

ORGANIC FARMING AND ECOTOURISM - HOW SERIOUS  
ARE CROATIA'S INTENTIONS?

**EKOLOŠKA POLJOPRIVREDA I EKOTURIZAM - KOLIKO  
SU OZBILJNE NAMJERE HRVATSKE?**

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this paper is to demonstrate the links between organic farming and ecotourism, and their benefits to the tourism industry. It opens by describing Croatia as a destination for environmentally and socially responsible travellers who tend to consume organic food and other environmentally-friendly products. The paper then focuses on the FAO's view of ecotourism as an opportunity for farmers/foresters to generate additional income. It then covers agrotourism, pointing to the symbiotic relationship between tourism and agriculture as a key element of responsible tourism. It explains the terms agro-ecotourism and eco-organic tourism.

Two countries facing rising economic prosperity are analyzed from the point of view of ecotourism and organic agriculture – China and India. Experts cite tourism as a leading cause of environmental degradation in these countries. But ecotourism has the potential to benefit both the economy and the environment. A study from Taiwan suggests that the links between organic agriculture and agro-ecotourism are capable of maximizing the economic benefits of organic agriculture.

Another article, dealing with the Himalayan areas of India, is also considered. Despite the area's world-renowned scenery and wilderness, tourism in these areas "remains a highly seasonal activity, served by a poor infrastructure and exhibiting unsustainable practices". Thus, in India organic farming and food production are expected to be services allied to ecotourism. Those, in turn, are expected to generate quality jobs and income.

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The paper then returns to Europe, illustrating several cases of successful cooperation between ecotourism and organic farming. It mentions certain organic farming practices which “benefit the environment while rewarding farmers: accommodation in buildings renovated/constructed according to ecological architecture; on-farm consumption or selling of organic foods and beverages; educational programmes and training (organic gardening, composting, wild herb collection and drying, traditional food and beverage production), and raising guests’ awareness of rational use of natural resources” (FAO). It mentions the Italian Association for Organic Agriculture established in 1998, and German Demeter Travel as the first agency that pursues the holistic goal of an organic farming association. The importance of eco-labels as vital marketing instruments for agro-ecotourism is underlined. The paper then provides an overview of the best-known forms of certification, as well as the regulatory mechanism developed by the BIO-Hotels Association from Germany, Austria, and Switzerland, established in 2001. The paper concludes with the open question of how serious Croatia is in pursuing its declared aim of being an ecotourist destination.

Key words: organic farming, agro-ecotourism, eco-organic tourism, responsible travellers.

## SAŽETAK

Cilj ovog rada je prikazati poveznice između ekološke poljoprivrede i ekološkog turizma, kao i koristi koje oni donose turizmu općenito. Razmatrane su mogućnosti plasmana ekoloških proizvoda u sklopu hrvatskog turizma. Hrvatska se opisuje kao odredište ekološki i društveno odgovornih putnika, koji nastoje konzumirati ekološku hranu i druge ekološke proizvode. Razmatran je i stav FAO-a o ekoturizmu kao mogućnosti dodatnog prihoda na gospodarstvu temeljenog na simbiozi između turizma i poljoprivrede. Pojašnjeni su termini agro-ekoturizam i ekoturizam, te su po pitanju ekoturizma i ekološke poljoprivrede analizirane dvije zemlje ekonomskog napretka – Kina i Indija.

Stručnjaci naglašavaju da je turizam vodeći uzročnik degradacije okoliša u tim zemljama. No ekoturizam ima mogućnost da bude od koristi i ekonomiji i ekologiji. Studija iz Taiwana ukazuje da veza između ekološke poljoprivrede i

ekoturizma može značajno uvećati ekonomsku korist. U Indiji se od ekološke poljoprivrede očekuje da bude u službi ekoturizma, a da joj ovaj za uzvrat osigurava kvalitetna radna mjesta i dohodak.

Razmatrano je i nekoliko slučajeva uspješne suradnje između ekoturizma i ekološke poljoprivrede u Europi: smještaj turista u zgradama obnovljenim po ekološkim principima, prehrana i prodaja ekološke hrane i pića na farmi, obrazovni programi i vježbe iz ekološkog vrtlarstva, kompostiranja, sakupljanja ljekovitog bilja, pripremanju tradicionalne hrane i pića, kao i razvoj pozornosti gostiju na racionalno korištenje prirodnih izvora. Talijansko udruženje ekološke poljoprivrede i njemačka udruga *Demeter Travel* prve su agencije s cjelovitim pristupom ovom pitanju. Naglašen je značaj ekološke markice i dat pregled najpoznatijih formi certificiranja proizvoda, posebno mehanizama koje su razvijeni u okviru Udruženja Bio-hotela iz Njemačke, Austrije i Švicarske. Na kraju postavlja se pitanje: Koliko je Hrvatska spremna poštivati vlastite deklaracije o ekoturističkim destinacijama?

Ključne riječi: ekološka poljoprivreda, agro-ekoturizam, osviješteni putnici-turisti.

The objective of this paper is to demonstrate the links between organic farming and ecotourism, and their benefits to the tourism industry in general. It particularly focuses on the possibilities of placement of organic products within the tourism branch in Croatia. Croatia often asserts that its unspoilt nature, healthy food and natural products are a main benefit for visitors. Let me quote Meler (2005.) professor at the Faculty of Economy, at Osijek:

"[...] positioning Croatia as a European ecotourism oasis, i.e., as an oasis of sound tourism based on healthy food, may indeed be one of the objectively most efficient alternatives for the development of Croatia's tourism in the foreseeable future [...]. Environmentally sound tourism and a tourist product that incorporates healthy, organic food would result in a contribution to the well-being of both the tourists on the one hand, and all those involved in creating such a product on the other hand."



Another – this time non-scientific – source in which organic food is mentioned in the context of tourism is a document drafted by the Croatian Ministry of Tourism back in 2003 called the Strategy for the Development of Croatian Tourism until 2010. The document lays great emphasis on organic farming. Still, the fact that ecotourism is mentioned not only in a sterile scientific context, at an international Symposium, but also – or even – in a government's paper made public several years ago does not necessary mean that now, five years after drafting the Strategy, this objective has actually been implemented. There are even not many indicators showing that it is on its way of being implemented by the year 2010, which the Strategy mentions as a deadline.

Then again, more and more often the results of various studies describe Croatia as a destination for environmentally and socially responsible travellers. Such travellers often tend to consume organic food and other environmentally-friendly products. So what prevents Croatia from being the ultimate unspoilt destination for ecologically responsible tourists?

Indeed, Croatia still is a "green" country. But can Croatia as a tourist destination offer responsible travellers really environmentally-friendly holidays? Before we take a glance at some of the destinations for responsible travel, let us go through some of the possible definitions of ecotourism, and its links with organic farming, in order to get a picture of what environmentally-friendly holidays should be like.

Whether we like it or not, Wikipedia gives the clearest and simplest definition of *ecotourism* as a form of tourism that appeals to ecologically

and socially conscious individuals.<sup>[1]</sup> Generally speaking, ecotourism focuses on volunteering, personal growth, and learning new ways to live on the planet; typically involving travel to destinations where flora, fauna, and cultural heritage are the primary attractions. So, at this point, Croatia definitely has all the necessary prerequisites.<sup>[2]</sup>

Responsible ecotourism includes programs that minimize the negative impacts of conventional tourism on the environment, and enhance the cultural integrity of local people. Therefore, in addition to evaluating environmental and cultural factors, an integral part of ecotourism is in the promotion of recycling, energy efficiency, water conservation, and creation of economic opportunities for the local communities.

If we concentrate on the definition given by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) in a research conducted back in 2004, we will immediately get to the link between ecotourism and organic farming.

The FAO views *ecotourism* as an opportunity for farmers and/or foresters to generate additional income, and at the same time as one of the most effective ways of preserving biodiversity. FAO distinguishes ecotourism from *agrotourism* (i.e. holidays on farmland), pointing to the symbiotic relationship between tourism and agriculture as a key element of an environmentally and socially responsible tourism.

FAO also mentions the term *agro-ecotourism* as a combination of nature-based ecotourism and farm-based agrotourism. It sees the most important resource for tourism development in the rural landscape, which usually is a combination of wild and agro-ecosystems. It points at examples from the Alpine Region (e.g. in Carinthia, Austria) that show that agriculture maintained an ecological value much more attractive to tourists than areas where agriculture activities were extremely reduced. The FAO then moves on to tropical countries

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<sup>1</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ecotourism>

<sup>2</sup> It is possible to volunteer e.g. in Caput insulae, the griffon vulture protection centre on the island of Cres. Or in the dolphin protection centre in Veli Lošinj. On Iž there is an orphanage held by a Swiss lady where young people come and volunteer taking care of the children. Or there is a British lady on the island of Brač offering lodging and vegetarian food in exchange for helping her on her organic farm.

that harbour extraordinary biodiversity as having an untapped potential for generating tourism business around biodiversity-rich farms.<sup>[3]</sup>

As another relevant term, the FAO report uses the term *e c o - o r g a n i c t o u r i s m* for agro-ecotourism evolving around an organic farm. As stressed in the report, conversion to organic management in agricultural areas and the development of connected activities such as tourism are increasing. The report points out that organically-managed farms increase the motivation for tourists' visits. It asserts that the expectations of new tourists have enhanced the quality of the supply such as diversified farm landscape, environmentally-sound farm-house architecture and local/typical gastronomy.

The best ecotourism project is certainly one that includes the local community, preserves the local environment, aspires towards local ownership, showcases innovative environmental practices, and – last but not least – sources food and supplies from the local area.

Let us now skip from theory to some practical examples of two countries facing rising economic prosperity and observe them from the point of view of ecotourism and organic agriculture. These two countries are China and India. Experts cite tourism as a leading cause of environmental degradation in these countries. But ecotourism has the potential to benefit both the economy and the environment.

Organic agriculture is regarded as one important approach to agriculture and food production that is environmentally sustainable and can generate several positive impacts to rural society in China. However, organic agriculture development is still limited e.g. in Taiwan and the major reason is lack of economic incentives to farmers. Hence, linking organic agriculture with agro-ecotourism is proposed in a recently conducted study (Nae-Wen Kuo et al., 2006.) to maximize the economic benefit of organic agriculture. The study results claim that the total annual revenue from eco-organic tourism in the explored region would be about 20 times that of the rice production in the study area.<sup>[4]</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> As an example the FAO states shade cacao and coffee farms as having a higher biodiversity than forest habitats, enabling families to receive money for visitors access to their land for bird-watching or for being actively involved in the agro-ecotour.

<sup>4</sup> <http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayAbstract?fromPage=online>

Thanks to efforts by both the private and public sectors, ecotourism – travelling in a natural environment taking into account conservation to ensure sustainable development, as defined by the White Paper on Ecotourism published in 2002 by Taiwan's government – is gradually gaining popularity.<sup>[5]</sup>

Alike in China, in India – probably one of world's most popular ecological tourism destinations – there are still some areas where, despite their world-renowned scenery and wilderness, tourism remains a highly seasonal activity, served by a poor infrastructure and exhibiting unsustainable practices. Thus, in India organic farming and food production are expected to be services allied to ecotourism. Those, in turn, are expected to generate quality jobs and income (Herro, 2007.).

Let us return to Europe and illustrate several cases of successful co-operation between ecotourism and organic farming, in order to show that ecotourism is possible in developed industrial countries as well. What is more, let us show some examples of best practice from Croatia's neighbouring countries, Italy and Austria. In Europe one of the key associations that proved to be successful in dealing with tourism and organic products is certainly the Italian Association for Organic Agriculture (AIAB), established in 1998. In the same year, AIAB developed a national programme on sustainable tourism, based on the concept of eco-organic holiday farms. The main objective is to convert rural tourism activities to environmentally-friendly tourism through the involvement of organic farmers. While organic farms that undertake agrotourism or restaurant/catering activities are the main targets for such conversion, particular attention is given to organic farms operating within or near protected areas. Adherence to eco-organic holiday farms includes basic compulsory requirements and optional requirements, including organic agriculture, landscape management and valorisation of local culture and products. Farms are inspected and granted a number of daisies on the label, from 1 to 5. The number of optional requirements fulfilled determines the farm classification: five daisies indicate adherence to all requirements. This system of classification indicates to tourists the level of commitment to the quality of the environment and of agrotourism services. In 2003, the AIAB directory included 143 eco-organic holiday farms but many more are being assessed for inclusion.

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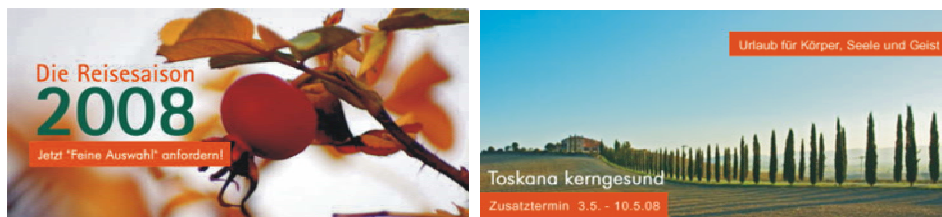
<sup>5</sup> <http://taiwanreview.nat.gov.tw/ct.asp?xItem=24245&CtNode=119>

Several Italian Regions (e.g. Tuscany, Emilia-Romagna, Lazio) have adopted organic agriculture as a best agricultural practice in parks and protected areas in order to support tourism activities: financial support is granted to convert to organic management, information desks are established for farmers within parks and demonstration activities are undertaken. In order to monitor implementation (and assist conflict resolution between agriculturalists and environmentalists), the Italian Association for Organic Agriculture (AIAB), the Italian Federation of Protected Areas (Federparchi) and the Environment Protection Association (Legambiente) have established in 2003 a virtual "Parks Observatory" in order to collect experiences and answer questions on how organic agriculture is managed in protected areas (El-Hage Scialabba and Williamson, 2004.). Another successful project is the biohotel chain – an association of hotels from Austria, Germany and Switzerland regulating the quality of food for their members. BIO-Hotels were founded in 2001 lead by the opinion that the rules applied by organic farmers and organic processors should also be possible in their hotels. So in collaboration with the state organic control bodies they developed a regulatory mechanism for BIO-Hotels. A hotel can be a member of the association only if it passes the bio-controls by Austria Bio Garantie, ABCert and Bio Inspecta.



Worth mentioning is also the German Demeter Travel <http://www.demeter-reisen.de/> as the first tourist agency to offer biodynamically produced foods combined with interesting ways of spending one's free time – hiking, visits to facilities with bio-dynamic backgrounds, family holidays, holidays for grandparents with grandchildren – rather simple, well-thought things, and always combined with Demeter products. A key prerequisite for providers of facilities to join Demeter-Reisen is the supply of a certain percentage of Demeter certified products for daily meals. In Germany it is 50%, in countries where one can easily find and buy Demeter products it is 30%, and in other countries it is 10%. This is certainly an excellent way of promoting and fostering biodynamic farming.





As the FAO study underlines, a crucial marketing instrument for agro-ecotourism are ecolabels. One of the reasons for this is the fact that price premiums encourage farmers' commitment to the conservation and maintenance of biodiversity – once they paid for the ecolabel, presumably the farmers will want to keep it. From the customer's point of view certainly another significant reason is the fact that ecolabels surely make the purchasing decision much easier for the buyer. The most well-known forms of certification include organic farming operations, organic and specialty foods (i.e. geographical denomination of origin) and forest stewardship products. Organic certification of farmhouse structure and facilities is less known but where implemented (e.g. Austria, Italy), it attracts more environmentally-conscious tourists. Ecolabels in our view are crucial in preventing ecotourism from making the negative forecasts coming from biologists working on the protection of biodiversity come true. Critics claim that opening up new biodiversity-rich areas for so-called tourism-cum-conservation projects only adds to the multi-dimensional impacts of mass tourism. In addition, opponents of ecotourism warn countries embarking on strategies to transform their last “unspoilt” territories into tourism attractions risk that their remaining patches of natural forests will be sacrificed for commercial purposes; marine, coastal and watershed areas get exposed and polluted; and already depleting biological resources further threatened (Pleumarom, 2000.). As any theory that is positive and idealistic at its core, ecotourism also runs the risk of turning into its opposite due to lack of control mechanisms.



Back to Croatia, let us at this point draw your attention to the 2008 Environmental Performance Index (EPI) that ranks 149 countries on 25

indicators tracked across six established policy categories: Environmental Health, Air Pollution, Water Resources, Biodiversity and Habitat, Productive Natural Resources, and Climate Change Change. The EPI identifies broadly-accepted targets for environmental performance and measures how close each country comes to these goals. Croatia ranked 20<sup>th</sup> out of 149 – which is an excellent score!



In the case of Croatia, it would be advisable to turn the existing mass tourism regions into real ecotourism oases by offering visitors certified organic food and beverages, soaps, shampoos and shower-gels, by using ecological products for washing up (linen, towels, dishes).

We hope that events such as this conference and the subsequent health food show will contribute to Croatia becoming "seriously green" now. Thank you very much.

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**A list of organizations and businesses providing ecological tourism and/or organic food supply services:** European Centre for Ecological and Agricultural Tourism, the leading European organisation in the field of small-scale sustainable tourism with a special attention to rural areas and organic farming; a network of over 1300 small-scale accommodations and tourist services all over Europe; promotes responsible travel which brings every year almost 500.000 overnights in rural areas for benefit of local economies in 20 European countries.

<http://www.eceat.org/>

<http://ecoclub.com/lodges.html>

[http://www.basicbio.de/basicbio/3\\_basic\\_news/demeterreisen.html](http://www.basicbio.de/basicbio/3_basic_news/demeterreisen.html)

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