

ANALYSIS OF THE ECONOMIC POTENTIAL OF THE IMAGE OF THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA AS AN ECOTOURISM DESTINATION

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Abstract

The Republic of Moldova possesses significant ecotourism potential due to its diverse natural landscapes, rural traditions, and rich biodiversity. However, its image as an ecotourism destination remains underdeveloped and poorly communicated to international markets. This paper explores the economic potential of Moldova's ecotourism image and evaluates how it can be improved to contribute to sustainable regional development. Using a mixed-methods approach – including content analysis of promotional materials, survey data, expert interviews, and SWOT-PESTLE frameworks – the research identifies key factors that influence the perception and attractiveness of Moldova as an ecotourism destination. Findings indicate that while Moldova's current tourism image is heavily wine-focused, there is substantial untapped interest in community-based ecotourism and nature experiences. Strategic branding, improved infrastructure, and cross-sector policy support could enhance Moldova's visibility and competitiveness, increasing both tourism revenues and local employment. The paper highlights the importance of coherent national policy, inter-institutional cooperation, and environmental education in turning Moldova's ecotourism image into an economic growth driver.

Keywords: *ecotourism; economic potential; national image; Moldova; sustainable development.*

JEL Classification: Q01; Q57; L83; Z32

1. INTRODUCTION

In the context of global transformations toward sustainable development, ecotourism has emerged as a dynamic sector with significant economic, environmental, and social implications. Defined as responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people, ecotourism aligns closely with the goals of green economies and community empowerment. For emerging economies such as the Republic of Moldova, ecotourism represents not only a diversification of the tourism sector but also a strategic opportunity to enhance the country's image and stimulate rural development.

Although Moldova is endowed with a rich natural heritage, cultural authenticity, and a relatively unspoiled rural landscape, it remains largely absent from the global ecotourism circuit. The dominant narrative continues to revolve around wine tourism, with limited integration of eco-conscious values, biodiversity preservation, or sustainable community engagement. This paper aims to analyze the economic potential of ecotourism by assessing how the Republic of Moldova is currently positioned as an ecotourism destination and how this image can be improved to attract visitors, generate income, and support sustainable development goals.

The study seeks to answer the following research questions:

- ✓ What are the key strengths and weaknesses of Moldova's ecotourism image?
- ✓ How does this image impact the country's tourism economy?
- ✓ What policy and marketing interventions are needed to improve Moldova's position in the ecotourism market?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The concept of destination image has been widely studied in tourism literature, being defined as the set of beliefs, ideas, and impressions that people have of a place (Kotler *et al.*, 2002). A positive and coherent destination image can significantly influence tourists' decision-making, travel intentions, and willingness to pay (Gallarza *et al.*, 2002). In the case of ecotourism, image plays a dual role: it must reflect both the natural appeal of the location and its commitment to sustainability.

Ecotourism itself is more than nature-based tourism; it involves education, conservation, and community involvement (Honey, 2008). It can generate sustainable income while promoting environmental stewardship, particularly in rural and protected areas. According to the International Ecotourism Society (TIES, 2015), successful ecotourism destinations tend to benefit from strong policy support, well-managed natural assets, and clear branding strategies that appeal to niche markets.

From an economic perspective, ecotourism contributes not only through direct spending on accommodation, transport, and local services, but also through multiplier effects that stimulate local economies and reduce migration by creating rural employment (Scheyvens, 1999). However, without strategic communication, even ecotourism-rich destinations may remain "invisible" on international markets.

The conceptual framework for this research is built around three key pillars:

Image as a strategic economic asset – Moldova's image is not only a reflection of current perceptions, but also a resource that can be managed and leveraged to attract targeted tourist flows.

SWOT and PESTLE analysis tools – These are used to systematically examine internal and external factors influencing Moldova’s ecotourism positioning.

Stakeholder perceptions – Understanding the views of tourists, local entrepreneurs, NGOs, and policymakers provides insight into the gaps between the perceived and desired image.

This framework supports an interdisciplinary approach, integrating tourism studies, economic development theories, and destination branding practices. In doing so, it allows for a comprehensive assessment of how Moldova’s ecotourism image can evolve from a fragmented narrative to a cohesive and economically impactful strategy.

3. METHODOLOGY

To assess the economic potential of the Republic of Moldova’s image as an ecotourism destination, the study adopts a mixed-methods approach that integrates both qualitative and quantitative techniques. This methodological choice allows for a more nuanced understanding of the current positioning of Moldova in the ecotourism market, the perceptions of stakeholders, and the potential economic benefits of image enhancement.

3.1. Data collection

The research is based on three main sources of data:

- 1) Content analysis of official tourism promotion materials (e.g., websites, brochures, videos) from the National Inbound and Domestic Tourism Association of Moldova, the Ministry of Culture, National Tourism Office and selected private tour operators. The purpose was to evaluate how ecotourism is currently framed and what messages dominate the national image.
- 2) Survey of 220 respondents (both domestic and international tourists), conducted online between September and November 2024. The survey focused on respondents’ awareness, perceptions, and interest in ecotourism in Moldova.
- 3) Semi-structured interviews with 12 stakeholders, including tourism entrepreneurs, NGO representatives, government officials, and marketing professionals. These interviews provided in-depth insights into challenges and opportunities in ecotourism development and image construction.

3.2. Analytical tools

The data were analysed using the following tools:

- 1) SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) – to assess Moldova's internal capabilities and external environment in relation to ecotourism.
- 2) PESTLE analysis (Political, Economic, Social, Technological, Legal, Environmental) – to examine macro-level factors that affect the development of ecotourism in Moldova.
- 3) Descriptive statistics and cross-tabulation (for survey results) – used to identify patterns in tourist behaviour and perception.
- 4) Thematic analysis (for interviews) – applied to extract recurring themes related to image, sustainability, and economic impact.

3.3. Limitations

While the mixed-method approach enhances the validity of the findings, the study has limitations such as the relatively small number of expert interviews and the potential self-selection bias in the online survey sample. Nevertheless, the triangulation of data ensures a robust foundation for conclusions and policy recommendations.

4. RESULTS AND INTERPRETATION

4.1. Moldova's current ecotourism image

The content analysis revealed that Moldova's official tourism image is predominantly centered around wine tourism and cultural heritage. While these are important assets, ecotourism elements – such as national parks, nature reserves, eco-lodges, and traditional rural experiences – are minimally represented or loosely integrated in promotional content. The term "ecotourism" appears infrequently, and sustainability narratives are generally absent or vague.

Survey data confirmed this discrepancy. Among international respondents (N=122), only 18% associated Moldova with nature or eco-based experiences, while 61% associated it with wine and gastronomy. In contrast, domestic respondents showed stronger awareness of natural attractions (Codrii forest, Prut river wetlands, Orheiul Vechi), but also expressed concern about the lack of infrastructure and accessibility in rural eco-areas.

4.2. Stakeholder perceptions

The interviews with stakeholders brought forward several key insights:

- Moldova has untapped potential in ecotourism, particularly in cross-border protected areas (e.g., Lower Prut Biosphere Reserve), rural guesthouses, and local crafts.
- However, there is no clear national branding strategy for ecotourism, and funding for small-scale sustainable tourism projects is limited.

- Stakeholders emphasized the need for inter-institutional collaboration and a consistent legal framework that incentivizes ecological practices in tourism.

4.3. SWOT and PESTLE findings

The SWOT analysis showed that Moldova's strengths include its unspoiled natural landscapes, authentic rural life, and low mass tourism pressure. The weaknesses lie in poor infrastructure, limited visibility, and inconsistent service quality. Opportunities include growing demand for off-the-beaten-path travel and EU green transition programs, while threats involve political instability and regional competition from Romania and Ukraine.

The PESTLE analysis indicated that environmental policies exist, but enforcement is weak; tourism legislation is fragmented; and technological adoption in rural tourism remains low. On the positive side, Moldova's visa-free regime, increasing internet penetration, and alignment with EU environmental standards provide a supportive macro-environment for developing ecotourism.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this research highlight a clear mismatch between the ecotourism potential of the Republic of Moldova and its current image on the international tourism market. Despite its rich natural and cultural resources, Moldova has not yet positioned itself as a competitive ecotourism destination. The predominance of wine and gastronomic branding overshadows unique assets such as biodiversity, traditional rural life, and community-based tourism.

From an economic perspective, ecotourism represents a viable development strategy that could support rural economies, create jobs, and contribute to the country's green growth. However, to unlock this potential, Moldova must transition from fragmented promotion and weak infrastructure to a coherent ecotourism vision backed by targeted policy interventions.

The research suggests the following policy recommendations:

Develop a national ecotourism branding strategy, integrating Moldova's natural heritage, community tourism, and sustainability values under a unified narrative. This should involve public-private cooperation and the use of digital platforms to reach eco-conscious travelers.

Invest in rural infrastructure and eco-friendly tourism services, particularly in areas with high ecological value (e.g., Lower Prut, Codrii, Orheiul Vechi). These investments must be aligned with environmental protection measures and local benefit-sharing mechanisms.

Introduce fiscal incentives and grant programs for small tourism enterprises adopting ecological practices and sustainable business models.

Strengthen institutional cooperation between ministries (tourism, environment, culture, economy) and local authorities to coordinate planning, funding, and monitoring of ecotourism development.

Promote environmental education and awareness among both tourists and service providers to support responsible behavior and preserve the authenticity of ecotourism experiences.

In conclusion, Moldova has the opportunity to reposition itself as a green, authentic, and sustainable destination in Eastern Europe. With the right image, policies, and partnerships, ecotourism can become a strategic pillar for inclusive economic development and international visibility.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author wishes to express sincere gratitude to the interviewed stakeholders, including representatives from the National Inbound and Domestic Tourism Association of Moldova, local tourism entrepreneurs, and environmental NGOs, for their valuable insights and time. Special thanks are extended to the academic advisors and colleagues at the Moldova State University for their continuous support and feedback throughout the research process.

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