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Rural Tourism in Marginimea Sibiului Area—A Possibility of Capitalizing on Local Resources

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Abstract: The current research was motivated by observed particularities of local communities and the necessity of local rural economy diversification. Development through rural tourism is a possible sustainable response that can be implemented in many of Europe’s rural areas, including Marginimea Sibiului. Thus, the purpose of this research, and its main contribution, was to identify the specific features of the Marginimea Sibiului area and possible strategies for capitalizing on local resources through rural tourism activities. We also sought to understand the extent to which rural tourism is seen by the owners of tourist structures as a developmental possibility. We utilized a case study research method to address these questions. The research has major implications due to the questionnaires applied to the owners of rural tourism structures during August 2022, which allowed us to determine: the motivation of tourist structure owners to carry out tourism activity, the degree of development, aspects concerning the operation and management of the tourist structure, and future development and improvement of the owned products. Because the area is representative at the national level in terms of rural tourism activity, an X-ray was sketched after the conclusions were drawn, which issued some proposals for “mixing” the resources through rural tourist activities as a “presentation modality”, which may potentially have favorable future consequences.

Keywords: rural tourism; rural resources; capitalization; rural development



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1. Introduction

The main objective of this research was to consider a case study regarding rural tourism and the extent to which rural tourism activity is seen by the stakeholders from Marginimea Sibiului as a developmental possibility, starting from the necessity of diversifying the economies of rural area. areas.

Concern for rural areas has grown in recent decades, and the European Union encouraged a regional development policy [1]. A central issue is the orientation of rural areas towards tourism [2,3]. Thus, it is valuable to consider the development of rural tourism using a holistic approach, taking into account the following sustainable implications [4] for the rural community: [5] the tourists enable capitalization of several elements (e.g., food, local products, accommodation) [6]; tourism increases contact with local rural environment and awakens interest in local resources [7]; communication and participation in the life of the local community is increased; and the traditional activities of the area are maintained.

In the modern world, interest in tourism in small communities of rural environments has grown stronger [8,9]. However, the image of the countryside, as a whole, must be rethought, and this reorganization/reinvention must not be based only on agricultural activities as representative resources of this area. While this aspect is easy to formulate, it is not so easy to implement; new “presentation modes” must be identified so as to include

both agricultural and natural resources with an ecological aspect or cultural and traditional resources. “Mixing” these resources through rural tourism [10–12] as a way to present the rural environment [13,14] could help maintain its future development in a sustainable way [15].

The different forms of tourism particular to the rural environment can support the capitalization of local resources and ensure its economic viability. Thus, according to several studies, those rural areas that made a living from rural tourism [16,17] and additional income [18,19] (which they are proud of [20,21]) were able to ensure sustainable economic development of rural localities [22,23] to a modern version that is accepted both by tourists and locals [24]. Thus, if it is a successful business [25], there are already visible/tangible economic effects in the early stages of providing such services, which are much desired by the rural environment and by the owners of such businesses. This includes the possibility of obtaining additional income, securing employment, and investments in local infrastructure. These benefits generate possible changes in the lifestyle of the locals. After the tourism business develops, it will encourage most of the community to get involved with various products or services in the field of tourism, thus generating major effects at the local community level. Regarding localities with “a large baggage of real/sustainable resources”, their engagement in tourism is not only desirable but necessary, assuming it is done appropriately and while ensuring the conservation and perpetuation of representative elements.

The Marginimea Sibiului area was selected as the location for this research. It is part of Sibiu County, and it has been an important point of Romanian rural tourism for a long time. It has customs, traditions, and original gastronomic products, which have a high degree of originality and are well preserved even in to this day. According to previous research [26,27], these values and numerous guesthouses that can offer the necessary conditions for having an unforgettable stay, together with the designation of Sibiu as the European Cultural Capital in 2007, bring this area to light and renews interest for it. Based on these observations, research regarding the actual development of the tourism sector, especially research that aims to understand the opinion of those directly involved in the development of this domain, namely the owners of tourist structures, is necessary to achieve future strategies of development.

The aim of the paper. The eternity from the village seems lately to be a reality estranged from its initial valences, and the village, a “corner of heaven”, is asked about more frequently by modern tourists, who are eager to know the past or go back to the roots. Marginimea Sibiului is such an area; it is a corner of heaven where the originality of the traditional village can still be found in its primordial, archaic formula. Because the area has potential for rural tourist activities, some studies have been conducted, but these consisted only of quantitative studies regarding economic and tourism development. Thus, the current paper has added value due to the use of questionnaires/interviews given directly to the owners of rural tourism structures. This information could provide a basis for much future research.

The purpose of this research was to consider a case study regarding strategies of capitalizing on local resources through rural tourism activities from the Marginimea Sibiului area and the extent to which rural tourism is seen by the owners of tourist structures as a developmental possibility. The main contributions and implications of this research to the field are highlighted by its main findings: analysis of the current infrastructural situation, identification of the motivations of tourist structure owners to carry out the activity, the degree of development of agritourism activity, and aspects concerning operation and management. Based on the obtained information, some proposals for future development and improvement of local tourist products were sketched, and some possible future favorable consequences starting from these proposals were considered.

2. Literature Review

The rural environment is the location where the rural tourism phenomenon manifests itself, and it must be analyzed in close connection with this activity, starting from its special characteristics. On the one hand, the rural environment possesses valuable resources. On the other hand, however, it exhibits numerous disparities, including a lack of jobs and income necessary to ensure a decent living as well as the abandonment of lands and houses (even in areas with high natural tourism potential). Given this situation and the existence of resources of natural origin or of “unique” character, for which there is both a potential for capitalization and a need for conservation, rural tourism (in the opinion of Beteille, R and Liu et al. [28,29]) can be one of the best options, regardless of the form of its manifestation (according to Gyr, Calina, and Yang [30–32]) (see Table 1). According to Beteille, R and Liu et al. [28,29], using the specific resources characteristic of rural environments, rural tourism [33], agritourism [34], or ecotourism can ensure sustainable development across time and can provide answers and solutions to current problems [35–37] in terms of rural development (see Table 1). [38].

Some studies [25,39] have tried to underline the reasons for capitalizing rural resources through rural tourism. The results revealed that this particular form of tourism reconciles two potentially conflicting objectives: the economic development of the rural environment and the preservation of local natural resources. This ensures a modern “reinvention” for the rural world. How this could be achieved was the subject of other research [40,41]. The answer brought to light was that it will raise the living standards of rural area as a whole, with a direct and sustainable impact on villages through: improving the general infrastructure on which the revitalization of the entire rural economy (roads, water network, sewerage, telecommunications, electricity) depends; arranging farms, boarding houses, and tourist households as models and as endowments and organization of the activity, although this would be done with the respect for the local architecture and traditions, while avoiding the kitsch, the standardization, or the transfer of the urban constructions to the rural environment; achieving a centralized record of valuable resources for tourism activities; capitalizing on the resources with tourist potential in the village world by introducing them in the tourist product as ways to spend free time.

Table 1. Rural area “X-ray” of problems, resources, and capitalization possibility through forms of rural tourism.

Particular Problems of Rural Area	Specific Advantages/Resources	Forms of Rural Tourism That Can Help
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - insufficient jobs - the reduction or, in some situations, the non-existence of the desire of young people to stay in rural area - high degree of abandonment of agricultural land and agricultural activities due to the high volume of work and the unprofitability and difficulty of marketing products - general infrastructural capacity to support various activities is reduced - the disappearance of valuable resources (such as traditions and crafts) due to lack of interest and the impossibility of their further transmission to the younger generations - many areas, even if they are of great wealth in terms of existing resources, are deficient in terms of services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - airy space, creating the possibility to ensure peace and safety - close human relationships and a specific lifestyle characterized by the existence of representative values - the existence of values listed and asked by tourists more frequently in recent years - gastronomic products and handicraft products of a special quality and a high biological value - unique natural resources that can be exploited “for free” - interest from the locals towards rural tourism entrepreneurship - the opportunity to support rural tourism activities through European funding 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>agritourism</i> is an authentic and sustainable way of supporting the rural environment; it is oriented towards the capitalization of agricultural resources, traditions, crafts, and the rural way of life - <i>ecotourism</i> is the ecological version of tourism of rural environments; it focuses on bringing natural resources to light and on protecting them - <i>rural tourism</i> aims to increase the involvement of the entire community in supporting tourist activity and capitalizing all categories of existing resources at the community level, with benefits for the entire community

Source: own analysis.

The possibility of rural environment development [36,38] and capitalization of local resources through tourist activities [42,43] requires a holistic approach to economy, society,

and environment, and it requires the help of three groups: [44,45] change agents (government, industry, and education), opinion leaders (community leaders and entrepreneurs), and social networks. There must be a partnership between these groups. The final effect of this approach [46] will be the achievement of a competitive rural environment [47,48] in which developmental focuses on sustainability [49] allow it to stay on the market for a long time through exploitation of rural tourism. Key aspects of rural tourism include representative natural resources, the actual agricultural farm, the various tourist resources (known as “curiosities”), and the way of life specific to the rural environment.

In conditions in which consumers are visibly interested in tourist products with an ecological aspect, the quality of the rural product can provide an opportunity to support the economy of many rural areas. Following the need to develop forms of rural tourism in rural areas, there were some positive consequences of capitalizing the resources of the rural world through tourism activities identified by He Y. et al. and Lundberg, which (as shown in the following) were separated between benefits for tourists and benefits for local communities [50,51].

1. Regarding the benefits for tourists, if the development of forms of rural tourism in the rural area is achieved, the following benefits can be expected:
 - Rural tourism offers are varied, meaning each countryside area allows tourists to visit a different region; thus, the tourists can choose the best option for them based on their possibilities and wishes.
 - Tourists can benefit from healthy food and from the possibility to relax and participate in the local community’s life, and the tourism provider ensures that this tourism experience is rare and unique.
 - Additionally, the tourist has the possibility to have direct contact with nature, with agricultural activities, and especially with the rural world and traditions. Due to these original resources, which have become more desirable in recent years, tourists have the possibility to rediscover and appreciate the rural world in its true value.
 - Compared with classical tourism, rural tourism is typically cheaper considering the fact that tourists receive not only accommodation, food, and leisure but also health (both psychological and psychical, e.g., healthy products and healthy air) and gaining knowledge (by participating in crafts, agricultural activities, or other daily activities in the rural world).
2. Regarding benefits for the local rural community or for farmers, Kim K. et al. and He Y. et al. developed the idea that if the exploitation of different local resources [52,53] is done through rural tourism, the following benefits could be expected:
 - The income goes directly to the farmers’ families without going through tourism channels that take the respective incomes outside the rural areas, meaning the income is invested locally. In this manner, rural tourism activity could support conservation efforts of rural areas instead of being lost in favor of foreign producers and investors.
 - Rural tourism activity helps provide jobs for those in rural areas who are unemployed and helps attract other businesses and small industries into tourism activity (crafts, food, etc.).
 - The individuals involved in tourism activity gain professional competence in the field of providing tourism services, which must be conducted in a professional way.
 - Ensuring the market for agricultural products is a possible advantage if rural communities turn to rural tourism activities. In this manner, the agricultural land is used, agricultural activities could become attractive, and, in time, it can ensure the sustainability of agricultural businesses and rural areas.

- Rural tourism supports the development of local infrastructure, which generates a general improvement in all living conditions for the entire rural community (not only for those involved in this particular activity).

3. Data and Methodology

The current research was designed to obtain real information directly from the stakeholders involved in rural tourism.

3.1. Research Methods and Reason for Choosing the Researched Area

In order to fulfill the established purpose of this research and determine the success of rural tourism activity in the researched area, the case study method was utilized [54,55]. This started from the intention to carry out a study regarding capitalization of rural resources through rural tourism. The case study method we used is considered suitable for large areas to carry out exploratory and explanatory, interpretive, or descriptive research, starting from the specific situation of life in an analyzed rural environment [56,57]. In this type of research, the focus is on the case study analyzed and not necessarily on the methodology used [58].

The reason for choosing the Maginimea Sibiului area as a research location was that it is one of the representative areas for Romania's rural tourism and has been for a long time; at the beginning of the attestation of rural tourist activity, two villages (Leresti and Sibiel) out of the fourteen villages selected at the national level were selected from Maginimea Sibiului.

Other old and well-known areas utilized for rural tourism development in Romania include Maramures and Brasov. In our days, the importance of this area for Romania's rural tourism, compared to Maramures and Brasov, is still registered. This aspect is reflected by the numbers (see Table 2): number of agritourism guesthouses, index of net use of agritourism accommodation capacity (in August), and arrivals of tourists in tourist guesthouses. It has numerous points of tourist attraction, including a picturesque landscape, traditions, culture, crafts, agricultural activities. These place the area at the top of all three important indicators of rural tourism.

Table 2. Representative rural tourism/agritourism areas from Romania—analysis and comparisons.

<i>Agritourism in Brasov area. Specific Tourism Indicators</i>					
Specification	2010	2018	2019	2020	2021
No. of agritourism guesthouses (number)	177	402	383	379	387
Index of net use of agritourism accommodation capacity (in August) %	12.4	29.2	34.5	28.1	31.4
Arrivals of tourists in tourist guesthouses (number)	45,735	184,565	198,292	119,681	178,666
<i>Agritourism in Maramures area. Specific tourism indicators</i>					
Specification	2010	2018	2019	2020	2021
No. of agritourism guesthouses (number)	104	144	147	185	264
Index of net use of agritourism accommodation capacity (in August) %	11.4	24.4	33.5	25.5	26.4
Arrivals of tourists in tourist guesthouses (number)	7785	51,918	58,516	27,813	53,111
<i>Agritourism in Sibiu area. Specific tourism indicators</i>					
Specification	2010	2018	2019	2020	2021
No. of agritourism guesthouses (number)	73	113	96	126	146
Index of net use of agritourism accommodation capacity (in August) %	20.4	26.6	37.4	29	35.6
Arrivals of tourists in tourist guesthouses (number)	9885	61,007	60,819	32,115	54,596

Source: Processing by data from the National Institute of Statistics, <http://statistici.insse.ro>, consulted on 10 November 2022 [59].

The present study aimed to collect information from the Marginimea Sibiului area through a face-to-face questionnaire/interview. We used the questionnaires/interviews as a research tool because they are suitable for social sciences [60]. This research tool is not usually utilized for any kind of representative sample, and according to Smith [61], it does not require application to a certain representative sample. As such, the results cannot be generalized. However, if the interviews are carried out carefully, representative information can be obtained about a specific subject pursued, which ensures the possibility of a narrative study supported by the discoveries in the territory. Thus, for interpretive and qualitative purposes, interview research methodology is suitable. Were collected a total of 69 questionnaires; the final study included only those with complete answers, which were 64 in number. The two-week period of information collection coincided with the period of August 2022, which is the peak of the tourist season. After information was collected, it was processed and analyzed. Findings were then presented and discussed.

3.2. Research Objectives and Steps of the Study

The research started with the main purpose, which was to achieve a case study regarding strategies for capitalizing on local resources through rural tourism activities in the Marginimea Sibiului area and to understand the extent to which rural tourism is seen by the owners of tourist structures as a developmental possibility.

Thus, the specific hypothesis of this research was to determine the extent to which rural tourism activity from the Marginimea Sibiului area is seen by the owners of tourist structures as a developmental possibility and a way to capitalize on local resources. The paper aimed to strengthen and support the proposed main objective, and it had the following working hypotheses and steps (see Figure 1).

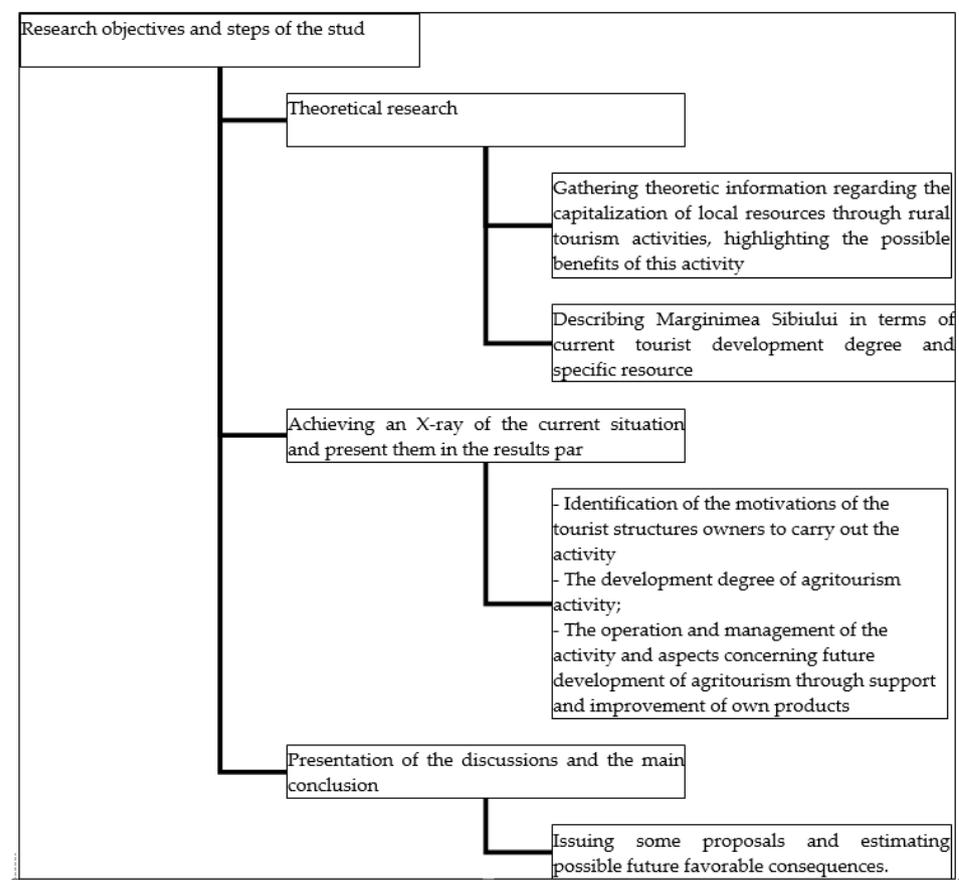


Figure 1. Methodological scheme of the research.

First, it aimed to gather some information from the specialized literature in order to clarify the theoretical part of the study. This intended to underline the idea that resources of the rural world can ensure its sustainable development if they are capitalized on through tourism activities. This is a necessity in modern times, and if it is developed using a holistic approach, it can produce positive consequences.

Second, it aimed to describe Marginimea Sibiului as the area of the research in order to highlight the current situation and specific resources in terms of its rurality and current infrastructural situation.

Third, it aimed to achieve a case study regarding strategies for capitalizing on local resources through rural tourism activities in the Marginimea Sibiului area. This was the objective through which the research brought added value to the field. This part of the paper included the following information obtained directly from the stakeholders: identification of the motivations of the tourist structure owners to carry out the activity, the degree of development of agritourism activity, the operation and management of the activity, and aspects concerning future development of agritourism through support and improvement of the stakeholder's own products.

Fourth, it aimed to sketch an X-ray of the current situation regarding tourism activity in the Marginimea Sibiului area based on the findings obtained directly from the field. It also issued some future proposals and estimated possible future favorable consequences of the proposals.

The original contribution of the study comes from its research objectives. The aim of the current study was to evaluate the current infrastructural situation of the rural tourism sector in the Marginimea Sibiului area and to bring added value through a case study analysis applied to the owners of rural tourism structures so as to determine the degree of development of agritourism activity and its managerial features. The obtained information can be used as base for future research and for proposals to improve and provide sustainable development for the area.

4. Results of the Research

4.1. Marginimea Sibiului—Location, Archaism, and Rurality

Marginimea Sibiului is a Romanian ethnographic area located in the southwest part of Sibiu County, which includes 18 localities [60]: *Boita* commune, *Talmacel* village, *Sadu*, *Rau Sadului*, *Rasinari*, *Poplaca*, *Orlat*, *Gura Raului*, *Saliste* communes, the spiritual capital of Marginime, with the villages of *Cacova* (Fantanele), *Sibiul*, *Sacel*, *Vale*, *Gales*, *Tilisca* commune, and, reaching on the ridges of the mountains, the communes of *Poiana Sibiului* and *Jina* (see Figure 2).

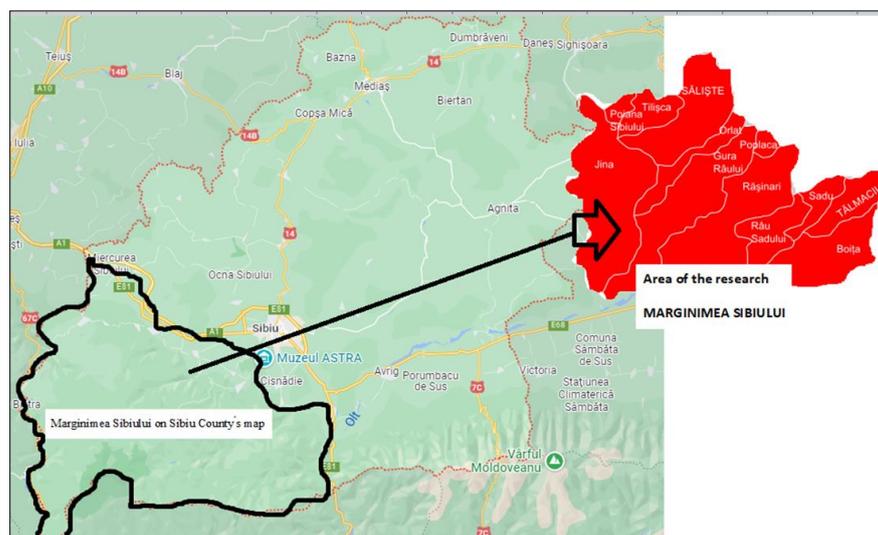


Figure 2. Marginimea Sibiului on Sibiu County's map processing after [61].

The geopolitical position of the area, located on the southern border of Transylvania with Wallachia and in the proximity of Sibiu, makes it a strong craft and commercial center and gave Marginimea Sibiului several defining features [62]. The name “margineni” was given to the inhabitants of these villages from Sibiu County because they lived in a contact area between the hill and the mountain on the old Austro–Hungarian border in southern Transylvania. This area was an agropastoral area; the main occupation of the villagers is raising animals. Thus, these villages feel the influence of different cultures. The localities have developed a mixed economy based on agriculture, animal husbandry, and traditional crafts, with a special emphasis on sheep farming. The “sheep roads”, as they are named, are roads traversed by flocks stretched beyond the Carpathians and the Danube, towards Constantinople, the Adriatic, Pannonia, Poland, Southern Ukraine, or Crimea. Shepherding remains a traditional occupation [63,64] and an emblematic activity of Marginimea even today. The most famous sheep centers from this area were: Saliste—an old administrative place and a center of spirituality of locals named “Cultural and Spiritual Capital of Marginimea Sibiului”; Orlat; Rasinari—an old orthodox episcopal residence located in between Sibiu and Paltinis; and Poiana Sibiului—a village founded later that very quickly became an important center for shepherds.

From the entire surface of Sibiu County, where the area under study is located, approximately 30% is occupied by mountains, 50% by hills and plateau, and the rest represented by the depression area developed between the two relief steps. The structure of agriculture is dependent on the specifics of the area. According to the data provided by the County Directorate of Statistics, Sibiu County benefits from an agricultural land fund that represents 56.5% of the total area. The structure of the agricultural area is dominated by pastures and hayfields, which cover 59.5% of the total agricultural area. Arable land occupies 37.9% of the total.

The configuration of the land, with less arable land, with hills partially covered with forests, and with extensive pastures joining the mountains, forced the inhabitants of these places embrace a complex system of occupations from an early point in time. A series of other complementary activities were added to these main agricultural occupations. This included fruit growing, vine and vegetable cultivation, fodder harvesting, and raising and caring for animals (from which a second main traditional occupation—the shepherd—later emerged and developed). A portion of the inhabitants also occupied themselves, as a secondary activity, with the raising of bees, as the flora of the area is favorable to the development of this activity.

Most of the villages from the area have preserved strong spiritual and ethno-folkloric traditions. Although modern buildings gradually replaced the old traditional ones, the atmosphere in Marginimea Sibiului remained unchanged. The typical peasant atmosphere, the intact preservation of traditions and customs, and the hospitality of the villagers increase the attractiveness of these places [62]. Festive costumes of rare elegance, embroidered in black and white, are proudly worn on holidays, and the crafts inherited from forefathers are successfully practiced even today [62].

Since ancient times, these shepherd populations have been masters in the processing of wool and animal skins. The area can rightly be considered among the most developed leather processing centers from southern Transylvania, and the inhabitants have ennobled leather processing with the characteristics of an artistic craft. These lands contain old churches, museums (e.g., the Sibiul Museum, which has the largest collection of glass icons from Europe; the Rasinari Village Museum, which includes common ceramic pieces, painted furniture, and household and craft objects; the Gales Museum, which contains an impressive collection of folk costumes; and the Orthodox Museum from Saliste, which includes old religious objects and books), memorial houses, and traditional peasant buildings [62].

Over time, Marginimea Sibiului has become an important point of Romanian rural tourism, with numerous guesthouses that can offer the necessary conditions for having an unforgettable stay [62].

The customs and traditions are still preserved today, and craftsmen, young or old, always enjoy the visit of those willing to discover the secrets of their crafts. These priceless values, which have been preserved for years, brought the Marginimea Sibiului area the title of European Destination of Excellence in 2009 as well as the exceptional prize in tourism and the title “Golden Apple” [64].

4.2. Marginimea Sibiului Rural Tourist Destination—Analysis of the Current Infrastructural Situation

After 1989 (the post-communist period), socio-economic evolution determined structural changes in the Romanian rural area, which was highlighted by the appearance and development of some non-agricultural activities (practicing crafts, making handicrafts, traditional processing of agricultural products from households, and tourism in the rural environment) and by the general trend of urbanization. Unlike other locations, the rural culture from the Marginimea Sibiului area is preserved at the ancestral stage in many of the studied villages, which is becoming increasingly attractive, particularly in the context of the overloads of urban life.

The rural habitat of the studied area still preserves elements that have an impact on tourist demand from highly developed countries and from the Romanian urban area. As a result, until the 1970s, there were pastoral settlements located in the mountains at altitudes of over 700 m (Jina, Poiana, Rod, and Raul Sadului) where the main activity (the raising of sheep) was complementary to the agricultural production of crops. The second category, the pastoral-agricultural settlements, are mainly located in the contact area possessing agricultural surfaces in depressions (Boita, Talmacel, Poplaca, Gura Raului, Fantanele, Vale, Gales, and Tilisca).

Most of the localities from the studied area had a number of units (rural and agritourist structures) ranging from a few units to a dozens of units (see Table 3). The complex influence of practicing tourism in the rural environment on the rural areas is noticeable through changes in the economic, social, and cultural environment such as: changing the mentality of the locals; increasing the degree of civilization; modernization of housing; supporting the continuity of old jobs; “revival” of traditions; and construction of new living spaces intended for tourist accommodation.

Table 3. Rural infrastructure from Marginimea Sibiului area with accommodation functions by localities.

Types of Tourist Reception Structures	Settlements	Years											
		2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Rural tourist pensions	Saliste	3	3	3	3	2	6	5	6	4	4	4	4
	Talmaciu	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-
	Poplaca	-	-	-	-	-	1	1	-	-	-	-	-
	Rasinari	-	-	-	-	-	1	1	1	1	1	2	1
	Saliste	13	4	5	7	7	21	17	22	17	11	19	22
	Talmaciu	1	-	-	1	1	2	2	2	1	1	1	1
Agritourism guesthouses	Boita	-	-	-	-	-	1	1	1	1	-	-	-
	Gura Raului	11	3	3	3	3	11	11	11	13	13	12	16
	Jina	1	-	-	-	-	2	2	2	1	1	1	1
	Orlat	4	2	3	1	2	4	3	5	4	4	5	5
	Poiana sibiului	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	1	1	1
	Poplaca	-	-	-	-	1	3	3	3	1	2	3	3
	Rau Sadului	2	1	1	1	1	1	2	3	1	1	4	6
	Sadu	2	-	-	-	-	3	2	4	2	2	3	2
	Tilisca	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	1	1	3	2
	Rasinari	11	5	5	4	4	12	12	14	14	8	12	11

Source: <http://statistici.insse.ro>, consulted on 6 August 2022 [59].

Based on the above table, it can be seen that the “star” villages in terms of the number of rural tourist structures from the studied area are Saliste, Gura Raului, Poplaca, Rau Sadului, and Orlat. The number of rural tourist structures from these villages is rising.

From the 75 existing tourist and agritourist units in the analyzed area, 60 are found in these villages, (see Table 4).

Table 4. Rural infrastructure from Marginimea Sibiului area—comparative situation 2010–2021.

Types of Tourist Reception Structures	Settlements	2010	2021
<i>Rural tourist pensions</i>	Saliste	3	4
	Talmaciu	-	-
	Poplaca	-	-
	Rasinari	-	1
	Saliste	13	22
	Talmaciu	1	1
<i>Agritourism guesthouses</i>	Boita	-	-
	Gura Raului	11	16
	Jina	1	1
	Orlat	4	5
	Poiana Sibiului	-	1
	Poplaca	-	3
	Rau Sadului	2	6
	Sadu	2	2
	Tilisca	-	2
	Rasinari	11	11
Total rural tourist units		48	75

Source: <http://statistici.insse.ro>, consulted on 6 August 2022 [59].

By making a simple comparison between the initial period and the current period using the statistics presented in Table 3, it can be observed that compared with 2010, when the total number of rural tourist units existing in the area was 48, in 2021, the total number of rural tourist units in the area was 75. This constitutes an increase of 156.25%, which stems from support with European funds for the construction of rural tourist structures as well as increased interest among tourists for this area and the desire of the locals to identify other possibilities for the exploitation of local resources.

A positive aspect can also be noted, namely that the strongest growth was recorded at agritourism guesthouses, which indicates a great benefit for the rural environment and local producers in the sense of the direct exploitation of own/local products and resources.

4.3. Case Study Regarding the Strategy to Capitalize on Local Resources through Rural Tourism Activities and the Extent to Which Rural Tourism Activity Is Seen by the Owners of Tourist Structures as a Developmental Possibility

The purpose of the present research was to identify the degree of development of rural tourism activity at the level of the studied area and to determine the extent to which rural tourism activity is seen by the owners of tourist structures from the studied area as a developmental possibility.

4.3.1. Aspects Characterizing Owners of Rural Tourism Structures

From the area under study, nine localities were included in this study based on the statistical data published by the National Institute of Statistics. The questionnaires were applied in these localities, and the conclusion are presented below (see Table 5). Sixty-four valid questionnaires were obtained and included in the study, meaning 85.33% from the existing rural and agritourism structures participated in the study. Their distribution, analyzed as statistical situation (a), showed that 35.94% were from the Saliste locality, 23.44% were from Gura Raului, 17.19% were from Rasinari, 6.25% were from Raul Sadului, 4.68% were from Orlat, 4.68% were from Poplaca, 3.12% were from Sadu, and 1.56% were from Jina.

Table 5. Characteristics of owners of rural tourism structures from studied area.

Villages from Marginimea Sibiului Included in Study	Measure Unit	Statistical Situation (a)		Education Level (b)		Training for Agritourism Activity (c)	
		No. of Valid Questionnaires	% from Total no.	Middle Level	Higher Level	Yes	No
Saliste	No.	23	35.94	12	11	5	18
	%			52.17	47.82	21.73	78.26
Gura Raului	No.	15	23.44	7	8	4	11
	%			46.66	53.33	26.66	73.33
Jina	No.	1	1.56	1	-	-	1
	%			100.00	-	-	100.00
Orlat	No.	3	4.68	1	2	-	3
	%			33.33	66.66	-	100.00
Poplaca	No.	3	4.68	2	1	1	2
	%			66.66	33.33	33.33	66.66
Rau Sadului	No.	4	6.25	2	2	1	3
	%			50.00	50.00	25.00	75.00
Sadu	No.	2	3.12	2	-	-	2
	%			100.00	-	-	100.00
Tilisca	No.	2	3.12	2	-	1	1
	%			100.00	-	50.00	50.00
Rasinari	No.	11	17.19	8	3	5	6
	%			72.72	27.27	45.45	54.54
Total	No.	64	85.33	37	27	17	47
	%			57.81	42.18	26.56	73.43

Regarding education level (b), 57.81% of the surveyed tourist structure owners from the Marginimea Sibiului area had an average education, and 42.18% had a higher education.

Regarding training for agritourism activity (c) 26.56% of the owners of rural tourism structures included in our study had specialized training in the agritourism field, and 73.43% had no specialized training. Unfortunately, the percentage of those who did not have specialized training in the agritourism field is higher than that of those who had specialized training. This is one aspect that must be corrected, because that can ensure an increase in sales in the future by increasing the capacity to improve the tourism product.

4.3.2. Openness and Motivations of the Owners of Tourist Structures

This research objective was pursued through three aspects, and the results are summarized in Table 6.

Table 6. The seniority, importance, and motivations of the agritourism activity in studied area.

Villages from Marginimea Sibiului Included in Study	Measure Unit	Seniority in the Tourist Activity (a)		Knowing the Features of Agritourism Activity (b)		The Motivations of Agritourism Entrepreneurs for Carrying out Tourism Activity (c)		
		Up to 10 Years	Over 10 Years	Yes	No	Obtaining Additional Income	Capitalize Agricultural Products	Ensuring Jobs
Saliste	No.	3	20	17	6	8	12	3
	%	13.04	86.95	73.91	26.08	34.78	52.17	13.04
Gura Raului	No.	4	11	9	6	6	4	5
	%	26.66	73.33	60.00	40.00	40.00	26.66	33.33
Jina	No.	-	1	1	-	-	1	-
	%	-	100.00	100.00	-	-	100.00	-
Orlat	No.	1	2	1	2	3	-	-
	%	33.33	66.66	33.33	66.66	100.00	-	-
Poplaca	No.	3	-	2	1	2	1	-
	%	100.00	-	66.66	33.33	66.66	33.33	-
Rau Sadului	No.	1	3	2	2	1	2	1
	%	25.00	75.00	50.00	50.00	25.00	50.00	25.00
Sadu	No.	-	2	1	1	-	1	1
	%	-	100.00	50.00	50.00	-	50.00	50.00
Tilisca	No.	2	-	1	1	1	-	1
	%	100.00	-	50.00	50.00	50.00	-	50.00
Rasinari	No.	1	10	7	4	3	6	2
	%	9.09	90.90	63.63	36.36	27.27	54.54	18.18
Total	No.	49	15	41	23	24	27	13
	%	23.43	76.56	64.06	35.93	37.50	42.18	20.31

Regarding the first aspect, i.e., the seniority in the tourist activity (a), a gratifying aspect was observed related to the seniority of the tourist activity from the rural environment analyzed. From the 64 surveyed units, 49 units (76.56%) have been in business for more than 10 years, thus combating the lower degree of specialized training in the agritourism

field through seniority and accumulated experience. On the other hand, 15 of the 64 units (23.43%) included in the study had an age of activity of less than 10 years, which underlines the constant existence of interest in this field of activity.

The second aspect pursued within this objective, referred to as knowing the features of agritourism activity (b), was investigated due to the fact that there are situations in which the rural tourism activity is confused with agritourism activity. It was gratifying that in the area under study, the owners of 41 of the analyzed structures (64.06%) understood the difference between the two forms of tourism. However, there were also 23 units (35.93%) whose owners did not understand the difference between the two forms of tourism, which indicates the necessity of and opportunity for some training courses or perhaps consultancy.

Through the third aspect pursued in this objective, the motivations of agritourism entrepreneurs for carrying out tourism activity (c), the main motivation among the tourist structure owners for carrying out this type of activity was evaluated. From the three variants of pre-set answers, they were able to choose only one answer. Thus, upon ranking the answers it was found that the opportunity to capitalize agricultural products was the main motivation for 27 owners (42.18%), thus underlining in practice the motivation for the emergence of agritourism activity. Twenty-four of those surveyed (37.50%) chose the possibility of obtaining additional income as the main motivation, which justifies the motivation for the emergence and development of agritourism activity in the countryside. Thirteen respondents (20.31%) started the agritourism activity with the motivation of the ensuring jobs for them and their family members, which is an aspect that reflects a general shortcoming of the rural environment.

4.3.3. Degree of Development of Agritourism Activity from Researched Area

The dimension of agritourism activity from the Marginimea Sibiului area was tracked in the present study with the help of three indicators, and the results are presented in Table 7.

Table 7. Identifying the dimension of agritourism activity in the studied area.

Villages from Marginimea Sibiului Included in Study	Measure Unit	The Dimension of Agricultural Land Exploited (a)		The Type of Tourist Facilities Offered (b)			The Length of Leisure Stay (c)	
		Up to 10 ha	Between 10–50 ha	Accommodation	Accommodation and Food	Accommodation, Food, and Entertainment	1–3 Days	3–7 Days
Saliste	No.	19	4	6	14	3	14	9
	%	82.60	17.39	26.08	60.86	13.04	60.86	39.13
Gura Raului	No.	13	2	3	8	4	9	6
	%	86.66	13.33	20.00	53.33	26.66	60.00	40.00
Jina	No.	1	-	-	1	-	1	-
	%	100.00	-	-	100.00	-	100.00	-
Orlat	No.	3	-	1	1	1	2	1
	%	100.00	-	33.33	33.33	33.33	66.66	33.33
Poplaca	No.	3	-	1	2	-	2	1
	%	100.00	-	33.33	66.66	-	66.66	33.33
Rau Sadului	No.	3	1	1	3	-	3	1
	%	75.00	25.00	25.00	75.00	-	75.00	25.00
Sadu	No.	2	-	1	1	-	2	-
	%	100.00	-	50.00	50.00	-	100.00	-
Tilisca	No.	2	-	-	1	1	1	1
	%	100.00	-	-	50.00	50.00	50.00	50.00
Rasinari	No.	9	2	2	6	3	8	3
	%	81.81	18.18	18.18	54.54	27.27	72.72	27.27
Total	No.	55	9	15	37	12	42	22
	%	85.93	14.06	23.43	57.81	18.75	65.62	34.37

Thus, regarding the dimension of agricultural land exploited (a), the pleasant observation was made that the tourist structures from the studied area carry out agricultural activities in parallel with tourist activities, meaning it respects the basic goal of this field to carry out the two activities combined. However, the size of the agricultural holding, and implicitly of the agricultural activity carried out, is still at the semi-subsistence level; only 14.06% of the analyzed structures work a land area between 10 and 50 hectares, and the remaining 85.93% of those questioned work a small area, of less than 10 hectares. The

conclusion that emerges is that while agritourism activity is in the beginning phase, it is experiencing developing trends.

Additionally, the following indicator, the type of tourist facilities offered (b), reflects the pioneering stage of agritourism activity. From the 64 units included in the present study, 23.43% offered only the accommodation element of the tourist product, which means that they are at the beginning of their activity and do not have yet the experience and resources necessary to include other elements in the offered tourist products. It was satisfying to observe that 57.81% of the surveyed structures offered accommodation and food, so indicating that they are in the upward development stage. Of the surveyed structures, 18.75% were in the stage of advanced development, which means that they can offer all three elements of the tourist product.

The third monitored aspect, the length of leisure stay (c), required choosing a single answer from the two established options and highlighted the existing trend at the national level and for a short duration of the leisure stay, usually limited to the weekend. One positive observation was that the demands for “weekend” type tourist products have increased. This was caused in part by the pandemic period.

4.3.4. Operation and Management of Agritourism Activity and Product

In general, the degree of development of agritourism activity from an area as well as the main cons can be established by following how the agritourism product is constituted and how the agritourism business is managed. Thus, the last part of the study was dedicated to these aspects (see Table 8).

Table 8. Establishing the characteristics of specific agritourism products and business operation and management.

Villages from Marginimea Sibiului Included in Study	Measure Unit	The Specific of Agritourism Product (a)			Management of Business Operation (b)					
		Local Natural Resources	Resources, Activities, and Own Products	Resources, Activities (Crafts, Customs)	Capitalization Their Resources Only through Tourist Activities		Ability to Have Partnerships with Other Producers/ Entrepreneurs		Trade on Their Own or through Agencies	
					Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Saliste	No. %	5 21.74	12 52.17	6 26.08	17 73.91	6 26.08	4 17.39	19 82.60	18 78.26	5 21.73
Gura Raului	No. %	4 26.66	8 53.33	3 20.00	9 60.00	6 40.00	3 20.00	12 80.00	11 73.33	4 26.66
Jina	No. %	1 -	1 100.00	- -	- -	1 100.00	- -	1 100.00	1 100.00	- -
Orlat	No. %	1 33.33	2 66.66	- -	3 100.00	- -	- -	3 100.00	2 66.66	1 33.33
Poplaca	No. %	- -	2 66.66	1 33.33	2 66.66	1 33.33	- -	3 100.00	2 66.66	1 33.33
Rau Sadului	No. %	1 25.00	2 50.00	1 25.00	3 75.00	1 25.00	2 -	4 100.00	3 75.00	1 25.00
Sadu	No. %	- -	1 50.00	1 50.00	2 100.00	- -	- -	2 100.00	2 100.00	- -
Tilisca	No. %	- -	1 50.00	1 50.00	2 100.00	- -	- -	2 100.00	2 100.00	- -
Rasinari	No. %	2 18.18	7 72.73	2 18.18	8 72.72	3 27.27	3 27.27	8 72.72	9 81.81	2 18.18
Total	No. %	13 20.31	36 56.25	15 23.43	46 71.87	18 28.12	10 15.62	54 84.37	50 78.12	14 21.87

The specific of agritourism product (a) reflects the type of tourist services offered by the units that were part of our study and also indicates their degree of development. Thus, 20.31% of the analyzed units built their tourism product based on local natural resources (generally using the advantages of the special location), which means that they generally offer only accommodation. Of the rural tourist units included in the study, 56.25% used local resources, specific activities, and own products in the constitution of the tourist product, which is a beneficial aspect for all participants in agritourism activity. This category especially includes the agritourism structures that offer accommodation and food so that they capitalize on the products of their own production through tourist

activities. The combination of local resources with own products (with animal husbandry in particular) reflect the specificity of the area. In the case of 23.43% of the units included in the study, the tourist product contained local resources and specific activities (e.g., crafts and customs). This percentage included the units that understood that it is necessary to come with leisure elements to ensure future development.

Regarding the second aspect analyzed, the management of business operation (b), we first wanted to highlight whether the tourist structures included in the study could combine the two activities: tourism and agriculture. Thus, 71.87% of these structures capitalized on their own production/services/crafts only through tourist activities, which means that they could successfully combine the two activities. However, 28.12% of the analyzed structures capitalized on their own production/services/crafts only through tourism activities; this percentage included larger holdings that distribute part of the agricultural production obtained through sources other than tourism. While the ability to combine the two activities appeared promising, the same cannot be said regarding the aspect related to partnerships with other producers/entrepreneurs; it emerged from the processing of the answers that the vast majority (84.37%) of the owners included in the study did not have partnerships or collaborations with other producers/entrepreneurs. This will have to be improved in the future. In general, the trade aspect is quite difficult to assess, as it is conducted either “on their own” or “through agencies”. A total of 78.12% of the analyzed structures marketed their tourist products on their own, which is not necessarily a beneficial aspect. Thus, while they have control over sales, they lose time for designing the tourism product. It would be ideal, both for the owners of rural tourist structures and for the area, if in the future there were specialized agencies for the marketing and promotion of tourist products. This would relieve the owners of the responsibility of marketing and sales management.

4.3.5. Aspects Concerning Future Development of Agritourism through Support and Improvement of Own Products

In identifying the level of development of rural tourism activity from the studied area, we considered it necessary to identify the desire for support. Support can ensure the future development of this field. We also considered the direction that the owners of local rural tourism structures wished to follow in this future development. The conclusions are revealed in Table 9.

A total of 68.75% of the owners of the tourist structures included in the present study were aware that they needed support for agritourism activity (a), which represents a beneficial aspect in the sense of awareness and openness to specialized consulting. The question went further and requested input on the direction for which support was desired, which allowed us to relatively easily identify the problems faced by those involved in this activity. Among the identified problems were: consultancy on the legislation side; reducing the bureaucracy related to classification stage; the creation of the tourist product and the integration of agricultural activities in the tourist product; directing the method of presentation to promote the tourism structure/product; support in accessing financing lines to improve the structure/carry out the activity; and training to ensure innovative business management.

Regarding the future direction to improve tourism product (b) the results were quite balanced: 56.25% of the surveyed owners chose adding “smart value” through local products/crafts/gastronomy as a future direction to improve the tourism product, and 43.75% chose adding the “originality of local rural community’s life” as a future direction to improve the tourism product.

Table 9. Support necessity and future development directions.

Villages from Marginimea Sibiului Included in Study	Measure Unit	The Need for Support of Agritourism Activity (a)			Future Direction to Improve Tourism Product (b)		
		Yes	No	Direction on Which the Support is Needed	Adding "Smart Value" through Local Products/Crafts/Gastronomy	Adding the "Originality of Local Rural Community's Life"	
Saliste	No. %	16 69.56	7 30.43	-	Cconsultancy on the legislation side;	14 60.86	9 39.13
Gura Raului	No. %	8 53.33	7 46.66	-	Rreducing the bureaucracy related to classification stage;	8 53.33	7 46.66
Jina	No. %	1 100.00	-	-	The creation of the tourist product and the integration of agricultural activities in the tourist product;	1 100.00	-
Orlat	No. %	2 66.66	1 33.33	-	Directing the way of presentation to promote the tourism structure/product;	1 33.33	2 66.66
Poplaca	No. %	2 66.66	1 33.33	-	Support in accessing financing lines to improve the structure/carry out the activity;	1 33.33	2 66.66
Rau Sadului	No. %	3 75.00	1 25.00	-	Training to ensure innovative business management	2 50.00	2 50.00
Sadu	No. %	2 100.00	-	-		1 50.00	1 50.00
Tilisca	No. %	1 50.00	1 50.00	-		2 100.00	-
Rasinari	No. %	9 81.81	2 18.18	-		6 54.54	5 45.45
Total	No. %	44 68.75	20 31.25			36 56.25	28 43.75

If we attempt a general statistical analysis of the results, we can synthesize the research results regarding the working hypotheses as follows (Table 10):

- Regarding the seniority, importance and motivations of the agritourism activity in the studied area the results showed that 76.56% of the rural tourist owners had over 10 years in this field of activity, 64.06% of them knew the features of agritourism activity, and the motivations of agritourism entrepreneurs for carrying out tourism activity were connected by capitalizing on their own agricultural products to obtain additional income and ensure their own jobs.
- Regarding identifying the dimension of agritourism activity from the studied area, it was revealed that most rural tourism structures were at the beginning stage of their activity, both through services offered and through the duration of the leisure stay. They were experiencing developing trends.
- The third hypothesis referred to establishing the characteristics of specific agritourism products and business operation and management, and it revealed the specifics of local rural tourist products and revealed a strong emphasis of capitalizing on their resources through tourist activities. However, a weakness was found regarding the operation aspect, as the ability to have partnerships with other producers/entrepreneurs was relatively absent.
- Regarding the support necessity and future development directions, they were oriented through adding "smart value" through local products/crafts/gastronomy and adding the "originality of local rural community's life".

Table 10. Analysis of the main results.

<i>Aspects characterizing owners of rural tourism structures from studied area</i>	Education level (b)	<i>Middle level level</i>	57.81%
	Training for agritourism activity (c)	Yes	42.18%
		No	26.56%
<i>The seniority, importance, and motivations of the agritourism activity in studied area</i>	Seniority in the tourist activity (a)	<i>Up to 10 years</i>	73.43%
	Knowing the features of agritourism activity (b)	<i>Over 10 years</i>	23.43%
		Yes	76.56%
	The motivations of agritourism entrepreneurs for carrying out tourism activity (c)	No	64.06%
		<i>Obtaining additional income</i>	35.93%
		<i>Capitalize agricultural products</i>	37.50%
<i>Identifying the dimension of agritourism activity from the studied area</i>	<i>The type of tourist facilities offered (b)</i>	<i>Ensuring jobs</i>	42.18%
		<i>Accommodation</i>	20.31%
		<i>Accommodation and food</i>	23.43%
	The length of leisure stay (c)	<i>Accommodation, food, and entertainment</i>	57.81%
<i>Establishing the characteristic of specific agritourism product and business operation and management</i>	The specific of agritourism product (a)	<i>1–3 days</i>	18.75%
		<i>3–7 days</i>	65.62%
		<i>Local natural resources</i>	20.31%
	Management of business operation (b)	<i>Resources, activities, and own products</i>	56.25%
		<i>Resources, activities (crafts, customs)</i>	23.43%
		<i>Capitalization on their resources only through tourist activities-YES</i>	71.87%
		<i>Ability to have partnerships with other producers/entrepreneurs-NO</i>	84.37%
<i>Support necessity and future development directions</i>	The need for support of agritourism activity (a)	<i>Trade on their own or through agencies-YES</i>	78.12%
		Yes	68.75%
	Future direction to improve tourism product (b)	No	31.25%
		<i>Adding "smart value" through local products/crafts/gastronomy</i>	56.25%
		<i>Adding the "originality of local rural community's life"</i>	43.75%

5. Discussions and Recommendation

The researched area is one of the most beautiful areas of the country and one of the most important points of interest for tourists, as some of the previous studies' findings confirm [24,29,30]. The main findings of this particular study, starting from the research hypothesis, were grouped by positive and negative effects, as follows:

1. Positive aspects:

- It is gratifying to see that three quarters of the owners of rural tourism structures have been in business for more than 10 years, thus combating the lower degree of specialized training in the agritourism field through seniority and accumulated experience.
- In the studied area, more than a half of the structure owners knew the difference between rural tourism and agritourism, which is a good thing for future development, as it enables the proper creation of tourism products. Additionally, by knowing these features of this particular field of activity, the stakeholders can identify the opportunity to use tourism to capitalize on their agricultural products and to develop their activity in order to obtain additional income and to ensure jobs for them and their family members.

- To generate tourism products, local natural resources, specific activities, and own products or local activities are used. The stakeholders are willing to improve their products (which is a good thing) by adding “smart value” through local products/crafts/gastronomy or through the “originality of local rural community’s life” as future directions.
2. Negative aspects:
- Unfortunately, among the tourist owners from the studied rural area, the percentage of those who do not have specialized training in the agritourism field is an obstacle in terms of ensuring the future organization of the business to achieve long-term development.
 - Only a quarter of rural tourist structures were able to offer all three elements of the tourist product, which is reflected by a short length of leisure stay, i.e., stays limited to the weekend period.
 - Even if the stakeholders can successfully combine the two activities and capitalize on their own production/services/crafts through tourist activities, partnership with other entrepreneurs or with travel agencies is poor.

Based on the main findings, future proposals were made in Table 11 and possible positive consequences of the implementation of these proposals are listed.

Table 11. Marginimea Sibiului—X-ray of the main findings and proposals for future tourism development.

Findings from the Study	Future Proposals	Possible Consequences/Benefits
	✓ creating local training opportunities in the field, possibly involving owners in exchange of experience or “meetings” with the purpose of brainstorming with other owners	✓ efficiency of the activity carried out following the acquisition of specialized knowledge
	✓ identifying and using existing opportunities/resources at local level and creating a database	✓ ensuring local sustainability and long-term economic viability by using local resources
<i>Positive aspects</i>	✓ long term strategy regarding the management of tourism activity from rural area, with an emphasis on:	✓ obtaining an original/healthy tourist product
✓ seniority in activity—more the 10 years	- creating databases including consumers and their desires to create “a healthy, desired and unforgettable tourism product”	✓ the possibility for farmers to get support through partnerships
✓ the stakeholders know the specific characteristics of agritourism and rural tourism field	- creating partnerships with local farmers and authorities	✓ capitalization on local products and, therefore, support for all producers while simultaneously attracting local producers and the population to support tourism in the rural environment
✓ using agritourism to capitalize on agricultural products and obtain additional income or jobs	- creating an authentic tourist product with an emphasis on “local products and local resources”	✓ reiterating the interest for the rural environment by creating job opportunities, own businesses, and additional income
✓ combining agricultural activities with tourist activities		✓ support for local farmers to connect agricultural activities with tourist activities through a smart-way rural tourism
✓ the upward stage of development	✓ reconsidering tourist activity in the local development strategies by the authorities and supporting an increase in the “visibility” of this field through:	✓ preserving and ensuring the transmission over time of the original crafts/customs that are on the verge of extinction
✓ capitalization of local resources (natural, gastronomic, and crafts)	- creating partnerships with local farmers and authorities	✓ improving the appearance of the villages and increasing the standard of living
✓ <i>Negative aspects</i>	- road signaling	✓ the diversification of the rural environment economy, which is otherwise deficient
✓ lacking specialized training	- support for preparing necessary documentation for classifying tourist infrastructure	
✓ the shortness of leisure stays	- promotion on institutional sites	
✓ lacking partnerships with other entrepreneurs and tourism agencies	- including rural tourism in local development strategy with concrete support	
✓ only a few can offer all three elements of tourism products		

6. Conclusions

We began our research with the purpose of achieving a case study regarding the strategy of capitalizing on local resources through rural tourism activities in the Marginimea Sibiului area and the extent to which rural tourism activity is seen by the owners of tourist structures from the studied area as a developmental possibility. We addressed these questions by gathering information through a questionnaire/interview applied directly to the owners of rural tourism structures. This makes a novel contribution to the field by reporting findings directly related to those involved in this field.

The main limitation of the current research consisted of the uncertainty associated with obtaining many filled-in questionnaires, which, given that our study took place at the peak of the tourist season when owners of tourist structures are busy, could have been hindered their ability to formulate realistic conclusions. Another limitation was derived from fact that the territory used for this research was quite large, which raised the possibility of not being able to apply the questionnaires in all the component villages of the area under investigation. Nevertheless, both these limitations were eliminated during study.

The research revealed that, regarding the rural tourism field, the researched area, Marginimea Sibiului, is at an early stage of development but has high potential.

Regarding the operation and management of agritourism activity and products, we found that the analyzed area had suitable resources for tourist activities and the tourist structures included in the study could combine the two activities. They could capitalize on their own production/services/crafts both through tourist activities and through other sources. The owners of tourist structures who have started the introduction of local resources, specific activities, and own production in the tourism product have only to gain. Unfortunately, however, the ability to offer particular accommodations and food is translated into a short length of leisure stay and high seasonality, which are aspects present in other areas as well. [65] Additionally, the partnerships with other producers/entrepreneurs requires improvement in the future. The marketing of most tourist products was carried out by the owners independently (without the help of agencies), which is not necessarily a positive aspect. The stakeholders were aware that they need help, and they want it in the fields of consultancy, classification, creation of the tourist product, presentation the tourism structure/product, accessing financing lines, and training.

Supporting the future development of rural tourism in the studied area comes as an innovation [66] and with the possibility of ensuring the long-term “health”/“sustainability” of the villages through some relevant aspects: [67,68]

- preserving a segment of traditional agriculture that allows the stability and viability of the villages from the studied area;
- the increase of individual incomes and the desire to make the labor force permanent in the rural environment as a result of ensuring the possibility of obtaining additional incomes;
- capitalizing on new, original, and lesser-known tourist resources, which allows the achievement of a “personalized” tourist offer. Thus, architecture and folklore, some secular or religious traditions that can take different forms in tourist products, can be passed on to future generations. The interest in such traditions is growing, and over time, the possibility of diversifying and preserving the local economy is ensured.

Taking the findings into consideration, we can also determine our future research directions in terms of finding the aspects concerning the demand for the area, the involvement of other entities in the rural tourism sector (in other words, the stage of public–private partnership), and evaluating future opportunities of this field of activity for the analyzed area starting from the current infrastructural situation.

We believe that the transformation of the Marginimea Sibiului area (and other areas) through rural tourism into a sustainably developed area requires the observance of certain principles: tourist activity must be initiated with the own means of the local community, and it must maintain its control over tourism development; tourism must provide residents

with jobs that will improve the quality of life of local communities, and a balance must be achieved between the economic activities already existing in the area and tourism activities; educational programs and training must be carried out in order to improve management in the field of protection of natural and cultural resources.

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