

REVIEW

By Prof. Dr. Maria Stamatova Vodenska,
place of work International Business School - Botevgrad,
scientific area 4.4. Geography of recreation and tourism
for the acquisition of an educational and scientific degree "doctor"
in the professional field 3.9. Tourism,
with candidate doctoral student of independent training Adelina Savova Stoyanova

This review was written according to the requirements of the existing Law on the Development of the Academic Staff, the Rules for its Application and the Ordinance on the Development of the Academic Staff of the NBU.

The presented dissertation has a total volume of 211 pages, contains 127 titles of used literature (59 in Bulgarian and 68 in a foreign language), as well as 15 Internet sources. There are 2 applications. The text is illustrated by 6 tables and 36 figures, representing completely sufficient illustrative material.

The dissertation is structured in an Introduction, 3 main chapters and a Conclusion, covering the topic of the rapidly developing area in the tourism industry - ecological tourism.

The topic developed by PhD student Adelina Stoyanova is quite difficult, multifaceted and wide-ranging. In general, it covers the place and role of ecotourism, but the foci within it are two - one is the educational element in ecotourism, and the other is the experiences associated with this type of tourism. 3 main directions of development can be defined - ecological tourism (with all aspects of its sustainability); educational tourism (which is not yet sufficiently covered in our scientific literature) and tourism experiences in an ecological aspect, which is a completely new niche in ecological tourism research.

In this sense, we can conclude that the topic is extremely relevant and significant both in a scientific sense (it reveals the relationship between ecological and educational tourism in the context of their sustainability), and in a scientific and applied sense - a specific tourist product is proposed and presented, created on the basis of the achieved scientific results.

The introduction is written like a textbook - the relevance of the research is very well justified, the object and subject of the research are correctly defined, the purpose and tasks of the dissertation are precisely formulated. The objective contains a research element as well as regular connections between the educational aspect, experiences and other key aspects of ecotourism. The methods used as well as the limitations of the study are presented. A research thesis and 5 hypotheses were formulated (which are respectively proven in the presentation).

Doctoral student Adelina Stoyanova knows very well the state of the individual types of tourism and the problems in them and has used modern scientific and literary sources to outline and analyze their features. Such basic and at the same time versatile and multifaceted concepts from tourism theory as ECOLOGICAL TOURISM, SUSTAINABLE TOURISM, EDUCATIONAL TOURISM, TOURIST EXPERIENCES, DIGITALIZATION are examined in detail. An excellent knowledge of the theory regarding the concepts mentioned above is shown, the dividing line between them is clearly distinguished, and the evolution in their understanding and definition is traced. The main elements of ecological tourism are indicated.

Various definitions of ecological, sustainable, educational tourism are presented in many places. The author clearly indicates which definitions she accepts as the basis for conducting her research and analysis.

More specifically, the author focused on the following subtypes of ecological tourism – ornithological, mountain-hiking, visiting eco-trails, caving and floral tourism, thus demonstrating in-depth knowledge of each of them. Relatively less attention has been paid to

eco-trails, which represent a significant part of the tourist infrastructure in our country. At the same time, the results of the survey show that the respondents have the greatest interest in eco-trails (77%), followed by mountain tourism (62.5%).

It is necessary to point out that this group can also include other types of tourism with a pronounced ecological orientation. The author of the dissertation believes that the mentioned types of ecological tourism are directly related to nature and ecology. In fact, ecological tourism can be practiced wherever there is a preserved natural environment, places with interesting biological and geological diversity.

A separate part of the dissertation is devoted to the sustainability of ecological tourism (third paragraph, First Chapter). The main principles and goals of sustainable ecotourism are summarized in the context of the impacts of ecotourism on the environment. The numerous contributions of the sustainable development of ecological tourism have been identified and analyzed. Some of the main indicators used internationally to measure sustainability in the tourism sector are listed.

Doctoral student Adelina Stoyanova also examines the role of the state and institutions in the management of sustainable ecological tourism, mentioning the main normative documents in this direction. She positively accepts what has been done so far, approves the status quo in the legal framework and makes no proposals for additional regulation of the development of sustainable ecological tourism in our country. Recommendations were made mainly to non-governmental organizations.

Special attention is paid to the analysis of educational tourism and the possibilities of integrating educational elements into sustainable ecological tourism. The doctoral student rightly points out that in an ecological trip, the leading element motivating the tourist is precisely the ecological and the experiences related to it, while the educational element supports the interpretation and perception of the ecological content of the trip. The prerequisites for the modern growth and upsurge in the field of educational tourism are well founded and analyzed. It should be noted that according to the survey conducted by the PhD student, for 90% of the respondents it is important to gain new knowledge during their trip. Adelina Stoyanova draws attention to the need for independent management of the educational component in any environmental program. It is necessary to evaluate the training and education achieved, preferably through measurable indicators, so that its effectiveness can be continuously improved.

Based on this rather thorough and comprehensive review of various definitions, the author of the dissertation gives her own definition of sustainable ecological educational tourism (p.64). This is a challenge that goes beyond the requirements for an ONS "doctor".

In general, the precise definition of the conceptual apparatus used, the binding of the concept of sustainable development in the modern practice of ecological tourism and the consideration of the educational aspect would be of great importance for tourist users, expressed in obtaining more knowledge and enriching their knowledge and experiences during on a trip.

All the main statements necessary to support the formulated thesis and to achieve the goal of the dissertation have been clarified and analyzed.

The doctoral student rightly advocates the thesis that the production of a mass tourist product is no longer relevant, I would also add that it is unnecessary and ineffective - the modern tourist demand is aimed at unique experiences, new feelings and emotions. I especially like the concept "Experiences are the added value of ecological tourism". (I would say of any type of tourism).

The author of the dissertation rightly points out that in the modern world, more and more new technologies are used to increase the efficiency of experiences, since their generation has dimensions of economic rather than artistic activity.

The concept of experiences in the tourism industry is relatively new (25-30 years ago), but it is quickly gaining ground and already occupies a significant place in the marketing, creation and consumption of tourism services. The PhD student demonstrates a very good knowledge of the theory of experiences and their contemporary role in the tourism industry.

It should be noted that in the dissertation the experiences are analyzed both from the point of view of consumers and as an element of the tourism product. In this sense, they are an integral part of all other product elements, which is very important as a concept. Factors affecting eco-travel experiences are examined and analyzed. The importance of experiences and in particular new experiences during eco-travel is proven mostly by the responses of the survey respondents - for 88% of them it is important that the trip is accompanied by a new experience, 96% would try something new and different during their vacation, for 87%, eco-friendly travel itself is an experience.

Adelina Stoyanova has shown high correctness in citing a significant and representative number of authors. The concise, well-structured, clear content and presentation of the dissertation work is impressive, regardless of the number and variety of elements considered. Each body paragraph of the dissertation ends with the corresponding conclusion. The specificity and accuracy of the statement when considering each individual element of the dissertation should also be noted.

The scientific research presented is extremely thorough and has developed a grounded theoretical model and plan. The main elements of the study (first chapter) are primarily focused on ecological tourism - its features, the prerequisites and opportunities for its sustainable development, as well as the ways and opportunities to increase the educational element in it. The second chapter is devoted to tourist experiences - their essence and importance for tourist satisfaction. Attention is paid to the specificity of experiences during ecological travel, as well as to the factors that shape and influence them.

The third chapter represents the scientific and applied contribution of the dissertation work. The developed online platform, together with the programs it offers, is in accordance with all the principles of ecological visiting and viewing of natural objects and has a strong emphasis on the educational aspect, focusing on the emotional side of travel – the experiences during the journey itself. The elements of the concept of sustainable ecotourism included in the platform are: various eco-friendly trips, their educational aspects, the experiences that await users, a high level of user awareness, opportunities to support environmental causes and to track the funds provided for this support. In this sense, we can claim that the digital platform fully reflects the essence, goals and thesis of the dissertation work.

The individual stages of creating the online platform are examined and explained step by step. Special attention is paid to initiatives and environmental causes of support presented to eco-consumers. They represent activities or projects aimed at supporting the ecological well-being of a specific natural environment or animal species. The utility of this aspect of the online platform is that participation in the initiatives and supporting environmental causes can in the future lead to increased visits to a given destination, greater environmental awareness among users and additional financial support.

The strategy for the development of the digital platform has been revealed and presented only partially in the dissertation, as it requires technical time to be tested and updated in the Internet space. Nevertheless, the author of the dissertation has outlined in sufficient detail the future directions for the development of the online platform and its content in the short and long term.

The content of the digital platform has already been characterized by considerable variety and diversity, including programs from the four types of ecological tourism - ornithological, mountain, pedestrian, speleological and floral. All proposed programs have a clear educational emphasis and underline the uniqueness of the experiences during the trip

itself. Using the free WordPress site management system gives a lot of customization options, it's versatile, easy to maintain, and allows for quick and easy management.

In order to achieve the goal and solve the set tasks, various analytical methods have been applied and used by the author of the dissertation - induction, deduction, research, observation, analysis, synthesis, selection method.

The collection of literary data was carried out through the method of induction. The data has been systematized and processed and subsequently their analysis has supported the formulation of opinions, conclusions, decisions and evaluations.

The deduction method was used to analyze the results and draw conclusions.

The methods of analysis and synthesis were used consecutively in the study of individual phenomena, as their elements were initially dissected into parts for the purpose of their better study and subsequently were united and synthesized, in which knowledge and conclusions about the phenomena as a whole were obtained.

The selection method was widely applied, by means of which, from the huge set of collected homogeneous data, those that gave the clearest and most unambiguous idea of the essence of the phenomena and allowed the derivation of specific results and the formulation of scientifically substantiated conclusions were selected.

Within the framework of the research, the interview and survey methods were also used - mainly in the process of obtaining primary information. Structured surveys with a pre-made questionnaire were used.

To realize the goal and achieve the set tasks, various digitalization methods have been applied and used, presented in the various stages of creating the digital platform - planning, development, optimization, etc. The digital platform has been developed in WordPress - an open source platform for content management on sites.

It can be said that the chosen research methodology and techniques fully correspond to the set goal and tasks of the dissertation work.

Regarding the collection and analysis of empirical data, the doctoral student focused primarily on conducting a survey, which was conducted and presented correctly. She made a distinct personal contribution to the online survey of 120 respondents aged 25 to 55. The questionnaire was compiled correctly and the three main areas - ecology and cause, awareness and knowledge, motives and search for experiences - were successfully integrated into the questions asked to the surveyed respondents. All respondents who participated in the study are real users of the ecological type of tourism in its studied forms – ornithological, speleological, mountain-pedestrian and floral tourism. The results of the survey derive from the analysis, which is also an independent contribution of doctoral student Adelina Stoyanova.

The contributions of the dissertation are based on extensive primary and secondary information obtained as a result of the author's scientific research, which is a guarantee of the reliability of the material used. The results of the conducted research are objective and derive entirely from it through the use and application of adequate research methods and techniques.

Doctoral student Adelina Stoyanova has divided the contributions of her dissertation work into theoretical, scientific and practical-applied ones. I agree with this distribution and in general with the indicated contributions of the three groups. They are worded clearly, concisely and precisely.

As a theoretical contribution, she has indicated only one - defining the theoretical specificity of ecological tourism by studying the connections and dependencies between the concepts of "ecology", "education" and "experiences". The author's definition of sustainable ecological educational tourism (p. 64) should be added here as a separate contribution or as a result of the already cited contribution. This is a challenge that goes beyond the requirements for an ONS "doctor".

The analyzed and established interactions of ecological tourism with education and experiences during tourist trips are indicated as scientific contributions.

The practical contribution – the created digital platform – is extremely interesting and useful. In a broader aspect, a model is proposed for the development of new eco-programs with an educational purpose and an emphasis on experiences, with a corresponding digital application.

It should be pointed out that the ecological tourism programs themselves proposed by the new digital platform have been developed after a thorough study of the offer of leading Bulgarian tour operators specializing in ecological travel, some of them being completely new, not yet offered on the tourist market in Bulgaria, e.g. in the field of floral tourism, which are an example of innovation in ecological travel. The adaptation and development of the already existing tours is expressed in placing an emphasis on the generation of added value of the trip such as experiences, education, experience, entertainment, aesthetic enjoyment of the natural landscape, etc. In this sense, another practical-applied contribution of the dissertation work can be derived - creation of a new type of eco-travel programs with a corresponding digital application.

In general, the dissertation work shows that its author has in-depth theoretical knowledge of the relevant specialty and abilities for independent scientific research. 10 summarized conclusions have been formulated for the individual research directions of the dissertation work, and specific guidelines for their improvement have been indicated.

The presented research shows that the previously set goals and tasks in the dissertation have been implemented and achieved both in theory and in applied terms. The formulated scientific theses and 5 working hypotheses have been proven by the author, PhD student Adelina Stoyanova, in a categorical and unequivocal way.

Beyond any doubt is the high degree of personal involvement of the dissertation's author in the contributions, which deserves a very high rating.

This dissertation gives a new, modern perspective for the development of ecological tourism with an educational element in the context of the experience industry, gives a new insight into the understanding and practice of ecological tourism in Bulgaria, which will contribute to the protection of the natural resources of our country.

The abstract reflects sufficiently fully and in detail the content of the dissertation work and is fully consistent with its main points and contributions.

There are 8 publications on the dissertation work of doctoral student Adelina Stoyanova, and most of them (6 in number) are co-authored. Four of them are in CEEOL, EBSCO refereed publications. The rest are in non-refereed, but scientifically edited peer-reviewed publications. Half are reports at national and international scientific conferences. The publications of the doctoral student are quite enough and all of them are directly related to the topic of the dissertation work.

I do not know doctoral student Adelina Stoyanova well enough, but my general impressions of her are completely positive. She is a purposeful and hardworking young woman researcher who very successfully combines her education in the field of biology with the problems of sustainable ecological tourism both theoretically and in the specific conditions of Bulgaria (2 of the publications are regionally oriented).

Considering that as a defensible doctoral dissertation is considered one that shows a very good knowledge of the theory and scientific literature on the subject, the ability to use different research methods, the ability of the doctoral student to make independent studies, analyzes and conclusions, I believe that the dissertation presented by Adelina Stoyanova significantly exceeds these requirements and the procedure for its defence can be initiated.

I have no critical notes. My recommendations to Adelina Stoyanova are to continue her scientific research in this direction, paying attention to both theory and practice. In addition

to the national level, I suggest that she covers the issues at the regional, local, and why not at the international level. To focus on larger studies and the writing of textbooks, studies and monographs.

Based on the above, I express my fully positive assessment of the presented dissertation work. I believe that there is a completed independent scientific study with significant theoretical, scientific and practical-applied contributions. The author has shown in-depth knowledge of theory and methodology in the field chosen by her, there is a completed empirical study, mastery of the main processing and analysis methods of primary and secondary information is proven. Taking into account all this, I propose to the respected members of the scientific jury to vote **positively** for awarding **Adelina Savova Stoyanova** the educational and scientific degree "doctor" in professional field 3.9. Tourism.

17.10.2023
Sofia

Signature:
(Prof. DrSci Maria Vodenska)