



SCIENTIFIC OPINION

On a doctoral dissertation for obtaining an educational and scientific degree "Doctor" in professional field 3.7. "Administration and Management", specialty "Organization and Management of Production (Forestry and Forest Industry)"

Member of the Scientific Committee: Assoc. Prof. Dr. Nikolay Konstantinov Neykov, Department of Alternative Tourism at the Faculty of Economics and Landscape Architecture, University of Forestry - Sofia

Author of the dissertation: Nikolay Aleksandrov Tashev, regular doctoral student at the Department of Alternative Tourism at the Faculty of Economics and Landscape Architecture, University of Forestry - Sofia

Title of the dissertation: "Opportunities for Sustainable Tourism Development in Forest Areas in the Central Rhodopes"

Academic Supervisor: Assoc. Prof. Dr. Emil Rosenov Kichukov, Department of Alternative Tourism at the Faculty of Economics and Landscape Architecture, University of Forestry - Sofia

Academic Consultant: Assoc. Prof. Dr. Vladimir Dimitrov Vladimirov,

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1. Brief biographical information

Doctoral student Nikolay Aleksandrov Tashev completed his secondary education at an American college in Sofia. As early as 2001, the doctoral student participated in initiatives related to nature and tourism, namely the ILSI2001 project - International Leadership Study in Israel BBYO Bulgaria: Leadership and communication skills, acquaintance with Jewish culture and religion, survival in various natural conditions (mountains, desert), building international relationships. He completed his higher education at the University of Forestry, Sofia, Faculty of Business Management, with a bachelor's degree in "Alternative Tourism" (top of the class) and a master's degree in "Business Management" (top of the class).

Throughout his years of study and after its completion, doctoral student Nikolay Aleksandrov Tashev has been actively involved in tourism practice, holding various positions that enrich his competence in the field, such as: "Restaurant Management and Service" at McDonald's Bulgaria; "Restaurant Management and Service" at "Kelis" Ltd.; cook at "Santa Marina" Complex, Sozopol, Hotel "St. Ivan Rilski", Bansko, Art Club "Museum", Sofia. He is also a consultant at the "Together" Foundation - Communication for Support and Development - 10 kindergartens in Sofia: "Tasty Gardens - Lessons from Nature for Everyone" 2012 - a project for innovation in education - creating ten educational biogardens in Sofia, with the support of the America for Bulgaria Foundation.

2. General Characteristics of the Dissertation

The dissertation consists of 216 printed pages and includes an introduction, three chapters, conclusion, appendices, and utilized informational sources. Within the text, there are 47 figures, 37 tables, and 164 informational sources. There are 6 appendices containing rich information from conducted surveys and analyses.

The topic of the dissertation is relevant and significant for the theory and practice of alternative tourism in the country. The aim is to identify and evaluate the organizational forms of alternative tourism in the forest areas of the Central Rhodopes, leading to sustainable tourism development in the region. The object of the study is the territory of 6 municipalities – Smolyan, Chepelare, Asenovgrad, Borino, Devin, and Banite, collectively referred to as the Central Rhodopes. The subject of the study is the organizational forms of alternative tourism in the forest areas in the region of the Central Rhodopes.

The first chapter examines the level of tourism research in forest areas in the country. The problems and peculiarities of sustainable tourism, its role in the circular economy, and the development of the country's economy are discussed. A significant contribution to practice is made by comparing mass tourism with sustainable tourism. Summaries of tourism in natural areas and useful characteristics of natural areas in the country are provided. The information provided to the reader about tourism in natural areas worldwide contributes to the awareness of the importance of the topic and the overall development.

In the second chapter, the author extensively analyzes the methodological essence of sustainable development in tourism. Concepts and models are presented. In the methodology of the experimental research, the author presents their own model, based on empirical data from territorial surveys in the research area. A questionnaire method is used to collect primary information. The questionnaire is developed in a suitable manner to reveal the psychography of tourists in the Central Rhodopes. This is a very challenging criterion for market segmentation when such is necessary, making the current dissertation particularly useful for practice.

In the third chapter, the author applies the results of the conducted research and describes with necessary detail elements of the tourist infrastructure that contribute to the implementation of various organizational forms of alternative tourism. The chapter contains results of studies on both participants in the tourist market - entrepreneurs and tourists. The author evaluates the degree of sustainability of tourist forms and directions in the Central Rhodopes. It is concluded that ecotourism in the area of the studied municipalities is in a state of sustainable development, while sustainable development of recreational tourism in the surveyed area is not observed. Similar results demonstrate the realism of the study and contribute to solving existing problems.

3. Evaluation of the Scientific and Scientific-Practical Results

The dissertation contains the empirical material necessary for generating the obtained results, as well as sufficient theoretical substantiation. From the presented work, it can be concluded that the doctoral student can conduct high-quality theoretical and applied economic research, which is the goal of the educational and scientific degree "Doctor".

The most important contributions in Nikolay Aleksandrov Tashev's dissertation are as follows:

- Six municipalities - Asenovgrad, Chepelare, Smolyan, Borino, Devin, Banite, collectively known as the Central Rhodopes, and the tourist environment within them, have been studied. The area was visited multiple times during the period 2020-2023, gathering information from local sources, popular routes were traversed and described, data on the state of tourism and the associated space were collected according to 271 representatives of tourists and local representatives of the tourism sector. The tourist environment and popular forms of alternative tourism were studied, analyzed, evaluated, and recommendations for improving the existing situation were proposed.

- An annual event calendar for events held annually or periodically in the territory of the Central Rhodopes has been compiled (Appendix 1). It chronologically describes the events in the municipalities, their time, location, type, occasion, and a brief description of the activities and customs associated with the events.

- An innovative approach for collecting, processing, and evaluating information on tourism development has been applied in the region. It is based on both objective facts and the personal impressions of tourists and entrepreneurs on various aspects of the tourist environment. The approach allows outlining the main profiles of local entrepreneurs and their guests, trends in supply and demand, the comparative level of sustainability between them, as well as evaluating some characteristics of the tourist environment from the perspective of the impressions created and existing among the participants in the tourism processes. A questionnaire was prepared for both surveyed groups, and the results obtained were systematized. The results of data processing were presented as numerical values, based on which assessments, comparisons, conclusions, and recommendations were made.

3. Evaluation of Publications on the Dissertation

Regarding the unrevised studies in the dissertation, the author has prepared four publications, two of which are independent. They are presented at prestigious scientific forums and showcase results from the research on the dissertation topic.

4. Evaluation of the Abstract

The abstract has been prepared according to the requirements and is 51 pages long. It contains all the requisites from the dissertation.

5. Recommendations

Recommendations for the dissertation are towards expanding research to other regions of the country. The contributions should be presented more convincingly. They are significant, and their value should not be underestimated. The study contains additional contributory aspects and useful information. Towards the end of the third chapter, in the analysis of tourist expenses and incomes, there are ambiguities that need clarification when applying the work to solve practical problems. Often, models are described with text rather than analytical or tabular visualization. In some of the graphs, the names of the coordinate axes should be placed.

6. Personal Impressions

The candidate is diligent, capable, and above all honest. His research is conducted with high integrity towards science. His perseverance has allowed the challenging tasks of the research to be solved.

CONCLUSION

Considering the relevance and significance of the completed scientific research in Nikolay Aleksandrov Tashev's dissertation, I believe that it meets the requirements of the Law for the Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria and the regulations for its implementation at the University of Forestry - Sofia. I recommend that the members of the Scientific Committee give a positive evaluation of Nikolay Aleksandrov Tashev's dissertation and award the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" in professional sub-area 3.7. "Administration and Management", specialty "Organization and Management of Production (Forestry and Forest Industry)".

15.04.2024

Member of scientific jury:

/Assoc. Prof. Dr. Nikolay Neykov/