

---

# DEVELOPMENT OF THE APUSENI MOUNTAINS (WESTERN CARPATHIANS) THROUGH REGIONAL CO-OPERATION

---

**RADU CRISTIAN BARNA**

Today the people in the world are limited neither by space and time nor by capital and goods. This is why the Apuseni Mountains are no longer a “national asset”: wealth/richness is created in those mountains by many foreign firms, tourists and organizations from a host of different countries, all contributing to the progress of this region. Now the Apuseni Mountains belong to the world heritage and they participate in the spiritual development of all those who spend their holidays there. Consequently, their progress and preservation are no longer a matter of concern only for those who live there permanently and for the Romanian Government but also for all of us who live in the region. The Tisa River hydrological basin covers a substantial part of Romanian territory and is entirely delimited by the Carpathian Mountains. Ecological accidents that took place in 2000 and in March 2005 in the superior watershed and their effects on the rivers upstream with resulting transboundary influences proved the necessity of a regional approach to environmental protection and the active involvement of riverside countries in establishing common strategies and programs for preventing and reducing the risk of accidental pollution. Knowledge about potential sources of risk is a first step in this direction<sup>1</sup>.

Environmental assessments and the establishment of improvement and conservation measures must be performed in the context of sustainable development principles and the development of a specific national legislative and institutional framework. The regional context and the lack of borders related to environmental issues request legislative and institutional harmonization in riverside countries.

---

<sup>1</sup> The Regional and Environmental Center for Central and Eastern Europe, Country Report: Romania, [www.rec.hu](http://www.rec.hu)

## The Apuseni Mountains

The creation of the Apuseni Mountains is the work of millions of years of earth movements and of two rivers, the Somes and the Mures, which have cut their way through to the river Tisa. The Apuseni (Western) Mountains are not high mountains, the tallest peak being only 1.848 m, and human settlement extends to the highest altitudes. The wonders of the Apuseni are not above, but underground. Hidden in deep valleys are extensive limestone formations that give rise to some spectacularly eroded scenery. It turns out that the whole region is like a big chunk of Swiss cheese<sup>2</sup>, thoroughly carved by underground rivers for millions of years. The forests hide sinkholes, which are like magical gates to the kingdom below. The most impressive is called the Castle of Ponor, where the powerful river managed to pierce a passage through a whole mountain, giving birth to an immense natural bridge. Another unique place is a cave called the Living Fire, which owes its name to a curious lighting effect: the summer sun shines through a tiny opening at a precise time of the day, and bounces off the glacier inside the cavern, illuminating the walls with a strange glow and giving the impression that the glacier is on fire.

The Apuseni Mountains represent one of the most interesting tourist sites in Romania. The karstic rocky relief (about 400 caves), as well as the specific flora and fauna are as many reasons for calling these mountains a natural reserve. The

<sup>2</sup> [www.patrir.ro](http://www.patrir.ro)

inhabitants of this zone, the “moti”, good wood-workers, are renamed for all the domestic-use wooden tools they produce. Besides the various karstic relief (Cetatile Ponorului, Padis, Groapa Ruginoiasa, Poarta lui Ionele, Ghetarul de la Scarisoara, Focul Viu etc.), a point of interest is the Gold Museum in Brad, where visitors may see a huge collection of gold nuggets, but also traditional tools used for extracting gold (this activity is over 2000 years old in this area)<sup>3</sup>.

### **Regional economy**

In Romania, a country labelled as “in development”, the Apuseni Mountains are one of the poorest regions. The area has been declared a disadvantaged one due to its economic and social underdevelopment. During the communist era, the extensive exploitation of the mountains led to a great concentration of a workforce that is now over-represented and underqualified. The infrastructure is also in a very bad shape.

People have survived here mostly by means of a most archaic agriculture and to some extent by the sale of wooden products. The intensive exploitation of the wood allowed, in the short term, an improvement in the material situation of the inhabitants, but in the medium term they continue to remain very poor, and in the long term, this activity is obviously destructive. As regions, even in Romania, gain more and more financial autonomy, the immediate solution was to cut the forest, which led to the decline of all other activities. In the context of globalisation, agriculture, mining or forestry are no longer profitable activities for this region, and I think that the only serious solution and real opportunity for development in the region is tourism (compared to gold mining as we will see later). But tourism, even if we could hear some echoes, is almost non-existent in the area. There are some hotels in some valleys of the mountains and also people who go holidaying there, but the way tourism is understood and planned as an economical activity is very backward. Tourism has never been seen as a viable solution and most of the time it has been ignored, because the development of a tourist network, in the majority of the zones beginning from zero, would have implied significant investments. This situation persists because in order to receive, the Apuseni Mountains have to offer something. Probably

<sup>3</sup> Vasile Netea, *Muntii Apuseni, Muzeu istoric si Pantheon al poporului roman*, Ed. Sport-Turism, Bucuresti, 1977.

the most negative aspect is the perception that the inhabitants of the region have toward tourism and related services. Many people in the region cannot even understand how tourism can be profitable and what they could sell to a tourist. Thus, the only solution seems to be education and foreign investments, but also the involvement of people like us, interested in the development of our region. It is a fact that the most accessible tourists for its promotion, those from the neighbouring regions, are ignored, but also that the inhabitants of those regions ignore the Apuseni Mountains.

A variety of programs and projects for the development of the area are running:

### **Tourism as way of development**

For Spain, France or Italy, tourism has become the first industry in the country and at the same time the first job provider. In Europe alone there are many regions that have based their development on tourism and some of them are living thanks to it, and it is well known that for each job in tourism there are created another two in annex activities. That is why everywhere in the world the trend is to develop the offer at the maximum, and find the consumers' motivations in order to better answer their expectations. Among these motivations one can mention therapeutic, contemplative or pilgrimage practices, which arise from a fundamental otherness of the natural environment, and most sporting practices, for which nature is no more than a favourable surrounding<sup>4</sup>. But more important nowadays, the choice of the holiday is conditioned by imitation values such as cultural standards and thus, by holiday selling procedures. Leisure time has to bring to the consumer the improvement of his image and the place where the holiday is spent has to place him in an advantageous stage in his entourage. Because of this positioning, the fashion effect has gained a huge importance.

It is agreed that the tourist product is built by the juxtaposition of 3 elements:

- a positive image;
- facilities adapted to demand;
- good infrastructure.

---

<sup>4</sup> Yvette Veyret, *Les Montagnes, Discours et enjeux géographiques*, Ed. Sedes, Liege, 2001.

One can realise how difficult the selling of a tourist product can be: a stay in a mountain resort thus depends on factors that cannot be influenced by the seller, such as the roads, governmental marketing and so on. The image, not only of the place of stay, but of the entire region and country is extremely important. Local economy, sport, culture and of course the natural environment complete alongside to create a regional image which is the motivational root for a stay. Ireland for example has succeeded in the creation of a very good image for tourists by utilizing the myths of the “green Land”, tranquility and the approach to a preserved nature. Romania, like some other Eastern countries, has a very bad image concerning the environment and security. For those who have already visited our country it is well known that people here do not have an ecological culture, nobody cares about the environment and more than that, that there are no structures to implement a real protection of the environment. As an example, the scouts from western countries who come in the Carpathians on clean-up drivess, despite their goodwill, will take home an image of cultural backwardness, and we know that among tourist motivations, the most important are the change of scene, relaxation and the desire to enlarge the horizon. A country with an image of backwardness, dirt and insecurity cannot attract tourists.

The extension of leisure, the progress of means of transport, the inconveniences of urban life and the development of new sport activities arouse the attraction of nature for a mostly urban public in search of contact with nature and with their dreams, in a recreational, mythical and possibly somewhat strange environment.

Tourist development involves the existence of infrastructures to facilitate access to the place of stay and the mobility there, and one has to dovetail the environment with the desires and the imaginary of the tourists. The result will be a modification of the territory and the opening of confrontation fields between different economic activities. Industry, for example, can disturb the tourist in many ways, from noise or smell to the roofs of buildings or in our case, the eyesore of abandoned factories. Among other motivations, the consumption of nature is a very high priority with tourists, and in order to get them on our side we have to make some compromises with nature.

In many western countries, improvement in agricultural profit has left a lot of space available for wild animals and for reforestation. The problem is that often those territories are eroded and no longer compatible with the life of wild animals, but in spite of that situation some countries have considered the repopulation of disappeared species. This decision hurt the interests of the tourist service providers, who claimed that, for their customers, security was one of the most important factors in the choice process. The survival of the local population being linked to those activities, they did not have the choice to choose between tourists or wild animals; in Switzerland there was no ecological whimsy on the subject, because tourism is too important for the economical and social equilibrium of the country.

The exodus of the rural populations to cities, beginning in Romania with the industrialization of the sixties, has now slackened because of the recession of the transition. This migration will start again when Romania becomes a member of the EU because of an increase in productivity and competition logic, traditional life in the mountains being unsatisfactory from the economical point of view. Tourism can also, to a certain extent, remedy this tendency and put down roots for rural populations, because besides the specific jobs in tourism, other work places will be created in industries and services linked to the leisure industry. These could be in commerce, services or in administration. For this to occur, the intervention of local authorities is very important not only for investment and in the creation of protected areas in order to grow the regional attraction, but especially to develop the “tourist” spirit of the local population. It concerns in a high degree the comprehension of the investment processes, of tourist structures and the modelling of a new behaviour oriented toward services. It is necessary to transform peasants into guides, hotel agents or employees of different promotion agencies. That is why it is essential to give them the necessary education and the independence to look to their own interests and the interest of their region. Tourism could generate a high dynamic of development, the only condition being the mobilization of the good will of the decision-makers and to create a specific educational framework. The knowledge that people could accumulate will make them the main players in the region. Spending their lives there, they would be also more sensitive to the environment, the result being the formation of a virtuous circle of local development and environment protection.

And this will increasingly be the case in the future, because if in fact today the entire rural population in Romania works in agriculture, this situation will change, as we can see in France, where only 13% of the rural population has agriculture as its main source of income<sup>5</sup>.

We should be able to predict any changes in the public or the inhabitants' need in order to be capable to anticipate the effects on the environment, taking into account the development projects for cities, resorts or infrastructure networks. The orientation towards customers or the financial aspect should not precede the general objective that is the preservation of the natural heritage.

The communist period left us an inheritance in tourism characterized by inadequate and unaesthetic constructions that are difficult to restructure. In these conditions, it is often more profitable to build a new resort, therefore investors are tempted to abandon the old structures, something that is unacceptable for the environment because of the occupied but unused spaces that remain. The various investment projects should be framed by common interest rules and by administrative constraints in order to direct the investments towards sustainable development. Investments should be based on the best distribution of economic activities based on the human and natural resources in a geographical area. Territorial planning involves an environmental transformation process, which should take into account the scarcity of natural resources.

Taking into account the cultural aspect of each region and its inhabitants, we are tempted to include people among the scarce resources. When in contact with a tourist, locals change. By definition the tourist is the more modern and the tendency is to imitate him. The tourist's habits and behaviour are examples. Again, the communities have to encourage tradition by offering financial support and by promoting local culture. Financial support is essential, not only in the early stage—the case with Romanian tourism—but also during the developmental stage. It is very important to avoid the concurrent use of space—which can have ominous effects on the environment—to encourage economic activities and to ensure legal competition. Direct funding and subventions should be granted in order to minimize geographical handicaps and additional costs. It is necessary to use fiscal incentives such as exemption from the payment of various taxes and most importantly to facilitate access to credit accounts.

<sup>5</sup> Yves Madiot, *Amenagement du territoire*, Ed. Armand Colin, Paris, 2001.

In some Romanian regions we can at present talk about the "Missing Middle"—the impossibility of having a credit account and therefore to invest—which is the main cause for these regions being undeveloped.

There are reasons to believe this situation will change, and agro-tourism is a very good example. Farms are not only developing, but they are doing so by making the most of local resources. A major component of the farmers' multilevel activity and of the diversification of their revenue, agro-tourism may be the only way to achieve the development of an economic exploitation with its self-financing capacity blocked by the regression of benefits. A virtuous agriculture–tourism–environment circle is created, making it easier to overcome the profitability point. Agro-tourism is not only going back to one's roots and health benefits, but also a way to discover local cultures and towards a public opinion with a favourable bias concerning the countryside. Certain products related to the forest such as grains, plants, different fruits, mushrooms or honey may be of local interest in the same way as developing extensive activities like hunting, fishing, equestrian farms and animal parks. Both the inhabitants and the tourists should feel at home in a farm, hotel or resort in order to maintain a perennial activity. In the same way as the tourist has to feel the "value" of his/her vacation venue, the services provider has to be proud and satisfied and to see it as the future for his/her children.

The role of communities is to transform the region into a local cultural centre. Michael Casteights<sup>6</sup> underlines "the symbolic capitalization of the centre rather than the peripheries. This hierarchy of different areas and of their central placement determines also the morphology of space and the status of its inhabitants". Building a centre will influence the inhabitants' attitude towards their environment through a harmonious coexistence of activities, and will enhance their sense of identification with their region. Being a part of the centre they will no longer need to go somewhere else and will be able to do everything in one place.

Promoting local landscapes will be all about taking advantage of their particularities by mobilizing this diffuse cultural ensemble by adapting to potentially sensible to ecological issues visitors. People are increasingly

---

<sup>6</sup> Michel Casteights, *L'aménagement de l'espace*, Ed. LGDJ, Paris, 1999.



consumers of “nature/natural” products, the world population is growing, and the regions neighbouring the Apuseni Mountains have a high economic growth rate that is an encouraging matter. Tourists could be attracted to our rusticity and to our culture providing that they are the objects of an adapted communication process.

We should not forget about tradition. From a strictly commercial point of view, traditions can create a much-wanted competitive advantage and can be the difference between the “countries famous for tourism” and us. In spite of the inevitable ominous effects on the environment, tourism can be an opportunity for it. Instead of impoverishing both the environment and the inhabitants of a certain region, tourism can be a life source providing the efficacy of the legal system<sup>7</sup>. The legal system is responsible for distributing incomes from tourism, creating an adequate educational system and creating a propitious image of the region. The tourists are only expecting a model to preserve the environment.

It is important to develop and to build, but not at any cost; the physical characteristics of a resort establish the heating conditions, the water springs and the richness of nutritive elements in the soil, which establish the presence of vegetation and animals. The resort’s conditions evolve in time since the climate, the relief, the soil and the tourists are changing. Therefore, the choice to build must take into account these changes and adapt the objectives in order to achieve a long-term development. The long-term development, according to The World Commission on Environment and Development, “allows satisfying present needs without compromising the future generations’ ability to satisfy theirs”. The long-term development raises the question of intergenerational and interregional solidarity that should be integrated in our development schemes.

Sustainable tourism means an optimal use of resources, biological diversity included, the minimization of cultural, social and ecological impacts and in the meantime, the maximization of all benefits derived from the conservation of traditions and local communities. It also means that the management of all structures and organizations, the aims of which are precisely those mentioned above, have to adapt themselves to the long run objectives. Sustainable tourism is situated at the intersection of the needs of today’s tourists with those of the host region, protecting and developing opportunities for the future. It is

<sup>7</sup> Bernard Pecqueur, *Le développement local*, Ed. Syros, Paris, 2000.

therefore seen as a rather complex domain: the management of all resources has to be very efficient, so as to satisfy the economic, social and esthetical needs, to maintain the cultural integrity, the biological diversity, and to support the systems which work toward the growth of the living standard. Unfortunately, in the Apuseni Mountains, on the one hand people are subject to poverty, though this situation can be solved; on the other hand, the mountains are subject to a real and organized aggression, which in the long term could lead to a disaster that could not be overcome. That is why a protective legislation is not enough; people who live in the region have to take care of their own interests and to protect the mountains, and we are convinced that this can be done only through education.

### **“Rosia Montana”, exemplification of why we need to co-operate**

Praised by the business sector and criticized by the civil society, the Rosia Montana gold mining project prepares for excavations in the Apuseni Mountains, to create the largest opencast gold mine in Europe. A site is currently being prepared for production of gold due to start in 2005. Over the gold mine's estimated 17-year life span, 300 tons of gold and 81 tons of silver will be extracted annually using cyanide technology<sup>8</sup>. The project is run by Rosia Montana Gold Corporation, a joint venture between the private Canadian company Gabriel Resources Ltd. (80%), the Romanian state-owned Minvest SA Deva (19,3%), and small shareholders (0,7%). This mining activity requires an investment in excess of USD 400 million. In a recent move, the World Bank refused to participate in the USD 250 million loan for the controversial project. The International Finance Corporation (IFC), the bank's private-sector lending arm, announced in October 2002 that it was abandoning negotiations with the Canadian company Gabriel Resources Ltd. over a loan that was to back the mining project. The bank's involvement would not have exceeded USD 100 millions. The decision was taken during the World Bank's annual meeting in response to heavy criticism from activists that the bank was backing environmentally dubious projects, such as Rosia Montana. The international coalition includes Alburnus Maior (from Rosia Montana, Romania), CEE

<sup>8</sup> Savulescu Alexandru, Gold, cyanides and excavations in the hearth of Transylvania, Danube Watch, [www.icpdr.org](http://www.icpdr.org).

Bankwatch Network, Friends of the Earth International, Greenpeace CEE, Mineral Policy Center (Washington DC, USA) and Mining Watch Canada.

In order to be economically feasible, the project would transform the valley of Rosia Montana, the oldest documented settlement in Romania, into four open-pit mines. The neighbouring valley of Corna would be converted into an unlined cyanide storage 'pond' covering a surface of up to 600 hectares, held back by a 180-meter high dam. The pits would generate roughly 196.4 million tons of cyanide-laced waste. Two years ago, an accidental cyanide and heavy metals spill at another Romanian gold mine, Aurul Baia Mare, affected almost 2,000 kilometres of rivers in the Danube river basin, contaminating the drinking water supplies of 2.5 million people, and killing some 1,200 tons of fish. Remembering the Baia Mare accident, Frits Schlingemann, UNEP Regional Representative for Europe, warns against risks coming from new mining projects that relay on the use of cyanides: "At this stage of development, a country like Romania, which has serious problems with floods and other natural disasters, is not yet prepared to cope with the risks of another cyanide spill-over. I am sorry to say that none of the two proposals made in the wake of the Baia Mare accidents were yet taken seriously by the Romanian Government"<sup>9</sup>. The first proposal was a river management plan and possibly an international convention for the Tisa River Basin, including the interests of the downstream countries, and a potential financial contribution of Hungary to prevent future accidents. The second involved more the local population. "A lot of damage could be prevented if the downstream population was better informed"<sup>10</sup> said Schlingemann. Of course, decisions regarding potentially hazardous investments, such as the USD 400-450-million Canadian-Romanian open-pit gold mine in Rosia Montana are rather complex, "one of the clear issues being the split between employment needs and environmental hazards"<sup>11</sup>. Recognising the complexity of the issue, and hoping to find directions to follow, Romanian environmental authorities turned their heads towards the European Commission. But Anne Burrill, principal administrator for the collaboration with European third countries at the Environment Directorate-General, says that any decision

---

<sup>9</sup> [www.alburnusmaior.ro](http://www.alburnusmaior.ro)

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

regarding the project will have to be taken at the national level. According to Burrill, there are three reasons for that<sup>12</sup>:

- 1) Romania is not a EU member;
- 2) There are no EU funds involved in the project;
- 3) The EU has no specific legislation regarding cyanide gold mining.

Following the Espoo convention<sup>13</sup>, the Environment and Water Ministry from Hungary has made an impact study on the environment in Hungary. The results have produced a host of critics over the past years, among them that of the Hungarian environment minister, who asked for measures to stop the disastrous project. So, the Hungarian Parliament decided on the 12 of October 2004 to ask the EU to persuade Romania to stop the project, and the Hungarian prime minister, Ferenc Gyurcsany promised a few days later to help the region with many other investments if the project would be abandoned. He said that the creation of some underqualified jobs for a very limited period of time couldn't be an argument for the destruction of eternal mountains.

To the same end, the Association Rosia Montana has organised the 26-28 August "Hay Party Rosia Montana", a festival with a varied arts and sports itinerary, aiming to draw attention to the region and to show to the people the beauties of the mountains, the best Romanian music groups coming to entertain 15,000 visitors. It is the biggest summer-party in Romania and also the most entertaining, because of the very original competitions taking place during those three days, among which is the Hay Jumping, giving the Hay Party its name.

---

<sup>12</sup> [www.rosiamontana.ro](http://www.rosiamontana.ro)

<sup>13</sup> Convention of the European Union policies on transboundary impacts.

## References

- Barna Radu Cristian, L'impacte du développement touristique sur l'environnement, Revista Transilvană de Științe Administrative, No.1(10)/2004, Cluj-Napoca, pp. 9-23.
- Casteights Michel, L'aménagement de l'espace, Ed. LGDJ, Paris, 1999.
- Keeble David & Weaver Eric, New firms and regional development, Croom Helm, 1986.
- Madiot Yves, Aménagement du territoire, Ed. Armand Colin, Paris, 2001.
- Netea Vasile, Muntii Apuseni, Muzeu istoric si Pantheon al poporului roman, Ed. Sport-Turism, Bucuresti, 1977.
- Pecqueur Bernard, Le developpement local, Ed. Syros, Paris, 2000.
- Savulescu Alexandru, Gold, cyanides and excavations in the hearth of Transylvania, Danube Watch, [www.icpdr.org](http://www.icpdr.org).
- The Regional and Environmental Center for Central and Eastern Europe, Country Report: Romania, [www.rec.hu](http://www.rec.hu).
- Veyret Yvette, Les Montagnes, Discours et enjeux géographiques, Ed. Sedes, Liege, 2001.

## Web-references

- [www.alburnusmaior.ro](http://www.alburnusmaior.ro)
- [www.patrir.ro](http://www.patrir.ro)
- [www.rosiamontana.ro](http://www.rosiamontana.ro)