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# Regional Development of Rural Tourism: The Case of the Gorska Hrvatska Region

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## Abstract

An approach to sustainable tourism through clusters is considered an appropriate strategy in less-developed rural areas of tourist-oriented countries, such as Croatia. This paper clarifies the key challenges of the development of tourism clusters in the region of Gorska Hrvatska and provides new data for an approach to sustainable rural tourism development. Using available secondary data from governmental bodies, non-governmental organizations, protected areas of Gorska Hrvatska, and primary data of the Lika Destination Cluster, the paper explores the key challenges of developing a cluster of tourism and selective forms of tourism. Most tourism clusters in Croatia have remained in the first phase of development for years, even though this approach has failed to achieve significant results. The key benefits of networking and branding in rural areas are identified and defined, but these potentials are still largely underutilized. The objective of this study is to provide practical recommendations to the Croatian tourism industry on how to learn from the suggested best practices and how to implement them effectively. For that purpose, the case of sustainable tourism located in the Gorska Hrvatska region, called the Lika Destination Cluster is analyzed.

**Keywords:** rural tourism, Gorska Hrvatska, clusters, protected areas, competitiveness, Lika Destination Cluster

## Introduction

Tourism is a set of relationships and phenomena, which, unlike other economic activities, is very closely related to nature conservation and protected areas. Croatia has significant potential for the further development of rural tourism, especially if we take into account the fact that most of the overnight stays are spent at its coastal region and tourism is still based on offering visitors “sun, sea and sand” activities. More sustainable and balanced regional rural development through the development of rural tourism can be a significant source of employment due, to its labor-intensive character (Sharpley, 2002). Rural areas, according to data from the *Rural Development Program of the Republic of Croatia from 2014 through 2020*, cover almost 80% of the country's land area. Those living in rural areas constitute 56.7% of the total population. These data support the need to design development models that will primarily reconcile environmental and economic interests and benefit local rural communities.

Researchers in developed countries such as the United States (e.g., Látková and Vogt, 2012) are dedicated to exploring the attitudes of residents towards the existing and future development of rural tourism. On another hand, the evolution of tourism in developing countries like Croatia, where tourism is one of the main sources of income, has not yet been sufficiently investigated. In recent years, the growth and development of tourism have been increased in Croatia, both in the coastal area and inland, where Croatia has more and more to offer both to European and non-European tourists.

The cornerstone of a rural tourist destination should lie in a complementary tourism product (Demonja et al., 2011), which consists of accommodations, transportation, food, and natural attractions. All companies within one tourist region are interconnected in some way, so it is a logical sequence of their development and survival to networking through clusters. One of the main activities of the cluster is tourism promotion — branding of the destination, in both the domestic and foreign markets through natural, cultural, gastronomic, and historical features. The tourism clustering model has been accepted worldwide as an appropriate strategy for the sustainable development of a destination, primarily because it enables a particular region to be as competitive as possible through numerous activities in the “tourism value chain” (Đurašević, 2009).

Gorska Hrvatska stretches through three counties: Primorje-Gorski Kotar, Karlovac and Lika-Senj County, and geographically through Gorski Kotar, Lika, and Ogulin-Plaški valley. It is the least populated part of Croatia, with approximately seven inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup>, and it is known for its exceptional natural beauty. There are three national parks in this area: Risnjak, Northern Velebit, and Plitvice Lakes. Most tourist activity occurs just inside or around the parks, especially in the Plitvice Lakes National Park, which is the most visited national park in Croatia. According to the Ministry of Tourism, the average tourist stay is 1.3 days. Apart from national parks, most of this area is under protected status; under the protection of Natura 2000 (almost 70% of the surface is included), there are also special nature reserves, significant landscapes, strict nature reserves and nature monuments. An effective marketing policy in a protected area is extremely important, not only for the local population and its impact on regional tourism, but also for the overall presentation of the natural phenomenon and the specific features of the protected area. In the context of great global competition, major changes in tourists' lifestyles and increased demand for vacations in naturally attractive non-urban areas, rural areas will experience new challenges and obstacles to their sustainable development.

To create a competitive advantage for a tourist region in the global market (especially if we observe the market in developing economies with low rates of economic development) the clustering of micro, small and medium enterprises can only contribute to development. Developing business relationships and achieving family business goals (Andersson, Carlsen, & Getz, 2002) by combining relevant sectors such as agriculture and trade with tourism can create an environment of longer job retention and circulation of money in the region. Within the cluster, the focus is placed on the links between companies and businesses by supporting connections between customers and suppliers, joint education, marketing, and lobbying (Nordin, 2003). The term *networking* refers to a widespread type of behavior and the cooperation between businesses or organizations that would potentially, in other circumstances, be competitors (Hall et al., 2003).

The main purpose of the paper is to show the possibilities of developing sustainable rural tourism, in synergy with economic activities, and which represents additional income to local communities, that is, the additional channel for distribution of local products. The existing literature on rural tourism of developing country clusters is very limited, and this paper aims to provide new data and a broader understanding of tourism clusters in underdeveloped regions to test the assumption that *by adopting the recommended tourism-cluster approach, Gorska Hrvatska can become a unique and recognizable destination for rural tourism in the European tourism market*. This paper aims to clarify the challenges in the development of rural tourism in Croatia through secondary research done by the Ministry of Tourism, the State Bureau of Statistics, the Institute of Tourism, and other relevant sources on the Internet. In order to fulfil the paper's aim, the following research questions have been posed: RQ1: What are the opportunities for developing regional tourism and the local economy in the protected natural region? RQ2: What are the advantages and disadvantages of the tourism cluster for Croatia? RQ3: What are the ways to finance tourism cluster employees? RQ4: What are the benefits of networking and branding in a protected natural area? RQ5: What are the economic interests of the local population that are served through tourism development?

The structure of this paper consists of six interconnected sections. After the introduction, now completed, the second section discusses tourism clusters and selective forms of tourism in the literature review. The third section describes the methodology, which is followed by the fourth section, a case study of the Lika Destination Cluster. Section Five presents research results and discussion for the development of tourism clusters in Croatia, and section Six presents the conclusions and future implications of the research.

## Literature Review

### Selective forms of tourism

Modern rural areas development within the European Union is oriented towards sustainable rural development concepts, seeking to encourage specific actors in a particular area to create development visions based on their comparative advantages (Bušljeta-Tonković, 2018). This is precisely how the development strategies of each region are shaped, and this is ultimately the common strategy for rural development at the European level (Galdeano-Gómez et al., 2011) i.e., to support rural development projects launched locally to revitalize rural areas and create jobs. Rural tourism is considered to be a series of different activities and forms of tourism that occur outside the cities and those areas where mass tourism has developed and is conditioned by the tourist attractions located in rural areas. "The importance of rural tourism is reflected in the interaction of agricultural production, production of traditional products, presentation of tradition, traditional gastronomy and tourist services, and use of existing resources" (Demonja and Ružić 2011, p. 12).

Attractions and activities that are considered as the basis of tourism clusters have a positive foothold, based on the experience from all over the world through theme paths, routes, or simply branding of an entire geographic region, such as Tuscany in Italy, Silicon Valley in the US or Provence in France. There is extensive literature on the thematic trails of countries in Europe that have been used to develop rural tourism, whether in Montenegro (Morić, 2013), Macedonia (Petrevska et al., 2013), Serbia (Pavlović & Čavlin, 2014), Sweden (Nordin, 2003), or Italy (Babalola et al., 2011).

All rural areas are different, in terms of needs, amenities opportunities for development. There are also various specific products and services in each area, as well as their connection with agriculture or another economic branch. Production and consumption occur with the help of tourism in parallel, but at the same place (Bušljeta Tonković, 2018). Selective rural tourism is linked to farms, as well as small and medium-sized enterprises, and yet it is in close collaboration with the natural world and cultural heritage, along with traditional practices construction. The basic elements of any selective form of tourism, regardless of its content, must include physical infrastructure, high-quality human resources and financial institutions, along with successful marketing and advertising.

### Tourism clusters

There are many possible definitions of a cluster and, accordingly, a wide experience of cluster economy development

is present in many countries. It is common for clusters to support the development of relationships among different participants, providing opportunities to create critical mass, reduce costs, and to improve productivity, information, knowledge, and technical expertise. The atmosphere of a cluster is cooperative, and the competition and cooperation can exist side-by-side because they occur in different dimensions and among different actors (Potter, 1998). The concept of the cluster is well-positioned to stimulate small and medium-sized enterprises at different levels and can, therefore, help to revitalize underdeveloped areas and regions.

According to several authors, the key benefits of a tourism co-operation and advantages of a cluster in the protected natural region are the following:

The cluster could be an element of strategic orientation towards sustainable development, maximizing positive effects while minimizing negative ones (Hall, 2005); the tourism cluster could overcome key shortcomings in rural tourism, increasing competitiveness and merging small and micro enterprises; a tourism cluster can be used as a framework for SMEs to compete globally by collaborating locally (Partalidou et al., 2012); a tourism cluster could help to alleviate poverty and retain locals who would devote themselves to supporting tourists (Moric, 2013). Economic downturns and depopulation are continually occurring in the regions of tourism-dependent countries, especially in transition countries (Braun, 2005). Multi-level tourism clusters can create greater economic benefits for the local economy by fostering image and brand creation, thus integrating more actors and attractions into a competitive product (Hall, 2005).

However, the research also suggests several, possible disadvantages of tourism clusters: the duration period of the cluster due to government funding and public sector policy (Hall, 2005), lack of skills of regional managers and human resources (Morić, 2013), poor quality of transport, information and communication infrastructure (Braun, 2005), availability and expertise of capital financing in the region (Đurašević, 2009), the existence of significant separate, distant space between cluster participants within the region (Morić, 2013) and administrative separation - the existence of multiple public administrative agencies and units in the region (Williams & Hall, 2002).

The attractiveness of selective forms of nature-related tourism can bring operators together in specific regions via clusters. The cluster development based on the European examples of rural development programs has been used for various thematic rural product projects and thus increased the attractiveness of rural tourism (Partadidon et al., 2012). A cross-sectoral collaboration between stakeholders such

as caterers and small renters (e.g., restaurants and lodging), cultures (e.g., museums and cultural centers), shops (e.g., souvenirs and other shops) and the food and agriculture sectors (e.g., farmers, mills, dairies, farms) increases the level of viable income and thus affects the most important problem, which is the unfavorable demographics of rural parts of the countries that have developed tourist coasts (Morić, 2013; Galdeano-Gómez et al., 2011; Đurašević, 2009). Selective forms of tourism have the potential to increase the number of tourist visits and the number of nights (Kesar, 2007); the result would be that the trade sector increases and makes a diversified supply of indigenous and authentic products and goods, which in turn would have an impact on the agricultural sector, as it would be directly marketed (Morić, 2013).

Within the document *Strategy for the Development of Croatian Tourism until 2020* (Ministry of Tourism, 2013), selective forms of tourism that are considered promising for the entire territory of the state of Croatia are listed: health tourism, cyclo tourism, gastronomy and enology, rural tourism, cultural tourism, adventure, and sports tourism, hunting and fishing tourism, team-building tourism, ecotourism.

The biggest advantage of the tourism cluster is the linking of selective forms of tourism with the public sector, technology, manufacturers, suppliers of products and services, and sales channels (i.e., linking the economy of small and medium-sized enterprises). In this way, tourist destinations are positioned globally, especially if everything is rounded off with a quality brand (Đurašević, 2011). According to Nordin (2003), tourism clustering can be viewed most easily from a geographical point of view (protected reserves, geographical natural regions) or the aspect of basic activity of clusters, such as adventure tourism, rural tourism, eco-tourism, agri-tourism, sports tourism, etc.

Clusters are gaining importance, both in theory and in practical terms, in the development of contemporary tourism. Many authors give recommendations for tourism cluster models that are specific to their countries and regions. In Serbia, for example, tourism clusters include sub-areas or micro-destinations within a region that have similar tourist value (Pavlović & Čavlin, 2014). Their Master Plan for the Sustainable Development of Rural Tourism was adopted in 2011 and covered the development of 12 rural tourism clusters, grouped into four rural tourism groups that are divided by regions in Serbia. Capone (2016) shared his findings on the analysis of tourism clusters in Western Europe, in which he talks about thirteen groups of tourism clusters, involving more than a thousand businesses and located in popular tourist destinations, such as Paris, Madrid, London and Barcelona.

Staszewska (2009) highlighted three important sectors in her research on cluster models in Poland as the driving force behind the tourism cluster: the private sector, the public, and the R&D sector.

Ferreira and Estevão (2009) presented a tourism cluster model in which the effectiveness of a tourist destination depends on the level of managerial handling of the destinations, information services, promotional activities, hospitality and staffing. Mirčetić et al. (2019) discuss the Danish model of the tourism cluster in terms of local government mediation, regional development agencies, chambers of commerce, and the private sector. Tourism clusters in Poland (Staszewska, 2009) are coordinated by tourism organizations that provide advisory activities, audits, and promotion.

Novelli et al. (2006) investigated the development of tourism clusters in the United Kingdom and they have promoted economic innovation and the measurable success of SMEs as a key factor. According to them, clusters are important for creating conditions that stimulate the development and advancement of business in the economy. In Slovakia (Szekely, 2010), the current model of the tourism cluster in the Zhilina region is coordinated as part of regional innovation, and in cooperation with the private sector; a local university is located in the cluster.

Italy is one of the leading countries in tourism clusters (Babalola et al., 2011), especially in its rural areas. As one of the key recommendations for improving the business of tourism clusters, the authors cite improvements to the unique quality standard, focused branding, improving coordination between the private and public sectors, and improving integrated tourism strategy and marketing. At the same time, they state that current world trends should be exploited so that artistic and cultural tourism, health and wellness tourism, and oenological and gastronomic tourism are improved and promoted.

Weiermair and Steinhauser (2003) explore opportunities for improvements to tourism sports and wellness clusters in the Alps, taking into account lifestyle changes. Tourists coming to the Alps, above all, expect a healthy and active way to spend their holidays. This is precisely why the service providers in Alpine tourism have to guarantee even better quality and greater orientation and flexibility to tourists than they ever have before.

Rural tourism is an extremely important economic activity that can play a decisive role in a given space, especially if there is no alternative, and can even boost the natural and historical-cultural potential of underdeveloped regions (Ferreira & Estevão, 2009).

Tourism clusters imply an interaction between a variety of participants, namely competitive enterprises providing accommodation, transport, travel agencies and tour operators, tourist attractions, non-profit organizations (banks, insurance companies, etc.) educational and government institutions. The basic type of interaction refers to the links between tourism companies, suppliers, and tourists, and is called the vertical linking model.

The second model of relationships is called horizontal and represents links between and within tourism businesses, such as joining forces in their claims to the government to obtain certain benefits (e.g., tax relief), or to avoid some levies. Uniquely looking at integration, we can observe horizontally (the agricultural sector) and vertically (the agricultural and tourism sector). Cross-sectoral clusters are considered as diagonal clusters (Morić, 2013), because each member creates a value chain with some contribution, and such clusters are considered by some authors to be the most efficient (Partalidou et al., 2012).

Vertical and cross-sectoral clusters are recognized in their first form through the creation of certain activities and attractions (Hall et al., 2003) such as wine trails, honey trails, or cheese roads. Another form of clustering involves joint branding via marketing through brochures, workshops, exhibitions at fairs, and websites. This type of networking improves the structure, character, and quality of rural tourism products (Morić, 2013).

Certain clusters in Italy have a tradition of networking through personal contacts and long-term business relationships, thus building a strong social trust capital (Gomezelj Omerzel et al., 2016). Giving export incentives, reducing value-added taxes, creating conditions around the cluster, attracting financial capital and exporting promotional activities are just some of the common interests that can achieve better results.

In the last few years, there has been a lot of talk about rural tourism development in Croatia, and many public meetings and conferences have been held on this topic (Demonja & Ruzić, 2011). Much of the rural area of the country is empty and has experienced an exodus, and the results of the economic crisis have not yet been eliminated. Given the specificities of tourist countries and the diversity of clusters, much more analysis and systematization are needed to come up with a unique model at the national and regional levels. Tourism clusters should be unique in their form for each country and region. Such clustering has led to successful results in many EU member states, such as Ireland, Finland, and Sweden (Tijanović, 2009. Nordin, 2003), as the clusters produce numerous positive effects for rural regions (Rosenfeld, 2002). This shows the need for clusters to be included

in regional policy because, in addition to overall economic development, clusters also contribute to innovation (Tijanović, 2009) The policy of encouraging cluster formation in tourism and other sectors should become a project of national, regional and local interest.

The role of protected natural areas is increasingly important in rural tourism in Croatia, as confirmed in the research by the Institute for Tourism Zagreb (2017). The demand for nature-based tourism accounts for 7% of total global tourism demand, with an annual growth rate of 10% - 30%. The demand for eco-tourism is 7% and 10% of world tourism demand with annual growth rates of 2% and 4%. The demand for adventure tourism is growing at an annual rate of 8%.

Tourism clusters may look similar, but each cluster has the specificities that make it unique (Fundeanu, 2015). In the European Union, positions on the importance of clusters in economic development are very clear (Tijanović, 2009). Thanks to their development, many European regions have developed their comparative advantages, even though they may not have had certain natural predispositions for them, such as flower production in the Netherlands.

## Methodology

The research was conducted following Tong, Sainsbury and Craig's (2007) framework criteria in the basic form for reporting qualitative research (COREQ), focusing on the following issues: (i) research team, (ii) design and (iii) data gathering and analysis.

### Research team

Research was focused on the Lika Destination Cluster. The primary data was collected from rural tourism operators and managers in tourism offices in Lika, with the aim of investigating the key challenges and factors associated with (in)efficiency of the cluster. The team consisted of the main researcher and other associates. The interviews with cluster managers were conducted by the main researcher. Other associates, who work in the tourism offices in Lika, checked the results of the interviews in order to find possible inconsistencies in relation to the situation on the field.

### Design

A qualitative study using a content analysis approach was employed for data collection and analysis. Qualitative approaches enable researchers to explore complex phenomena

encountered by policy makers (Tong et al., 2007). Content analysis is a systematic approach to coding and categorizing, which can be used to explore textual information in order to ascertain the trends.

Participants were selected by a purposive approach. Only one tourism cluster is successful in the Lika region, and all the three interviewees were employed there. They were all exclusively engaged in branding for the Lika region. They interact regularly with 59 cluster members, which are mostly manufacturers. In addition, they find new members each year. The possible source of the bias is the fact that managers live in the Lika region, but possible inconsistencies and bias were checked by the supportive team members, as described in previous text.

### Data gathering and analysis

In addition to using the available secondary data from the Ministry of Tourism, the Institute for Tourism, and relevant sources from the Internet, the primary data surveys were conducted through personal in-depth interviews with Lika Tourism Cluster managers. In-depth interviews were conducted over the telephone and were additionally requested in writing. The results of the interviews are presented in the rest of the paper, the purpose of which was to explore the character, structure, and key development challenges associated with the effectiveness of the tourist cluster and to provide ideas and guidance for future development through this approach.

The managers have provided written answers to the following research questions: (i) What are the advantages and disadvantages of the tourism cluster? (ii) what business results have been observed with local manufacturers and service providers since they were in the cluster? (iii); how is the quality of services and products within the cluster maintained/controlled? (iv) how is the Tourism Cluster Branding implemented? (v) how are branding cluster managers funded?; and (vi) how much does the public sector help them in branding the tourism cluster? The participant quotations are presented to illustrate the theme findings. Each quotation is identified, and there is a consistency between the data presented from the managers and the findings in secondary data. Each interview lasted on average between 20 and 40 minutes. Participants were encouraged to openly convey their viewpoints.

### Case Study: Lika Destination Cluster

In the area of Gorska Hrvatska, a five-year project of LAG Lika (a local action group) is underway, which implements

the tourist clustering of Lika and Ogulin-Plaški valley by branding the integrated quality label brand Lika Quality. The project is oriented towards the development of a wide range of economic activities, but its primary objective is to establish self-sustaining economies in a specific rural area. The space is thus branded as a protected natural area and gastro-destination, and the activities of the Lika Destination Cluster take place under the slogan "smart sustainable destination".

The branding is carried out through a series of smaller cooperation projects, and perhaps the most significant is "Stay 3 days in Lika", or "7 days in Lika", whose main goal is to keep tourists in Lika longer than one day, focusing mostly on visitors to Plitvice Lakes National Park. According to the Ministries of Tourism and Institute of Tourism (2017), Plitvice Lakes National Park has been visited annually by 10% of tourists who visit Croatia, and allowing small producers to sell at such a location is a big step in their development.

These projects also offer visits to other natural phenomena, cultural heritage, and recreational amenities found in this region. The cluster employees are dedicated to constantly informing cluster participants, from suppliers to tourists. Since 2017, they have been implementing the regional food, beverage, and souvenir quality system called Lika Quality, which aims to brand the destination as a gastronomic destination, and they are involved in connecting small local producers with catering facilities. In cooperation with the Agricultural Cooperative Lika Coop, in 2018 they opened a joint outlet of all the Lika Quality products at the entrance to the Plitvice Lakes National Park. Currently, there are 169 products from 59 manufacturers in the Lika Quality system, divided into 11 categories (honey, meat and meat products, milk and dairy products, bakery products, drinks and beverages, vegetables, wild herbs, cosmetics, souvenirs, fruits, and fruit products). For each category, there are certain parameters that a manufacturer must satisfy for his product to receive the Lika Quality mark. When asked about the certification method, the managers of Lika Tourism Cluster answer was "that most manufacturers are familiar with the required documentation and application method before launching a public invitation so that they have no major problems with certification. Each certificate is awarded every two years and quality control is carried out at the very award of the certificate, during product recertification and the period of certification through periodic inspections".

In addition to expanding the market to small local Lika producers, for the first time, they had the opportunity to sell their products at one of the most visited tourist destinations in Croatia. In this way, local producers can present themselves and their products, and tourists visiting the park

have the opportunity to buy local traditional Lika products. When asked about satisfactory quantities, the managers of Lika Tourism Cluster answer was that *“there are several businesses in the Lika Quality system that work with large quantities for several years, but most of them are small local manufacturers whose sales were mostly limited to door-steps and fairs and there were deficiencies in quantities of seasonal fruits and vegetables”*.

With the opening of such a large market as Plitvice Lakes National Park, the need for production has increased. Due to good business results, in the next year, the Lika Quality brand products will be represented in other institutions managing protected areas in Lika (Paklenica National Park, North Velebit National Park, Velebit Nature Park, Cave Park Grabovača and the Caves of Barać).

This project brings together entities that are already an existing part of the tourist offer, namely manufacturers, associations, travel agencies, catering establishments, hotels, small renters, tourist boards, and all forms of attractions. The standard set for collecting the Lika Quality brand is authentic—that is, they must be from this destination and somehow inspired by nature and the environment. The cluster includes three national parks (Plitvice Lakes, North Velebit, and Paklenica), Cave Park Grabovača (the only cave park in the world), Shelter for Young Bears on Velebit, Cerovačke Caves, natural landmarks of the rivers Lika, Gacka and Una, Rizvan City Adventure, Linden Tree Retreat & Ranch, Nikola Tesla Memorial Center.

Attractions and activities related to the purchase of indigenous products of rural households have been increasing since 2016, and their number is increasing year by year (Adventure parks, Canoeing Gacka, House Velebit, Lika Falcon, Linden Tree Retreat and Ranch, Memorial Nikola Tesla Museum and the Museum of Gacka Lika, Plitvice Art farm, Plitvice Bike and Bed, Mountaineering Association, Rizvan city, Plitvice Resort, Bio Bašča and other family-run farms, hotels, and camps with private rentals). The cluster operates in the area of 15 local self-government units (Karlobag, Lovinac, and Brinje municipalities and the towns of Senj, Otočac, and Gospić) of which the tourist board has 9 of them. When asked how they carry out destination branding, the managers of Lika Tourism Cluster answer is as follows: *“They implement destination branding through promotion in all media, enabling them to make financial constructions. This is the first time Lika has been mentioned as a tourist destination, operating under the motto: Smart sustainable destination. Training that serves to attract new participants to the cluster is conducted as part of informing the population and therefore they organize workshops throughout the year”*. They have already implemented several projects, one of which is interesting: a collective ticket is for all protected areas. Also, to make the destination

branding more successful, all projects involve children and young people, civil society organizations, public institutions, numerous external associates, all holders of tourist offers in the destination, and all interested members of the public who want to get involved.

Of the mentioned tourism participants, the public, private and civil sectors are merged in this way. Although this tourist cluster does not significantly change the tourist map of Croatia, it does change the tourist map of the region by using the natural environment as a basic resource.

Cluster integration, together with appropriate strategic management and marketing, enables the region to compete on the international scene (Geić et al., 2014). Proper branding at the global level strengthens the tradition of the highest natural, historical, and ecologically preserved whole, and with a distinctive offer, it can undoubtedly compete in the demanding international market.

There is no single definition of the concept of a cluster, even though a great deal of literature has been devoted to this concept. Perhaps most commonly used is the one first defined by Porter (1998, p. 78) as: *“Clusters are geographic concentrations of interconnected enterprises and institutions in a particular area, connected by commonality and complementarity.”*

His theories applied in the beginnings to the manufacturing industries and eventually were applied to tourism. The implementation of tourism clusters is in developed European countries is different from developing countries, primarily due to differences in economic development and social capital. Several authors have viewed tourism clusters through Porter's diamond of competitive forces (Aznar-Sánchez et al., 2011; Đurašević, 2009; Morić, 2013; Hall et al., 2003). In this model, the competitive advantages of a destination determine its competitive positioning. To be successful, a destination must offer a higher market value than competing destinations. According to the Porter diamond (Porter (1990, 2013)), clusters represent groups of all businesses and other elements that make a destination competitive, such as attractions, infrastructure, equipment, service providers, other ancillary sectors, educational and training opportunities, and all other contributing activities that experienced consumers expect from the destination they have chosen to visit.

The entrepreneurial clusters of different economic entities that are classified into one or more comparative activities are developing rapidly with focused marketing activities, and under directed strategic management they will make the most of their environment. The result is that the region gains a competitive edge over others. Cluster-based economic development is a model for the successful development

of small and medium-sized enterprises because they are the main drivers of development. Undoubtedly, clustering offers a greater degree of sustainable competitive advantage for all small business activities, which, in turn, underpin the survival and revitalization of demographically disadvantaged regions.

The entire tourism product of the region can be viewed as a package (Lončarić et al., 2014) with five segments: attractions in the tourist region, tourism infrastructure, traffic access to the destination, brands and perception and price to the customer. The Lika tourist destination currently has a complete package. Perhaps one of the most competitive segments of the cluster is the successful tourist experience. A variety of attractive resources, whether the natural environment or historical cultural sights, form the core brand within tourism marketing (Geić et al., 2014). Tourist attractions, thematic trails, monuments, archaeological sites, cultural and gastronomic traditional manifestations, along with naturally attractive resources, are the basis of the region's competitiveness and the cornerstone of development. The selective forms of tourism are one of the great potentials of this area, primarily because of the trend of a return to its roots and nature. The increasing number of outdoor adrenaline parks and cyclo tourism trails in this region confirms this. With visits to natural beauty, there is an increasing need for direct living in nature that can be experienced in rural households.

The support of national and regional institutions and EU funds is of utmost importance for the economic revitalization of the region and rural area of Croatia, as the EU, through its programs has greatly influenced the depopulation in the rural areas of Austria, France, Italy and Switzerland (Geić et al., 2014). Following the LEADER + program, LAGs have a wide range of options for rural development projects. In Greece, for the development of rural tourism in the period 2000-2006, 40 tourism clusters were organized within the LEADER initiative (Partalidou et al., 2012).

The main tourist drivers of rural tourism are attractions and activities, as they bring tourists to their destinations (Morić, 2013). Attractions support all forms of selective tourism because they cover all the needs of tourists while traveling, including food, lodging, experiences, all retail and transportation, travel agencies, and even construction companies, as they build hotels and retail establishments (Morić, 2013).

A successful combination of rural tourism with other forms of selective tourism (e.g., wine and bicycle, honey and bicycle, cheese and mountaineering) could increase revenues and improve business opportunities for all cluster stakeholders (Morić, 2013), and such combinations would be a good selection for weekend breaks and day trips.

According to Ružić (2009), in Croatia, it is possible to carry out these tourist activities in the rural areas (with examples carried out in the Lika Destination Cluster): a) all forms of hiking, such as hiking on marked trails (Mountaineering Association Gromovača), motorized hiking tours with off-road vehicles and motorcycles, horseback riding (Lindeen Tree Retreat and Ranch, Eguus Igni Ranch, Velki Mlin Ranch), b) all kinds of water activities, such as swimming, staying on rivers in houses by the water (Plitvice Holiday Resort), boats, barges, canoes (Kanu Gacka), fishing (Velebit activities), c) all kinds of air activities, such as flying gliders and small aircraft, flying kites and hot air balloons (Lika Falcon), d) all kinds of sports activities, such as rock climbing, skiing, tennis and golf (Rizvan City Adventure Park Likos, Park Ogi, Zipline Bear), e) all activities of discovering local attractions, such as local traditional production, agricultural family businesses (family run farms), f) all kinds of cultural theme activities, such as handicraft workshops, art workshops, folklore groups, archaeology groups, gastronomic resources, and g) all health activities (health benefits, fitness, wellness).

Tourist farms are generally considered to be a pattern of rural tourism, but all other accommodation facilities are very important for the development of rural tourism.

Both the problem and advantage of Gorska Hrvatska is that all the concentration of tourists is happening around the Plitvice Lakes National Park. Within the park itself, there is some concern for environmental protection; however, for the rest of the region, any form of selective tourism development would bring economic revitalization.

Collaboration and networking are highlighted as a key moment in shaping, implementing, and realizing sustainable development ideas. For this reason, this could be called a pilot project, relevant in the sense of a kind of innovation that has been tried elsewhere in Croatia, adapted to the context of Gorska Hrvatska, and it becomes a platform for designing development strategies in the future.

## Research Results and Discussion

### Successful cooperation between the public and private sectors

The basic model of cluster business in a tourist destination is primarily designed to connect the public sector, technology, suppliers of products and services and sales channels, travel agencies, and other private tourism entities. Interconnecting and using all forms of communication through technology



can enhance business and position the cluster on the international scene. Small and medium-sized enterprises in Croatia do not have the economic strength to achieve greater business results if they are not led by the public sector. By creating a unique brand, the reputation of a tourist destination grows in the world, making it easier to sell a 'tourism product'. Businesses within this branded tourism cluster will develop faster, thereby maximizing their market environment.

There is currently a very low level of communication and coordination between national, regional, and local levels, and thus inadequate microeconomic policy, as evidenced by the everyday situation in Croatia. Certain parts of the public sector do not cooperate on the same issues, which creates confusion for the private sector with increasing administrative and tax burdens. SMEs in tourism are much more sensitive to competition than to the benefits of working together, and trust is the key to the success of a partnership. Without trust in institutions among cluster members, it is difficult for a cluster to succeed. Clusters should be fostered by more intensive public policies and measures as they achieve the objectives of SMEs, by establishing professional management and long-term budgeting. The most important function of clustering is precisely the greater involvement and proactiveness of small businesses, both urban rural.

### **Adequate cluster leader, i.e. the leader of the tourism cluster**

In different countries there are various institutional forms of cluster leaders; however, they all share approximately the same goals and objectives of the action. The World Tourism Organization stands for DMO (Destination Management Organization), that is, tourism destination management organizations, which in Croatia is the Ministry of Tourism, i.e. tourist boards and offices. Their role in promoting tourism in Croatia is indisputable; however, they are not able to organize and maintain tourism clusters by themselves. Tourist boards and offices in Croatia are non-profit organizations, financed by statutory income such as residence taxes and membership fees, income from the performance of economic activities, the budget of local self-government units and the state (regional) self-government and the state budget.

In the case of Gorska Hrvatska from the LAG Lika initiative, as a leader of the Lika Destination Cluster, a tourist cluster was created with the cooperation and encouragement of Plitvice Lakes National Park, which is the leader of the entire development of this region. LAGs (Local Action Groups) can be set up as destination management organizations if they are guided by a targeted policy of self-financing from EU projects. However, if they are not driven by quality

management and the public sector, their existence and implementation of the set goals is questionable.

Multisectoral tourism clusters in rural areas were addressed as a topic at the congresses on rural tourism in 2007 and 2011, which discussed clusters, their development, advantages in entrepreneurship, services, and everything else related to the organization of rural tourism in Croatia (Demonja, 2012). Much has been said about the importance of tourism clusters and the necessity of marketing and branding, but concrete results have not yet been achieved.

The National Center for Clustering has been operating in Croatia since 2004 as a part of the Croatian Employers Association. However, the organization and management of this economic form of association is still largely unknown in tourism, since the first major tourist cluster, Lika Quality, was not launched until 2017.

Given the impact of globalization, changes in tourism trends indicate that it will be very difficult for small entrepreneurs to succeed in tourism unless new solutions are found. A professional cluster management approach requires quality management that can balance between small manufacturers and service providers and government institutions.

### **Physical infrastructure**

Shortcomings in the physical infrastructure are a major problem in underdeveloped regions of Croatia. The places where people live and their places of work are very poorly connected by public transport. According to the public sector, transportation is becoming more expensive and more difficult to organize. Connections within underdeveloped regions, and even larger cities, are poorly organized. Inadequate access to public transport and mobility of the local population is becoming an increasing problem.

### **Continuous competitiveness and environmental sustainability**

The answer to the question of how to achieve success in realizing the development of a tourist destination is to create its competitiveness without incurring too much social and environmental cost. According to Porter's diamond, success in the destination's rural tourism is reflected in a unique market offering that cannot be found elsewhere. Croatian tourism is still heavily oriented toward mass tourism. It is in the region of Gorska Hrvatska that there is a natural wealth of the Plitvice Lakes National Park around which intense discussions about pollution have been going on for years. There has been uncontrolled construction of apartments in

the vicinity of the National Park, which has disturbed the ecological balance and caused pollution of underground waters. The biggest issues are the high number of new apartments and construction permits in areas with no access roads or sewage, which is critical in the case of such a sensitive ecological system. Because of the region's great popularity, attention has been paid to this issue; however, other protected areas and nature reserves have the same problems, but they are not so exposed to tourists, so the true consequences of pollution are not yet known.

### Information literacy

Particular emphasis should be placed on the information literacy of the local population to better promote and implement marketing activities. Specifically, if the diversity of the cluster's offer and its promotion is to be increased, there is a wide scope for the use of information technology to make further improvements. Opportunities for more rational adoption of marketing concepts include Customer Relationship Management (CRM), segmentation, differentiation, brand building, images, and other systems. In the field of marketing research, data mining tools have been identified, which is a new technology that can help crafts and businesses to predict future trends and behavior (Pejić-Bach, 2003). Undoubtedly, information technology is an advantage for all rural tourism stakeholders in creating a marketing strategy through direct and interactive communication (Morić, 2013).

### Long-term financing of tourism clusters

One of the key problems for cluster survival is long-term financing. Given the opportunities provided through EU projects, all clustering funding depends solely on the persistence of individuals. The resulting projects provide short-term financing. The role of the state should be to stimulate precisely such individuals and to disseminate information on the opportunities created by the cluster and support for public-private cooperation. Creating a favorable business environment is not possible without the financial support and legitimacy provided by the public sector. Unfortunately, the practice of all implemented clusters is that they are successful while there is financial support, and then they stagnate and lose their attractiveness among all stakeholders, from travel agencies to manufacturers and tourists.

Available indicators indicate that there are two main sources of financing for tourism clusters, those funded by the government (national and regional), and others financed by the local tourism industry. In developing countries such as Croatia, financial institutions are comparatively weaker and investments are mainly high risk, (Đurašević, 2009), and the

function of financial brokers in such countries is carried out by a country that usually lacks funds. Unless the role of the state in the development of the regions and small business is clearly defined and the laws adopted are controlled, the issue of financial survival becomes equal to the issue of demographic and environmental sustainability.

### The lack of human capital and quality retention

Rural areas in Croatia face a depopulation, or rather, an exodus of space. There is a very low level of human capital, primarily because the young population has left the rural areas, leaving behind a largely older population. Consequently, there is a general lack of SMEs and an overall interest in development. There is a serious shortage of experts who can innovate in development, or just follow established models from abroad. The increasingly competitive environment in tourism raises several questions regarding new models of tourism development and cooperation between local actors in the form of social relations and shared values. Human resources and skilled labor are crucial for the success of the tourism business, and this is a problem for the global tourism future.

Much of the tourism infrastructure is collapsing because it has not received investment for years, reducing the overall quality of both accommodation and services.

The quality standards should define the membership of the cluster and should be very clearly set for both accommodation providers and food producers. Often the problem in clusters is the definition of quality standards and a significant mismatch concerning the services provided.

The Lika Destination Cluster is not the first cluster to be established in Croatia. Other clusters were launched, such as the Eco-Ethno Cluster and the Slavonia Cluster, among others, but they did not have much success in their promotion or development. According to secondary data, there is a great deal of information about the states, needs, desires and necessities, but, in general, clustering is still a "foreign" term in the rural tourism of Croatia.

## Conclusions

Rural tourism in Croatia is still underdeveloped; perhaps the biggest fault lies in the inefficient and stagnant state system, especially those state institutions that should specifically address rural and regional tourism development. However, there has been a continual decrease of the quality workforce in tourism, and local government policies have not had any

noticeable results for years. The activities of the Ministry of Tourism are quite intense, but they have been unsuccessful in preventing such a large negative trend of emigration from rural parts of the country. Finding the right position and recognition in the fast-growing market is one of the great challenges of developing the tourism industry in Croatia. The Lika Quality Cluster should be involved in the solution of numerous ecological programs, not only in Lika and the Ogulin-Plaški valley, but also in Gorski Kotar and other protected areas in Croatia. According to this concept of clustering, all regions in Croatia could and should harmonize spatial plans and develop rural tourism.

Clustering as a way of networking should become a key driving force for the development of not only Gorska Hrvatska, but also other parts of the country. The planning, budgetary, and strategic clustering approach should be a guideline for all future rural regional tourism clusters in Croatia. The targeted development of selective forms of tourism, such as cyclo tourism, eno-gastro tourism, with thematic trails featuring bicycle and wine, bicycle and honey, as well as bicycle and cheese features, will surely have increased benefits and will attract targeted, eco-conscious tourists. It is precisely such environmentally-conscious tourists that we should strive for, with targeted branding of the tourist cluster regions. Directed marketing and branding of protected area clusters should primarily be undertaken for the sake of the local people, who are sometimes unaware of their wealth of natural and cultural heritage. Local peoples' role in preserving their natural environment and their shared role as promoters of development should be the topic of future research and new literature dedicated to this particular issue.

The research revealed the following answers to the research questions.

The aim of the research was to highlight the facts regarding the development of tourism clusters as potential drivers of rural regional tourism, and in response to the first research question (RQ1), a good example of a tourism cluster in a protected natural area in Croatia was analyzed. Our research revealed that there are opportunities for the development of regional tourism, as well as opportunities for the development of the local economy, especially if there is support from the public sector or the state.

In the following analysis, the tourism cluster of sustainable tourism development in the part of Gorska Hrvatska called Lika Destination Cluster shows us all the benefits of a tourism cluster in a protected natural area (RQ2). The disadvantages of the cluster are not noticeable for the time being among the cluster participants and managers, and it is expected that in the near future they will be able to respond

to the challenges they are facing. Due to the possible challenges, successful development of any other tourism cluster in Croatia has not occurred, and they should be taken into account in further strategic plans aiming to revitalize the country's rural regional space.

The answer to the third research question (RQ3) confirms that, for the time being, employee financing is only made possible through public tenders and awarded EU projects, but this should change in the near future. The public sector should serve as the support in financing, especially when projects are coming to an end.

The benefits of branding and networking in a protected area are perceived by the increasing number of cluster participants each year, which means that there is the aspiration on the part of the local population to stay in rural areas and earn money from their land through agriculture and tourism (RA4). Protected natural areas for the local community are rich in opportunities for sustainable development, and the tourism cluster offers the opportunity for all family members and all generations to stay. The branding is also affecting the habitation of new inhabitants who would like to live within a protected area, away from cities. Collaboration and networking is highlighted as a key moment in shaping, implementing and realizing sustainable development ideas.

Related to the fifth research question (RQ5), economic interest of the local population is recognized through the development of tourism. With the increase of tourism in the coastal part of the country every year, there is an increase in the development of rural areas. In the observed area, it was found that the tourists take this route on the way to the coast, and manage to stay for more than a day. Tourism clusters form a positive movement in the local interest groups.

### **Theoretical implications**

This model of a tourism cluster is a relatively new phenomenon in Croatia. The challenges of developing tourism clusters in Croatia are outlined and should chart a direction for future planning and organization of tourism cluster models that could contribute to the conservation of this country's protected natural areas. The tourism cluster could overcome obstacles and achieve the necessary competitiveness in the world market. The factors influencing the development of tourism clusters and selective forms of tourism are the successful cooperation of the public and private sectors, the existence of a tourism leader in the region, the availability of all necessary infrastructures, and qualified staff.

This research contributes to new insights regarding tourism clusters of underdeveloped regions and protected natural

areas. It contributes to the tourism literature by providing recommendations to the Croatian tourism industry. Accordingly, our research proposition that the cluster approach could generate a competitive advantage for the rural tourism sector in Croatia is confirmed.

In Croatia, the National Center for Clustering has been formed, functioning as part of the Croatian Employers Association since 2004. However, the organization and management through this economic form of association is still the big unknown in tourism, because the first serious tourist cluster, Lika Quality, was launched only in 2017. Given the impact of globalization, changes in tourism trends are sure to make it very difficult for small entrepreneurs to succeed in tourism of the future, unless new solutions are found for "survival" and competition.

More intensive tourism development on the coast, as well as in national parks in Croatia, has connected consequences, and ecological sustainability will be seen only after longer exploitation. Then the question remains whether it will be able to stop the destruction of natural and cultural heritage, i.e., whether nature will be able to recover.

The Lika Quality Cluster is one of the few positive examples and a valuable source of information and experience to be used and applied for future research, primarily because promotions and projects are being conducted through it.

### Practical implications

Research results indicated are that there are some changes in the development of tourism in Gorska Hrvatska, which is the most underdeveloped region in Croatia. Consequently, we come to new issues related to the local population. Can the locals fight for survival alone, or do they need a significant intervention? It is precisely the locals who, with the help of the public sector, are at the forefront of this tourism cluster, and until the public sector fully embraces this form of "innovation" in terms of development, it will hardly be possible to revitalize other protected rural areas of Croatia.

Much of the rural area in Hrvatska is not inhabited and has experienced a population exodus, public national funds are decreasing and the results of the economic crisis have not yet been eliminated.

However, new opportunities have been brought through the EU funds, which are confirmed with the project like this. There is still relatively healthy and organic agricultural production in Croatia, and such insights may lead to a different understanding of the current situation and the future of rural tourism.

### Limitations of the research

The main limitation of the research stems from the fact that the participants in the survey are local residents, as a result of which, unsurprisingly, the primary survey did not indicate disadvantages in the tourism cluster. Participants mostly see only the benefits of the tourism cluster within the Gorska Hrvatska region through the implemented branding of the protected natural area. This limitation was offset at least partially with the participation of a supporting research team, who checked the interview results for potential inconsistencies.

### Future research directions

This paper provides a descriptive analysis of a tourism cluster in Croatia, in the region of Gorska Hrvatska, and its structure, along with key advantages and challenges. Although the key benefits of the cluster approach have been identified and clearly defined, in the case of Croatian rural tourism, this potential mode of development and revitalization is still largely unused. Further research should focus on the role of government in creating tourism clusters, that is, the role of the entire public sector, which will improve the entrepreneurial environment in the rural tourism sector and contribute to the conservation of protected areas. These measures could be in the form of tax incentives, financial support, legal frameworks, etc. Future research should empirically explore the impact of the cluster approach on the entire Croatian rural tourism.

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## Regionalni razvoj podeželskega turizma: primer regije Gorska Hrvatska

### Izveček

Pristop k trajnostnemu turizmu, ki temelji na združevanju v grozde, je primerna strategija za manj razvita podeželska območja turistično usmerjenih držav, kot je Hrvatska. Ta prispevek skuša pojasniti ključne izzive razvoja turističnih grozdov v regiji Gorska Hrvatska in predložiti nove podatke za pristop, ki temelji na trajnostnem razvoju podeželskega turizma. Na podlagi razpoložljivih sekundarnih podatkov, pridobljenih od vladnih organov, nevladnih organizacij, zaščitenih območij Gorske Hrvatske, ter primarnih podatkov grozda destinacije Lika skuša prispevek raziskati ključne izzive razvoja turističnega grozda in izbranih oblik turizma. Večina turističnih grozdov na Hrvaškem je ostala v prvi fazi razvoja, čeprav s takšnim pristopom že leta skušajo doseči rezultate. Glavne prednosti mrežnega povezovanja in znamčenja so prepoznane in opredeljene, vendar so ti potenciali še vedno v veliki meri premalo izkoriščeni. Cilj te študije je predložiti praktična priporočila hrvaški turistični industriji o tem, kako se učiti iz predlaganih najboljših praks in kako jih učinkovito izvajati. V ta namen smo analizirali primer grozda trajnostnega turizma, imenovan grozd destinacije Lika, ki se nahaja v regiji Gorska Hrvatska.

**Ključne besede:** podeželski turizem, Gorska Hrvatska, grozdi, zaščiteni območja, konkurenčnost, grozd destinacije Lika