



## REVIEW

**On a dissertation thesis for obtaining the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" in professional direction 3.7 Administration and management, Doctoral program: "Organization and management of production (forestry and forest industry)"**

### **Author of the dissertation**

**Nikolay Alexandrov Tashev**, full-time doctoral student at the "Alternative Tourism" department at the Forestry University, Sofia

**Topic of the dissertation:** "Possibilities for the development of sustainable tourism in the forest areas in the Middle Rhodopes"

**Member of the scientific jury:** Prof. Dr. Krasimira Svetoslavova Staneva, University of Forestry, PN 3.9 Tourism, scientific specialty Economics and Management, appointed as a member of the scientific jury by order No. 3ПЦ-88/26.02.2024 year from the Rector of LTU.

### **1. Brief introduction of the candidate**

Alexander Tashev was born on 4<sup>th</sup> of September 1984. Graduated with a bachelor's degree at LTU, majoring in Alternative Tourism in 2014, where he also obtained a master's degree, majoring in Business Administration in 2016. Fluent in Russian and English. Has a good digital culture.

### **2. Relevance of the problem**

The developed dissertation topic presents current problems that are related to the sustainable management of the tourism sector. The development of tourism in mountain areas has proven its economic benefits and is an attractive tourist product for customers. The expansion of the offered tourist services in the forest territories provokes our attention to the balanced use of tourist resources and the creation of adequate models for tourism management. In this regard, the proposed development is relevant for all interested parties.

### **3. Degree of knowledge of the state of the problem and creative interpretation of the literature review**

In the Doctoral thesis, a comprehensive review of the development of tourism was made, clearly highlighting the development of travel agency activity. The historical review examines the possibilities of applying the various natural resources in personalized tourism products. An in-depth study of the development of ideas for sustainable tourism and the place of protected

in-depth study of the development of ideas for sustainable tourism and the place of protected areas in the tourist offer has been made. The development of tourism in a natural environment, in particular in forest areas was an emphasis. A characterization was made based on the categorization of protected areas according to the IUCN /International Union for Conservation of Nature/. The PhD student presented the specifics of the territories that are an element of the National Ecological Network Natura 2000 with the necessary detail. The some limitations to the development of tourism in the individual categories of protected territories were presented. On the basis of the studied information resources, a description of the content of forest tourism was made, which is logically related to the idea of it adopted by the PhD student. The idea is illustrated with relevant examples of recognizable ecotourism destinations in parks.

#### **4. Purpose, tasks, hypotheses and research methods. Correspondence of the chosen research methodology with the set goal and tasks of the dissertation work**

The aim of the peer-reviewed dissertation is "To establish and evaluate the organizational forms of alternative tourism in the forest territories of the Middle Rhodopes, which lead to the sustainable development of tourism in the region". The PhD candidate presents five research tasks, among which the one worthy of attention is the one for developing an adapted methodology for assessing the sustainability of various forms of tourism in the Middle Rhodopes according to the ratio of demand and supply in the field of tourism in the considered region.

In the course of the research, the following hypothesis was verified: "Following the requirements for "sustainability" in the area, more and more diverse forms of sustainable alternative tourism should be developed, as well as their combinations, especially those suitable for practicing in forest areas and taking into account the resources and the specifics of the region, which will lead to the resolution of important socio-economic problems and increase the tourist popularity and attractiveness of the region".

The author has used a standard, adequate research toolkit for the problem under consideration. In this sense, the methodological approach is consistent with the working hypothesis and determines the achievement of sufficiently representative results from the theoretical and experimental research. The survey templates are methodologically developed correctly and are sufficiently informative for the purposes of the survey. The style of the exposition is tight, and in terms of the presented structure, there is a logical connection between the individual parts in the dissertation. The Second Chapter "Methodological aspects for the study of the territorial development of tourism" deserves attention, where a thorough review of the methodological approaches for the study of sustainable tourism recognized by the PhD student is made and in this connection models for its development are referenced. The models cover a sufficiently long period of the development of tourism in general: from 1980 to 2019, when the problem of sustainable development has had a different focus and degree of detail in the research. The chosen quantitative type of methodological approach for collecting and analyzing primary information for the purposes of dissertation development is clearly defined. I could summarize that the methodological approach is consistent with the working hypothesis and determines the achievement of sufficiently representative results from the theoretical and experimental research.

## **5. Transparency and presentation of the obtained results**

The dissertation is presented in a volume of 202 pages of main text, including 46 tables and 44 figures. 164 titles of literary sources are cited (54 of them in Cyrillic, 52 in Latin and 82 web-based online sources), presented on 9 pages, 2 pages list of abbreviations, 1 page list of appendices.

The approach and presentation style used in the presented dissertation demonstrate the professional attitude of the PhD student, both when referencing the literary sources and when analyzing the results obtained in the course of the research. The results achieved in the course of the study are graphically well illustrated in the text of the dissertation, and a significant part of them are also presented in separate appendices, which makes the work complete and complete.

## **6. Discussion of results and used literature.**

The main results in the presented dissertation work are summarized in the Third chapter, where a description of the natural resources necessary for the development of ecological tourism is made in the study objects-six municipalities of the Middle Rhodopes. The presented description of the recognizable eco-routes is based on secondary information sources developed in 2012. The eco-trails with their routes are well illustrated with photographic material, personal archive of the PhD student. The resources for event tourism in the Middle Rhodopes were also examined. The presented calendar of events is a continuation of the PhD student's personal studies, which are presented in detail in his bachelor thesis. Cultural-historical and ethnographic resources for the area are correctly described, and their degree of assimilation can be very clearly traced compared to 2012, when their cataloging in the scientific space dates back. The described resources for the development of nature-oriented and ecological tourism, summarized in a systematic list of the nature reserves, protected areas and natural attractions presented in the study area, deserve attention. It reconfirms existing scientific information from 2012 on the cataloged tourism recreation resources in the same study area.

The survey among entrepreneurs, which was conducted in 2021, gives a representative picture of the tourism services offered in the surveyed area and the level of management culture of tourism entrepreneurs. The profile of the surveyed tourists is correctly presented by the PhD student: family tourism dominates during the summer season, and the respondents support the idea of introducing a fee to maintain the tourist infrastructure.

The literary sources cited by the PhD student are as follows: 54 of them in Cyrillic, 52 in Latin and 82 web-based online sources. They are correctly cited in the text of the dissertation. The literature review covers a significant time period /1940-2021/, which allows to trace the development of the idea of sustainable tourism.

## **7. Contributions of the dissertation work.**

7.1. In the dissertation work, scientific and applied contributions related to methodically collected and analyzed secondary information about the available tourist resources in the

Middle Rhodopes, which can be used for the sustainable development of alternative forms of tourism, can be presented.

7.2. An event calendar has been compiled in chronological order for the Middle Rhodopes, which is a good basis for the development of the tourist offer in the area.

7.3. The "innovative for the region approach to collecting and processing information on tourism development" described by the doctoral student and defined as a contribution is a traditional scientific research approach applied by different scientific research teams in various studies conducted in the region in the period of 2007 - 2012. It could be assumed that by applying it in the specific study, the PhD student contributes to updating the available information /from secondary sources/, which essentially has a contributory character.

## **8. Evaluation of the degree of personal participation of the dissertation student in the contributions.**

The personal participation of PhD student Tashev is indisputable in the collection of primary and secondary information, its interpretation and in the field research of specialized tourist routes. The conducted survey with the analyzes made have a serious place in the contribution value of the dissertation.

## **9. Critical Notes and Questions.**

The dissertation has the following critical notes:

9.1. When forming the research thesis, the doctoral student considers the forest areas as a tourist market, which is not correct. These territories can be the object of development and presentation of a product with a different tourist specialization, and indirectly the tourist / economic activity developed in them participates in the segmentation of the tourist market.

9.2. In the Third chapter "Assessment of the economic contribution of the organizational forms of ecotourism in the sustainable development of the Middle Rhodopes region" the emphasis is on secondary information resources, presenting in detail the strategic and legal framework for the development of ecotourism. It is more appropriate to include this text in the content of the first chapter and thus logically precede the analysis of the survey and the economic contribution of tourism in the area.

9.3. It would be difficult to stand out the economic contribution of the organizational forms of ecotourism in the Middle Rhodopes based on the detailed description of the applicable national action plans and strategies for the development of the region along with the legal framework in the field of tourism. Undoubtedly, they have their place in forming the framework of the sustainable development of tourism, but they do not have the necessary information value for the specifically considered issues of clarifying the economic benefits of the development of ecotourism.

9.4. The source data used by the PhD student for comparative analyses, conclusions and summaries are in very different time ranges: for the development of the internal market they are from 2011, for the external market they are for the period 1990-1997, and the questionnaire

surveys were carried out in 2021. This fragmentary approach is not suitable enough for the dynamics of the tourist market, especially with the two clearly distinguishable stages of its development, before and after the Covid pandemic. The given data are without a doubt applicable for deriving certain trends, but constructed in this way in the time vertical do not allow to clearly outline leading directions for the tourism industry after 2019.

9.5. I do not consider that the research method described by the doctoral student on page 167 as "own" is specific and is a personal contribution of the PhD student. In this regard, the set research task: "development of an adapted methodology for assessing the sustainability of various forms of tourism in the Middle Rhodopes according to the ratio of demand and supply in the field of tourism in the considered region" has not been fulfilled.

There is the following question for doctoral student Tashev:

1. How does the method described by the PhD student on page 167 in the dissertation differ from the widely used systematic approach to primary information collection and analysis?

#### **10. Published articles and citations.**

On the topic of the dissertation, two articles were published in co-authorship with the scientific supervisor, one report in a collection of papers from an international scientific conference and one abstract in a collection of abstracts from an international scientific conference. The publications presented reflect the results presented in the dissertation.

There is no information about citations made to the publications indicated by the doctoral student.

#### **11. Evaluation of the publications on the dissertation work: number, nature of the editions in which they are printed. Reflections in Science - Use and Citation by Other Authors.**

The presented publications reflect a significant part of the results obtained from the research of PhD student Tashev. Two of them were published in a journal referenced in VINITI-RAN, and a third publication was in the Proceedings of an International Scientific Conference in Georgia.

The dissertation abstract contains 55 pages; 5 tables and 5 figures. It is designed in A4 format. It objectively reflects the structure and content of the dissertation work.

#### **CONCLUSION:**

The peer-reviewed dissertation meets the standard requirements for doctoral thesis, demonstrates good professional erudition and practical skills of the PhD student.

The presented dissertation meets the requirements for obtaining the educational and scientific degree "Ph doctor", which gives me reason to evaluate it POSITIVELY.

I would like to recommend to the honorable Scientific Jury to award Nikolay Alexandrov Tashev ONS "doctor" in professional field 3.7 Administration and management, doctoral program: "Organization and management of production (forestry and forest industry)".

Date: 17/04/2024

Sofia

**REVIEWER:** \_\_\_\_\_

(Prof. Dr. Krasimira Staneva)