development of rural tourism)	21.57	18.33
Innovation	2.94	5.00
IRT	3.92	3.33
Lifecycle	0.98	0.00
Livelihood, human capital and local identity (Residents perspective studies)	13.73	16.67
Local Food	0.98	0.00
Marketing (destination branding, destination image, branding, promotion)	7.84	11.67
Quality Measurement and Visitor Satisfaction	5.88	5.00
Risk management	0.98	0.00
Rural – urban comparison	3.92	3.33
Rural Cultural tourism	4.90	1.67
Rural Ecotourism	0.98	0.00
Seasonality	0.98	1.67
Spirituality (rural religious tourism)	0.98	1.67
The impact of tourism and Sustainability	13.73	18.33
Tourist routes	0.98	0.00
Tourism infra and suprastructure (Transportation)	2.94	1.67
Policy and legislation	0.98	0.00



### 3. SUMMARY

Rural tourism has been the central theme in numerous international scientific journals of tourism science and other different profiles, which indicates interdisciplinary nature of tourism set in rural environment. The author identified 21 research themes, indicating multileveled and varied nature of rural tourism and its coexistence with other types of tourism and urban tourism. It has also become apparent that creating categories for characterization of rural tourism research is a difficult task due to the fact that many themes tend to overlap. The main recurring themes are rural development, tourism impact, attitudes of residents towards tourism and segmentation of rural tourists. The research papers dedicated to the supply-side analysis of rural tourism still prevail, while the demand side is slightly overlooked. However, it is important to note the growing tendency of research papers written on the demand side, as the benefits of rural tourists are gaining considerably more importance in the academic research of rural tourism. On the other hand, a great number of studies is dedicated to the welfare of the residents of a settlement, whose wellbeing (objective and subjective) is still under research. Europe's dominance is obvious when it comes to locating the studies geographically, while Africa, South America and some Asian countries remain the white spots on the map of international rural tourism research. Some issues, including the role of women in rural communities and their tourism activity, the problems of rural tourism in multi-ethnic areas, or the role of rural TDM organizations, have not been dealt with at all, despite their huge importance.

As the countryside is changing constantly, the scientific literature dealing with it is also constantly changing. The issues to be over researched in developed countries can be interesting research topics in the third world countries, or in the areas where rural tourism is a relatively new phenomenon.

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