

# **MASTER THESIS**

THE SUSTAINABILITY OF WILDLIFE TOURISM IN ROMANIA

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# THE SUSTAINABILITY OF WILDLIFE TOURISM IN ROMANIA

## THE CASE OF LARGE CARNIVORES

## **MASTER THESIS**

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## **Abstract**

This paper sets out to explore how sustainable is wildlife tourism (WT) based on large carnivores in Romania, focusing on commercial non-consumptive wildlife experiences in the wild in an effort to understand whether, in this case, WT is part of the conservation solution or is just another threat for the well-being of the observed species. Choosing the three large carnivores (bears, wolves, lynx) seems to be a great chance to analyze the complex relation between tourism and wildlife as these iconic and protected species possess an important marketing potential tour operators appear eager to develop, but moreover because they survive in viable numbers in very few areas of Europe, Romania being one of them. In the case of this country, the sustainability of wildlife tourism is even more stringent as the survival of these species is menaced by a general unsustainable economic development, WT having an ambivalent potential of further damaging or supporting their protection.

Addressing this subject, the author employed qualitative research methods in order to collect detailed data needed to understand how this type of tourism meets various sustainability dimensions that, in the absence of a specific theoretical framework, were considered departing from the three pillars of environmental, socio-cultural and economic sustainability, backed up by further specific or general elements related to tourism sustainability. Two locations at the opposite ends of wildlife tourism development were included in order to get a broader perspective and two research methods were used to elicit as much relevant information as possible on whether and how the sustainability dimensions are integrated.

The results indicate an wildlife tourism industry still in its infancy, yet with great potential strengthened by the important wildlife resources of the country, but also by a growing market demand for this type of products. Sustainability does not appear however to be clearly articulated as WT based on large carnivores develops ad-hoc, without coordinated and participatory planning of all stakeholders, in the absence of what seem to be short-sighted authorities and uninformed local communities, without proper regulations that would balance the environmental sustainability and hence the wildlife's long-term interest with the economic, potentially short-term thinking of the industry. Further studies are needed to explore what seems to be the complicated relation between biodiversity and tourism.

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## 1. Introduction

It is often stated that tourism is the fastest growing industry in the world, the number of people traveling in the present reaching higher levels than ever before. While complex factors influence its growth and shape its future, the development of the tourism industry can also be attributed to its capacity of anticipating, creating and nurturing the needs of its consumers, many of them in search of what they no longer possess in their daily existence. This tendency is also visible in the expansion of nature based attractions all over the world and of some specific forms such as wildlife tourism (WT) that is rapidly growing into a popular and very distinct type of tourism given its unique capacity of showing tourists through first-hand experiences how nature looked like before humans transformed it.

However, what differentiates furthermore WT from other forms of tourism is its complex relationship between the wildlife conservation promise it advances and the increasing pressure it adds to an already diminishing and, in some cases, endangered wildlife resource. As a result, wildlife tourism walks a very thin line between degrading and conserving the sensitive resource it depends upon, its sustainability appearing to be a vital necessity for its commercial long-term viability, but moreover for the well-being of the environmental resource. The ambivalent prospects this type of tourism creates intrigued the author who decided to further explore if and how WT integrates sustainability in the case study of one European country, Romania.

Therefore, this paper's main research aim is to explore *how sustainable is wildlife tourism based on large carnivores in Romania*<sup>1</sup>, focusing on commercial non-consumptive WT activities in the wild.

This research choice is motivated by the fact that Romania possesses the most important potential for developing WT based on large carnivores<sup>2</sup>, as on its territory are found the largest populations of these iconic wildlife species in Europe no longer living in most countries of the continent. From this perspective, but also considering that this wildlife resource faces some very serious national threats including an increased loss of habitat, discussing the sustainability of WT appears to be a relevant topic as given its ambivalence, wildlife tourism development can both protect or further damage the existence of these species. The relevancy of this topic is further strengthened by the fact that no other similar research has been done on the sustainability of WT in Romania. The author hopes her work

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> That do not imply the intentional killing or hurting of the wildlife)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Around 40% of all European brown bears, 30% of wolves, and 25-30% of lynx, according to http://www.cbd.int/countries/profile/default.shtml?country=ro#status

can bring a contribution both to the academic research of WT sustainability, but also to the wildlife tourism industry in Romania.

In addressing this research question, the author will focus on two very different locations in term of WT development, considering this would allow her to get a clear view of wildlife tourism development in Romania.

The paper will further proceed with a literature review chapter that will introduce the main features of wildlife tourism research and its most important aspects with a focus on those elements that are needed for the discussion of its sustainability. This second chapter will be followed by the methodological part that will address and motivate the research choices the author considered appropriate for this case, including presentations of the studied locations. In the fourth chapter, the collected data will be analyzed using the methods presented in the previous part and discussed in the context of the relevant theoretical directions. Finally, the last chapter will advance the conclusions of this research and will address new directions of study in regards to the sustainability of wildlife tourism in the present case.

## 2. Literature review

This chapter outlines the most important aspects of wildlife tourism research in terms of their relevance for the topic of this paper, the sustainability of non-consumptive large carnivores tourism in Romania. It departs from a more general perspective necessary for the clear understanding of this type of tourism and then gradually progresses to some of its core elements, necessary for the discussion of its potential sustainability. This chapter is based on a thorough interdisciplinary literature review, including academic journals from the tourism and travel field, journals focusing on wildlife aspects, reports from international bodies like UNEP and publications from tourism research centers like the Cooperative Research Center for Sustainable Tourism from Australia. Given the scarce academic resources on WT regarding the large carnivores that are the focus of this paper, the author decided to use those WT studies that appeared relevant and applicable to this topic.

## 2.1 Introducing wildlife tourism

It is argued that wildlife tourism (WT) defined as "tourism based on encounters with non-domesticated (non-human) animals" (Higginbottom, 2004:2) is becoming a recognized component of the tourism industry given its rapid growth and the important financial contribution it brings to some destinations, especially in the developing world (Tremblay, 2001, Newsome et al. 2005; UNEP, 2006; Roe et al., 1997; Reynolds and Braithwaite, 2001). This type of tourism appears to attract a growing interest from governments, the tourism industry and researchers (Higginbottom, 2004) and of course the attention of an

increasing group of potential customers of the post-industrialized world for whom: "experiences in nature and with wildlife have become a sentimental luxury" (Vining, 2003 in Curtin, 2008:454).

While the fact that wildlife tourism is rapidly growing appears to be a consensus among researchers of the field, what differs, however, is the extent to which they assume this happens (Higginbottom, 2004; UNEP, 2006; Roe et al., 1997). Specifically related to wildlife watching activities<sup>3</sup>, some studies even indicate a growing rate at least equal or higher, in some cases, than the general rate of international tourism given the long-term interest of people in wildlife interaction, the rising numbers of older tourists and the desire to find new experiences through tourism (UNEP, 2006).

Generally, the growth supposition is motivated by the significant increase of tour operators who offer specific wildlife tours or include wildlife elements as additional options to their products (UNEP, 2006), by the data available on some specific forms like whale watching or bird watching (Higginbottom, 2004) or by using statistics, prior to 2000, that indicate that wildlife tourism accounted for 20-40% of all international tourism (Roe at el, 1997) or that is growing at 10% per year (Curtin, 2010). These over enthusiastic figures have to be, however, regarded with precaution as their credibility is biased by several aspects such as the generalization of numbers from specific activities or locations, the difficulty to separate wildlife tourism growth from a general increase in general tourism of the destination region and the use of actual activity participation to measure demand. This last element can lead to unrealistic figures given the fact that not all wildlife tourists are motivated by wildlife and that it does not take into consideration those potential tourists who would be interested in participating in a WT experience but do not achieve this due to reasons that can vary from financial aspects, distance, time or insufficient information (Moscardo et al, 2001; Moscardo and Saltzer, 2004).

The author did not find any specific numbers on the extent of growth related to large carnivores tourism in Europe. In the Romanian case, only one study (Bouros, 2012) mentions the rapid growth of wildlife tourism, both mammals and birds, statement motivated only by the presence of over 30 tour operators active in this field. It appears therefore useful to state that at this point the author has no previous suppositions on the growth of this specific form of tourism in Romania.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Non-consumptive forms of WT

Several factors contribute to the popularity of wildlife tourism, including the interest of wildlife managers and wildlife NGOs in creating conservation benefits through this type of tourism, the use of wild animals for branding nature-tourism destinations and tourists' preference for wildlife animals in comparison to other elements of the natural world (Higginbottom, 2004). In addition, its demand is fueled by a general raising environmental awareness, encouraged by an increase in faster and cheaper ways of transportation to new WT destinations and is backed-up by popular wildlife media documentaries (MacLellan, 1999).

The development of wildlife tourism should also be related to the growing interest of tourism markets in other alternative types of tourism as WT overlaps nature-based tourism, adventure travel and specifically ecotourism given its aspiration to bring conservation benefits through education (UNEP, 2006; Reynolds and Braithwaite, 2001; MacLellan, 1999). As a result, wildlife tourism is assigned many of the expectations and beneficial outcomes of ecotourism in order to justify its development in what inherently are fragile and sensitive environment with an increased vulnerability in face of human impact. Nonetheless, not all wildlife tourism products are part of the alternative types and in such a dynamic industry, wildlife tourism experiences are often integrated in mass tourism products (Newsome et al., 2005).

Wildlife tourism appears therefore to be a complex issue that transcends the boundaries of the tourism industry and extends to aspects of environmental management that figure high in the sustainability global debates. In this context, WT looks capable of reconnecting the industry with governmental and NGO interests in an exercise that could lead to better management and protection of wildlife and its habitat. In the end, wildlife tourism brings to the spotlight the wildlife-human relations and raises questions on how we as humans have accepted, destroyed or protected this unique and finite natural resource.

#### 2.1.1 Wildlife tourism research

As most tourism topics, wildlife tourism research requires an interdisciplinary approach. Given the fact that wild animals are the focus of this type of tourism and that their observation is also undertook in their natural habitats, it appears highly necessary to integrate, besides the specific tourism literature, research from the fields of biology, wildlife and environmental management or conservation. Moreover to understand and enhance its potential benefits and better comprehend visitors' connection with wildlife, theories from social sciences like psychology appear as a necessary research instrument.

Initial research related to this field began in the early 70s with wildlife managers concentrating on behavioral features of sport hunters and fishermen and researchers

focusing on the psychological traits of outdoor recreation. Beginning with the 80's, more researchers started to focus on the non-consumptive forms of WT (Duffus and Dearden, 1990). According to Reynolds and Braithwaite (2001), the traditional research appears to have been focused on the effects of the experience on the tourist, the effects on the natural environment (Roe et al., 1997; Newsome et al., 2005), the carrying capacity of the visited site, followed by a more recent approach of studying participants (Martin, 1997; Cole and Scott, 1999; Lemelin et al., 2008), satisfaction management and impacts and trade-off analysis. In the last years, WT research includes studies of its economics (Davis et al., 2001; Tisdell and Wilson, 2004), its stakeholders (Burns and Sofield, 2001; Newsome et al., 2005), its conservation potential (Ballantyne et al., 2011; Higginbottom and Tribe, 2004; Hughes et al., 2013) and sustainability aspects (STCRSC, 2008; Higham and Carr, 2003; Higham and Bejder, 2008; MacLellan, 2009).

Investigating the potential biological impacts of WT on more animal species appears to be one of the most important themes for future research (Carr, 2009, Newsome et al. 2005, Reynolds and Braithwaite, 2001; Higginbottom, 2004) together with more studies on the characteristics of the WT market (Moscardo and Saltzer, 2004). Research is also needed to understand stakeholders' engagement with different types of WT development (Newsome et al., 2005; Reynolds and Braithwaite, 2001), the economic implications for tourism and conservation, the role of interpretation in managing wildlife tourists' satisfaction and WT impact on society and education (Reynolds and Braithwaite, 2001). Determining the sustainability of wildlife tourism appears as a critical demand for future research taking into consideration the sensitivity of its core resource (Reynolds and Braithwaite, 2001; Higginbottom, 2004). There also appears to be a clear need to integrate animal rights in wildlife tourism related aspects (Carr, 2009).

Although vast, the existing research on WT has been critiqued for being too descriptive and anecdotal, for focusing on extensively studying wildlife tourism organized in legally protected areas despite the fact that WT also takes place outside protected areas or for providing insufficient quantitative data to allow a thorough understanding of its environmental impacts (Roe et al. 1997). Nevertheless, wildlife tourism appears to enjoy extensive research interest and as all other types of nature-based tourism its research has significant importance in guiding proper decisions making both at the level of the industry, but especially at the level of natural area managers who are responsible for the conservation of wildlife and its habitat.

### 2.1.2 Consumptive versus non-consumptive WT

While wildlife tourism experiences can take place in a variety of settings and under a variety of forms, and can focus on plants and animals, vertebrates and invertebrates, marine or terrestrial species, it is important to introduce at this early stage the differentiation between consumptive and non-consumptive WT given the focus of the current research on the second case. Using activity as a main instrument, we can state that the consumptive type focuses on activities that lead to the capturing or killing of the animal like recreational hunting or fishing while the second one is based on the experience of seeing the wildlife through observation, photography or feeding (Newsome et al., 2005).

The division between consumptive and non-consumptive goes, however, to further dimensions than the purpose of the encounter. Some authors advance economic arguments regarding the long-term conservation benefits of wildlife watching (Wilson and Tisdell, 2001) while others suggest positioning both cases on a continuum and accepting some overlaps between them given that not all hunts succeed in killing the targeted animal and non-consumptive activities often include a form of consumption such as environmental damage of the site or use of fossil fuels (Newsome et al. 2005).

Other researchers appear even more critical in regard to this division arguing that the inaccurate implications associated with the consumptive use seen as more commercial and, in opposition, the low impact and noble motivations of the non-consumptive side can lead to problematic tourism planning and management. Furthermore, another critique of this division is that both hunting and observation involve variable experiential intensities and that the current differentiation overlooks the complexity or variety levels of the experience, little evidence existing to support the greater empathy or learning benefits assigned to the non-consumptive side whose multiple damaging effects may in fact be more detrimental to wild ecosystems than hunting activities given it involves more participants with less willingness to pay (Tremblay, 2001).

While the scope of this paper is not to debate over the appropriateness of this division, the author considered useful including these critiques in order to get a more comprehensive perspective on the many nuances of this dichotomy. Nevertheless, the author would like to state that her understanding and use of the non-consumptive term is at this point based only on the purpose of the tourist encounter that does not intend to kill the animal observed. No further implications, either positive or negative, are assumed in this research. Given the focus of this research, from this point forward the author will concentrate only on non-consumptive WT that will be referred to as wildlife tourism, in order to ease the reading and comprehension of the text.

#### 2.1.3 Wildlife encounters in tourism

Wildlife tourism encounters in the contemporary world can take place in a variety of settings and environments. However, in Western societies the first encounter is usually virtual, intermediated by wildlife and nature documentaries, believed to have an essential role in creating the current view of the developed world on wildlife and offering potentially "the only encounter with wildlife" for many of the so called urban dwellers (Newsome et al., 2005:17). Outside the virtual world, wildlife encounters lie at the core of the wildlife tourism experience that can be understood as the result of the interaction between the wildlife and its habitat, the visitor, the operator, the host community, the economy and any existing management in place (STCRSC, 2008).

Hence, in the real world, wildlife tourism experiences can happen under a variety of forms. These experiences can be unguided encounters with wildlife in natural areas without the participation of a commercial operator, can be designed as specialized wildlife tours (bear watching), can take place at locations rich in wildlife like breeding sites or migratory routes, can be an element of a more general nature-based tour, can be part of research or education tours offered by conservation NGOs, can be incidental in sightseeing tours or they can happen at tourism facilities with surrounding wildlife (Valentine and Birtles, 2004). Moreover, wildlife encounters can take place in *captive* settings, completely built by humans (zoos, aquariums), in *semi-captive settings*, partially human constructed (wildlife parks, rehabilitation centers) and in the *wild*, the animals' natural environment like national parks, breeding sites, feeding/drinking sites (Newsome et al., 2005), that is also the case of this present research on Romania's large carnivores.

Encountering free ranging wildlife in its own habitat appears to be a key factor of a successful wildlife experience (Moscardo and Saltzer, 2004; Sinha, 2001). This encounter can include activities like viewing, photographing or feeding depending on the observed species. Six factors are associated with a successful WT experience: authenticity related to how natural the animal behaves and its environment, uniqueness connected with having a special experience, intensity depending of the level of excitement created by the experience, duration referring to the length of the encounter and, furthermore, by species popularity and species status (Reynolds and Braithwaite, 2001). These two factors will be further addressed in more detail as they appear relevant for the topic of research.

Although believed that interpretation and good guiding can transform any wildlife species in a successful tourism product (UNEP, 2006) several studies show that mammals and birds enjoy a higher popularity than reptiles or invertebrates (Newsome et al., 2005; Valentine and Birtles, 2004; Moscardo and Saltzer, 2004), with some notable exceptions like the Galapagos iguanas. Various physical and behavioral characteristics of wildlife appear to shape tourists' demand, including dimensions, larger animals being preferred to smaller ones, color, grace and even fluffiness, level of perceived intelligence and human-like features such as the ability to form attachment (Tremblay 2002; Newsome et al., 2005).

There also appears to be a great interest in rare or unique animals, in predators like the big cats or aggressive herbivores although not all animals perceived as being dangerous are usually liked, and in iconic species with a powerful cultural association (Moscardo and Saltzer, 2004; Newsome et al, 2005; Reynolds and Braithwaite, 2001). Tourists' preference for certain species can also be understood using the societal ladder of worth, basically an hierarchical scale of value with human at its top and animals positioned higher or lower based on their human resemblance (Moscardo et al., 2001). Although this model explains people's interest in primates and other animals that can be easily anthropomorphized like pets, penguins, pandas, it fails to explain the high interest for the most popular species in terms of wildlife tourists' numbers, birds.

The large carnivores studied in this paper: the Brown Bear, the Wolf and the Lynx appear to meet the criteria of demand for large, rare and iconic species. Hunted until extinction in most parts of Western Europe, these species survive today only in those areas that offers extensive wilderness habitats, a true rarity in an urbanized continent like Europe. The attractiveness of these species could be therefore directly linked to their association with wilderness areas, the Romanian Carpathians being in fact one of their most favorable and last remaining habitats.

#### 2.1.4. Sustainability claims

As other alternative types of tourism, WT is also advocated of being a sustainable form of tourism development, capable of bringing long-term economic benefits, community participation and conservation support for wildlife, especially in less developed areas (MacLellan, 1999). Nonetheless, this essential aspect has not received extensive research attention to date, fact that has serious implications for the development of WT operations that deliver benefits for conservation and local communities (UNEP, 2006; Roe et al., 1997).

However, it is argued that wildlife tourism:

"can only be sustainable if it contributes to the conservation and survival of the watched species and their habitats, provides benefits for local communities and community development, offers good quality tourism in line with market expectations, and is commercially viable" (UNEP, 2006: 61).

To better understand how sustainable tourism can be applied into WT, the author will briefly address the main aspects of the sustainability concept defined as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their own needs" (UN, 1987:37). Achieving this goal is generally understood through the pillars of the Triple Bottom Line referring to environmental quality, social justice and economics prosperity. Moreover, it is argued that reaching sustainability requires integration between the three factors and the identification of synergies that can provide mutually reinforcing benefits (Newsome et al., 2005).

Thus, sustainable tourism should "make optimal use of environmental resources" preserving the ecological balance and conserving biodiversity, should "respect the socio-cultural authenticity of host communities" and support their cultural heritage and traditions, and furthermore should "ensure viable, long-term economic operations, providing socioeconomic benefits to all stakeholders that are fairly distributed" (UNEP, 2006:11). Moreover, sustainable tourism depends on a participatory contribution of all its stakeholders, on a strong political will to make it functional, and on the industry offering quality experiences that enhance tourists' satisfaction and their education towards sustainability (UNEP, 2006).

Nevertheless, applying the concept of sustainability to tourism is by no means linear or homogeneous, one major issue being the way in which the concept is applied, often to the sustenance of the industry than of the resources that gives it its benefits. The lack of homogeneity in sustainable tourism approach and implementation can also be explained through the different cultural perceptions of those who apply it as sustainability is perceived to be a cultural concept (Newsome, 2005), with no absolute nature, definable only "in terms of the context, control and position of those who are defining it" (Mowforth and Munt, 2003). Moreover, it is argued that sustainability should be seen as a continuous process (UNEP, 2006) as no tourism attraction can ideally fulfill all the conditions of sustainability, ultimately a relative concept "to each other without contradiction, relative to the varying perceptions of those who use them, and relative to the values, ideological and moral, of those who apply and interpret them" (Mowforth and Munt, 2003:113).

Integrating the concept of sustainability into wildlife tourism appears therefore to be a complex task, highly dependent on the context of the wildlife attraction and on the interplay of its stakeholders. The various dimensions of sustainable wildlife tourism will be addressed in more detail in section 2.3 of this chapter while discussing the impacts of WT that ultimately, by their extent, indicate the sustainability of this type of tourism in a specific location.

#### 2.1.4.1 Wildlife tourism as a Common Pool Resource (CPR)

In direct connection with the sustainability dimension of WT, the author considers relevant including at this point the potential CPR characteristics of wildlife tourism, a concept developed extensively after Hardin's (1968) *The Tragedy of the Commons*. The CPR concept is based on two main criteria, *non-excludability* that refers to the difficulty or high costs of excluding other users, and *subtractability* that relates to the fact that one's experience is impacted by others activities as exploitation of the resource by one user reduces the resources available for others (Briassoulis, 2002). In tourism, natural and human created landscapes often face CPR problems that, in this case, translate into *overuse* as a consequence of the difficulty to limit the level of resource use by both locals and tourists, and into an *investment incentive problem* caused by the presence of free riders who profit without paying for resource maintenance or improvement (Healy, 1994). In this context, "CPR dilemmas in which people follow their own short-term interest produce outcomes that are not in anyone's long-term interest" (Ostrom, 1999 in Moore and Rodger, 2010:831).

Moreover, in destinations with unmanaged and intense CPR issues, achieving sustainability is a difficult task as the wellbeing of the host community is affected, the attractions lose competitiveness as the tourist resource degrades, social justice is not feasible because of its dependency on external groups that have no interest in the long-term viability of the location and tourist satisfaction drops. Furthermore as the tourism commons represent the tourism product the tragedy of the tourism commons becomes the tragedy of the tourism product (Briassoulis, 2002).

Wildlife tourism can be considered a CPR issue if the main criteria of non-excludability and subtractability apply. Therefore, when it is highly difficult to exclude users, be they locals, tourists or tour-operators, whose uncontrolled presence might lead to crowding and negative impacts on wildlife, and secondly, when WT is damaged by the *investment incentive problem* that translates in a lower level of investment than required to ensure sustainability. Wildlife tourism possesses additional CPR features such as the permeability of boundaries and the mobile character of wildlife that exposes the animals to the threat of being hunted outside the parks.

In this context, integrating sustainability depends on whether users cooperate and set rules regarding the limits of use, fund monitoring and implement punitive measures if users disrespect the rules (Rodger and Moore, 2010). The author considered relevant including the potential CPR problems of WT in the current research given her intention to explore whether large carnivores tourism in Romania is also affected by these CPR features and how this affects its potential sustainability.

#### 2.2. Wildlife tourism stakeholders

Wildlife tourism engages many types of stakeholders considered to be "any person or group that is involved in or may be affected by an activity" (UNEP, 2006:18). While each group has different interests, level of power or involvement, integrating all stakeholders in the planning process appears as a prerequisite for the success and hence, sustainability, of wildlife tourism although this might often prove too expansive or time-consuming (Newsome et al., 2005). The range of stakeholders in WT varies from local communities, public and private sector wildlife managers, conservation NGOs, national and local governments, tour operators, local operators, accommodation sector and tourists, each with its own motivations, views and responsibilities (UNEP, 2006). Although that usually nature is assumed to be represented by protected area managers or/and conservation NGOs (UNEP, 2006), approach also embraced in this paper, the author would like to highlight at this point her belief that in the context of WT, wildlife and the overall natural environment remains the fundamental stakeholder whose level of wellbeing determines all the other stakeholders' success or failure. As the interests of stakeholders who defend nature appear to be clearly connected with its conservation, four other main stakeholders whose interaction is seen as relevant for the topic of research will be next discussed.

#### 2.2.1. Tourists

Tourists are one of the building blocks of any tourism development. In the case of WT, their importance is heightened by the fact that their preferences, numbers and values towards wildlife and environment ultimately shape the tourist experience and its impacts, therefore impact its sustainability. Despite their importance and their constant growth, wildlife tourists appear to be a less researched topic in the field of WT (Moscardo and Saltzer, 2004; Valentine and Birtles, 2004; STRCSC, 2008; Ballantyne et al., 2009). This lack of information can raise significant issues in terms of making the correct estimates regarding their demand for both commercial operators and wildlife areas.

Several traits appear to differentiate the wildlife tourist from other tourists (Table 1) and some researchers consider that, similar to ecotourists, they have a biocentric orientation and intrinsic motivation, they desire to experience nature first hand and to positively impact

wildlife and environment (Newsome et al., 2005). However, "tourists cannot be considered a homogeneous population; even tourists that may primarily be motivated by the same stimulus, such as wildlife viewing" (Duffus and Dearden, 1990: 222). Moreover, they can have different views on wildlife depending on their education, interests, cultural background and even on the encountered species (Newsome et al., 2005) and may not be generally wildlife or nature sensitive (Lemelin et al., 2008). Segmenting the wildlife market appears therefore a necessary effort to better understand and design experiences with implications for the management of WT and its overall sustainability.

Study	Wildlife tourists were more likely:
Boxall and McFarlane, 1993	To be older
Christmas bird count, Canda	To have higher levels of educations
Pearce and Wilson, 1995	To stay longer; To travel further;
International tourists to New Zeeland	To spend more; To be younger;
	To have higher education levels and incomes; To
	be independent travellers
Moscardo, 2000	To stay longer in the regions
Tourists to the Whitsundays, Australia	To be independent travellers
Freedline and Faulkner, 2001	To be younger; To travel further; To stay longer;
International visitors to Australia	To be on a package tour
Moscardo et al., 2001	To be female; To be younger, independent,
Tourists to Tasmania, Australia	longer stay; To use internet for information

**Table 1.** Differences between wildlife tourism markets and other tourists (Source: Moscardo and Saltzer, 2004: 177)

One of the most used approaches to differentiate wildlife tourists is their level of specialization. First applied to non-consumptive forms of wildlife tourism by Duffus and Dearden (1990), this approach generally identifies two main opposing groups, the specialists and the generalists, each with its own different management requirements. This type of segmentation is backed-up by various researchers who also identify some intermediate groups between the two extremes. Generally, the specialists are seen as the explorers, better informed, less interested in facilities and more keen for interpretation, with a higher degree of environmental awareness, for which wildlife watching and love of nature might be an essential part of their life. At the opposite side, the generalists or the novices need more facilities and appear more interested in non-wildlife related aspects of the experience (Duffus and Dearden, 1990; Moscardo, 2000; Martin, 1997; Cole and Scott, 1999; Curtin, 2009; Lemelin et al., 2008).

The differentiation between two or three groups of wildlife tourists based on their interests, motivations and needs appears as a useful instrument in analyzing their potential impacts and satisfaction with the experience. Moreover, according to Duffus and Dearden (1990) it can indicate the level of tourist development of the wildlife destination that ultimately

influences its sustainability. Although wildlife tourists will not be interviewed in this research, the author will try to elicit as much relevant information as possible from other concerned stakeholders on their characteristics, interests and expectations towards the wildlife experience.

#### 2.2.2. The host community

This stakeholder group contains all the people who live in the nearby of the tourist attraction and who are involved and/or affected, directly or indirectly by WT activities (Burns and Sofield, 2011). The host community is an essential stakeholder for the sustainability of the wildlife tourism experience that also depends on hosts' satisfaction with the WT activity and the potential benefits and costs it brings (Burns and Sofield, 2001; Newsome et al., 2005; Higginbottom, 2004; Jurowski et al., 1997; UNEP, 2006; Roe et al., 1997). Despite this, the importance of the host community is not widely reflected in the existent wildlife tourism research (MacLellan 1999; Burns and Sofield, 2001).

Generally, hosts can be involved in tourism directly through employment, indirectly through redistributed compensations from tourism or have no sort of involvement. The intensity of their involvement depends on their level of education/skills, the extent of employment chances, their awareness of tourism benefits and interest in participating, their access to capital, information and power compared to other stakeholders, the number of tourists and their previous tourism experience. While hosts can participate in various forms and at different stages in the wildlife tourism development, some obstacles can make their access more difficult. These include poverty, language barriers, lack of capital and different interest groups inside the community (Burns and Sofield, 2001).

The involvement of host communities in the present large carnivores tourism study will understood on a context based analysis, taking into consideration the level of economic development and socio-cultural aspects of the locations, but also their traditional relation with the large carnivores populations from their nearby.

#### 2.2.3. Wildlife managers and tour operators

Wildlife managers and tour operators have different and often opposing interests in the development of WT. This opposition lies fundamentally in their distinct primary goals as the first group aims to conserve the wildlife, its habitat and the overall biodiversity of the area while the second group aims to develop and market wildlife into a tourism product that can generate profit. This tension is further stressed by their different perceptions on the gravity of ecological impacts on wildlife as, in the absence of relevant data, both groups often act on the basis of a precautionary principle, without clearly understanding each other's constraints. While wildlife managers use this approach to restrict some tourism activities, tour operators

employ it in making decisions on the commercial viability of the tourism experience (Reynolds and Braithwaite, 2001).

Furthermore, tour operators have a key role in delivering the protected area's conservation messages, in minimizing negative impacts on site and in using interpretation to foster appreciation and even attitude and behavioral changes (Armstrong and Weiler, 2010). They play therefore a crucial role in the sustainable management of the wildlife experience and their customer knowledge and direct relation with visitors should allow them to be included in the tourism planning and management process (Curtin, 2010). Nonetheless, the way tour operators behave in protected areas has not received a lot of attention until now and further research is needed (Armstrong and Weiler, 2010).

These two stakeholders appear strongly dependent on each other as wildlife managers need tourism revenue to fund wildlife management and tour operators need the expertise and approval of wildlife managers in developing this type of product. Moreover, their partnership is seen as a necessity in developing sustainable tourism in protected areas, their collaboration limiting the marketing/planning gaps that threaten sustainability (Powell and Ham, 2008; Jamal and Stronza, 2009). Their potential conflicted or collaborative relation will be also analyzed in the context of this large carnivores research as the dynamic of their partnership is seen as an important step in ensuring this activity is headed in a sustainable development direction.

## 2.3. Wildlife tourism impacts

The wildlife tourism experience can have positive, negative and neutral impacts on the economy, society and the environment, including the wildlife of the visited destination (Newsome et al., 2005) that can range from the noble goal of conservation to the tragic result of animal death. Despite the rising concern regarding the impacts of WT on its core resource, it is argued that its net effect is represented by the balance between any negative impacts and positive outcomes such as conservation (Higginbottom and Tribe, 2004). Both positive and negative impacts will be addressed next in direct relation with their effect on the sustainability of WT.

#### 2.3.1. Conservation dimension

According to UNEP (2006: 61), wildlife tourism is sustainable only if it "contributes to the conservation and survival of the watched species and their habitats". This aspiration is not singular to this form of tourism as even the larger nature-based tourism (NBT) appears to be a preferred choice of development in natural areas given the fact that it offers incentives for their protection compared to alternative activities with higher environmental impacts

(Higginbottom and Tribe, 2004; Powell and Ham, 2008; Lee and Moscardo, 2005; Beaumont, 2001). In this conservation aspiration context, WT also appears to be:

"more than travel to enjoy or appreciate wildlife, it also includes contributions to conservation and community projects in developing countries, and environmental education and awareness" (Kutay, 1993 in STCRSC, 2008:3).

This assumption is backed-up by various institutions and researchers who consider that the socio-economic incentives provided to the communities and the education of visitors will enhance the protection of wildlife and its habitat (Roe et al., 1997; Higginbottom and Tribe, 2004; Duffus and Dearden, 1990; Reynolds and Braithwaite, 2001; UNEP, 2006; WWF, 2000). However, these enthusiastic assumptions for both NBT and WT are not always supported by extensive research (Ballantyne and Packer, 2011) and some authors warn that maybe too much is expected (UNEP, 2006).

Wildlife tourism can contribute to the conservation of the wildlife resource through:

Direct wildlife management and supporting research. These types of activities happen most of the time at the site and can include activities like animal reintroduction and protection against poachers that can involve various stakeholders, including commercial operators or NGOs offering conservation holidays (Tribe and Higginbottom, 2004).

By providing income to fund conservation through the collection of entrance and license fees, taxes and donations (UNEP, 2006; Wilson and Tisdell, 2001; Ballantyne et al., 2011). However, with few exceptions like mountain gorilla tourism in east Africa or the Galapagos case, wildlife watching tourism does not manage to raise considerable revenue similar to consumptive activities like hunting (Tribe and Higginbottom, 2004).

By providing socio-economic incentives for operators and local communities to support conservation of wildlife given its well-being is essential for the existence of tourism (Tribe and Higginbottom, 2004; UNEP, 2006). This is assumed to be the major conservation benefit of nature-based tourism as "conservation is only as strong as its community support" (Buckley, 2003 in Reynolds and Braithwaite, 2001:32).

By educating visitors towards conservation by raising their awareness, increasing their knowledge and influencing their attitudes and even behaviors (Tribe and Higginbottom, 2004).

Although the conservation outcome is promoted as an essential positive outcome of WT and a fundamental aspect of its sustainability, its achievement depends also on the viability of the tourism operations, the management of visitor numbers, the resilience of the species and even the marketing and business plans of operators (UNEP, 2006). To be successful,

conservation should be encouraged both outside and inside the protected area, including people's needs and economic realities (STCRSC, 2008) and there should be an increased awareness of and support for conservation activities amongst all stakeholders (UNEP, 2006).

Moreover, this outcome is feasible if the revenues from wildlife tourism activities can cover the costs of tourism management, provide tangible benefits like employment for local communities and generate enough extra revenue to fund general conservation actions (UNEP, 2006). According to Tribe and Higginbottom (2004), the conservation potential deals with some serious challenges like the limited capacity of both visitors and operators to invest time and money into conservation, the inherent commercial thinking of most tour operators and the lack of research, especially on the role of interpretation and its effectiveness in terms of conservation outcomes.

The author considers the conservation potential of wildlife tourism for the large carnivores of Romania a highly important and most needed aspect of its potential sustainability given the fact that these species face numerous threats in this country, including poaching, habitat loss and a general lack of political support for their efficient protection. Hence, at this point the conservation aspect is one of the sustainability dimensions that will be included in the discussion of large carnivores tourism in Romania.

### 2.3.2. Negative environmental impacts

Developing tourism in a fragile environment and building the experience on the encounter with wildlife is bound to lead to adverse effects of various intensities given the sensitivity of this core resource and the inherent wild nature of animals. The WT actors can only attempt to maintain them to acceptable limits if they wish to reach sustainability and keep WT a viable alternative for natural areas use.

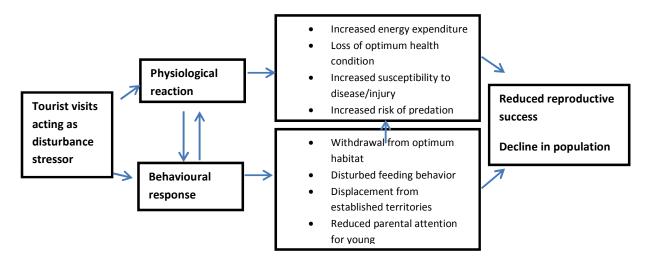
A variety of classifications exist regarding the negative impacts of WT on wildlife, a topic that receives much attention in the study of this topic. The negative effects of wildlife tourism can be direct and indirect (Roe et al., 1997), can vary on a temporal dimension, can be observed at physiological and behavioral levels and can be triggered by different stimuli (Green and Giese, 2004). Additionally, impacts can be influenced by types of access and observation, distance, feeding and often extend to species outside the interest of visitors (Newsome et al., 2005). Other classifications divide the negative effects in four categories: harvest, habitat modification, pollution and disturbance. In order to keep the discussion of this subject relevant for the topic of this study, the author will focus next only on the types of WT impacts that appear relevant for the species of interest in this paper, the three large carnivores of

Europe. In this context, we start with the division of impacts in direct, easier to identify, and indirect, the last category facing an increased difficulty in quantifying negative effects (Roe et al., 1997).

WT can have several *direct negative impacts* on wildlife like disturbance of essential behaviors as feeding, hunting and breeding, of parent-off spring relations or other daily activities, can lead to the accidental death of animals, can favor disease transmission and even determine animals to abandon key habitats. Other critical direct impacts are closely linked to the generation of waste and intentional animal feeding that can have serious implication on the ecosystem balance and can also endanger tourists' safety. Prolonged exposure to human presence might even lead to the wildlife's habituation that can increase its vulnerability and the probability of its encounter with the local community (Roe et al, 1997; Newsome et al., 2005). Furthermore, depending on species and the design of the tourist experience three types of wildlife reactions appear possible in the face of human disturbance: avoidance, attraction or habituation (Newsome et al., 2005).

Each of these scenarios of wildlife's reaction to human disturbance involves risks that can even extend to the human observers. The provision of food in order to elicit the second reaction of attraction will be further addressed given it is a current practice to attract bears to observation points. In fact, feeding is one of the most popular and widespread means to increase the chances of close wildlife observation. It also has a significant importance for tour operators who need to ensure somehow the visibility of animals in the wild in order to remain financially viable. Even so, feeding for tourism purposes is seen as a controversial practice, blamed for its potential of altering natural behavior patterns and populations, increasing human dependency and habituation, leading to intra and inter-species conflicts for food and potential health impacts (Orams, 2002).

The *indirect impacts* of WT on wildlife are more difficult to quantify and mainly relate to the loss of habitat quality due to an increase in tourism facilities, noise, littering, vegetation trampling and even habitat clearing to ease wildlife observation that may affect feeding and other key activities (Newsome et al., 2005; Roe et al., 1997). The level of services and facilities can vary from camping to luxurious accommodations, influenced by the number of visitors, their expectation and level of specialization (Duffus and Dearden, 1990). Both direct and indirect impacts can have short and long term consequences and extend to other species besides those of focal interest (Figure 1). Although temporary, short-term effects can lead to a cumulative impact if they happen on a frequent base and in sensitive periods of the animal's life and can lead to potentially dramatic consequences for rare or threatened species (Green and Giese, 2004).



**Figure 1.** The potential linkages between an animal's reaction to humans and flow on ecological effects (source: Newsome et al., 2005)

Not all impacts are easy to identify in non-consumptive forms of WT due to the complexity of the ecological system, the difficulty of separating human effects from natural processes, the absence of data on certain species or the difficulty to determine the overall biological impact on the long term. All these factors make managing wildlife tourism a difficult, but essential task in minimizing negative impacts and ensuring therefore the sustainability of wildlife tourism development given the fact that, in natural areas, this activity will always affect the environment even at low levels of intensity.

To sum up, addressing the negative impacts of this type of tourism on the wildlife and its habitat appears to be an essential aspect of discussing its *environmental sustainability*, authors arguing that this dimension should be the priority in WT planning and development (Newsome et al, 2005) as without it wildlife tourism would be just "short-term mining of the resource" with "no role in a modern sustainable society" (Valentine and Birtles, 2004:52). Therefore, an efficient management and monitoring appears to be a fundamental stepping stone for a sustainable WT activity (Ballantyne et al., 2009; Newsome et al., 2005) as, in its absence, the WT attractions would most likely evolve over time to the detriment of both wildlife and visitors (Higham, 1998).

In this context, the environmental aspect appears therefore to be if not the main, then an essential aspect of the overall sustainability of WT and will be included in discussing the sustainability of large carnivores tourism in Romania.

#### 2.3.3. Impacts on tourists

Wildlife tourism mostly impacts visitors in a positive way, short or long term. For them, the benefits of a wildlife tourism experience can range from cognitive outcomes as increased environmental knowledge to psychological benefits like attention restoration given the fact that nature is "the most effective restorative environment" (Curtin, 2009:453). The positive impact of WT on the environmental education of visitors is closely related to its potential conservation outcomes as this type of education helps tourists increase their awareness on environmental issues, their respect for nature and wildlife and, on the long run, can foster the adoption of sustainable principles (Ballantyne and Packer, 2009; Lee and Moscardo, 2005; Tisdell and Wilson, 2005; Ballantyne et al., 2011). Moreover, if the WT experience manages to have a lasting positive impact on visitors' attitudes and behaviors, long after their trip ended, the net effect for wildlife is assumed to be a positive one (Ballantyne et al., 2011).

In this context, tourists' satisfaction with the wildlife experience is seen as an essential step in achieving wildlife tourism sustainability (Moscardo et al., 2001; UNEP, 2006). Their satisfaction is determined by both tangible, services and contextual factors, and intangible factors such as the duration or authenticity of the experience (Reynolds and Braithwaite, 2001). In wildlife experiences, some studies indicate a generally high level of satisfaction, influenced by the diversity of wildlife seen, the specific features of animals, the possibility of getting close and seeing large or rare species, the natural setting, but also learning about the wildlife and its habitat (Moscardo and Saltzer, 2004).

This last dimension has a particular importance for the topic of research as raising tourists' awareness on conservation issues is a necessary requirement of a truly sustainable WT activity (Moscardo et al., 2001). In this case, interpretation appears to be the optimum tool to encourage an appreciation of our natural and cultural heritage and of communicating nature conservation ideals and practices" (Littlefair, 2003:21). An essential component of any tourist experience, interpretation is believed to raise visitors' awareness, to enhance their knowledge and to encourage pro-environmental attitudes and responsible behaviors (Powell and Ham, 2008; Beaumont, 2011; Ballantyne et al., 2011). The same assumption is made in the case of WT interpretation although there is not enough evidence of this happening (Moscardo et al., 2004).

Given its importance for addressing the sustainability of WT, the author will include tourists' satisfaction in the discussion of large carnivore tourism in Romania in the context of its relation to environmental education aspects, but also in direct relation with how tour operator set realistic or unrealistic expectations for tourists before the actual experience.

#### 2.3.4. Impacts on the host community

Wildlife tourism has the potential of impacting host communities in both a positive and negative manner and for it to be sustainable it should attempt to reduce as much as possible its costs to this group and even more, improve the livelihoods of local people whose satisfaction or discontent with WT ultimately can enhance or undermine its sustainability (UNEP, 2006). Still, dividing impacts in benefits and costs appears to be a subjective endeavor as the host community has its own different stakeholders that might have conflicting opinions on what are the positive or negative outcomes of wildlife tourism (Burns and Sofield, 2001).

Referring to the positive impacts, wildlife tourism can potentially create employment and alternative sources of revenue in rural or remote areas where wildlife is usually located, can bring better quality services and facilities, can enhance the preservation of local cultures and can contribute to poverty reduction (Newsome et al., 2005; UNEP, 2006). However, as any other form of tourism, WT also brings costs that can be understood referring to the three areas identified by Butler (1974): resources, economic wellbeing and lifestyles. Therefore, the potential costs of WT can be associated with limited access to the resource and its degradation, an increase in property and commodity prices and disruption of local life styles, although this last effect is generally difficult to determine or measure.

Hosts' evaluations of WT benefits and costs appear to be determined by what they value and on whether they perceive the exchange with tourism as being beneficial or not. Developing a sustainable wildlife tourism attraction from a hosts' perspective requires therefore understanding the various elements that affect this stakeholder's perceptions and attitudes towards tourism and the benefits and costs hosts are willing to accept (Burns and Sofield, 2001). Several factors can influence hosts' perception of tourism impacts, including the economic gain, the groups earning more being more supportive; the use of tourism resources as its abuse lead to unsupportive attitudes; the attachment to the community and the attitude towards the environment (Jurowski et al., 1997). This last aspect has a particular aspect in the present large carnivores' case, as hosts' attitudes towards wildlife that can range from open hostility, consumptive use, indifference to care, concern and conservation can further shape their overall perception of WT development (Burns and Sofield, 2001).

Given the importance and the necessity to integrate the socio-cultural dimension in achieving sustainability in any form of tourism, the author will include the way in which the nearby communities are impacted by WT in the large carnivores tourism discussion. This aspect will be understood in a context-based analysis, taking into consideration the particular relation with the three species, but also locals' awareness on WT activities, a possible lack of

information being seen as a threat to its sustainable development as this could increase the costs and reduce the benefits.

#### 2.3.5. Economic impacts

Wildlife tourism can bring significant economic benefits at the level of the local community by creating employment and generating income with the condition that the tourist expenditure does not take place elsewhere. In WT, economics can be used to estimate the impact of visitors' expenditure on revenue and job creation, to consider the economic value of wildlife in order to make appropriate management decisions and the use of economic policy instruments like taxes and fees to increase the positive outcomes of WT (Tisdell and Wilson, 2004).

Economics is a core aspect of wildlife tourism sustainability as it is directly linked to the generation of conservation funds, providing economic value for the protection of wildlife resource and local community development. Nevertheless, authors argue that it is equally important as the social and environmental dimensions it cannot exclude or overcompensate (Mowforth and Munt, 2003). Ensuring economic sustainability appears closely connected to the commercial viability of wildlife tourism businesses, dependent on their capacity of understanding tourists' wants and travel trends, and delivering a product that can contribute to poverty alleviation and community development at the destination (UNEP, 2006).

Given its importance, this dimension will be included in discussing the sustainability of large carnivores tourism in Romania. As addressing this aspect is closely connected to the value of the natural resource, one economic concept, economic rent, used in natural resource management appear to be relevant in discussing the sustainability dimension. Defined as: "the economic surplus over and above normal profits that are earned from the exploitation of a resource" (Davis et al., 2011:5), this concept will be used to discuss which groups appropriate the economic benefits from the tourism use of large carnivores that, as all other wildlife species in Romania, are state owned and hence a public good.

#### 2.3.6. The bigger picture of WT sustainability

Although discussing the sustainability of WT clearly departs from the way its environmental, socio-cultural and economic impacts reflect its potential outcomes, other aspects also appear to influence and hence determine its viability as a sustainable exercise. Therefore, it is necessary to consider that the success or failure of this type of tourism in becoming sustainable also depends on the long term survival of species and their habitats, of its integration in national, regional and local strategic planning policies, on the capacity of natural areas' managers' to protect the wildlife by controlling access and limiting future development, on offering quality tourism according to market expectations (UNEP, 2006), of

its CPR features (Rodger and Moore, 2010) and on the collaboration between its stakeholders whose goals need to be compatible or at the very least not contradictory (Higginbottom, 2004).

At this point, addressing the sustainability of large carnivores tourism in the Romanian context seems to be a complex issue that needs a broad comprehension of the location, of its stakeholders, of the resilience of its core resource, and of the interplay of the dimensions seen as necessary for its viability following this theoretical chapter:

- Contribution to conservation of species and habitat
- Environmental sustainability
- Tourists' satisfaction/ Quality tourism in line with market expectations
- Socio-cultural sustainability
- Economic sustainability
- CPR features
- Long-term survival of large carnivores and their habitat
- Integration in planning frameworks and political support
- Capacity to limit access and future development
- Efficient collaboration between stakeholders

Finally, not all locations have the necessary conditions to aspire for sustainability and therefore an essential step appears to be identifying those areas where the "requirements for conservation, tourism and community development are compatible with each other and to recognise that elsewhere wildlife watching tourism is unlikely to be successful and cannot be sustainable" (UNEP, 2006: 50).

# 3. Methodology

This chapter presents the methodological choices of this research paper, beginning with the philosophy of science, followed by the qualitative approach preferred to explore the topic of this study. Critical aspects like the research design, the research methods and the data collection procedure will be also detailed.

## 3.1. Philosophy of science

Stating the chosen paradigm for this study appears as a necessary first step as this represents: "the basic belief system or worldview that guides the investigator, not only in choices of method but in ontologically and epistemologically fundamental ways" (Guba and Lincoln, 1994:105). Starting with the ontological dimension, concerned with the nature of

reality, the author considered most suited the *constructivism* approach that assumes the fact that multiple and even conflicting social realities exist in a constant state of revision. This implies that the researcher will always present one specific version of reality that cannot be seen as definitive (Bryman, 2008). In constructivism, knowledge is viewed as indeterminate and relative, depending on various factors, including political, economic, cultural that differentiate the interpreters (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). Furthermore, for constructivists, the aim of research is the:

"understanding and reconstruction of the constructions that people (including the inquirer) initially hold, aiming towards consensus but still open to new interpretations as information and sophistication improve" (Guba and Lincoln, 1994:113).

Given the fact that the application of the sustainability concept into tourism appears to be subjective and relative "to the varying perceptions of those who use them, and relative to the values, ideological and moral, of those who apply and interpret them" (Mowforth and Munt, 2003:113) and the critical importance of stakeholders, seen as social actors creating and interpreting knowledge, the authors considered constructivism to be the most appropriate ontological perspective for the current research.

From an epistemological perspective, concerned with what is considered to be acceptable knowledge, the present study is led by *interpretivism* that "respects the differences between people and the objects of the natural sciences and therefore requires the social scientist to grasp the subjective meaning of social action" by interpreting others' interpretation in the context of relevant theories (Bryman, 2008: 16). The author considered this dimension to be most suited given her intention to elicit the ways in which different stakeholders interpret wildlife tourism and further interpret these findings in the context of its potential sustainability.

## 3.2. Towards a qualitative research

Given the exploratory nature of this research and the need to produce detailed information on the various dimensions of large carnivores tourism sustainability in a specific location, the author opted for the use of a qualitative research strategy seen as most useful in exploring the research question, but also as the most appropriate in the context of the chosen philosophy of science. This decision was further backed-up by the general lack of research on the topic of this paper that would have threatened the quality of a quantitative approach. For instance, at the moment there are no precise data on the number of wildlife tourists that come to Romania, on the number of wildlife observation points or on the revenues it generates, the author considering these would have been essential information in a potential quantitative approach.

As a research strategy, the qualitative approach is usually discussed and understood in opposition to the quantitative dimension, although the two are often combined in mixed methods research projects. Broadly, qualitative research:

"emphasizes words rather than quantification in the collection and analysis of data. As a research strategy is inductivist, constructionist and interpretivist, but qualitative researchers do not always subscribe to all three of these features" (Bryman, 2008: 366).

A qualitative perspective determines the researcher to see the world from the perspective of the people being studied and to give a significant attention to producing detailed descriptions used to highlight the importance of the particular context of the researched topic. However, qualitative research is often critiqued for being too subjective given the close implication of the researcher, for being difficult to replicate because of its unstructured nature dependent on the preferences of the investigators, for being inappropriate for generalization or for lacking transparency (Bryman, 2008).

The author will attempt to tackle this last potential flaw by providing clear details on the choice of the methods, the data collection process and the main findings. In what concerns the level of generalization it is not in the intention of the author to extend the conclusions of this case study on large carnivores tourism in Romania to other types of wildlife tourism activities happening in the same country or elsewhere.

Given the difficulty to properly use quality criteria as reliability and validity in this type of research, several alternatives were advanced, including using the *trustworthiness* and *authenticity* criteria (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). However, the author will try to respect the quality criteria proposed by Yardley (2000) given they appear most suitable for this study. The first criterion is *sensitivity to context* that includes besides the social context of the research, also other potential relevant theoretical and ethical aspects. Furthermore, the author will try to prove *commitment* and *rigor* in approaching the subject, therefore committing to a thorough data collection and analysis, *transparency* and *coherence* in presenting the research method choices and the advanced arguments, *impact* and *importance* of the study for theory, researched community and even for practitioners (Bryman, 2008).

## 3.3. Research design

Opting for a case-study design, defined as "the detailed and intensive analysis of a single case" (Bryman, 2008: 52) appears to be the most relevant choice of research design as the present paper is focused on the sustainability of large carnivores tourism in a single location, Romania. This option is furthermore enhanced by the use of qualitative methods that usually go hand in hand with this type of design although it does not exclude the employment of quantitative approaches (Bryman, 2008). Five types of cases were identified by Yin (2003 in

Bryman, 2008): the *critical case* that usually tests a hypothesis, the *extreme or unique case*, the *representative or typical case*, the *revelatory case* and *the longitudinal case*. However, researchers argue that any case study holds a combination of these various types and it is possible that the significance of the case becomes clear only at a later stage of the research. In this early point of the current case-study, the author assumes it to be the second type, the unique case, Romania's uniqueness element being the fact that it holds the most significant populations of large carnivores of Europe, so a great potential for WT, yet undeveloped in comparison to other European countries with less wildlife effectives (Finland, Slovakia, UK).

## 3.4. Analyzing sustainability

As previously mentioned, sustainability is a relative concept, depending on the context, but also on those who define it and implement it and this relativity coupled with its continuous dimension complicate its efficient or homogenous evaluation. Several sustainability indicators for tourism destinations have been advanced by bodies like the World Tourism Organization (2004) and more recently the European Union (2013) while the Convention on Biological Diversity (2004) developed specific guidelines for designing sustainable tourism in high biodiversity sensitive area. However, just few case specific initiatives exist on developing frameworks for assessing the sustainability of wildlife tourism, mostly for Australia's marine wildlife. While the absence of research on the sustainability of WT is recognized as research gap in this field, setting some specific indicators that could be applied to WT appears to be a very challenging task as for wildlife attractions it is:

"not possible to make universal guidelines, every case is site specific according to local environmental conditions, existing management and conservation strategies and the extent to which compliance with existing codes might occur" (Smith, 2006).

In the current research, the analysis of large carnivores tourism sustainability will be based on the dimensions that appeared as relevant following the second chapter (section 2.3.6), departing from the three pillars of sustainable tourism: the environmental, the socio-cultural and the economic aspects and adding further elements that refine and contextualize the analysis.

#### 3.5. Research methods

The choice of research methods is closely determined by the qualitative direction of this study. The author decided to employ *semi-structured interviews* to determine stakeholders' perspectives on large carnivores tourism, but also to get detailed data to address the different sustainability criteria mentioned above. *Content analysis* is the second method employed to explore the integration of this type of tourism in the existing national, regional and local planning and policy framework, the political support it gets and the context in which

it develops. This method will also be used to analyze the character of market expectations created by tour operators who offer large carnivores observation trips.

Given the fact that the potential sustainability of this type of tourism is strongly linked to the interplay of its stakeholders, its proper discussion also depends on clearly identifying and approaching these relevant actors. In this context, purposive sampling is seen as the indicated direction as this type of sampling identifies participants based on their relevancy for the research question.

#### 3.5.1. Interviews

The author considered the interview, "probably the most widely employed method in qualitative research" (Bryman, 2008: 436), to be the most suited approach to collect rich data that would allow her to understand the opinions of the various stakeholders involved and the compatibility of their perspectives or actions with the sustainability requirements presented in the previous chapter.

Given the extent of the research topic and its specificity, the author opted for the use of semi-structured interviews that however allow for additional spontaneous questions and discussions to arise. Several stakeholders of WT for the two studied locations were interviewed and a total of 13 interviews were realized with wildlife managers, conservation specialists, wildlife guides, tour operators, local authority, tourism associations, tourism specialist. Each interview was based on an interview guide designed according to the nature of the stakeholder (Appendix 1). For instance, more specific questions related to how the wildlife experience affects the observed species were addressed to wildlife specialists, while other aspects concerning tourism organization and tourists were addressed to wildlife guides or tour operators.

Nevertheless, common questions were designed for all stakeholders to understand how they feel about relevant issues such as species conservation, governmental support or developing nature based tourism in Romania that could indicate how well they could collaborate with each other in the context of WT planning. Moreover, the interviews were designed in a way to help the author gather much of the information needed to address most of the dimensions that appeared to be relevant for discussing the sustainability of WT. A resume of each interview is presented in Appendix 2. For confidentiality reasons that some of the respondents demanded, the author will not display the real name of respondents, but will differentiate them through numbers, for instance: TO1, TO2 for tour operators, WM1 and WM2 for wildlife managers, Brasov conservationist and Harghita conservationist.

#### 3.5.2. Content analysis

This is perhaps the most used approach for the qualitative analysis of documents, either official or private, of newspaper articles, of virtual or visual documents. Contrary to the quantitative direction, there are no straightforward rules on how qualitative data analysis should be developed. In this context, *coding*, basically a method of organizing the available data by assigning parts of it to specific codes, appears to be the starting point of most qualitative content analysis, although it has been critiqued for leading to data fragmentation or loss of context (Bryman, 2008). Coding is also an essential aspect of the *grounded theory* developed by Glasser and Strauss in the late 60's, a popular approach to qualitative content analysis.

In the current study, this qualitative method will be used to analyze the planning documents that are seen as relevant for the case of large carnivores tourism, including national documents regarding biodiversity conservation and tourism development. Moreover, this method will be used to analyze the market expectations tour operators create when it comes to the wildlife watching tours they offer in Romania that may affect both tourists' satisfaction and negatively impact the operations on site. Both narratives and visuals of their large carnivores trips offers, as presented on their websites will be analyzed in order to determine their position and the eventual differences that might arise among them.

#### 3.6. Data collection

Most of the data (interviews, documents, visual and narratives from websites) were collected between April 7 and April 30 with the exception of one interview that wwas taken around May 10. First, the planning documents needed for the first part of the content analysis were collected and six were seen as relevant, after researching both Romanian authorities' websites (Environment, Tourism Ministries) and international bodies (World Economic Forum). In what regards the second part of this analysis, in order to collect as many relevant narratives and visuals as possible, the author decided to use two methods. First, the tour operators who offered wildlife watching tours that were present on the website of the Romanian Ecotourism Association (AER)<sup>4</sup> were collected. Second, a Google search with various combinations of key words such as "wildlife watching Romania", "tour operators wildlife Romania" or "wildlife tours Romania" was employed, the author checking the results of the first 10 pages of this searches. Most results showed the tour operators already selected through the website of AER and only the tour operators or local guesthouses which included viable offers, actualized in 2013, were kept. In total, 15 websites were selected.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> www.eco-romania.ro

A more challenging data collection process was caused by the gathering of interviews. If initially, more than 30 potential respondents from all stakeholder categories were contacted, less than half of them, around 16 were interested or willing to further discuss the interview topic. Nevertheless, some of them, the wildlife managers, backed out shortly before the interviews dates without providing a reason or accepting a new meeting, the author offering to take the interviews whenever the respondents would have the time, in person or via Skype however without a positive reply.

Luckily, the author managed to secure interviews with other two wildlife managers, one for each location, although one of them at a later date than all the other ones. In the end, 13 interviews were conducted, eight in person, three via Skype, one through e-mail, two via phone conducted with the following stakeholders: wildlife managers (both locations), tourism associations (both locations), tour operators (both locations), local guesthouse (both locations), conservation and wildlife specialists (both locations), local authority (one location), tourism planning specialist (national level).

Around 16 hours of interviews were recorded and rich and relevant data was collected, most respondents showing a keen interest for the topic of research. Moreover, some of the respondents had simultaneous different roles covering the interests and experiences of more stakeholders, for instance owner of local guesthouse, tour operator and wildlife guide or wildlife manager and wildlife guide for tour operators, fact that allowed the author to surprise important complementary information in a single interview. All interviews were transcribed for the analysis process, yet only their resume is provided in Appendix 2 as most interviews, nine, are in Romanian and only three are in English.

At this moment, the author believes it is necessary to state that not having the possibility of interviewing more extensively could be a limitation of this research given the possible existence of possible different interests inside the same stakeholder group. Moreover, it is important to mention that the absence of tourists' from the list of the respondents is caused by the timing of the data collection, most of them coming in Romania in the summer months. This absence was however anticipated from the beginning and the researched was planned to be as less possible impacted by their absence.

#### 3.7. The locations

It appears useful at this stage of the research to present the locations of the study, including a short presentation of Romania. The two locations, Brasov and Harghita, will be addressed briefly, mainly from a tourism perspective, to set the context of wildlife tourism development.

#### **3.7.1. Romania**

Romania is a medium sized European country, located in the Southeastern central part of the continent, covering around 6% of its surface. From 1945 until late 1989, Romania was part of the communist bloc and in 2007 became a member of the European Union (EU). Romania's tourism potential is significant although this sector lacks competitiveness and its weak performances place Romania on one of the last positions in Europe. Overall, in 2012, were registered 1.653.400 international arrivals with a number of 3.291.500 overnight stays, from the total of 7.653.400 tourists (National Institute of Statistics, 2012), lower levels than the surrounding countries.

Romania's tourism potential mainly lays in the country's varied natural attractions, including some of the best conserved wilderness areas of the continent. In fact, according to the Convention on Biological Diversity, Romania is the most biogeographically diverse country of the EU, conserving many fauna and flora species disappeared from other parts of the continent, including the most important population of large carnivores (40% of all European Brown Bears, 30% Wolves, 25-30% Lynx<sup>5</sup>), that are the focus of a growing wildlife tourism activity, the subject of this paper.

### 3.7.2. Brasov<sup>6</sup>

The Brasov County is located in the Southeastern part of Transylvania, the central region of Romania and is one of the most industrialized counties of the area and also the most urbanized of the central region, around 74%. The area of Brasov is surrounded by various parts of the Carpathian Mountains and around 45% of its territory is mountainous. The scenic landscape and the hundreds of cultural and historical monuments, including UNESCO sites, make Brasov one of the most visited cities of Romania. In fact, Brasov has the second highest accommodation capacity of the country, concentrated mostly in the urban areas and only 19% in the rural areas, based on a 2009 statistics, however with modest rates of occupancy varying from 19,6 to 22 from 2009 to 2011<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Convention on Biological Diversity (<a href="http://www.cbd.int/countries/profile/default.shtml?country=ro#status">http://www.cbd.int/countries/profile/default.shtml?country=ro#status</a>) accessed on May 3, 2013

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Dates and numbers from the Development Strategy of Brasov 2013-2020-2030 (2010) and from the National Institute of Statistics (<u>www.insse.ro</u>), accessed on May 3, 2013

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Development Strategy of Brasov (2010)

Mountain tourism and especially skiing are very developed in the area of this county, followed by various forms of active tourism, cultural tourism and rural tourism. The natural surrounding landscape, protected through 32 areas, gives Brasov a great potential for nature-based tourism, promoted in the area through several ecotourism initiatives. Brasov is also the most developed Romanian tourist destination in terms of wildlife watching, most international tour operators choosing this location due to its short distance from Bucharest, numerous attractions, but especially for its high density of wild species. Nevertheless, the initiative of developing this form of tourism in the area was not locally based, but was the result of an international conservation project, very famous at its time, the Carpathian Large Carnivores Project (CLCP) developed between 1995 and 2003 in the area of Brasov. Developing ecotourism in the area, based on wildlife observation, was part of the integrated management approach of the project that viewed this form of tourism as a necessary aspect for enhancing community support towards the conservation of large carnivores in the area (WWF, 2000).

The media interest and promotion generated led to first foreign wildlife tourists appearing in 1997 with significant increases in groups and international tour operators in the following years of the project. Due to changing political circumstances, the creation of the Large Carnivore Center, a research base and a visitor center with large carnivores in captivity, designed to attract higher numbers of tourists was dropped in the early 2000's. This project managed to create however the image of Brasov as a wildlife destination and a tourism base as most of local tour operators and local guesthouse active at the moment were directly involved in the CLCP initiative.

The sustainable development of nature-based tourism and inevitably WT is however menaced by several serious threats including illegal deforestations, chaotic tourism development in the nearby and inside the protected areas and inappropriate waste management, to name just some of the most important threats<sup>8</sup>.

## 3.7.3 Harghita<sup>9</sup>

The Harghita County is located in the Eastern part of Transylvania, the central region of Romania. Similar to Brasov, Harghita's territory is mostly mountainous, the Carpathians occupying around 60% of its surface. However, contrary to Brasov, Harghita registers one of the lowest urbanization rates of the central region, 42,2% in 2011. Furthermore, what distinguished Harghita from other counties in Romania is its majoritarian ethnic Hungarian

<sup>9</sup> Dates and numbers and from the National Institute of Statistics (<u>www.insse.ro</u>), accessed on May 3, 2013

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Development Strategy of Brasov (2010)

community, 86,1% that shapes the strong cultural identity of the area that also influences its tourism sector and political context.

Compared to Brasov, Harghita has a significant lower accommodation capacity (6.759 versus 17.795 in Brasov), but has a slightly higher rate of occupancy than Brasov in the interval 2009-2011. A significant difference is also registered in terms of tourist arrivals, with Brasov having six times more tourists than Harghita in 2011 (642.800 compared to 100.300).

The most important tourist attractions in the area of Harghita are represented by some of the most well-known lakes in Romania, mountainous landscapes and historical monuments, alongside with cultural and religious traditions well conserved in the rural areas of the county. Harghita has an important potential for nature-based tourism development, including wildlife watching and other forms of specialized tourism. Its dense forests accommodate some of the most significant densities of large carnivores in the country. However, compared to Brasov, the commercial tourist observation of large carnivores is considerably less developed, this area being less accessible and less known to international visitors, with the notable exception of Hungarian tourists. Nonetheless, the same threats as in the case of Brasov affect the sustainable development of nature-based tourism and hence WT: illegal deforestations, chaotic tourism and urban development in the nearby and inside the protected areas, inappropriate waste management<sup>10</sup>.

# 4. Data analysis

This chapter sets out to present, analyze and discuss how the sustainability dimensions advanced during the second chapter are met in the Romanian context. First, the content analysis method will be employed to understand the level of WT<sup>11</sup> integration in planning policies, its potential political support, its context and the marketing expectations created by the tourism industry, followed by the analysis of the interview findings for both locations.

# 4.1. Content analysis - planning documents

As already mentioned in the literature review chapter, integrating the sustainability concept into tourism is not a straightforward process, depending in great part of the context in which it takes place, on the actors who define it, apply it and monitor it (Mowforth and Munt, 2003). Moreover, for it to have a shot at sustainability, wildlife tourism has to be integrated in regulatory and strategic planning frameworks at all levels, national, regional and local, and has to be supported by a strong political leadership in order to truly succeed in creating the

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> Development Strategy of Harghita (2002)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> In order to ease the reading of the text, from this point forward WT will be used interchangeably with large carmivores tourism, referring to this specific form unless otherwise specified.

long-term benefits of sustainability (UNEP, 2006). These dimensions, seen as relevant for approaching the sustainability of any type of tourism, will be further approached through the analysis of the following documents"

- The Master Plan for Developing National Tourism 2007-2026 (UNWTO, 2006)
- the Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Report 2013 (World Economic Forum, 2013)
- Realizarea Brandului Turistic al Romaniei (Ministry of Tourism and Regional Development)<sup>12</sup>
- National Development Plan 2007-2013 (Romanian Government, 2005)
- National Sustainable Development Strategy Romania 2012-2020-2030 (Government of Romania, Ministry of Environment and Sustainable Development, UNDP, National Center for Sustainable Development, 2008)
- National Strategy and Action Plan for Biodiversity Conservation 2010-2020 (Romanian Government, 2010)

For a comprehensive analysis of these sources, the author decided, after first reading all documents, to follow three main codes, seen as relevant for understanding both the context in which wildlife tourism operates, but also the support for and the integration of sustainability into the tourism sector. These dimensions are: the Romanian institutional context, the Romanian tourism sector and the Romanian environmental context. In order to ensure a clear and easy reading process, each dimension will be further addressed separately, although at times the author will indicate the existing connections between them.

# 4.1.1. The Romanian institutional context

In this part, based on the documents presented above, we will try to analyze to what extent or if Romania's public authorities appear to support the tourism sector. According to the WEF (2013) Tourism and Travel Competitiveness Report, Romania's authorities do not appear to be precisely aware of the importance of the tourism sector despite their declarative support for it. In fact, the Romanian government appears to be one of the least preoccupied in the world with this aspect, occupying the 129 position of the 140 total. Even more, in just two years, the level of governmental expenses changed from a competitive advantage, 43 rank, into one of the lowest rates in the world, 112 rank. While this considerable reevaluation of the governmental expenses for the tourism sector can be attributed in part to the economic problems of the country that provoked numerous budgetary cuts, the author believes it is important to mention the fact that in 2012, once with the installment of a new

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> Romania Brand Guide, source: <a href="http://www.minind.ro/">http://www.minind.ro/</a>, accessed on May 1<sup>st</sup>, 2013

parliamentary majority and hence a new government, the existing Ministry of Tourism, one of the most active in contracting European funds, was downgraded as a National Authority under the coordination of the Ministry of Finance<sup>13</sup>. This decision was followed by numerous last minute cuts in budget in many of Romania's fair participation, the representatives of the industry complaining about its effect on the promotion and on the external image of the country<sup>14</sup>.

At this point it can be argued that the level of support towards tourism depends on the vision of the political party that holds the power and is not properly determined by its actual potential or by the existing strategic documents. According to NDP<sup>15</sup> (2005), this political dependency has led to an inefficient managing and planning in the public system that lacks organizational culture and long-term vision.

In terms of tourism policies, organization and tourism legislation, the instability of the public sector is translated through lack of public-private cooperation, of awareness towards tourism and weak local representation that, according to the Master Plan for Tourism, are the weaknesses that undermine a proper planning and regulatory framework. Not surprisingly, this makes Romania rank on one of the last positions, 132 of 140, in terms of transparency of government policy making in the WEF report (2013), explained in the NDP (2005) by the constant changing and difficult administrative procedures, the centralization, lack of specific competences at the level of public authorities and weak political coordination between different ministries and agencies.

This situation directly and negatively affects the capacity of developing sustainable tourism as it makes extremely improbable the participatory planning approach of all relevant stakeholders in the planning process. This almost complete lack of transparency that generally characterizes the Romanian public system makes extremely difficult if not impossible the implementation of adequate strategies for sustainable tourism that need to "be able to consistently match long-term tourism master planning, short-term interest of multiple stakeholders and external influences such as macroeconomic events or tourism demand changes" (WEF, 2013: 78).

The lack of communication often leads to contradictory decisions, mentioned by the strategic documents analyzed, as for instance urbanism planning that damage the successful development of tourism or funding of projects that damage the environment. As the Master

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> http://stirileprotv.ro/stiri/politic/guvernul-a-infiintat-autoritatea-nationala-pentru-turism-in-subordinea-ministerului-economiei.html

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> http://www.mediafax.ro/economic/grapini-a-anulat-participarea-romaniei-la-targul-de-turism-de-la-munchen-hotelierii-si-agentii-acuza-ministerul-pentru-pierderile-suferite-10582348

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> National Development Plan 2007-2013

Plan states, this lack of dialogue and integrated planning leads to unsustainable urbanism development that increases the negative effects of tourism and brings some additional ones, especially in sensitive areas. At this point, the participatory planning and the cooperation among stakeholders, especially public-private partnerships, needed for sustainable tourism development appear to be a desiderate more than a reality.

Summing up, it seems that the long-term dependency of the public function on the political context have created an inefficient and unstable public authority that does not have the capacity to follow long-term goals or common visions. This situation has negative effects on the tourism sector that does not receive constant support or funding as its potential or importance appears to be differently interpreted by different politicians who tend to disregard existing strategic documents. In this context, the instability of governmental support and the lack of transparency in planning for tourism that excludes concerned stakeholders, appear to be significant barriers for sustainable tourism development in Romania and hence limit the potential support for responsible WT growth.

### 4.1.2. The Romanian tourism sector

Despite Romania's significant tourism potential, this sector appears dominated by a serious lack of competitiveness that is translated through a low direct contribution to the GDP, only 1,5% in 2012 and considerable low numbers of international tourist arrivals (1.514.800 in 2011) compared to other former communist countries, now members of the European Union (WEF, 2013). According to the WEF (2013)<sup>16</sup> report, Romania dropped five positions, from 63 to 68, in the past two years on its worldwide Tourism & Travel Competitiveness Index and ranks the 35 out of 42 European countries analyzed.

Its low scores indicate a consistent deficit in many of the pillars that are essential for the development of a sustainable tourism sector and that potentially threaten the sustainability of any form of wildlife tourism. For instance, the economic viability of tourism businesses and hence the overall economic sustainability of the sector appears seriously hindered by the extent and effect of taxation that positions Romania on one of the last places (138) of the 140 countries reviewed by WEF. Not surprisingly this has an effect on the level of expenses and receipts tourism generates to the GDP that place Romania again at the bottom of the list, rank 116 of 140. Furthermore, the quality of services, an important factor in ensuring tourists' satisfaction, another variable of sustainable tourism, appears to be consistently downgrading the competitiveness of this sector as the low levels of staff training position the country on the 109 position, apparently in direct connection with the weak quality of the educational system, rank 107.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup>Downloaded from <a href="http://www.weforum.org/issues/global-competitiveness">http://www.weforum.org/issues/global-competitiveness</a>, accessed May 3, 2013

These extremely low ranks appear to be connected to the fact that the tourism sector in Romania was and is generally ignored by public authorities, although several governments indicated it as a national priority, omitting however to allocate the necessary funding for this type of important economic role. Further issues linked to its slow and problematic privatization and the rapid changing legislation according to political interests weakened a tourism sector already undeveloped and the lack of national planning characterized this industry until Romania's accession in the EU when several strategic documents were prepared including three of the documents analyzed in this section.

All of them identify tourism as a highly important sector of the national economy, integrating it as an instrument in lowering regional development discrepancies across the country. Moreover, the sustainable dimension is included in this vision, although it appears to be more of a formal statement in accordance to the European standard than an actual direction closely followed at least in the Master Plan for Developing National Tourism. In fact, in this document, the sustainability of tourism is usually seen through the eyes of ecotourism, one of the big and green washing trends of tourism in Romania, that even in this document is seen as nature-based tourism in rural and poor areas, without a proper inclusion of all other features that distinguish it such as the environmental education of tourists. The author believes this lack of clarity on what sustainable tourism actually is and how it can be adapted to the Romanian context an important threat for its common understanding by the various stakeholders involved and therefore can lead to its inappropriate application or to its general ignorance in favor of short-term benefits initiatives.

Despite the inclusion of tourism in a more coordinated way than ever before in these strategic planning documents, the results, much of which should have been visible by 2013, are still hard to observe and the low ranks occupied by Romania in some critical pillars of the WEF report of 2013 appear to support this absence of significant positive changes. Some of the causes of this lack of success are identified as risks by the same documents that planned and envisioned tourism as a competitive sector of the economy. For instance, the Master Plan states from the very beginning that its implementation depends on the level of political will, which as mentioned before seems to be unaware of its potential, as evidence its low investment and inefficient marketing, and on the availability of European funds, that Romania failed to contract, only a 13,5% rate from 2007 to 2012<sup>17</sup>. Additional risks for general sustainabile development, also relevant for the tourism sector, are identified by the NSDSR (2010) such as delays and lack of coordination between the public and private sector, dependency on the political context, patronage-based choosing of priorities in public

 $<sup>^{17}\,</sup>http://www.media fax.ro/politic/basescu-rata-de-absorbtie-a-fondurilor-ue-de-numai-13-5-nu-ne-multumeste-10749494$ 

funds distribution that costs projects with a real positive economic, social and environmental impacts.

Summing up, the tourism sector appears to be the least competitive from the EU states, weakened by its lack in service quality, policy and regulation and the extent and level of taxation, with direct consequences on its economic sustainability that can further negatively influence other sustainability components. This situation has much to do with the constant lack of strategic vision and planning that characterize this industry and furthermore by weaknesses such as low funding and political instability that impede the successful implementation of its main strategic document.

Furthermore, the dimension of sustainable tourism does not appear clearly positioned in these strategic documents, tourism generally being seen for its potential rapid economic gain and employment opportunities, yet its potential negative impacts are rarely mentioned, with the notable exception of the NSAPBC (2010) which nevertheless is not a tourism planning document. Although the sustainable term is often used in connection to tourism, the integration of the concept does not appear in the actions plans of Master Plan for Tourism or of the National Plan for Development. In fact this last document has certain contradictory points, as on one hand mentions the negative impacts of tourism on the natural environment and the low funding of protected areas in coping with it (page 116), but on the other hand prioritizes mass-tourism development based on natural resources seen as capable to generate short-term development opportunities (pages 342-343). At this point, it looks like WT is developing in the absence of a clear and strong approach of how sustainability can be integrated into tourism and on what sustainable tourism really is, aspects that will most likely threaten the proper development of this form of tourism that needs strategic vision, lacking in this case, and political support, inconsistent and unstable in the Romanian context.

#### 4.1.3. The Romanian environmental context

This dimension appears particularly important for the current topic of research as large carnivores depend on the vast wilderness areas that are inherently linked to the present state of environment in Romania, but also to the potential future threats that might affect its biodiversity. Moreover, the author considers the sustenance of the resource, in this case biodiversity, an essential aspect of sustainable WT as no development can take place upon a deteriorating environmental resource (Newsome et al., 2005). Therefore, the relation between tourism and environment from the perspective of the documents mentioned in the beginning of this chapter will be further discussed while mentioning the general features of the environmental context in Romania. The extent to which tourism is planned in accordance to the principles of environmental sustainability and the general present state of the

environment will be considered as indicators for the maintaining and long term survival of the key resource, large carnivores and their habitat, one of the criteria of WT sustainability used in the analysis part.

According to the Brand Guide, the natural environment appears to be the key resource in differentiating Romania as a tourist destination, position supported by the Master Plan for Tourism (2006) and the National Development Plan (2005). In fact, the brand of Romania lies on the attractiveness of the untouched Carpathians and wilderness is seen as one of the key six tourist products of Romania. Nonetheless ensuring the long-term competitiveness of this resource is closely linked to its protection and sustainable use, a connection that is most clearly considered by the NSAPBC (2010), in comparison to the other planning documents. Nonetheless, this document presents tourism as one of the present threats for biodiversity conservation, alongside with industry, agriculture, urbanization, transportation infrastructure, and acknowledges the balancing of the growing tourism demand for protected areas and their protection as a major challenge of the tourism sector.

A weaker position in indicating the potential negative effects of tourism on the environment is presented in the Master Plan that appreciates the current environmental infrastructure as a threat for tourism development and does not indicate specific measures towards identifying or controling negative impacts. A more clear approach towards the two-way relationship between tourism and the natural environment is noticeable in the National Development Plan (2005) that points some examples of negative environmental effects of tourism and considers that local authorities often do not have the necessary budget to tackle them. However, both documents consider that Romania's environmental legislation is viable although not properly applied and ignore the lack of proper funding of protected areas, while the NSAPBC (2010) is more critical indicating the absence of proper laws on landscape protection, coherent policies and inefficient institutional framework.

It appears at this point that although the natural environment is seen as the main feature of Romania's tourist potential, the guiding documents (NDP, 2005 and MPNDT, 2006) do not indicate precise actions with viable funding sources to conserve the long-term competitiveness of this resource. This deficiency is clearly pointed out by the very low ranks occupied by Romania in the WEF report (2013) on the "Environmental Sustainability" pillar. In direct connection to the discussion above, the sustainability of the travel and tourism industry development occupies one of the last positions, 129 of the 140 countries list.

This is not surprising if we consider two other indicators from this pillar, the stringency of environmental regulations where Romania has the 109 rank and the enforcement of these regulations that positions this country on another very low rank, 101. These results appear to indicate a deficient relation between legislation, proper controls and environmental protection as indicated by the NSAPBC (2010). Moreover, the negative impacts of this inefficient regulatory system can be identified through another indicator of the WEF (2013) report, the quality of the natural environment where Romania occupies only the 107 rank.

At this moment, there seems to be a lack of coordination between the premises of using the natural attractions of Romania to boost the tourist attractiveness of the country and sustaining this resource, threatened by the economic short-term and unsustainable development and left unprotected by the legislative framework. As a direct consequence, the bio-productive capacity is lower than the demands of the socio-economic system and only half of its estimated capacity, the NSAPBC (2010) arguing that this gap is going to extend as some economic development priorities contradict the principles of sustainable development with important negative effect on the biodiversity production capacity.

Concluding, maintaining of the environmental resource and hence of the wilderness habitat of the large carnivores appears to be seriously threatened by the lack of proper legislation and environmental regulation enforcement, by the chaotic and profit driven economic development, by the lack of common and strategic vision of public authorities that fund both measures of protection and projects that damage the natural balance. Moreover, the current tourism strategy encourages nature-based tourism as a competitive advantage without addressing substantial measures in ensuring the long-term quality of this resource and hence threatens the economic and environmental sustainability of this product and therefore of WT.

# 4.2. Content analysis - marketing expectations

In this part of the analysis, the author intends to discuss two key aspects related to the sustainability of WT: how the tour operators who offer large carnivores observation in Romania shape market expectations regarding the wildlife encounter and how or if they integrate a conservation message in their marketing of these experiences.

The first aspect appears to be a sensitive point for addressing the sustainability of wildlife tourism as UNEP (2006: 61) assigns "offering good quality tourism in line with market expectations" as sustainability criteria for this type of tourism. Moreover, as already mentioned in the second chapter, the sustainability of tourism is also based on the satisfaction of tourists and, in the case of natural areas, on limiting the marketing-planning

gap (Powell and Ham, 2008) that might threaten the success of the experience and hence affect the chances for tourists' satisfaction.

The second aspect also appears to be relevant as conservation is one of the main aspirations of this type of tourism, issue more extensively discussed in the second chapter, and also one of the demands of its sustainability. In fact, as stated earlier in this paper, achieving the conservation dimension depends not only on the viability of tourism operations and tourism management at site, but also on marketing and business plans of operators that could indicate their awareness and support for it.

The author will base the discussion of these two key aspects on the analysis of the selected tour operator's websites, considered to be an essential component of their marketing efforts and generally a viable indicator of their tourism philosophy. Before starting this discussion it appears useful to briefly present the tour operators/local guesthouses whose websites were analyzed to better understand who they are (Table 2). A list of with their websites links is provided in Appendix 3.

Name	Location	Business	Experience	CLCP experience/AER membership
Roving Romania	Brasov, Romania	Tailor made holidays	1998	CLCP/AER
CNTours	Brasov, Romania	Nature and wildlife specialized	1999	CLCP/AER
Transylvanian Wolf	Brasov, Romania	Nature and wildlife specialized	2003	CLCP
Exodus	UK	Adventure &activity	1976	-
Nature Trek	UK	Wildlife specialist	1988	-
Limosa Holidays	UK	Bird watching	1985	-
Active Travel	Brasov, Romania	Nature and wildlife specialized	2008	CLCP
Absolute Carpathian	Brasov, Romania	Nature and wildlife specialized	2003	CLCP/AER
Ibis Tours	Tulcea, Romania	Nature and wildlife specialized	1995	-
Travel Eco	Brasov, Romania	Nature and wildlife specialized	-	CLCP
Professional Team	Brasov, Romania	Wildlife guides	2003	-
Tioc Reisen	Sibiu, Romania	Nature and wildlife specialized	2002	AER
Diana Travel	Bucharest, Romania	Nature and wildlife specialized	2003	-
Green Travel	Brasov, Romania	Local guesthouse	-	-
Pensiuni Harghitene	Harghita, Romania	Local guesthouse	2003	-

Table 2. Tour operators and local guesthouses included in the analysis

# 4.2.1. Shaping market expectations

As noted in the second chapter, encountering free ranging wildlife in its natural habitat is a main factor for successful wildlife experience (Moscardo and Saltzer, 2004; Sinha, 2001), yet this is often threatened by the unpredictability of these species (Newsome et al., 2005). This is particularly true for the large carnivores of Romania that live in dense and less accessible forested environments, so observing them in wide open spaces as the African savannahs is not a possible option. Moreover, all three large carnivores, although not aggressive to humans, with the exception of mother bears with cubs, avoid human contact and flee at the very first sign of human presence. Therefore, despite Romania's high numbers of these species, observing them is not an activity easy to plan and not even the best planning can guarantee the encounter. Moreover, only the bear, an omnivorous species, can be attracted to the nearby of the observatories using feeding. Wolves and, especially the mysterious lynx, rarely seen even by specialists, are difficult to encounter as they cannot be lured with food at the tourist observatories.

Therefore, in discussing how tour operators shape market expectations of the wildlife encounter on their websites, the author will be interested in how realistically the encounter is described, included the possibility of not seeing the animals. Moreover, as this encounter cannot be understood in the absence of its local context, the author will also follow how the destination is presented and if any level of misrepresentation is present, based on her knowledge of the areas. Hence, two codes were used to organize the collected narrative and visuals from the website: the wildlife encounter, including the visuals of the species, and destination image, including the visuals.

#### 4.2.1.1. The wildlife encounter

With the exception of researchers, foresters, hunters or some local people, for other people the first encounter with the three large carnivores is mostly virtual and tour operators have an important role in creating their customers' expectations towards it. However, reading the data assigned to this code, it appears that the 13 tour operators and two local guesthouses studied do not have a homogenous approach on presenting this encounter and hence the tourism product. While at a certain level this might be influenced by characteristics of the tour, specialized wildlife watching tour versus a more general tour, the omission of some key aspects, like those related to the unpredictability of the species, may lead to tourists developing unrealistic expectations.

In fact, only seven, about half of the studied offers, mention or explain that the wild nature of these animals makes them unpredictable, some mentioning success rates in the case of observation points: "From June to August the probability to see bears are 70-90%. In May, September and October the probability to see bears are 60 - 70%" (AT) while others clearly state that in the wild: "Seeing wolves or lynx must be regarded as impossible" (RR). The unpredictable dimension remains however the most common element of their tour descriptions, followed by the educational dimension, five tour operators and one local guesthouse providing information on the species, their habitat or how to behave in their nearby.

The concomitant presence of these both dimensions in the studied offers is usually accompanied by mentions of potential negative impacts of observation linked to group size: "In order to minimise the impact on the wildlife we require a minimum of three persons and maximum of eight persons per evening" (PT) and ways to tackle them: "Do not feed wildlife - Avoid hand-feeding animals living in natural areas or leaving any left-overs behind after your lunch" (AC), other species that can be observed in the same area: "During our walk we should see signs of bears, wild boars, foxes, pine martins" (AC) and other operational elements: duration, ways of transportation, safeness. Less than half of the studied websites offer this kind of more detailed information, usually, but not only, those operators who are members of the Romanian Ecotourism Association or who were involved in the CLCP.

One of these tour operators gives in fact the most comprehensive presentation of the experience, offering the prospective tourist clear information on what to expect, including in terms of effort and levels of authenticity implied. In fact, it is the only one that clearly differentiates between the authenticity implied by the two forms of wildlife observation, at the hide<sup>18</sup> or in the wild, addressing the first type to more comfort desiring tourists<sup>19</sup> and the second one to those in search of the real thing<sup>20</sup> or true wild encounters.

However, while some of the wildlife experience presentations are more complex and balanced, including all or many of the elements mentioned above, others tend to present it as a sure thing, with a risk of creating unrealistic expectations, for instance: "Some evenings up to 19 bears where counted" (IT). This sort of commercial exacerbation leads to a divide

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> Observation point, small pavilion in the forest

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> "As these facilities offer different conditions than nature, the behaviour the bears display here is also "different than in the wild" (AC)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> The itineraries "in the wild" and "pure wild" are dedicated to people with a good, respectively very good degree of fitness and that can cope with the lack of sleep, as they take you out in remote areas very early in the morning and late in the evening to see wolves, bears and lynx in the most natural form they come". (AC)

among the group of researched offers, some tour operators positioning themselves at clear opposites, for instance the most eco-centric of them arguing that:

"Whilst some less responsible tour operators advertise bear and wolf "watching" tours in Romania, it is practically impossible to see wolves in the wild, and bears are very difficult indeed to see. Wolf and bear "watching" is misleading - we prefer to talk about wild animal "searching" (RR)

while one local guesthouse tends to falsify reality "Here you'll find the real Romania Wildlife" (GT) statement that does not stand on any actual evidence. In what regards the visuals of species, highly important in creating both the interest and the expectations for the encounter, the illustration of the wildlife also seems to reflect varying perspectives. For instance, one tour operator clearly sets a connection between brown bears surviving alongside traditional activities as shepherding in a clearly more remote community that the foreign visitor, positioned in the center of the image, explores, maybe from a superior and educational perspective (Photo 1).



Photo 1 (www.transylvanianwolf.ro)

Most websites use close-ups (Photo 2 and Photo 3) that although photogenic and attractive risk of diminishing the authenticity of the experience if not accompanied by photos where the wildlife is illustrate in its natural habitat. The use of only this type of photos can potentially create unrealistic expectations for tourists as, for instance, wolves are very hard to spot in the wild and the bears that come at the observation points will not lay or sleep, they come for the food and the smallest movement can chase them away.



Photo 2. Brown bear resting probably in a sanctuary

Photo 3. Gray wolf portrait (www.cntours.eu)

Few tour operators actually use images that appear to be more realistic in portraying the experience, including photos with animal tracks, for instance it is more likely for tourists to see wolf tracks than the actual wolf (Photo 4) or bears illustrated in a wild habitat like the one where the observation will take place (Photo 5)



Photo 4. Wolf track

Photo 5. Bear in the wild

(www.ibis-tours.ro)

Less authentic for the wildlife character of these species that is the center of the tourist experience appear to be a series of images where both bears and wolves appear anthrophormized and domesticated, aspect that completely falsifies their wild nature and leads to unrealistic expectations at least in the absence of proper explanations (Photos 6, 7).



Photo 6. Baby bear, probably rescued after his mother was killed (www.cntours.eu)

Photo 7. Domesticated wolf

As with the narratives, the use of visuals in portraying the experience is far from being homogenous as there appears to be an unclear mix between marketing images representing wildlife scenes almost impossible to spot in the wild (Photo 8 and Photo 9) and more realistic scenes that tourists might actually see in reality. Nonetheless, the use of visuals has to be

understood in the context of operators' commercial purpose that have to attract customers in order to be commercially viable. Although this does not justifies their potential misleading illustration of the wildlife experience, the use of narratives appears to be determinant in setting tourists' expectations.



Photo 8 Brown bear bathing, probably in a wildlife sanctuary Photo 9. Lynx (www.exodus.co.uk)

In this respect, it seems that those tour operators involved since the beginning of this activity in Romania<sup>21</sup>, have a more responsible attitude towards presenting the wildlife experience and hence create realistic expectations that indicate both respect for their customers and a good knowledge at the situation at the wildlife observation areas. However, the lack of entry barriers and the absence of specific regulations could favor the appearance of more commercial operators that might not share the knowledge or ecotourism approach of those who were the first ones in this business.

### 4.2.1.2. Destination image

While the wildlife experience gets different and contrasting presentations from the various tour operators, a significant higher degree of homogeneity exists in presenting the destination of the encounter and the local communities in its nearby. In fact, all of the studied resources present a romanticized and idyllic version of Romania and its mountain villages, were allegedly people live like they did centuries ago, in a clear attempt to differentiate it from other European destinations: "Romania - an extraordinary country as yet unspoilt by the ravages of mass tourism" (RR). This romanticized picture tends to reach some levels of falsification, some of the tour operators including additional trips to "Dracula's castle" without mentioning that the myth of Dracula is not historically related to the Bran castle, located in the nearby of wildlife attractions in Brasov. However, what truly creates a false image of the destination, with potential negative consequences on tourists' expectations are some exaggerations as for instance one that portrays Zarnesti, a town of 21.000 inhabitants, at the

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> Taken into consideration only tour operators included in this analysis

base of the national park where many of the wildlife tourists are accommodated in a sort of lost village where:

"people in Zarnesti still work in the old way: horse and carts are used for transport, farmers cut the hay with a scythe, flocks of sheep roam the mountains, guarded by shepherds and dogs against bears and wolves. The old traditions occupy an important role in community life" (TE).

In fact, Zarnesti is a modern small town, indeed located in a splendid natural setting, but significantly impacted by the communist heritage: the remains of the largest ammunition factory in the country that functioned here until the early 90's. Although more than half of the territory of the town is covered by forests and in the nearby of the national park entry there is a well conserved architectural style, tourists' will not get many chances of seeing carts or horses in the streets as most of its inhabitants have cars or use trains or buses to get to main center of the county, Brasov.

This idyllic image of the destination is also noticeable in the visuals used to illustrate their offers that build this imagery on two pillars, the green mountainous landscape and the hosts. Nevertheless, only those images that fit with the degree of remoteness and bucolic life are included, although the tourists will encounter many contrasting landscapes in that same destination. While this brief analysis of the visuals is not set to be a semiotic one, it is nevertheless tempting to connect these images with various potential connotative meanings. For instance, we could link the green and scenic landscapes with the meaning of untouched nature that maybe lacks in the origin countries of tourists, some sort of last undiscovered natural areas in Europe for more adventurous tourists to discover (Photo 10 and Photo 11).



Photo 10. Sheep herd in the Carpathian (bear watching weekend) Photo 11. Traditional house in the Carpathians ((www.ibis-tours.ro/ www.transylvanianwolf.ro)

In what concerns the hosts, their omnipresent illustration only in traditional settings could indicate a desire to picture the local community as stuck in time and maybe even with a certain degree of cultural commodification (Photo 12). Another dimension of the host that

appears to be a constant on many of the websites is that of locals performing all sorts of traditional activities, hence the myth of the working Other (Photo 13).



Photo 12. Sheperd camp moving (www.ibis-tours.ro)



Photo 13. Grass cuting (www.ibis-tours.ro)

Nevertheless, the use of these clichés in portraying the destination image of Romania as an exotic Eastern European country, where rural and natural landscapes survive intact, fact that is actually far from being true, has to be understood in the commercial context of tourism marketing. Even so, exaggerations and falsifications like some of those mentioned above can create unrealistic expectation that can influence the overall satisfaction of tourists, an important aspect of sustainable tourism.

# 4.2.2. Conservation awareness and support

The level of conservation awareness and support is another important indicator for the sustainability of WT (UNEP, 2006). Nevertheless, having analyzed the narratives of the 15 websites, it appears that only six incoming tour operators, usually those who were involved in the CLCP or who are members of the Romanian Ecotourism Association present some examples that indicate their support for conservation, either of species or of local traditions

and local communities. One single code, conservation awareness and support was used to research these narratives.

For instance, one of the tour operators contributes actively to a beaver reintroduction program, another has its own charity foundation developing projects for the local community, another one sells local hand-made products with large carnviores motives, while other two mention that the price paid by tourists will benefit local people: "Much of your tour price benefits local people, small businesses, local communities, and ecology and conservation projects - all IN Romania" (RR).

As mentioned before, this level of awareness is specific to those operators who were actively involved more than 10 years ago in conservation projects or/and who accepted the principles of the Romanian Ecotourism Association. They represent only 4-5 of the researched cases, although they also appear to handle most of the foreign tourists who come to Romania for large carnivores observation. The danger lies however in the profitable development of this type of tourism attracting new comers or outsiders that might not share the same principles as those who initiated the large carnivores observation in the area.

On the long-term there is the risk that the lax tourism legislation and the lack of precise rules or guidelines on how to develop wildlife tours so that environmental impacts are not ignored in the face of commercial profits could encourage less responsible operators to join the wildlife observation business.

The findings of this first analysis section are resumed bellow (Table 3)

Name	Location	Business	Experience	CLCP experience/AER membership	Marketing expectations	Conservation dimension
Roving Romania	Brasov, Romania	Tailor made holidays	1998	CLCP/AER	Realistic	Yes
CNTours	Brasov, Romania	Nature and wildlife specialized	1999	CLCP/AER	Misrepresentations Absence of rate of success	Yes
Transylvanian Wolf	Brasov, Romania	Nature and wildlife specialized	2003	CLCP	Realistic	Yes
Exodus	UK	Adventure &activity	1976	-	Misrepresentations	Yes
Nature Trek	UK	Wildlife specialist	1988	-	Realistic	-
Limosa Holidays	UK	Bird watching	1985	-	Realistic	-
Active Travel	Brasov, Romania	Nature and wildlife specialized	2008	CLCP	Realistic	-
Absolute	Brasov,	Nature and	2003	CLCP/AER	Realistic	Yes

Carpathian	Romania	wildlife specialized				
Ibis Tours	Tulcea, Romania	Nature and wildlife specialized	1995	-	Misrepresentations	Yes
Travel Eco	Brasov, Romania	Nature and wildlife specialized	-	CLCP	-	Yes
Professional Team	Brasov, Romania	Wildlife guides	2003	-	Realistic	-
Tioc Reisen	Sibiu, Romania	Nature and wildlife specialized	2002	AER	-	-
Diana Travel	Bucharest, Romania	Nature and wildlife specialized	2003	-	Misrepresentations	-
Green Travel	Brasov, Romania	Local guesthouse	-	-	Misrepresentations	-
Pensiuni Harghitene	Harghita, Romania	Local guesthouse	2003	-	Realistic	-

**Table 3.** Summary of content analysis results

# 4.3. Interviews analysis

As previously mentioned, 13 interviews were carried with various stakeholders from both locations. The data collected through this method will be further discussed and analyzed according to its relevance for the WT sustainability dimensions that will be applied to the Romanian context. In order to organize the analysis of the 16 hours of interviews, the author decided to code the texts that resulted after the transcription based on sustainability aspects identified earlier in this paper. To ease the process, but also due to the fact that some dimensions were closely connected, six codes were designed to cover the sustainability aspects. One additional code was created to group and discuss content related to wildlife tourists, including the satisfaction aspect and one code was assigned to identify aspects related to the experience that will be first addressed in order to allow the reader to better understand it. The findings from the two locations will be presented in parallel or together, depending on whether relevant differences appear. The author would like to mention again at this point that one of them, Brasov, is substantially more developed from a commercial WT perspective.

# The wildlife experience

Two types of wildlife experiences at both locations were identified following the interviews: the observation of the bear at one fix observation point in the forest, the hide, and the tracking of the three large carnivores (bear, wolf and lynx) usually early morning in the wild. The organization of the experience in these two directions appears to be determined by the characteristics of the species as only the bear, an omnivorous animal, can be lured with food at the observation points while for the wolf and the lynx which are 100% carnivorous this method cannot be used. These two species are extremely hard to see in the wild as this

experience requires more time, specialized guides or researchers who know very well the area where these animals roam and even then the chances are low given these animals can cover tens of kilometers in just one night looking for food. In fact, one specialized wildlife guide and tour operator (TO4) who offers this type of experience mentions that the success rate of seeing a bear this way is around 15-20% and considerably lower for wolves or lynx.

The differences between the two experiences, one completely in the wild tracking the large carnivores and the other one in a confined location where the bear is attracted with food, potentially create two types of wildlife experiences, one authentic and one staged with implications in terms of organization, tourists and socio-economic benefits. For instance, the organization of the first type requires the efficient collaboration of the tour operator with specialized and experienced wildlife guides, foresters or researchers, the wildlife fund manager not being necessarily included.

This is the case of the tracking in the area of Brasov, usually done in the protected and mountainous areas of its vicinity. As no access fees apply and no precise regulations exist regarding this type of tourism, the tour operators can organize the experience without involving the protected area authorities. The lack of economic instruments like access or tax fees diminishes completely the economic benefits the protected area (PA) might have captured from the organization of these tours on its territory and moreover creates the possibility that private operators appropriate the biggest part of the economic rent generated by the PA that is state owned and hence supported through taxpayer contributions. According to Davis et al. (2011) this type of private appropriation of the profits generated by a public natural resource hinders its sustainable use as there are low or no economic returns to the community.

Moreover, the lack of fees and taxes for this type of commercial activity hinders the development of an economic value for the PA and creates the risk of market failure<sup>22</sup> with further consequences on the inefficient use of resources. While the level of tracking wildlife done at the moment in the area of Brasov is generally low and will likely remain this way, 2-3 experienced tour operators offering this for very small groups, and hence with assumed minimal environmental impacts, we can still argue that as long as the profits generated by a public funded resource, the PA, and a state owned resource, the wildlife, are not fairly distributed including to the PA and the nearby local community, the economic sustainability is threatened.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> Appears when natural resources have no market price assigned (Davis et al., 2001)

Tracking large carnivores for tourism purposes is also done in the Harghita area, nevertheless this experience being as the interviewed wildlife manager said, just beginning at a commercial level as a response to a growing tourist demand for this type of experience. In this specific case, the situation is slightly different as this wildlife manager represents one of the few wildlife funds<sup>23</sup> still managed by the state forestry administration. In this case, we can assume that the economic benefits from the use of a state owned natural resource, the wildlife, are also appropriated by state representatives, diminishing this way the risk of economic unsustainability. Nevertheless, only three wildlife funds are managed by the state in the area of Harghita, the other ones having private management which furthermore, in the absence of specific rules on WT, reduces the chances of the revenue obtained through WT also reaching the state.

The second type of experience, watching bears at the observation points, appears to be the most used type of wildlife encounter as it involves a higher rate of success, a shorter duration and bigger groups, hence more economic revenues for wildlife funds and tour operators. As no organization or institution appears to have any record on the number of these observation points used for commercial tourism in any of the locations, the author will relate only to the number the respondents indicated, with the clear mention that these are estimates. Therefore, in the area of Brasov six hides are located on private land and managed by both state and private wildlife funds. While most respondents indicated the existence and constant use of these six hides, one tour operator also mentioned that three more are soon to be opened on another wildlife fund. In the area of Harghita, the exact number of the observation points used for commercial wildlife observation is also unclear, at least 3-4. From the six hides in Brasov, five of them are spacious enough for groups of 15-20 tourists and some respondents indicate that some of them are used exclusively for bear observation and have no hunting function.

The wildlife experience at the bear hides usually lasts from 2-3 hours to 5-6 hours, depending on the season, longer in the summer, and takes places in the evenings when the bear is expected to come at the feeding area in the nearby of the hide. Tourists have to follow strict rules during this experience, mostly related to staying in silence or talking in low voice to avoid scaring off the bear. At all times they are accompanied by an armed forester and although no violent incidents were signaled at the observation points, one tour operator suggests this is an adventure:

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> In Romania, the wildlife national fund is organized in wildlife funds in order to more efficiently manage the wildlife populations, all wildlife being state owned. Most funds are located on private land and are administered by different hunter associations or in some cases, by the local forestry authorities. The administration of wildlife funds is attributed on a 10 year period. Source: <a href="https://www.agvps.ro">www.agvps.ro</a>

"people realize oh well there are so many bears coming now to the feeding point and we have to get out there, it is getting dark and we have to go back to the car, how do we do that?" (TO1)

While all respondents mention that the encounter can never be guaranteed given the wild nature of the bear, the tour operators interviewed argue that Romania has the best potential for this type of bear observation in comparison to its other competing countries on this niche. Respondents indicated probabilities of at least 75% to see this way the bear in the area of Brasov and around 70% in the area of Harghita, all those directly involved mentioning however that factors like weather or mating periods can affect the chances of an encounter. Nonetheless, as this high success rates attracts more tour operators, potential risks related to the quality of the experience might appear, one specialized wildlife tour operator affirming that they consider limiting the use of what all tour operators consider to be the most famous and successful observation point: "I use the one in Valea Strambei, the best organized, but I want to retreat a bit because it's a bit too touristic for me now" (TO1).

Unlike the first type of wildlife experience, in the wild, that in most cases involves the tour operator, the guide and the tourists, this second, somehow less authentic encounter, involves another stakeholder, the manager of the wildlife fund that appears to be a key element in how and if the environmental sustainability of this activity is reached. Next, the wildlife tourists, as seen through the eyes of the respondents will be discussed, before addressing the dimensions of WT sustainability.

#### **Tourists**

Similar to the situation relating to the number of hides, no statistics exist on the actual number of tourists that use these bear observation points in either Brasov or Harghita area or that choose wildlife tracking. We can only assume that in Harghita, based on the information obtained from the respondents, the levels are most likely to be very low, around maybe a couple of hundreds. In this area, according to respondents directly involved in the bear observation at the hides, most tourists who choose this activity are foreigners, a substantial group being the Hungarian one. Nevertheless, given the strong connection between the Harghita area and Hungary, tourists from this country do not require the services of a tour operator and hence they organize their stay by themselves, the bear observation being an extra activity they might choose at the destination, but not the reason for which they visit the area.

A different situation appears to be in Brasov, where the interviewed wildlife manager estimates at least 2.000-3.000 tourists per year at the 6 observation points overall and TO1, the tour operator that organizes the largest groups of 15 people, estimates having 900 tourists in 2012 at these bear hides. Considering that some tour operators indicated at least

one of the hides, suitable for 15 people, being booked almost every day from May until autumn, we can assume that it is most likely for the total number of tourists who participate in the second type of wildlife experience to be indeed at least 2.000-3.000 per year.

As tour operators indicate, most tourists are middle-aged, usually experienced travellers interested in active vacations, with disposable income: "the ordinary people looking for the ordinary holiday are not interested in that because it has a price" (TO1), most of them with a previous interest in nature, usually desiring to see bears or wolves, fewer being aware of the existence of the lynx: "people who are serious about wildlife are interested in all species, but certainly the bear and wolves have a mythical image for them" (TO2). In terms of nationality, the UK and the German speaking countries appear to dominate the group, followed by French, Spanish and American. Most of them travel with a tour operator perhaps due to the negative image of Romania as one respondent suggest some visitors think Romania is some sort of Somalia. Fewer tourists appear to discover the possibility of seeing bears while already independently traveling in the country, contacting the incoming tour operators during their visit to Romania. As respondents that have direct contact with these tourists argue, their interest in participating in these tours is determined by their desire to see something they cannot find in their countries anymore, for some the large carnivores:

"they're difficult to observe, they are top of the food chain in nature, I don't know why but people have always been attracted on large carnivores, it doesn't matter if it was fear of them or desire, but they were just attracted" (JO)

Not all tourists are necessarily most attracted by wildlife, the wildlife manager from Brasov indicating that German and Spanish tourists appear to be most impressed by various types of forests. In terms of expectations, all tour operators interviewed argue that foreign tourists have some unrealistic expectations regarding the cheapness of the destination and moreover they imagine that: "in Romania they can do some African safari" (TO2).

Another important feature that can potentially segment the wildlife tourists appears to be their choice of experience: the first in the wild or the second type at the hide, one tour operator arguing that:

"for many people this is anyway too much [tracking, author's note] because you have to cover either long distances or areas that are quite steep or dense forests which is not quite easy for everybody and most of the tourism companies that come from abroad they offer wildlife tours on a smoother base" (TO1)

However, other tourists are precisely interested in tracking because they believe that feeding the bear at the observation points is not a natural process and they are searching for a complete in the wild experience even if they do not get to see the wildlife (TO4).

Based on the data from the interviews, very few of these wildlife tourists are Romanian, some of respondents assigning this lack of interest to the fact that Romanian tourists are perhaps not aware of this option or they are perhaps interested in aspects not found in Romania. Nevertheless, this apparent lack from domestic tourists could threaten the potential contribution of WT to conservation, as in the end, the national community is the one who can either defend or ignore the interests and protection of these species. In what regards tourists' satisfaction, the interviewed tour operators assign it to both tangible and intangible aspects of the wildlife experience, and although actually seeing the wildlife is the highlight, one tour operators states that:

"we go to some considerable lengths of energy to explain people the reality and for some people the satisfaction is only from learning on the situation of large carnivores even if they don't see any large carnivores" (TO2)

Similar opinions are advanced by other respondents, WM1 and TO4 arguing that tourists' satisfaction is determined by them learning more about these species, how they live, what are their habits and the threats they face:

"they are always interested in what's happening, how the conservation looks like, they're not very happy to hear that the bear is hunted, but they accept" (JO).

The educational component appears to be a strong feature for the success of both types of wildlife experience, one tour operator and wildlife guide, TO4, who offers tracking saying that this type of experience makes tourists learn by first-hand experience how to recognize tracks, wildlife habits, behaviors and also space and habitat needs for different species and their interaction and that this ultimately leads to their satisfaction. An important role in this educational process is assigned to the guide, various respondents insisting that he or she is a key stakeholder for the success of the experience:

"it is important as I said first of all to have an expert local person and the actual expert, the guide, adds to a successful experience. They talk about bears, conservation of actual species, so it's important" (JO)

Based on the answers of interviewed tour operators, some of them also having guiding experience, it appears that the educational component is a major part of tourists' satisfaction with the wildlife product, a fact that can be interpreted as encouraging the sustainability of the experience

# Contribution to conservation of species and habitat

The conservation promise appears to be one of the reasons that makes opening wilderness for tourism more acceptable, and as argued in the second chapter, this is possible in the context of WT through the generation of revenue for wildlife management and perhaps conservation, by creating socio-economic benefits that will eventually determine commercial

operators and local communities to enhance the protection of this asset and by educating and influencing visitors towards conservation. As it turns out, the interviewed stakeholders have a less idealized version on how large carnivores tourism can contribute to the conservation of these species in Romania, perhaps due to the fact that most wildlife funds are privately managed and hence have a dominant economic perspective.

In the Romanian context, the first potential conservation effect of WT appears to be linked to the fact that its profitability can reduce the economic pressure on wildlife funds by partly covering its costs, including salaries and food for the different animals, one public wildlife manager, WM1 from Brasov, mentioning the revenue obtained this way helps them plant different crops inside the forests for those species large carnivores hunt, so they are able to better manage the species of the wildlife fund. Nevertheless, it is difficult to generalize the perspective of this wildlife manager as he represents a public forestry authority whose interests might differ from those of a private wildlife manager. His approach is sustained by one tour operator, TO4, who believes that the revenues obtained through WT can increase the interest of forestry authorities to better conserve these species, the respondent insisting on the fact that in the past 10 years there has been a shift in these authorities' attitude towards WT that appear to be now more aware of its economic potential outside hunting. Furthermore, he argues that some wildlife fund managers are shifting their focus from hunting to wildlife watching, even eliminating the bear quotas they would be allowed to hunt each year.

While the income brought by wildlife watching helps these funds cover their costs and maybe even downsize the hunting pressure, their potential interest for conservation is seen with skepticism. For instance, the representant of AER argues that a wildlife fund manager is not motivated to invest in conservation and at the very best an additional conservation fee could be paid by the tourist, the respondent insisting however on the fact that this is unlikely to happen in the absence of a tourism association that would intermediate the relation between the tour operator and the wildlife managers. On a different, more positive note, the tour operator TO4 advances his own initiative of trying to convince one private wildlife fund to set aside some of the revenue obtained from WT in order to compensate local people who lost livestock in bear or wolves attacks, an initiative that if successful would truly have a conservation purposes

In what regards the second potential conservation outcome that sees WT determining stakeholders to conserve the species through the socio-economic benefits it creates, the respondents appear to be more reluctant in considering it possible in the Romanian case.

For instance, the Brasov conservationist and the AER respondent condition it by WT replacing and discouraging the hunting<sup>24</sup> and poaching of large carnivores, this being however described as an ideal scenario possible only if WT would be seen as a national interest. While more moderate, other respondents express a similar opinion, WM1 arguing that as niche tourism and in the absence of promotional domestic campaign WT cannot create an economic value that would lead to the overall better conservation of wildlife. Moreover, most respondents appear to be reluctant in assuming that this type of tourism will lead local communities to protect these species as they argue locals are either ignorant, indifferent or in a state of conflict with the large carnivores.

While positive attitudes of the local communities are also acknowledged, many of the interviewed stakeholders arguing that locals are becoming more aware that it is people who have entered the bear's habitat and not the other way around, respondents state that the lack of information on the economic benefits these species could bring if kept alive diminish the chances of WT changing their perspective. This lack of information is also translated through a lack of education as the international tour operator from Harghita points out:

"But the more educated the people or the leaders of the village communities they do realize that it is an important possibility for developing their own village or area if there's more nature to offer" (JO)

Nonetheless, as respondents from both locations argue, local authorities are less concerned if not all interested in the conservation of these species: "the problem is that the local authorities are not very reliable and have no interest in things like that" (TO1), the Brasov conservationist arguing even that some local authorities oppose wildlife conservation precisely because it hinders their unsustainable approach towards economic development usually done at the cost of their habitat. At this point, if truly "conservation is only as strong as its community support" (Buckley, 2003 in Reynolds and Braithwaite, 2001:32), WT appears to have a long and strenuous road ahead in achieving its conservation potential.

The third aspect of WT potential leading tourists to conservation attitudes enjoys some positive perspectives at least from behalf of the tour operators interviewed. Viewing or tracking large carnivores appears to increase tourists' knowledge and perhaps even changes their attitudes towards conservation aspects, as the tour operators from the area of Brasov claim. Still, other stakeholders are more reluctant in addressing this potential, advancing the fact that tourists who participate in these experiences already have a higher

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> The three large carnivores are strictly protected according to European laws, still Romania has a special permission to hunt each year a limited number of exemplars based on the total estimated populations. From 2012, no more hunting quotas are issued for lynx.

conservation awareness, so perhaps using interpretation to get them more involved is more of a preaching to the converted case<sup>25</sup>.

Concluding this part, it appears that the potential conservation dimension of WT, inherently dependent on its economic profitability, is limited in the Romanian context by the various wildlife managers involved and tour operators, the lack of a coordinating planning regarding WT, the lack of local awareness and even national awareness of wildlife as tourism attractions as few of the wildlife tourists are actually Romanian. Although perhaps possible in specific locations, for instance the notable initiative of TO4 of initiating the dialogue regarding the use of some of WT revenues to compensate local people, creating substantial conservation benefits appears hardly realistic if only commercial operators are involved and if the state who owns the species, alongside with conservation NGOs are not at all involved in designing the WT experience.

# Environmental sustainability

As any human activity in nature, large carnivore tourism in Romania is bound to have some negative impacts on the sensitive environments where it takes place. However, the way in which wildlife tourism managers address and handle these negative impacts can lead this type of tourism towards environmental sustainability or to a "short term mining of the resource" (Valentine and Birtles, 2004:52). Given the extent of tourism volume of the second type of experience in comparison with tracking large carnivores in the wild, the potential environmental impacts and their management will be addressed in the context of the first experience, bear observation at special hides.

In this case, the bear appears to be the most exposed of the three large carnivores to any negative WT impacts and two main direct impacts, habituation and disturbance, are identified by the interviewed wildlife managers and the Harghita conservationist. While the extent of the second impact caused by WT is compared by one wildlife manager to a mosquito bite in comparison to the existing environmental threats in Romania, feeding appears to be in the Romanian case the most visible of the potential negative impacts addressed in the literature chapter. Nevertheless, the interviewed stakeholders have contradictory opinions on this method, their diverse opinions confirming Orams' (2002) view that this practice remains a controversial one. For instance, according to the Harghita conservationist this is the most dangerous negative effect of WT because, if done on longer periods of time, similar to what is being done in the Brasov area at the WT observation points, it influences and modifies the bear's natural behavior, making the individual more

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> Situation addressed by Beaumont (2001)

habituated and hence more vulnerable to human presence, some of the consequences also identified by Orams (2002) in the second chapter.

A similar opinion is shared by the interviewed wildlife manager from Brasov who nevertheless admits having a dual opinion on this issue, also arguing for some upsides of feeding, the food supplement allowing younger bears to survive especially in sensitive periods of the year. On a different note, the second wildlife manager interviewed, WM2 from Harghita, does not consider feeding as a threat for the behavior of this species as he believes the bear's long-term behavior will not be negatively influenced, moreover insisting that the past 25-30 years of human intrusion into this habitat have in fact habituated the bear to the anthropic factor.

Outside this specialist group of wildlife managers and specialists, one tour operator advances a more pragmatic opinion clearly linking the feeding of the bear to the economic benefit and to the fact that it was already done before for hunting purposes, only this time it is done for WT:

"if you don't do it, you will not see the animals, people pay for it and there is a lot of mouth to mouth talking, people recommend it and it's getting famous and people will also tell don't go there, you won't see anything. So this will spoil all this type of tourism, so there an interest to feed all year round, but you have to be careful how much you feed, if it is done well you will only feed them a little bit, just to attract them" (TO1)

The final observations of this tour operator raise a very important aspect for the sustainability of the environmental dimension as minimizing the potential negative impacts of feeding appear to be closely related to who and how manages this activity, aspect also underlined by the interviewed wildlife managers. As the wildlife manager from Brasov argues, the most important role in how the feeding is done and generally how the wildlife experience is organized belongs to the managers of the wildlife fund that has the necessary means an interests to reduce as much as possible the negative impacts. According to him, wildlife managers are the first interested in not over disturbing the bear as it might not show up the next day and also to control its habituation to humans in order to avoid human-bear conflicts they would be responsible for. In addition, the wildlife manager from Harghita argues that organizing this type of activity needs careful monitoring and argues that daily observation would over disturb the bear, stating that perhaps that up to three bear observations per month would be feasible.

In what regards the indirect impacts on the species, respondents relate this to the deterioration of habitat caused by frequent human access, noise pollution, the potential appearance of facilities and tourism accommodations due to an increase in wildlife tourists appearing to be the worst possible indirect impact for large carnivores and other species

living in that habitat. As WM1 points out, in the area of Brasov, the chaotic constructions, including tourism accommodations, have cut important corridors used by large carnivores, that leads to long-term impacts on the viability of these populations.

While managing some of the indirect impacts, such as the disruption of their habitat through disorganized constructions escapes the control of wildlife managers, they appear nonetheless to be the essential stakeholder in efficiently monitoring and managing the effects of feeding and human pressure on bears and even on other species. Their economic orientation is not however the best guarantee for a long-term approach that balances ecological needs with profits, even more if we consider that wildlife funds are taken in custody for a ten year period. Moreover, the lack of regular controls from a state authority at wildlife funds that would ensure feeding regulations are respected and the long-term well-being of the species is considered, threatens the environmental sustainability of commercial bear observation.

# Impacts on the community

As argued in the second chapter, for WT to be sustainable it appears necessary to limit its negative impacts on the community while enhancing its positive ones and eventually leading to community development. The possibility of this happening will be addressed in the context of the two locations of the study, Brasov and Harghita, based on the interviews data collected.

In the case of Brasov, WT is becoming a well-established tourism product and the interviewed respondents expect the demand for it to continue growing in the future, fact that should allow the local communities, in this case, the villages from the nearby of the wildlife attractions to enjoy some of its potential positive impacts such as economic revenue. Nonetheless, based on the answers of the respondents from this area, the development of WT in the past 10-11 years is not necessarily reflected at a similar scale in the benefits it brings to the local communities.

One potential cause is the design of the tours, the Brasov conservationist interviewed arguing that the current situation where the planning involves only the tour operator and wildlife fund manager does not leave much space for nearby local communities to benefit if the tourists come only for the bears and leave immediately afterwards without spending some time discovering the community. Nevertheless, the same respondent argues that an important obstacle in bringing this third local stakeholder in the design of the tours is the absence of local leaders capable of recognizing and seizing the opportunity. This issue is also highlighted by one tour operator who argues that:

"since the nearest local community is quite a distance away and because there are few guesthouses in the area, then it's actually to ensure those communities get any direct benefit from the bear hide so the risk is losing out on those opportunities by not developing anything. But that's partly the responsibility of local communities to offer services and our responsibility as tour operators to use them, we can't use them if they don't exist" (TO2)

As he and other respondents from Brasov indicate, this is the case of the most popular bear hide of Brasov, located in a remote valley with few organized attractions in the nearby local communities. Moreover, as the same tour operators argues:

"I think quite a lot of tour operators who are using the hide from Stramba [the hide discussed before, author's note] or taking people to Piatra Craiului [the national park, author's note] looking for tracks of large carnivores related to the nature of Piatra Craiului are still staying in Brasov and not in Zarnesti or in the area around the national park" (TO1)

One possible explanation he advances for this situation is that a lot of the tour operators involved in WT have their own local guesthouses. Moreover, he states that although spending at least one night in the nearby communities is a must of ecotourism principles, quite a few of the tour operators part of the Ecotourism Association do no respect it. It appears therefore that at least in one of the local communities living in the nearby of the wildlife attraction, the socio-economic benefits of WT development are not necessarily proportionally reflected. According to the same respondent, more positive impacts are possible in the case of larger communities from the nearby of the national parks or of other wildlife attractions, for instance Zarnesti or Rasnov, where the tourism infrastructure is better developed and more attractions are set in place. Nevertheless it is difficult to make assumptions on the actual level of WT positive impacts on these communities as these are also well known and popular mountain destination for domestic tourism.

In what regards the negative impacts, the respondents usually appear to be more concerned with the effects of uncontrolled mass tourism on the rural communities that, as they indicate, already led to some serious negative effects in some of the wildlife areas such as destruction of local identity through chaotic constructions, either vacation houses or guesthouses, fact also related to local poverty and lack of awareness:

"When you think of people like people here, simple farmers, they have lived on sheep breeding, during the communist time they have worked all at the weapons factory or paper mill, what do you expect from people like this here? They have to survive somehow and the only value they have is the land and if they can sell the land to refurbish their house, to buy a car, to build an indoor bathroom, then this is their aim. They are simple minded, it's not that they are bad, but they are simple minded" (TO1)

In the case of the second location, Harghita, it appears that the level of WT impacts varies depending on whether tourists travel precisely for wildlife observation or if this is an extra activity of an already booked holiday in the area. In the first case, the economic benefits for the local community are potentially higher than in the second case, as the interviewed

international tour operator points out that his tourists coming to see the birds and bears spend around half the tour in the communities from the nearby of the attractions: "usually 4-5 days in that area for bird watching, quite substantial, usually half of the tour around the bear places" (JO). Moreover, this tour operator clearly links the success and sustainability of his operations to the involvement of the local people as; "if you don't have any local people who were good enough and if they are involved in ecotourism especially foresters or hunters it's very difficult" (JO).

Lower positive impacts for the community are perceived by other two stakeholders from Harghita, a tourism association and a local guesthouse owner who intermediate bear observation in two different areas of the county. According to them, the low number of tourists who choose this type of activity, also dictated by its price and reduced group size, cannot create at the moment a visible positive impact on the community.

Neither respondent from this location identifies any potential negative impacts of WT on the community at the current level, the tourism association mentioning that this would happen only if this type of tourism would develop into a mass tourism activity, perspective that is not desired or encouraged. The same opinion towards future development appears to be supported by the international tour operator who argues that: "ecotourism if it's done with local experts who know what the actual area can sustain and the companies and the leaders philosophies also I cannot see any negative impacts" (JO).

It looks like that the lack of strategic planning for the development of WT threatens in both locations the spread of long-term benefits for the local communities, who as WM1 argues, should receive most of the revenue in order to change their perspective on conserving natural resources. As the Brasov conservationist believed, this is a long-term and difficult process that requires the inclusion of more stakeholders than the tour operator and the wildlife fund manager in setting up the wildlife tourism program, the local leaders appearing to be an essential element in this process. Nevertheless, as respondents from both locations indicate most local authorities are not fully aware, interested or capable in getting involved, situation also complicated by the local communities' heterogeneous relations with wildlife, aspect previously discussed. Hence, without denying its positive impacts in some nearby communities of the wildlife areas, the author believes that in the absence of proper coordination they will most likely remain sporadic and context based, less capable of balancing any negative effects of WT might cause or actively leading to community development.

# Economic sustainability

In discussing the economic sustainability of WT in Romania, the author will relate to its need to ensure the commercial viability of business operations, but also to the fair distribution of its benefits among all stakeholders. Addressing the first aspect, at least in the area of Brasov, WT based on large carnivores appears to be a viable commercial activity with the condition of being done the wright way: "You can live on it if you do it the right way, but you have to be honest, it is not large scale, it's very limited in the number of persons and that makes the price higher" (TO1), an opinion shared by the other tour operators interviewed from the area of Brasov.

A less commercial viable approach appears however to exist in one of the locations from Harghita that offers bear observation as, according to the local tourism association interviewed, the guide gives half of the money back if the bear does not show up at the hide. This type of approach can seriously threaten the commercial viability of the whole operation and moreover it can menace the sensitive balance between the economic and ecological factor, best expressed by one tour operator from the area of Brasov:

"you have to combine both, the economic factor and the wildlife protection factor and if you don't have money you will not protect the animals so it's good to have this, but you have to see how you do it and do it the right way" (TO1).

In what regards the second aspect, the fair distribution of economic benefits, the discussion appears to be substantially more complex, especially in the absence of clear data on what are the exact revenues. The situation is furthermore complicated by the fact that no precise regulations exist for wildlife watching, fact that has some important consequences on how and if the benefits are equitably distributed among all stakeholders, one essential aspect for its sustainability being how the most important stakeholder, the wildlife which is state owned, profits in comparison to other stakeholders involved.

One economic concept, the economic rent, looks useful in this sustainability discussion as the wildlife resource is a public good as well as the protected areas where wildlife tracking is done. The question appears therefore to be who appropriates the economic rent obtained from the exploitation of a public good as the state appears to be almost completely absent from WT management as most wildlife funds are located on private lands that are rarely managed by public wildlife authorities. At first sight two main stakeholders share the economic rent, the tour operator and the wildlife fund, the final cost appearing to reflect their commercial interests:

"this is all part of the negotiation. I have to tell him I can bring you more people, but I have to sell at a certain price because if I pay people going there this cannot be. I have a business and I have to get out at least plus minus zero, or have a little income from it" (TO1)

However, we can argue that one of them, the wildlife fund, uses at least partly the money for wildlife management and hence returns part of the economic rent generated by a public good, diminishing to a certain degree the potential risk of unsustainability use of this resource. The situation is less clear in the context of wildlife tracking in the wild as the open access makes the protected area (PA) and therefore the state to miss out on revenue appropriated by private operators that does not necessarily returns to the PA. In this context, the absence of specific regulations on WT development can represent a threat for the fair distribution of benefits, as the wildlife, and hence the state who generates the input is not properly compensated.

On the other hand, as argued in the second chapter, WT development can potentially create an economic value that could lead to a better protection of this natural resource: "I hope that by offering realistic wildlife experience for tourists in Romania in a very small way we can increase the public view of their economic value [wildlife, author's note]" (TO2). This is however a long-term process, the wildlife manager from Brasov insisting that until now this happened only punctual and that it is unlikely to be otherwise given the fact that WT in Romania is and should remain a niche type of tourism.

#### Sustenance of the resource and its CPR features

These two dimensions will be further addressed together given their inherent link. The next discussion applies to both locations, given the problems that will be addressed are a national reality.

As mentioned in the second chapter, wildlife and its habitat represent the key stakeholder as its maintenance or degradation affects all other parts involved, hence its conservation should be a goal for those actors who wish to obtain long-term benefits from its development. Nevertheless, in the Romanian context, the threats to this resource escape the control of the private operators involved and rely more on the state's capacity, the owner of the resource, to control and eventually stop them. With the exception of the interviewed local authority representative from Brasov, all other respondents argue that the state is either incapable or unwilling to protect the wildlife resource, an aspect very eloquently addressed by one of the tour operators:

"concerned that the government is encouraging deforestation and is discouraging the setting up or maintenance of protected areas as well and there is also concern that the government is encouraging hunters, some of the most serious and devastating hunters in Romania are members of the government" (TO2)

Furthermore, there appears to a very crystallized and homogeneous opinion among respondents regarding the threats that exist upon the large carnivores in Romania: fragmentation and loss of habitat through extensive logging and chaotic constructions, including tourism resorts, poaching and human intrusion in their habitats. This unsustainable and apparently uncontrolled type of natural resource exploitation that threatens the maintenance of the wildlife resource inherently creates significant risks for the viability of WT, as one international tour operator offering bear observation in Harghita argues:

"Definitely, I mean if you start operating in a place and suddenly the structure of the forest changes it's only a couple of years and large carnivores could either disappear or move to a different location" (JO)

In this context and given the lack of proper state protection and clear regulation for natural resources, the vulnerability of wildlife tourism increases as it appears to possess Common Pool Resource characteristics that make its sustainability even harder to reach as both principles of non-excludability and subtractability apply to the habitat of large carnivores, some of the interviewed stakeholders having a first-hand experience of their consequences. For instance, several tour operators, but also the wildlife manager from Brasov have emphasized the fact that wildlife watching can, in some of the locations, become a failure due to the uncontrolled access of tourists with mountain bikes, endure bikes or other off road vehicles on the forestry roads that lead to the hides, their noise scaring the bears away and hence threatening the success of the experience. As one wildlife manager points out, their access with those types of vehicles on roads closed for public circulation, although illegal, cannot be stopped even if the natural area is private or publicly owned and gives several examples of the violent behavior of these type of free riders. As a result, the lack of means to control their access leads to the overexploitation of the natural resource, one tour operator arguing that as a result:

"if you go in the summer where the pastures are now, what do you think you'll find. Not only garbage, but everything is turned up and down because of the enduro bikes and the ... and these aren't places they should go, but this is the problem, the weakness of park authority and local authorities" (TO1)

The uncontrolled access and overexploitation of the large carnivores habitat cannot only be attributed to tourists. As the Harghita conservationist states, Romania's aggravating economic and social problems, most visible in rural communities, determine poor members of the local communities to rely on selling mushrooms, berries and other food products that imply their constant presence in the habitat of large carnivores, disturbing them and hence potentially decreasing the chances of their successful observation in a WT context.

These CPR features, likely to exacerbate in the absence of proper local authority involvement, and its development on a deteriorating environmental resource appear to threaten at this point the viable and long-term development of WT in Romania. An integrated planning approach based on the active collaboration of all its stakeholders, including local authorities, appears to be one of the few realistic ways to address these risks. If and how this is possible will be next discussed.

# WT planning, stakeholder collaboration and political support

As it appears from the discussions with the interviewed stakeholders, at the moment, the development of WT in Romania is not integrated in any local or national specific strategy, potentially due to the lack of interest or capacity of planning authorities to seize this opportunity. In fact some of the respondents argue that the local and central authorities are interested in developing a different type of tourism, the AER representative and the tour operators from the area of Brasov indicating that this is clearly nothing related to ecotourism, for instance new ski slopes, aqua parks or off roads in sensitive natural areas. As TO4 argues, the interest of responsible authorities is more likely to appear only as a result of foreign promotional materials on WT in Romania that usually capture the authorities' attention more than domestic initiatives.

This fact appears to indicate a general lack of cooperation between the tourism industry and the tourism authorities, the AER respondent strengthening this assumption through his remark that the collaboration process works well only at a declarative level. As he adds, in reality the lack of knowledge, of political will and the constant human resource replacement sometimes with unqualified people at the highest decisional positions makes a coordinated approach towards developing sustainable tourism highly unlikely.

Moreover, an eventual planning approach towards WT appears to be hindered by the political factor, the AER respondent arguing that the Romanian political climate is an obstacle for any kind of responsible tourism, stating that any future ecotourism initiative can only develop sliding through the responsible, but apparently not interested authorities. Some respondents connect their lack of interest with a general short-term thinking:

"the first thing is they are elected for four year and their way of thinking is directed to four years, limited to four years because they don't know whether they will be reelected and in this four years their main aim is to earn as much money as possible for them and their family. There's no common interest, this is lacking in Romania now very much and I think this got destroyed in all those years of communism" (TO1)

This lack of strategic vision appears to act as an essential obstacle for an efficient collaboration between the various stakeholders of WT: local authorities, protected areas, conservation NGOs, tourism industry and wildlife fund managers. While the last two have the economic motivation to maintain a viable cooperation, an extended partnership appears to be highly complicated, at least in the area of Brasov, where important tensions shaped the relation between some local authorities and the protected area in the region. A slightly different situation appears to be at least in one the areas of Harghita where the tourism association that intermediates bear observations was set up at the initiative of local authorities, confirming the statement of the AER representant that the planning or promotion of WT depends very much on the support of local authorities.

Nevertheless, the absence of proper regulations on WT might lead to its chaotic development as in the absence of clear guidelines not all tour operators behave responsibly, for instance the Brasov wildlife manager presenting the case of some tourists that were told by their tour operator they could hand feed the bears at the observations point. This type of regulations appear to be even more stringent as the interviewed tour operators predict a growing tourist demand for WT in Romania, opportunity that is apparently also seized by the other main stakeholder, the wildlife funds, the interviewed wildlife managers arguing that more wildlife funds are beginning to focus on this type of observation. While most respondents believe setting some guidelines would enhance the quality of the product by setting some standards, none of them believes the authorities are capable of properly implementing such a system: "I don't think it would actually help with the observation, the bureaucracy would be bigger" (JO).

Concluding this part, it seems that currently wildlife tourism in Romania is developing without proper planning and coordination, missing the involvement of important stakeholders like local communities and authorities. Moreover, it lacks political support and an eventual collaboration of its most relevant actors appears to be unlikely or at least inefficient as the local authorities are not seen capable of handling this process and few other if any viable options are identified.

# 4.4. Discussing the findings

Having concluded both parts of the analysis, it appears that several main aspects relevant for the exploration of the research question can be further addressed in the light of the obtained findings. First, it seems that wildlife tourism in Romania develops ad-hoc, as according to both parts of the analysis, non-consumptive forms of WT are not integrated in the existing tourism planning documents and, as emphasized by the interviews, it is less likely that will be included given the different vision on tourism development of responsible authorities.

Second, wildlife tourism is part of a Romanian tourism sector marked by a weak competitiveness at international levels and by a constant absence of political support combined with a significant lack of policy and planning transparency. Moreover, it develops in a tourism sector that does not have a coherent approach towards sustainability, the lack of knowledge, of awareness, the short-term interests and the instability of the responsible authorities appearing to be significant obstacles for developing this direction, finding backed-up by both parts of the analysis.

Third, large carnivores tourism in Romania appears to be led by an heterogeneous group of tour operators<sup>26</sup> whose responsible attitude towards creating realistic market expectations and even integrating conservations awareness aspects seems connected to their involvement in a conservation project that ended 10 years ago or on their membership to an ecotourism association that sets certain sustainability rules.

Fourth, wildlife tourism depends and grows on a deteriorating environmental resource, fact underlined by both parts of the analysis. This aspect poses a very serious threat for the sustenance of the resource given the lack of authorities' concern, interest or awareness towards conservation problems, aspect highly emphasized by interview respondents in the second part of the analysis. Moreover, large carnivores tourism in Romania presents Common Pool Resources features that, according to the stakeholders interviewed, menace the success of the wildlife experience and furthermore hinder its sustainability prospects.

Fifth, it seems that WT has limited socio-cultural and economic benefits for the local communities as it appears this stakeholder is not aware of the potential use of wildlife in a non-consumptive manner or does not have the capacity to get involved, weakness also caused by the difficult relation existing between local authorities in regards to conserving natural resources on one hand and seizing ecotourism opportunities on the other. Moreover, following the interview analysis, it looks like although commercially viable, the revenues are

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> Brasov case

not fairly distributed given tour operators and partly wildlife managers appropriate the most significant part of the economic rent generated by a public good which further limits the economic sustainability dimension.

Sixth, it appears that WT evolves in the absence of specific rules and guidelines, without the collaboration of all relevant stakeholders, especially those who could argue for the ecological interests of the wildlife resource. This leaves wildlife protection at the latitude of two actors whose primarily interests are related to economic gains, wildlife managers and tour operators, seen in this research as limiting the environmental sustainability and furthermore the conservation potential of WT that, as respondents argue, will make a difference only if WT produces enough revenue to replace hunting.

Taking into consideration these findings, the author argues that, at least at the present moment, large carnivores tourism activities in Romania are not developed in a sustainable manner. As one tour operator indicates, currently the sustainability of WT appears to be more accidental as:

"the amount of WT is really very small and that is partially sustainable and that some of it is done in a sustainable way and some of it with complete disregard to sustainability, but the biggest threats are not from tourism, are from other things. But, I don't think that things done sustainable are done because people are fully aware of what it means, it's more accidental because it's a very small based activity" (TO2)

Nonetheless, while no tourism attraction can ideally fulfill all the sustainability dimensions (UNEP, 2006), the author considers that sustainability cannot be accidental as this admits a temporary state and not one that would allow future generations to enjoy the same benefits as those living in the present.

# 5. Conclusions

This research set out to explore how sustainable is wildlife tourism based on large carnivores in Romania, departing from the assumption that sustainability is a must if WT is to balance its potential negative and positive outcomes. Two locations at the opposite ends of the development scale of WT were chosen and two qualitative research methods were used to understand how and if large carnivores tourism done in Romania incorporates the sustainability concept. Having analyzed the data collected in the context of the dimensions seen as relevant following the theoretical chapter, we can argue at this point that large carnivores tourism in Romania does not appear to integrate sustainability in a coordinated manner, its current reduced negative impacts being more the consequence of its small-scale than of its planning according to the principles of sustainable development.

Moreover, in the present case in which WT is developing on a fragile and threatened natural resource, without regulations established through participatory planning and without the collaboration of all concerned stakeholders, including those who protect wildlife, in which uninformed local communities are left aside and at best have limited economic benefits from WT, sustainability cannot be a realistic or solid component. This situation can lead to long-term negative consequences for both the viability of the wildlife resource and of the commercial operations if Romania is to take advantage of its considerable wildlife tourism potential. Nonetheless, as WT development in this country is still in its early stages and as argued in the second chapter, sustainability is a continuous process (UNEP, 2006), the current situation can improve with the condition of efficient stakeholders' cooperation and participatory planning based on sustainability principles.

At this point, it appears clear that addressing wildlife tourism sustainability is a complex endeavor and that further research, both qualitative and quantitative, is necessary in this direction. While the author considers the theoretical choices regarding the sustainability dimensions to be appropriate, it appears that some elements could be better analyzed if addressed separately. This is the case of those dimensions related to tourists' satisfaction, socio-cultural, environmental and economic sustainability that would require a more detailed and context based analysis. The author would also like to underline the need of study cases on wildlife tourists to better understand market demands that can further shape the experience and hence its sustainability and on the efficiency of wildlife interpretation in leading to conservation attitudes or behaviors. Besides, longitudinal case studies based on specific wildlife attractions, for instance bear observation points, would allow the testing of existing wildlife tourism frameworks and provide essential information on how and why large carnivores tourism in Romania evolves in a certain way.

In the end, the author acknowledges the limitations of this paper, some inherent in terms of time and financial resources that restrained the extent of the research and others related to the absence of any kind of relevant information regarding the extent of WT in Romania, for instance on the number of wildlife tourists, wildlife attractions or the revenues it generates.

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# 7. Appendix

### **Appendix 1: Interview guide**

The interview guide was designed in order to elicit answers related to the sustainability dimension addressed in the second chapter. Most of the questions were similar for all interviewed stakeholders. In order to avoid overextending this section, the author decided to include both the common and the specific questions in one single part, mentioning to whom they were addressed.

### Views on large carnivores tourism (all respondents)

What do you think of developing this type of tourism in Romania's natural areas?

Can WT be an alternative for the protection of large carnivores in this area and other areas of Romania? In what conditions?

How developed is wildlife tourism in the area of Brasov/Harghita?

How do you think it will evolve in the coming years?

Who controls the viability of these touristic activities, for instance the organization of the observation/experience?

### **Environmental sustainability (all respondents)**

Which of the three species is more likely to be observed? Why?

Should tourist activities of observation be organized during sensitive periods (breeding etc)?

What do you think are the potential negative effects of this type of tourism on the wildlife and its habitat?

Are there negative effects on other associated species?

What effects are the least/most dangerous? Why?

Can wildlife tourism pose a serious threat to the long-term survival of these species and their habitats?

What is your opinion on feeding as a technique to facilitate tourist observation of these species?

How do you think feeding for tourism purposes should be managed?

How could this type of tourism be managed to limit its potential negative impacts? Who manages it at the moment?

What are the main obstacles for an efficient management?

### Operational aspects (all respondents)

Have you participated in the planning of wildlife tourism activities in these areas? If no, would you be interested?

How do you think this planning process should look like?

How involved in this process do you think local authorities should be?

Do you think a code of conduct for large carnivores tourism would be necessary? Why yes/no? Who should design it?

Do you think a licensing requirement specific for wildlife tour operators would be appropriate?

How would you describe a responsible wildlife tour operator?

If there was a regional or national campaign on large carnivores tourism in Romania, what should be advertised as the main reason to go?

#### Sustainable tourism (all respondents)

What do you think determines the sustainability of wildlife tourism in particular and nature-based tourism in general?

Do you think large carnivores tourism in this area and generally tourism in Romania is sustainable? Why yes/not?

### Tour operators general aspects (tour operators/wildlife guides)

What are your company's long-term goals?

How long have you been offering large carnivores trips in Romania?

Are you a specialized wildlife tour operator/quide? If yes, what motivated you to choose this?

If no, what other types of tourist activities do you offer?

How many large carnivores tours do you offer in Romania?

What's the average size of the groups?

The WT product (tour operators/wildlife guides/wildlife managers)

How do you design the wildlife tourism experience?

Please describe the large carnivores experiences you offer (duration, seasonality etc)?

How long tourists stay in the area where they observe the wildlife?

How accessible are the locations where the encounter takes place?

What's the reliability of the encounter?

What techniques are used to increase its chances?

What are the factors you consider when planning for the WT experience?

Do you partner with wildlife managers/tour operators or other local actors in planning the experience?

How would you define a successful WT experience?

What are the main threats to the success of the experience? How do you manage these threats?

What do you think are the most important aspects of the large carnivores experience for tourists?

What other elements could be added to make the experience more attractive for tourists?

What are the possible dangers for the tourists? How do you tackle them?

Do you employ interpretation techniques to enhance the experience? If yes, what are its goals, who and how delivers it?

Can wildlife tourism experience can change tourists' attitudes towards these species? In what conditions?

### Wildlife markets (tour operators/wildlife guides/wildlife managers)

How would you describe your wildlife tourists (socio-demographic etc)?

Are tourists interested in knowing more about the large carnivores they observe?

Are tourists aware or preoccupied of their potential negative impact?

How specialized would are your tourists in regard to large carnivores observation? (a brief explanation on the authors' view on specialization will be provided at this point)

What is the current level of demand for large carnivores tourism in Romania? How do you think this level of demand will evolve in the next years?

What do you think determines people to desire to see large carnivores?

How would you describe the level of competition for large carnivores tourism in this area?

How easy/difficult it's to enter this wildlife tourism sector?

Generally, do you think wildlife tourism is a trend or does it have a well-defined market?

#### Market expectations (tour operators/wildlife guides/wildlife managers)

What are tourists' expectations in regard to the WT experience before living it? Do they match the actual experience?

How do they cope with the possibility of not encountering the large carnivores?

What are the features that most/least interest wildlife tourists?

How do you market your large carnivores trips?

### Tourist satisfaction (tour operators/wildlife guides/wildlife managers)

How would you define tourist satisfaction in the context of large carnivores tourism?

What factors do you think determine tourist satisfaction? What are essential?

Is the educational/interpretive aspect is relevant for tourists' satisfaction?

What could be done to enhance tourists' satisfaction?

### Socio-cultural sustainability (all respondents)

What benefits do you think this type of tourism and tourism in general brings to the local community?

What costs do you think this type of tourism and tourism in general brings to the local community?

What could be done to enhance the benefits and limit the costs?

## **Economic sustainability** (tour operators/wildlife guides/wildlife managers)

What fees do you pay to organize these trips in this protected/natural area?

What is the average price of the large carnivores trip you offer? What costs do they include?

What services tourists use in the wildlife destination?

Could you say if your WT tours are profitable or at least self-funding?

How would your business be affected in the species of interest would not present anymore in this location? How would you react in this case?

Is there a public perception on the economic value of wildlife and its habitat? What would that be? (all respondents)

Do you think large carnivores tourism could enhance this economic value? (all respondents)

### **Conservation aspects (all respondents)**

What do you think are the main threats for the conservation of these species? How can they be tackled?

What is the local/central authority's attitude towards this issue?

Can WT be an incentive for central/local authorities to implement efficient measures for biodiversity conservation? In what conditions?

### **Relation with other stakeholders**

### with the host community (all respondents)

How would you describe the local community from a socio-cultural perspective?

How is the host community included in your tours? (tour operators)

How do you think the host community feels about large carnivores tourism development?

What do you think is the hosts' attitudes towards large carnivores? Do you think this type of tourism can modify these attitudes?

What is locals' attitude towards tourists in general and wildlife tourists in particular? Is there any interaction between locals and wildlife tourists?

#### with local authorities? (all respondents)

How involved are local authorities in planning for this type of tourism? How involved do you think they should be?

## with tour operators (wildlife guides/managers/local authority)

How do you collaborate with wildlife managers?

### with the wildlife managers (tour operators/wildlife guides)

How do you collaborate with wildlife managers?

### with wildlife and their habitat (all respondents)

How do you feel about the three large carnivores and generally about wildlife?

How do you think their populations should be managed in this area?

Do you think your trips can have a negative impact on large carnivores and their habitat? If yes, please elaborate on what the impacts are/ what actions do you take in this respect

# The WT destination (all respondents)

What do you think are the strengths and opportunities of this location as a large carnivores tourism destination?

What do you think are the threats and weaknesses of this location as a large carnivores tourism destination?

What other attractions make/could make the area a popular tourist destination?

## Appendix 2

This section includes brief resumes of all interviews.

#### Stakeholders Brasov

#### 1. Ecotourism Association

(2h interview, referred to as AER representant in the analysis part)

This stakeholder generally has a positive opinion regarding WT, considering it should develop also outside Brasov, arguing that its potential future development at a national level might help raise the awareness of Romanian citizens regarding this resource. Nonetheless, the respondent advances problems related to the absence of responsible destination management organizations that should promote and plan WT and sees the local and central authorities as being incapable of managing this task. The reasons he advances for this are the lack of political will, of knowledge and the constant changes of human resources depending on political factors.

Moreover, this respondent argues that responsible authorities' vision on tourism is far from being sustainable, the economic gain being the main motivation. He further connects this economic vision with the weak chances for WT to lead to wildlife conservation as, he argues, the revenues would have to be large enough to replace hunting as the first option. This stakeholder connects sustainable tourism to responsible tour operators that create realistic market expectations, to the tourists' spending taking place as much as possible inside the community and to tourism contributing to conservation. Nonetheless, he considers that in general tourism in Romania, including Brasov, is extremely unsustainable, in the case of Brasov this state being related to the type of tourists that are not willing to pay more and to the fact that most tourism businesses are not locally owned.

In what regards the negative impacts of WT, the respondents indicates potential wildlife behavioral changes in the absence of regulations, conflicts at the tour operators' and wildlife managers' level, risks regarding tourists' safety and risks of increasing bear-human conflicts that could lead to bad press for the WT experience.

On the local communities, this stakeholder believes the locals' cultural identity is not strong enough to resist external influences and gives some examples of chaotic development<sup>27</sup> from the area of Brasov, arguing that generally in Romania local cultures are not appreciated.

This respondent is skeptical on the possibility of wildlife funds contributing to conservation, considering a more viable alternative would be adding a conservation fee to the tax tourists pay.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup> Bran and Moieciu, two traditional villages from Brasov whose specific was destroyed by uncontrolled tourism development, they are constantly used as negative examples by many of the interviewed stakeholders from this location

### 2. Wildlife manager (also wildlife guide and forestry engineer)

2h interview (referred to as WM1 in the analysis part)

This stakeholder has a positive opinion on WT development in Romania he sees leading to nature protection and economic gains with the condition of it remaining a niche activity, otherwise arguing that the resource would be seriously impacted. Directly involved in the commercial wildlife experience, this respondent appears to have a dual opinion regarding feeding as a technique to lure the bear to the observation point. As he points out, some serious potential negative effects like habituation and further exacerbation of bear-human conflicts are possible, but on the other hand it helps younger individuals to survive given the anthropic pressure on a diminishing habitat. Furthermore, he links WT conservation potential to the generation of revenues that can help cover some of the costs of wildlife management and even to change local people's attitude towards large carnivores. Nonetheless, as he points out this is a long-term process that can take up to 50 years.

In what regards the local authorities, this respondent indicates an improvement in their attitude towards these species, mentioning however some serious tensions between the authorities from one village and the administration of the nearby national park. Moreover he argues that local authorities will only get involved in WT development if the activity is profitable enough, other being the priorities in the Romanian tourism sector. Besides, as he points out, some local authorities encourage unsustainable tourism development as this brings them votes from less responsible owner in the local elections.

Considering the threats large carnivores face, this stakeholders indicates loss of habitat through fragmentation as a result of chaotic and unsustainable constructions taking place, stating that the negative effects of WT are like a mosquito bite compared to what happens to the environmental resources in Romania.

This respondent believes the demand for this type of tourism will continue to grow, but insists on the fact that a quality product needs to be constantly offered as the competition on these tourists is significant. Regarding tourists he addresses some very interesting points on their expectations of Romania being some sort of poor African country, negative image they change following their visit. Furthermore, he argues that a successful experience and tourists' satisfaction is very much connected to the educational component that he sees necessary given the wildlife tourists he guides are generally experienced travellers who want more from the experience than seeing the bears. Nonetheless, he sees the wildlife experience threatened by the CPR characteristics of the species' habitat.

This wildlife manager believes regulations are needed to limit the number of tour operators and their quality as he gives examples of some of them creating unrealistic and potentially dangerous expectations for tourists. Nevertheless, he does not know who would have the capacity to efficiently control the eventual implementation of WT regulations.

### 3. Wildlife Tour operator and local guesthouse owner

(2h, referred to as TO1 in the analysis part)

TO1 was part of the CLCP project and started its commercial activity as a wildlife tour operator following this project. According to this respondent, initially this type of activity was not well seen by the National Forest Authority that did not perceive the potential economic benefits from wildlife outside hunting, fact that complicated this form of tourism in the first years and somehow hindered its development in Romania, the respondent mentioning that other competing countries with lower wildlife populations are better positioned in this business. TO1 considers both economic and ecological aspects are important in wildlife tourism, insisting on the fact that animals cannot be protected in the absence of economic gains. This tour operator advances several aspects regarding the difficult collaboration with local authorities such as lack of interest or reliability, mentioning that at least in the village where her guesthouse is located, the mayor shows up only once every four years, before the elections, ignoring essential problems as waste management. According to this stakeholder, this attitude and behavior relates to the short-term thinking of local authorities and to a general lack of common interest. Moreover, the respondents gives some more detailed accounts on the tensioned relation that exists between the national park in the area on one side and some of the local communities and authorities on the other side, the result being the weak authority of the park in the face of chaotic tourism development.

In what regards feeding, this tour operator sees it as a necessary action to ensure the reliability of the encounter and to further promote a wildlife observation point, emphasizing the fact that feeding was initially done for hunting and that the responsibility of correctly feeding the bear belongs to the wildlife manager. This respondents believes logging and unplanned building into the forests are the biggest threats faced by large carnivores and other wildlife species in Romania, remarking how the valley where her guesthouse is located developed in the past 15 years. She also mentions the large number of people constantly going into the forests, some of them with mountain bikes or endure bikes threatening the success of her commercial activities as they scare away the bears. Furthermore, she considers local authorities are not concerned with wildlife protection and believes that in 10-15 years the village where her business is based will not look traditionally anymore as locals are selling their land which might lead to the repetition of some chaotic tourism development like in the nearby villages.

TO1 believes the demand for wildlife experience in Romania will continue to grow, this being one of the differentiating elements from other countries with mountainous relief. Nonetheless, she mentions the high competition among countries who offer this and believes Romania's negative image is the biggest disadvantage. In the area of Brasov, she believes WT activities are already very developed and potentially threatened by the level of constructions that reduced the amount of unspoilt forests and by the lack of involvement of local authorities in protecting the sensitive areas.

From an economic perspective, the respondent thinks WT is commercially viable if you do it the right way, being a small scale activity with higher costs. From an ecological point of view, TO1 argues that their tours do not have negative impacts as they keep on the marked paths and move carefully.

Finally, she states that the people involved in this type of tourism are aware it should be done sustainable and kept small scale, otherwise something similar to the African case appears.

#### 4. Tour operator

(2h, referred to as TO2 in the analysis part)

TO2 was involved in the CLCP project and has 12 years of experience in large carnivores tourism, handling small groups, insisting on the fact he announces early on potential tourists that wildlife observation cannot be guaranteed. This respondent believes Romania has the most important potential in Europe for developing wildlife tourism given the high population numbers compared to tourists' origin countries where they disappeared hundreds of years ago.

As this respondent explains, tourists' satisfaction is not linked only to the actual encounter, but also relies on the learning experience he tries to promote by presenting the real chances of seeing wildlife. Furthermore, he argues that more observation points like the most successful one in Stramba Valley and more programs of wildlife reintroduction are needed to give visitors the chance of seeing wildlife species. Nonetheless, he considers that mostly the larger communities benefit from WT activities as in smaller locations there is no tourism infrastructure, seen as the responsibility of local communities to develop. At this point, the respondent mentions some important aspects, according to him not all tour operators who are members of one ecotourism association following the principle that they should spend at least one night in the area of the observation. As he continues, most wildlife tourists are accommodated in Brasov.

Regarding the economic aspects, this tour operator explains to his tourists that the price of the experience is appropriate considering the other option wildlife managers have in generating revenue is through hunting, mentioning most tourists have the wrong impression that Romania is a cheap country. TO2 considers WT is a viable commercial activity given the great demand for it and links its success to the integrity of tour operators in presenting their clients the reality.

TO2 indicates a lack of interest from responsible authorities to tackle what he thinks are the menaces for wildlife species: deforestation and hunting, even assuming that at a certain level the government is encouraging this kind of damaging actions. He believes WT can lead to a change in authorities' attitude only on the long-term given the specific context of Romania as a former communist country.

On a wider level, TO2 argues wildlife tourism will increase, but the opportunity to see wildlife will decrease, considering its sustainability is determined by the attitude of the involved stakeholders towards it. In the specific case of Romania he thinks the level of WT is too small to make a significant negative impact in comparison to deforestation and loss of habitat, but also advances the fact that at the moment WT is partly sustainable because of its small scale size and not necessarily due to the awareness of its stakeholders.

#### 5. Brasov conservationist

(40 minutes, referred to as Brasov conservationist in the analysis part)

This stakeholder believes that WT should be done carefully as the over development in some area is not good for wildlife or tourism. Moreover, she considers WT should be combined with other opportunities and should be organized in more areas in order to avoid disturbing the animals. This conservationist argues that WT can change local communities' perspective on wildlife species, but this depends in great part on those who organize WT programs, whether they include or not the local communities.

According to this respondent, local authorities rarely seize WT opportunities, furthermore they either ignore or oppose protected areas or conservation actions. This conservationist mentions the lack of communication between authorities and protected areas' administration and also a heterogeneous attitude of locals towards large carnivores or the national park depending on how affected they are by certain restrictions. Besides indifference and rejection, she also specifies the existance of locals' who consider they are invading the wildlife's habitat and not the other way around.

In what regards the management of WT, this respondents believes there is need of another stakeholder involved, besides the wildlife manager and tour operators, who may be led mostly by short-term economic interests. The third stakeholder should protect the rights of wildlife, but she believes the existing authorities who could get involved do not have the knowledge or capacity to efficiently be part of this program.

Considering the threats for the large carnivores populations in Romania, the conservationist addresses habitat fragmentation, human intrusion and poaching, adding that local communities either ignore or oppose conservation measures as these imply the limitation of what they believe to be economic development. Moreover, she argues that central and local authorities are not interested in aspects related to conservation and that WT can actually contribute to wildlife conservation only if becomes a national business that could lead to hunting interdictions.

#### 6. Tour operator/wildlife guide

(2h, referred to as TO4 in the analysis part)

Following his participation in the CLCP project, this respondent gained a wildlife guide accreditation and started his own specialized tour operator activity. As a wildlife guide, he underlines his responsibility of making tourists aware of the uniqueness of the Romanian case of coexistence in regards to wildlife surviving in large numbers alongside local communities. TO4 mentions many foreigners come with false expectations that given the high numbers, bears are easy to see when in fact in reality bears and other large carnivore species are very difficult to spot in the wild. Nonetheless, he adds most tourists are satisfied with the experience, usually a combination of tracking and observation at the hide, because finally all of them are aware that encountering wildlife is not a sure think given the wild nature of the species of interest. Primarily focused on wildlife tracking, TO4 argues that a lot of tourists do not agree with the idea of feeding the bears in order to attract them at the observation points and that his tourists are satisfied with the tracking experience even if they do not see the wildlife they are looking for.

Regarding negative impacts, TO4 considers the actual levels of visitation to be very low and further adds he goes on different trails with larger and smaller groups to avoid any impacts of this sort. Moreover, TO4 compares the protected areas of Romania to some of the US national parks and remarks there is a long way before the level of visitation negative impacts from the US is reached. Nonetheless, he mentions the problem of chaotic tourism development, for instance endure bikes or off road vehicles that go deep into the forests and disturb the wildlife without being sanctioned. The main positive impact for the local community is seen as the image capital of Zarnesti as an ecotourism destination, TO4 further presenting some examples of changing local perceptions towards wildlife as a source of income through tourism. The connection between the wildlife and the local communities is seen as complex, the respondent indicating that even people who have lost cattle in bear or wolves attacks do not necessarily have a negative opinion on these species.

TO 4 argues the conservation of wildlife is the last on local authorities' list of priorities, giving one example of how what was supposed to become a large carnivore center with estimations of tens of thousands of visitors per year was not developed after newly elected authorities stop supporting this idea. The respondent considers habitat loss, massive deforestations and illegal constructions in wildlife's habitats as the main threats for large carnivores in Romania, in the absence of concern from responsible authorities.

This tour operator uses his experience to argue that WT can lead to a shift in visitors' attitude towards conservation as, according to his follow-up correspondence with his clients. TO4 believes Romanian tourists are not interest in this type of experience because either they are not aware or because they perceive wildlife to a normal feature and they wish to see things that do not exist in Romania. TO4 thinks the demand for WT will continue to grow, Romania having for many foreigners a nature they lost in their home countries. He adds that promoting WT is necessary, but not likely given the authorities are interested in developing another type of tourism and that generally they do not pay attention to domestic initiatives.

Concerning the conservation potential of WT, TO4 mentions his initiative of trying to persuade one wildlife manager to use small part of the revenue from WT to compensate domestic animals losses in wildlife attacks. Moreover, he argues that some wildlife funds are more orientated towards observation as these stakeholders become more aware that hunting generates economic benefits only on the short-term while wildlife observation will ensure a longer term revenue with the condition of preserving the species, a tendency that was unlikely ten years ago when hunting was seen as the main direction. In the future, TO 4 would like WT to develop based on some quality standards, but he does not know who could plan it.

# 7. Local authority (Zarnesti municipality)<sup>28</sup>

(30 minutes interview)

The local representative refers to the future tourism development of Zarnesti from mountain based tourism to a greater extent of rural tourism as one important access area in the national park will be connected through a paved road, aspect that should lead to the appearance of more local guesthouses. Moreover, he mentions a future ski slope, the

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup> The CLCP project was based in Zarnesti, a municipality located at the foothills of the National Park Piatra Craiului. Several tour operator and local guesthouses used by wildlife tourists are located in Zarnesti.

national park and the bear sanctuary as the main tourist attractions of Zarnesti. The respondent mentions strict urbanism rules will be included in the tourism development plan in order to avoid the chaotic construction of local guesthouses in the area, adding they would like to attract tourists with higher disposable income.

He refers to the WT possibility of being included in the tourism development plan, referring this as the responsibility of the national park or forestry authorities. The respondent indicates at the moment around 5-7% of locals being involved in tourism, considering tourism growth will bring a stable source of income.

Furthermore, the respondent argues that local authorities are aware of the economic value of the large carnivores, exemplifying this through their support for the bear sanctuary in Zarnesti. He considers local people are generally not informed on these species and that WT can change locals' opinion towards wildlife if they will get economic benefits from this activity, mentioning however the lack of financial possibilities of local people in getting more involved in tourism activities.

The respondent considers tourism development has no further negative impacts if it is done the right manner, and it could lead to cultural heritage preservation. Regarding the threats for the large carnivores, he mentions deforestation and poaching, mentioning he believes tourism has an insignificant negative impact. Furthermore, the respondent argues the economic benefits can compensate the potential tourism negative impacts on the environment, they would like nonetheless to be minim.

This stakeholder sees the local authorities as the main responsible part in ensuring the sustainable development of the tourism infrastructure in the area given they plan it and issue the construction permits.

### Stakeholders Harghita

### 8. International wildlife tour operator

(1h interview, referred to as JO in the analysis part)

JO has an extensive experience in conducting tours, usually bird watching, with a bear observation component in the area of Harghita. Moreover, he intends to design from next year a tour focused exclusively on brown bear observation in Romania, still in the area of Harghita, which he believes offers more chances of seeing the bear in its natural habitat than Brasov.

Regarding the wildlife experience, this tour operator mentions problems related to the fact that the bear hides are also used for hunting, aspect that made this type of commercial activity difficult when the forests were administrated by the National Forestry Authority as hunters could occupy the hide at the date when observation was supposed to take place. As he argues, the situation began to improve when private wildlife funds and younger generations of managers appeared, people who know "what the word sustainable means" (JO).

For the next bear tours of his company, JO is interested in creating a product for small groups, 2-6 persons, on longer terms and for more professional types of tourists such as photographers. This respondent believes the success of a wildlife experience depends on

the design of the tour, the logistic, the quality of the services from the host area, the tour leader, but most of all on involving local people, an aspects he considers closely linked in determining local communities to conserve their heritage.

JO considers that if done right, according to ecotourism principles, WT does not produce negative impacts. Furthermore, he mentions his tourists are also interested in the conservation related aspects of the species they see, observing a general negative attitude towards the fact that bears are still hunted. This respondent believes Romania has the most important potential in terms of large carnivores in Europe and argues the main issue in taking advantage of this potential is the lack of promotion, but also the lack of local involvement which he sees as crucial for developing ecotourism activities of this sort.

Relating to economic aspects, JO considers the existing price of the bear observation to be fair, mentioning it decreased considerably, 60-70%, from the early 90's when state wildlife funds used to foreign hunters were asking for similar fees for observation. JO considers the imposing of some rules through a licensing process would make the bureaucracy bigger without bringing many improvements,

On the threats faced by large carnivores in Romania, JO advances the deforestation as the biggest menace, one he sees capable of damaging his WT activities. Finally, he considers sustainability dependent on the level of control and the involvement of local experts who know what is affordable and what is good for nature and for the habitat.

### 9. Harghita conservationist

(1 hour, referred to as Harghita conservationist in the analysis part)

This stakeholder announces from the beginning his opposition to WT mostly because it implies feeding which he argues leads to behavioral changes for the bear populations involved. The respondent insists on the increased vulnerability of the bear to this type of behavioral impact given his opportunistic and omnivorous nature and on the fact that feeding for tourism purposes, together with increased human presence in its habitat, eventually leads to the bear's habituation with people.

This conservationist argues that habitat loss through fragmentation, chaotic tourism constructions and a general primary economic interest are the biggest threats for large carnivores populations in Romania, emphasizing his opinion that tourism is a big problem. To this note, he adds the dangers of feeding as not all wildlife managers respect the rules of what type of food should be used, nevertheless mentioning that if done right and only in limited periods of the year, a couple of weeks when photography activities could be developed, the negative impacts would not be so significant. At this point, the respondent argues that he is not necessarily against the more specialized tourists, for instance photographers, who know how to observe a bear.

According to this stakeholder, WT can also lead to other negative impacts as waste generation, noise pollution, tourism constructions close to its habitat and considers the lack of knowledge and collaboration as threats for an efficient management. The conservationist mentions that in the absence of proper rules, WT in Romania can develop chaotically, one additional problem being the way the protected areas are assigned, not always in the right manner.

The respondent argues that WT could change the perspective of local authorities towards species conservation only if they would get their share of the economic gains while for the local communities, although difficult, education appears to be the solution. Moreover, he insists on the lack of preoccupation of authorities towards the threats faced by large carnivores, their large numbers being seen as the result of the fact that proper habitats still exist, of their adaptation, but also of the fact that during the communist regime they were completely protected, hunting being an activity few could afford. As the respondent argues, modern life brought a significant disturbance for these species.

### 10. Local guesthouse

(30 minutes, phone interview)

This local guesthouse owner indicates commercial wildlife observation began in the area 10 years ago due to a growing interest at the time that nonetheless is stagnating at the moment given the costs implied by such an experience. The respondent mentions almost 100% reliability of seeing the bears in some periods while in other times the rate of success can decrease to 50%. Acting as an intermediary between the wildlife funds and the tourists who use his local guesthouses, the respondent specifies that around 3-5% of his customers, mostly Hungarian, participate in bear observation tours, the majority of them being foreigners who no longer have bears in their home countries.

Regarding the economic aspects, the respondent mentions that if the observation fee would be reduced the demand would grow considerably, a perspective that he would not encourage given the potential consequences. In fact, this stakeholder links the success of this experience to a limited group size of 4-6 people, otherwise the bears would be too disturbed and would stop coming in the following days. At this point, he makes an interesting remark, considering the bears from Harghita to be truly wild compared to those of Brasov because they leave as soon as they detect human presence.

On the threats faced by bear populations, the respondent mentions the human intrusion into its habitat, arguing however that the bear population adapts to this and that in the area of Harghita the bear numbers is too high. On a distinct note, he believes WT can lead to conservation of the species as few countries in Europe still have bears, but more promotion is needed in order to raise awareness on this aspect, including for local communities.

### 11. Tourism Association

### (1hour)

The representant of this tourism association has a mixed opinion on bear observation at hides, activity they started promoting just recently, in 2012. On one hand, he believes this is a new tourist attraction Romania can offer at a better quality than other European countries, but on the other part he mentions the fact that human feeding is not a natural process. Furthermore, he considers this type of tourism can only protect bears if WT is profitable and hence creates an incentive to protect this species.

This respondent mentions several problems in organizing a successful wildlife experience, the most important one being the fact that hunting activities can impede setting up the schedule for wildlife watching. Nonetheless, he believes that the hunting associations have

the best capacity to develop this form of tourism given they have the knowledge and the necessary infrastructure, but at the moment this direction is not implemented in their economic or cultural perspectives. This stakeholder considers that in the area of Harghita the bears are generally well protected and moreover that their population is actually too big for the existing habitat and to a certain level hunting is necessary.

Regarding the impacts on the local communities, the respondent believes at the moment the effects of WT are not noticeable given the small number of tourists, moreover as he mentions, tourists who choose to go to the bear observation point only interact with the guide. He argues that the tourist demand for this wildlife product is growing, but at the moment the tourists in his area are not very experienced, they do not come precisely for bear observation, most of them travelling from Hungary given the close ethnic connecting with this part of Romania.

The respondent considers this form of tourism should remain small-scale even if its mass development would bring more money, arguing this direction would not be sustainable.

### 12. Wildlife manager/forestry engineer

(1 hour phone interview, referred to as Harghita WM or WM2 in the analysis part)

This wildlife manager mentions from the beginning that the commercial wildlife tourism is just beginning to develop in his area as a result of a growing tourist demand for this kind of product. He has a positive opinion of the future growth of WT, mentioning more people are currently interested in seeing than hunting, adding that a decrease in hunting interest is noticeable perhaps due to the generation shift, younger people having different ideas related to wildlife.

Regarding feeding, the respondent mentions this is in fact complementary feeding, used for instance in the case of bears to keep them in a certain location in order to avoid human-bear conflicts. This wildlife manager does not consider this complementary feeding will have negative effects in terms of producing behavioral changes for bears, describing this species as being opportunistic and very intelligent. Furthermore, he argues that the changes from the past 25-30 years that resulted in constant human presence, through roads, constructions, tourism, inside the bear's habitat have led to the habituation of this species. Considering the negative effects of WT, this respondent mentions the anthropic disturbance on the species which he further relates on the features of the area. Nonetheless, he mentions these species need tranquility and is not indicated to organize daily observations in the wild. Referring to a potential future development of WT, this wildlife manager mentions the complexity of this activity which would require constant monitoring, at this point arguing that 2-3 observations per month could be organized.

He mentions that both wolves and lynx are very hard to see given these species are in a constant move and generally need quiet areas, and that tourists would need many days spent on field to maybe have a chance at observing them. Moreover, according to this stakeholder, most tourist requests appear to be focused on bears, which he think is the result of the media interest created around this particular species and his higher visibility in regard to other large carnivores species.

Regarding, the relation between the local communities and wildlife, WM2 argues the problems are mostly related to agricultural aspects and that a collaboration between local people and responsible authorities is needed to find the appropriate solutions to manage the damages. Nonetheless, he mentions that generally people are aware they have entered the bear's habitat and not the other way around.

On the long run, WM2 considers WT has to be very well planned and monitored, mentioning the big responsibility of wildlife managers that have to be very aware on the potential dangers for the people involved.

#### **Both locations**

### 13. National Tourism Planning Institute (short email interview)

This respondent considers the financial support from the Ministry of the Environment, the support of local authorities and the developing of EU funded project as necessary conditions for the optimum development of WT. Regarding its impacts, the respondents considers they can be beneficial for instance biodiversity conservation and job creation at a local level, and negative, mostly increased pressure from growing numbers of tourists, chaotic development of tourism related facilities, the carrying capacity of the site appearing as a necessary measure in this context.

This stakeholder links WT leading to an increased awareness of conservation inside the local communities to information and educational campaigns. Moreover, the respondent argues that specializing tour operators on this type of tourism can make the industry more responsible towards the natural area where this types of activities takes place.

In what regards sustainability, the respondent mentions it depends on a mandatory certification process, on developing a knowledgeable tourism industry and on the obligation that all constructions are done with local materials according to the local identity. The main obstacles seen for developing sustainable tourism appear to be the lack of proper infrastructure, of organized tourism services and of well-designed and promoted tourism products.

Concerning the institutional context, the respondent argues that the latest Tourism Master Plan is only in a small measure implemented and that tourism planning is hindered by the lack of interest of public authorities, the lack of involvement of local populations that desire to exploit the natural resources from protected areas and the lack of coherence and continuity of the central administration.

## **Appendix 3**

List of websites used in section 4.2.

www.limosaholidays.co.uk

www.exodus.co.uk

www.naturetrek.co.uk

www.cntours.eu

www.roving-romania.co.uk

www.adventure-tours.ro

www.absolute-nature.ro

www.ibis-tours.ro

www.travel-eco.com

www.professionalteam.ro

www.transylvanianwolf.ro

www.tioc-reisen.ro

www.green-travel.ro

www.dianatravel.ro

www.pensiuniharghitene.ro