

EXISTING AND POTENTIAL SITES FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF RURAL TOURISM IN THE POLOG REGION

Zejneditje ADEMI^{1*}, Nikola PANOVI², Hazir POLLOZHANI¹, Alirami SALIJI¹, Merime MUSTAFI³, Rukije IBRAIMI³

^{1*}*Department of Manufacturing Plant and Agribusiness, Faculty of Agriculture and Biotechnology, University of Tetova, NMK*

²*Department of Geography, Faculty of Mathematical and Natural Science, University "Ss. Cyril and Methodius" NMK*

³*Department of Geography, Faculty of Mathematical and Natural Science, University of Tetova, NMK*

**Corresponding Author: e-mail: zejneditje.latifi@unite.edu.mk*

ABSTRACT

The region of Polog with its natural, social, and economic features offers the growth and development of rural tourist sites. Rural tourism has great potential because 2/3 of the total area in the region is rural areas.

The paper focuses on the presentation of existing rural tourism sites in the region with all its qualitative geographical features and potential sites for rural tourism development.

In this paper, several interrelated methods are used: analysis and synthesis methods, evaluation methods, information methods, cartographic methods, and field research methods.

With the valorization of natural and anthropogenic tourist resources, the proper development of rural tourism can be achieved in all tourist localities in the region of Polog. From the knowledge and results obtained, it is concluded that the region of Polog has considerable potential for the development of rural tourism in existing and potential rural tourism sites. Rural tourism represents a strategic option for the social and economic development of the rural area in the Polog region.

Keywords: rural tourism, existing sites, potential sites, Polog region.

INTRODUCTION

The Polog region is located in the northwestern part of the Republic of North Macedonia. It covers an area of 2417 km², and in its framework are 184 settlements, of which 182 are rural settlements. Due to its favorable geographical location, has a large number of natural and anthropogenic values, a solid foundation for rural tourism development, and the growth of potential sites for the development of rural tourism. The existence of pleasant bio-climatic, hydrographic resources, relief forms, and ecologically clean environment occurs as a basic factor for the development of rural tourism in the region.

Based on the analysis, we can conclude that the region of Polog has developed rural tourism, as evidenced by a considerable number of rural tourist localities, which are presented in the paper. From the field studies and the analysis of physical-geographic and socio-economic features, a considerable number of localities that present the potential for the development of rural tourism in the researched region have been given.

1. Existing sites for the development of rural tourism in the Polog Region

The situation with the development of rural tourism in the Polog region is not at a satisfactory level. In the following, the existing sites that are known in the development of rural tourism and their geographical characteristics in terms of tourism will be shown. At the end of each site, the tourist attractions of that site are given, as strong points where the relevant institutions should focus on their preservation and development.

A known existing tourist site is the village **Lesok**, located at Sar Mountain, at an altitude of 450-550 m. It has beautiful nature, lush vegetation, and vast forests of chestnut, oak, beech, hazelnut, walnut, black locust, etc., and the rivers Lesochka and Bistrica are rich in river trout. Today in Lesok, one of the most famous monasteries - Lesok Monastery - is fully preserved. In Lesok, a special experience is the overnight stay in the monastery inn. In the uppermost part of the village, there are also accommodating facilities. Lesok is very much visited during the religious holiday of the Virgin Mary and on weekends by domestic tourists. [8]

Tourist attractions: picturesque nature, excellent panoramic view, forest complexes, clean nature, clean and fresh air, mountain and pleasant climate, fishing, culinary, historical religious objects, accommodation facilities.

The village **Varvara** is located on the slopes of Sar Mountain, at an altitude of about 800 m, with a wonderful view of Polog and the surrounding villages. For almost two decades this village has been without residents, recently a good part of the houses has been converted into weekend cottages for tourists as well. On the road to the village of Varvara is Markov Kamen - a solitary rock with an oval form, over three meters high, for which there are several legends. In the village, there is the church of St. Paraskava and a cultural center. In addition to the natural environment, the available accommodation facilities in the village of Varvara take precedence. [8]

Tourist attractions: high mountain relief, picturesque nature, steep cliffs, forest complexes, clean nature, fresh air, mountain climate, geodiversity, historical religious objects, and accommodation facilities.

The village **Vrapchishte** is located between the cities of Tetovo and Gostivar, at an altitude of 580 m. Vrapchishte with the number of its inhabitants and its infrastructure looks more and more like a small modern town. Nature offers the opportunity for walks and picnics.

The Reka region mainly covers the settlements located in the municipality of Mavrovo-Rostushe and this region today has a total of 40 settlements, where unfortunately, most of them are displaced. However, in almost all these settlements during the summer, many visitors originate from these areas and who have renovated and preserved their old dwellings. The most characteristic of them are: Boletin, Rosoki, Selce, Tresonche, Lazaropole, Galichnik, and Sushica. Among the existing villages, small ones predominate, with less than 300 inhabitants. The richness of the preserved fund and the specific forms of buildings and objects of traditional architecture speak in favor of the characteristic representation of the building traditions in this region. [9]

In addition to the beautiful churches and houses, in the Reka region, there is the renowned bridge called Elen Skok, on the river Gradska. This bridge was built in the middle of the 18th century from hewn stone with only one arch according to the plans and by the same architect who built the great bridge on the Neretva River in Mostar.

The Reka region has places with pronounced landscape value. These are the vistas of the sites of Tsareva Cheshma (Spring of Car) and Tonivoda, from where you can see most of the Korab massif, part of the Sharr Mountain, the Mavrovo Lake, and parts of Bistra. Other natural beauties that stand out for their attractiveness are: the caves of Alilica, Kalina Dupka; the waterfalls and natural

cascades of Rostushka and Tresonechka Reka; the landscape of the villages of Galichnik, Lazaropole, Gari, and Tresonche, the mountain dairies in Bistra and Deshat [1].

The village of **Galichnik** should be singled out from this region. The village is situated under the rocky ridges of the peak Govedarnik (2018 m). It is a settlement in a general setting as an amphitheater, oriented east-southeast with views of endless panoramas to the mountain massifs of Krchin, Stogovo, the Radika valley with the villages of Janche, Azhievci, Prisojnica, Skudrinje, Bitushe, Rostushe, Velebrdo and Trebiste.

On the right and upper side of Galichnik rise the gray rocky landscapes of Mountain Bistra, and on the left side flow the springs of Gjenevica, through the canyon of Torteska Krasta, separating Galichnik from the green beech forest. The beginnings of tourism in Galichnik date back to the early 1920s. A hotel built in a traditional style is available to visitors. The local architecture and the location itself of Galichnik are, in addition to the Galichnik Wedding itself, one of the biggest specifics of this village, which we can freely say is an architectural reserve. [10]

Tourist attractions: high mountain relief, picturesque nature, excellent panoramic view, caves, steep cliffs, forest complexes, clean nature, diverse flora and fauna. sun, clean and fresh air, mountain climate, lake, historical religious objects, accommodation facilities, "The Galichnik Wedding Festival".

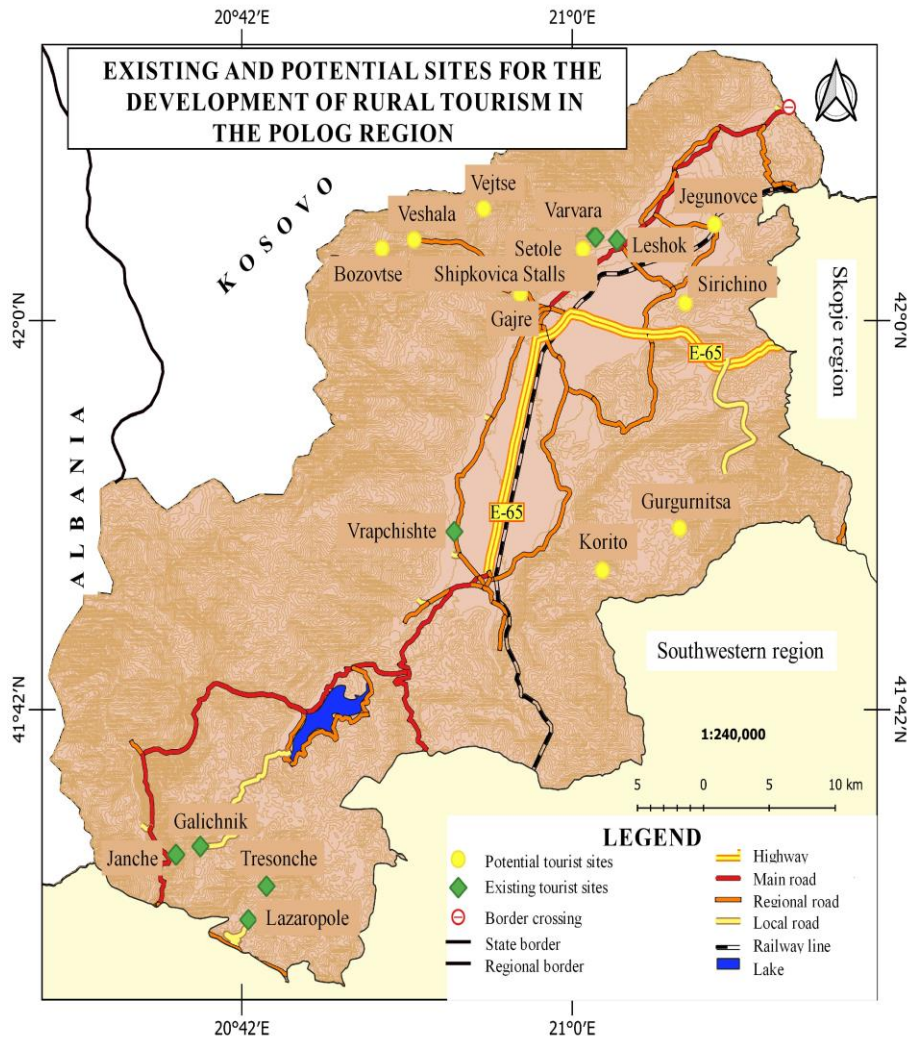
The village **Lazaropole**, is located on Mountain Bistra at an altitude of 1,350 m. It is a typical Mijak village. This village is displaced today and simply inhabited seasonally in the spring and summer months. The most dominant object in Lazaropole is the village church of St. George. Construction or building, as a craft but also a profession, has lived and has been cherished in the Lazaropolitan regions for a long time, which can be seen to this day. The village on all sides is surrounded by a beech forest, and through it flows the Lazaropolska River which breaks through the meadows where the Lazaropolska wild rose is an endemic plant which is the white daffodil that blooms in mid-May. Not far from the village, about two kilometers away, is the Kalina Dupka cave. There are several cottages here that have a well-equipped infrastructure and can be converted into rural households at any time that would provide quality services to rural tourists. There are several places for recreational activities here, and the most famous sites are Gorni and Dolni Livadi, Gyurepi, Sokolitsa, and many others. In the village, during the summer, almost all the buildings are full, mostly by locals who originate from these areas. [8]

Here is also one of the meteorological stations that constantly provides accurate data on the weather conditions, which, among other things, is an important factor for the development of all types of tourism that take place in mountainous areas.

Tourist attractions: high mountain relief, picturesque nature, panoramic view, caves, forest complexes, clean nature, diverse flora and fauna, fresh air, mountain climate, pleasant climate, cold springs, riverbeds, caves, fishing, historical religious objects, and accommodation facilities.

The village of **Tresonche** is at the foot of Mount Bistra. Tresonche is abundant in the architecture of the old houses, which were built of solid material – stone. Currently, there are two churches "St. Peter and Paul" and the church "St. Nicholas" in Tresonche, but about one kilometer west of the village in the "Shtali" locality there is a small temple dedicated to "St. Paraskeva", and under the peak of Brzovec to the north on a rock there is a sanctuary dedicated to the holiday "Epiphany". About 4 km from Tresonche in the middle of the Bistra Mountain, on the right side of the Tresonechka River on a rather inaccessible terrain is the Alilica cave. The Tresonec Canyon is also interesting to visit, but this visit can only be made with a specialized guide. There are 12 cascades in the canyon, and the largest waterfall is 30 m high. [8]

Tourist attractions: high mountain relief, picturesque nature, excellent panoramic view, caves, canyon, steep cliffs, forest complexes, clean nature, diverse flora and fauna, mountain climate, riverbeds, historical religious objects, and accommodation facilities.



Map 1. Existing and potential sites for the development of rural tourism in the Polog Region.

2. Potential sites for the development of rural tourism in the Polog Region

In this part of the text, we can safely say that the situation with the development of rural tourism is not satisfactory, especially in the lower region of Polog, as well as in the villages scattered in Sar Mountain and in the valley, which have potential sites for the development of rural tourism. Most of the villages may be attractive to visitors because of their abundance of pure and virgin nature and environment. Some of the mountainous villages have pastures, and mountain dairies that are not well-maintained enough to accommodate visitors for sleeping, still they can offer different types of activities such as keeping sheep, making cheese, trying traditional foods, walks in nature, collecting forest berries, recreational hunting, etc. all these animations which contribute to the development of rural tourism. The potential sites for the development of rural tourism will be shown

next. Particular emphasis should be placed on villages such as Bozovce, Veshala, and Vejce, as places located in the area of National Park Sar Mountain.

The village of **Bozovce** is located in the inner part of Sar Mountain. The village is a typical mountain settlement, with a pronounced landscape value, the dominant facility in the middle is the village mosque. Bozovce is identified by the tradition and customs that families have had for years, the production of traditional food, handicrafts, and silence make this mountainous inhabited place in the region. Forest fruit harvesting is quite practiced.

The population began to open their houses to visitors, and the people who lived in these places actively participated in civil organizations that worked in the direction of environmental protection, ecology, mountaineering, hospitality, etc. The village of Bozovce is the birthplace of Fadil Sulejmani, the first rector of the University of Tetovo. Lesnica waterfall, Bozovce pines, the glacial lake Golem Xhol, etc. are very attractive natural resources, for which the village is the "epicenter" of tourists, especially mountaineers. [1] In terms of accommodation facilities, food and accommodation facilities were recently adapted. The attendance is highest in the summer, but the village is facing a lack of accommodation facilities and insufficient parking lots. The village is a potential site for the development of rural tourism, natural resources, traditional mountain architecture, traditional dishes, and shepherding are important elements for rural tourism. The relevant institutions should also intervene in training the population to welcome tourists, given that foreign tourists account for more than 70% of the total number of visitors.

Tourist attractions: high mountain relief, picturesque nature, steep cliffs, forest complexes, clean nature, diverse flora and fauna, fresh air, mountain climate, glacial lake, waterfall, shepherding, religious objects, accommodation facilities, "Illyrian carnivals".

The village **Veshala** extends to the Sar Mountain, about 20 km northwest of the city of Tetovo. The village is located on the upper reaches of the Pena River, just above the village there are mountain passes, one of which is northeast of Kobilica at 2,175 m, and the other is east of Karanikolica at 2,060 m. The village is of a compact type, emigration is kind to the city of Tetovo and abroad, thus some of the houses are emptied, but they can be converted and adapted to welcome tourists. The village is more often visited by mountaineers, hunters, and lovers of nature and the mountainous rural landscape and is a potential site for the development of rural tourism if a greater effort is shown by the population and local authorities.

In the village, Mountaineering Club Luboten rents a cottage for all nature lovers.

Tourist attractions: high mountain relief, picturesque nature, steep cliffs, forest complexes, clean nature, diverse flora and fauna, fresh air, mountain climate, rivers, shepherding, religious objects, accommodation facilities.

The village **Vejce** is the next potential site for rural tourism, also located on Sar Mountain, stretching into the slopes on the left side of the Pena River, surrounded by beautiful nature. A recognizable destination for tourists – especially foreign hikers. There is also a hostel and several adapted houses available to accommodate tourists. While households keep up to date with the way tourists are welcomed, often the households offer hikers a short snack, a traditional table with boiled potatoes, and milk cottage cheese with mountain tea. The village of Vejce is famous in the region and beyond for quality potatoes, consumed by many of the region's population. [8]

Tourist attractions: high mountain relief, picturesque nature, steep cliffs, forest complexes, diverse flora and fauna, fresh air, mountain climate, rivers, shepherding, religious objects, and accommodation facilities.

Stanet e Sipkovitses is a potential site for rural tourism. It is located at an altitude of 1,700 m in Sar Mountain, at a place called *The Meadows of the Mountains*. Mountain diaries have been recorded in the place since 1950 by shepherds from the village of Sipkovica. The site is famous and very visited in the warm months, today there are about 20 mountain diaries and about 50 cottages, of which only a small portion is rented out. It is envisaged to expand the mountain diaries and expand the accommodation capacities. "Zabeli" is a unique catering establishment that offers traditional dishes of its own meat and dairy products. The site is an interesting destination for tourists, for a one-day visit (where they can try sheep's milk, cheese, and meat, buy them to take away), and stay in the cottages, and camping and various entertainment events are organized by young people.

Tourist attractions: high mountain relief, picturesque nature, forest complexes, diverse flora and fauna, fresh air, mountain diaries, shepherding, picnics, traditional food and accommodation facilities.

The village of Gajre is located in Sar Mountain, 900 m above sea level, from the city center of Tetovo, only 5 km. [6] It is presented as a potential site for the development of rural tourism as a result of these factors: beautiful mountain settlement, beautiful nature, transit character between Sunny Hill (Kodra e Diellit) and Tetovo, beautiful traditional restaurants recognized outside the region, large number of weekend cottages that could be issued for tourists. At night, only from the village of Gajre, you can enjoy a beautiful night view of the city of Tetovo and the surrounding rural settlements.

Tourist attractions: excellent panoramic view, paragliding, culinary, restaurants with traditional food.

The village **Setole** is a hilly-mountain village, 12 km away from Tetovo. This village is situated at the foot of Sar Mountain, at 1,000 m altitude, rich in mountain water. In the village there is also a church "St. Virgin Mary Pure". Today this village is completely displaced, a large number of the old houses have been restored and cottages have been built, thus starting a new life in the village. Setole's tame landscape provides extraordinary conditions for the future development of hunting tourism, but the presence of the Hunting Club of the hunting company "Sar Planina" from Tetovo confirms the tendency to develop hunting tourism, a type of tourism that is closely related to rural tourism.

Tourist attractions: mountain relief, picturesque nature, forest complexes, clean nature, diverse flora and fauna, hunting, mountain climate, riverbeds, historical religious objects, and accommodation facilities.

The village **Sirichino** is located in the municipality of Jegunovce, along the Vardar River, and one part stretches at the foot of Mountain Zeden. Known in the region for its fish restaurants along the Vardar River. A typical rural environment with silence. Cultural landmarks include The Church of St. Paraskeva", which dates back to the 16th century and is among the oldest in the region. In recent years, gastronomy and fish restaurants near the Vardar River have developed.

Tourist attractions: picturesque nature, riverbeds, fishing, historical religious objects, fish restaurants.

The village of Gurgurnica is located at 1,250 m above sea level on the Suva Gora mountain. It is 40 km southeast of the city of Tetovo. [6] The village is characterized by difficult accessibility and karst relief, which contributes to the lack of water, but has beautiful landscape views. From the edge of the western side of the village plateau, you can see the Polog Valley, and from the village itself, on the eastern side, you can see the flow of the Treska River and Lake Kozjak.

The village is identified with the folk costumes that women wear on a daily basis, which are not found in other villages in the region. The traditional costumes are quite interesting for numerous ethnologists and tourists who explore and visit the village and enjoy the magnificent views from around. Villagers identify with the kindness and hospitality they show visitors. The village welcomes the most visitors on the eve of the event, "The Festival of Cultural Heritage in Gurgurnica".

Tourist attractions: high mountain relief, picturesque nature, excellent panoramic view, steep cliffs, clean nature, fresh air, mountain climate, riverbeds, mountain lakes, paragliding, "The Festival of Cultural Heritage in Gurgurnica".

CONCLUSION

This paper focuses on the analysis and presentation of tourist localities and their impact on the development of rural tourism in the researched region. Localities already developed in this respect and potential localities for the development of rural tourism have been presented, giving valorization from a geographical and touristic point of view. The region of Polog with its favorable geographical position, favorable climate, wealth of forests and vegetation, exceptional landscape values of the relief, and rich hydrography, with many villages has great potential for the development of rural tourism. From what has been presented so far, it can be concluded that in the rural environment of the Polog region, rural tourism is presented with a trend of development and growth, which means that the natural geographic features are fulfilled, there are many initiatives from the local population and the two national parks found in this region are a special stimulus. The given localities are very encouraging and with proper commitment from the local and central government, they can achieve the necessary development. The development of rural tourism should raise the awareness of a wider circle of people, namely the care for the preservation of the natural environment and the biodiversity of natural ecosystems, given that the greatest contribution is made by humans with excessive exploitation and degradation. With the valorization of natural and anthropogenic tourist resources, the proper development of rural tourism can be achieved in all tourist localities in the region of Polog. From the knowledge and results obtained, it is concluded that the region of Polog has considerable potential for the development of rural tourism in the existing and potential areas of rural tourism. Rural tourism represents a strategic option for the social and economic development of the rural area in the Polog region.

REFERENCES

- [1] Ademi Z., Ibraimi R., *Natural-geographical characteristics and their importance in the development of the rural tourism in the Polog region*, Journal of Natural Sciences and Mathematics of UT 9-10/2017, UDC5, ISSN 2545-4072, JNSM Vol.5,120-129, 2020.
- [2] Ibraimi R., Ademi Z., Mustafi M., (2019), *Tourist localities in Sharr mountain*, Journal of Natural Sciences and Mathematics of UT, Vol. 4, No. 7-8, 2019,139, UDC: 338.48-44(497.7:23), 2019.
- [3] Katherine Dashper., *Rural tourism: An international perspective*, Newcastle, UK, 2014.
- [4] Muça, E., *Zhvillimi Rural i Qëndrueshëm*, Tiranë, 2014.
- [5] Mustafi M., *Veçoritë fiziko-gjeografike të Pollogut*, Tetovë, 2008.
- [6] Rushiti M., *Veçoritë gjeografike të vendbanimeve në komunat e Pollogut*, Punim magjistrature, Gjeografi, FSHMN, Universiteti i Tetovës, Tetovë, 2018.
- [7] Адеми З., *Можности за прогласување на Националниот Парк Шар планина и неговата туристичка функција*, Магистерски труд, ПМФ, Институт за Географија, Скопје, 2013.
- [8] Адеми З., *Руралниот туризам како стратешка опција за социјалниот и економскиот развој на Полошкиот регион*, Докторска дисертација, ПМФ, Институт за Географија, Скопје, 2021.

- [9] Методијески Д., Димитров Н., Рурален туризам, Интерна скрипта, Скопје, 2013.
- [10] Министерство за Економија, Сектор за Туризам., 2012. *Национална стратегија за рурален туризам 2012-2017*, Скопје.
- [11] Панов Н., & Штетик С., *Туристичка географија*, Селектор, Скопје, 2008.
- [12] Панов Н., Ангеловски Н., *Туристички водич низ Македонија*, Скопје 2009.
- [13] Панов Н., *Комплексни проучувања на резиденцијалниот туризам во Република Македонија*-докторска дисертација, ПМФ, Скопје, 1994.
- [14] Панов Н., *Можности за развој на селскиот туризам во Република Македонија*, Зборник од вториот конгрес на географите на Република Македонија, македонско географско друштво, стр 259-268, Скопје, 2000.
- [15] Панов Н., Талеска М., *Економика на туризмот*, Селектор, 2013.