RESIDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF TOURISM IMPACT ON THE RURAL COMMUNITY IN THE RAVNI KOTARI

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Abstract

Purpose – Tourism, as one of the fastest-growing contemporary phenomena, significantly affects local communities, both positively and negatively, particularly in rural areas. This study aims to examine the attitudes of the local population towards tourism development and its perceived impacts in the Ravni Kotari area in Croatia.
Methodology/Design/Approach – The research employs a qualitative approach, using semi-structured interviews with residents. Collected data were transcribed and analysed in MAXQDA 22, enabling systematic coding and the interpretation of key themes related to tourism development and community perceptions.
Findings – The results indicate that the local population recognizes the positive economic and environmental effects of tourism development. However, awareness of potential negative impacts—particularly economic, sociocultural, and ecological—is limited. At the same time, tourism development has contributed to a growing understanding of the importance of preserving traditional lifestyles and protecting the autochthonous character, as well as the cultural and natural heritage of the rural area.
Originality of the research – This study provides context-specific insights into community perceptions of rural tourism development in an under-researched Croatian region. It contributes to a better understanding of how local awareness shapes sustainable tourism development and highlights the need for a more balanced consideration of both positive and negative impacts.
Keywords rural tourism, local community perceptions, tourism impacts, sustainable tourism development

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INTRODUCTION

Rural areas are commonly associated with preserved cultural heritage, traditional lifestyles, and strong community identity. However, over the past few decades, these areas have undergone transformations driven by globalization, structural economic changes, and the declining competitiveness of traditional agricultural activities. As a result, many rural communities face challenges such as depopulation, economic stagnation, and the erosion of traditional livelihoods (Dax & Fischer, 2018). In response to these pressures, rural tourism has increasingly been promoted as a viable development strategy capable of generating additional income, revitalizing local economies, and supporting the preservation of cultural and natural heritage.

Tourism, including its rural forms, represents a complex and multifaceted phenomenon with both positive and negative implications for host communities. On the one hand, it contributes to employment creation, diversification of income sources, and the valorisation of local products, crafts, and traditions (Gao & Wu, 2017). On the other hand, tourism development can lead to spatial transformation, environmental degradation, commodification of culture, and changes in the quality of life and social structure of local communities (Gössling, S. et al., 2020). Prior studies highlight that local communities often prioritize short-term economic benefits, particularly in early stages of tourism development, while potential negative impacts remain under-recognized or insufficiently addressed (Lee & Jan, 2019; Lin et al., 2017; Ribeiro et al., 2017).

Understanding local community perceptions is therefore essential for ensuring sustainable tourism development. Community attitudes influence the support and long-term viability of tourism initiatives, as well as the extent to which tourism contributes to balanced economic, sociocultural, and environmental outcomes (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2017). While existing studies have extensively examined tourism impacts in mature destinations, comparatively less research focuses on rural areas in the early stages of tourism development, particularly in emerging tourism regions.

The Republic of Croatia represents a highly relevant context for such analysis. As one of the most tourism-dependent economies in the European Union, with a significant share of GDP generated from tourism (Croatian Bureau of Statistics, 2025), Croatia faces structural challenges related to the spatial and temporal concentration of tourism activity. Tourism demand is strongly concentrated along the Adriatic coast, with approximately two-thirds of tourist overnight stays occurring during the peak summer months (Croatian Bureau of Statistics, 2026). In recent years, policy efforts and market trends have encouraged the spatial expansion of tourism into inland and rural areas, aiming to reduce seasonality and promote more balanced regional development (Croatian National Tourist Board, n.d.).

This shift has brought new opportunities, but also emerging challenges, particularly in rural regions that are only beginning to experience tourism development. In such contexts, local communities may lack prior experience with tourism and may not

fully recognize its long-term implications. This creates a critical need to examine how tourism is perceived at its initial stages, as early attitudes can significantly shape future development trajectories.

Against this background, this study focuses on the Ravni Kotari area, a rural hinterland of Zadar County in Croatia, currently in the early phase of tourism development. The study aims to explore how the local community perceives tourism development and the extent to which residents recognize its positive and negative impacts. By doing so, the study seeks to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of community awareness in emerging rural tourism destinations and to highlight the importance of integrating local perspectives into sustainable tourism planning and policy-making.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORY

1.1 Rural tourism

Rural areas possess distinctive characteristics that make them attractive tourism destinations, including preserved cultural heritage, traditional lifestyles, and relatively undisturbed natural environments (Adamov et al., 2020). More intensive tourism development in rural settings occurred in the second half of the 20th century, driven by structural transformations in rural economies (Rosalina et al., 2021). These transformations, manifested through depopulation, declining agricultural competitiveness, and lifestyle changes, have created the need for alternative development pathways. In this context, rural tourism has emerged as a strategic response (Gao & Wu, 2017).

The growth of rural tourism has also been stimulated by increasing demand from urban populations seeking authentic experiences, contact with nature, and participation in traditional ways of life (Kastenholz et al., 2020). Rural tourism is therefore not only supply-driven but also shaped by tourists' cultural imaginaries and expectations, who associate rural areas with simplicity, authenticity, and heritage (Zhang et al., 2019).

Despite its growing importance, rural tourism remains conceptually ambiguous. The term itself is often contested, as "rural" primarily refers to a spatial context rather than a clearly defined set of tourism activities (Lane & Kastenholz, 2015). This raises the question of whether rural tourism should be understood as tourism in rural areas or as a distinct form of tourism with specific characteristics (Sharpley & Roberts, 2004). Defining what constitutes a "rural area" is equally complex, as it may depend on population density, economic structure, and social organization (Nair et al., 2015).

In response to these conceptual challenges, the UNWTO (n.d.) frames rural tourism as an experience-based form of tourism connected to nature, agriculture, local culture, and traditional lifestyles. Building on this perspective, Rosalina et al. (2021) defines rural tourism as tourism occurring in areas characterized by traditional, authentic, and sparsely populated environments, where visitors can physically, socially, or psychologically immerse themselves in the destination. This highlights the multidimensional nature of rural tourism.

1.2 Impacts of Tourism on Rural Areas

Tourism development generates a wide range of impacts on rural destinations, often described as a "double-edged sword". Its effects can be both beneficial and detrimental, depending on the scale, intensity, and management of tourism activities. The magnitude of these impacts is influenced by factors such as tourist volume, seasonality, and the degree of spatial concentration (Martínez et al., 2019).

Tourism studies examining residents' attitudes toward tourism development are frequently grounded in Social Exchange Theory (hereinafter referred to as SET), which remains one of the most widely applied theoretical frameworks in this research field (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2015; Hadinejad et al., 2019). SET assumes that residents evaluate tourism development through a cost-benefit perspective, meaning that support for tourism depends on whether perceived benefits outweigh perceived negative impacts (Gannon et al., 2021). In the context of tourism, perceived benefits may include employment opportunities, infrastructure improvements, and enhanced quality of life. In contrast, perceived costs often involve environmental degradation, rising living costs, spatial transformation, and sociocultural change (Eslami et al., 2019). Residents who perceive tourism as beneficial are therefore generally more likely to support further tourism development and participate positively in tourism-related activities. (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2015; Gaonkar & Sukthankar, 2025).

In its early stages, rural tourism typically develops as a small-scale activity embedded within the local community, often without significant external investment or major infrastructural transformation (Guizzardi et al., 2022). At this stage, its impacts are generally perceived as positive, particularly from an economic perspective. Rural tourism can generate employment, diversify income sources, reduce rural outmigration, and stimulate entrepreneurial activity (Ibănescu et al., 2018). It can also enhance the marketability of local products and support the preservation of traditional crafts, gastronomy, and cultural practices (UNWTO, 2023).

Beyond economic benefits, rural tourism can contribute to social cohesion and community development by fostering networks among local stakeholders and facilitating cultural exchange (Yanan et al., 2024). These processes may strengthen local identity and promote the valorisation of cultural and natural heritage (Ma et al., 2021). Stakeholder-oriented approaches have become increasingly important in tourism research, particularly in the context of sustainable development and destination governance. Building on this, stakeholder theory assumes that destinations consist of various actors, such as residents, entrepreneurs, local authorities, tourism organizations, tourists, and associations, whose interests and levels of influence may differ (Nguyen et al., 2019). Their cooperation is important for balancing economic, sociocultural, and environmental goals, although tourism development can often create tensions among them due to unequal power relations, fragmented governance, and different development priorities (Khan et al., 2021; Li et al., 2020).

Tourism development also entails risks. Economically, it may lead to higher land and property prices, rising living costs, and an unequal distribution of benefits, thereby affecting residents' standard of living (Martín Martín et al., 2020). Environmentally, converting agricultural land to tourism-related uses can disrupt ecosystems and alter landscape structure (Ristić et al., 2019). Socio-culturally, tourism may contribute to the commodification of local traditions, loss of authenticity, and changes in community values and lifestyles (Zielinski et al., 2020).

Rural areas are vulnerable to such impacts due to their ecological sensitivity and socio-economic fragility (Chin et al., 2018). The very attributes that attract tourists, authenticity, traditional lifestyles, and preserved environments, can be undermined by uncontrolled tourism development. From a sustainability perspective, tourism impacts should therefore be assessed across three interrelated dimensions: economic, sociocultural, and environmental. Achieving a balance among these dimensions remains a central challenge for rural tourism development.

2. METHODOLOGY

This chapter outlines the methodological framework for investigating local community perceptions of tourism development in Ravni Kotari. Particular attention is given to the justification of qualitative methods as appropriate for capturing subjective experiences and context-specific insights.

2.1 Research Area

Ravni Kotari, located in the Adriatic region of Croatia, is a rural hinterland characterized by growing tourism activity. Geographically, it extends across parts of Zadar and Šibenik-Knin counties, situated between Bukovica, the Adriatic coast, and the Krka River basin (Hrvatska enciklopedija, n.d.). For this study, the area is defined by the administrative scope of the Ravni Kotari Tourist Board, which includes six municipalities and the town of Benkovac, covering approximately 21.5% of Zadar County.

Tourism development in Ravni Kotari is relatively recent, having intensified over the past two decades. Despite its early stage, the area has experienced notable growth, with tourist arrivals increasing by 73.79% and overnight stays by 72.32% between 2018 and 2022. Nevertheless, its overall share of total overnight stays in Zadar County remains modest (1.5%), indicating that it is an emerging destination.

A distinctive feature of tourism in Ravni Kotari is the dominance of accommodation in private households. This form of tourism enhances opportunities for cultural exchange but also increases the relevance of local community attitudes, as residents play a central role in shaping the tourism experience (Sthapit & Jiménez-Barreto, 2018).

2.2 Research Design

To provide an in-depth understanding of tourism development opportunities and their impact on the local rural community, this study employs a qualitative research design based on semi-structured interviews. Qualitative research is particularly suitable for exploring complex social phenomena, as it enables the interpretation of meanings individuals assign to their experiences and social environments (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this context, tourism development in rural areas is a multidimensional process shaped by subjective perceptions, local values, and socio-cultural dynamics that cannot be fully captured by quantitative approaches (Carson & Carson, 2018). A qualitative approach is particularly valuable when investigating real-life settings where context and participant experiences are central to the research problem (Patton, 2014).

The study's exploratory nature further justifies the choice of a qualitative approach. Rural tourism development in the Ravni Kotari area is still in its early stages, making predefined variables and hypotheses insufficient to capture the complexity of local perceptions. Instead, an open-ended, flexible design allows new insights to emerge from participants' experiences.

2.3 Data Collection

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, widely recognized as one of the most effective techniques for capturing participants' experiences, attitudes, and interpretations (Flick, 2014). Semi-structured interviews balance consistency and flexibility, enabling the researcher to address predefined topics while also exploring unexpected insights that arise during the conversation.

According to Brinkmann and Kvale (2015), qualitative interviews are a form of social interaction through which knowledge is co-constructed between the interviewer and the participant. This perspective is particularly relevant in this study, as it acknowledges that respondents' perceptions of tourism development are shaped through dialogue and reflection rather than being fixed or purely objective.

The interview guide consisted of 28 questions organised into three thematic sections:

1. respondents' attitudes towards the rural area and the local community,
2. perceptions of tourism development potential, and
3. perceived impacts of tourism development on the area and the community.

In addition, general socio-demographic information was collected to contextualize participants' responses.

The structure of the interview was informed by previous studies on rural tourism and community perceptions (Algassim et al., 2022; Liasidou et al., 2021; Ma et al., 2020; Hwang & Stewart, 2017), ensuring both theoretical grounding and comparability with existing studies.

The use of semi-structured interviews is particularly appropriate for this study because it facilitates in-depth exploration of perceptions while maintaining a degree of comparability across participants. As noted by Patton (2014), this method enables the researcher to obtain rich, detailed data while still addressing specific research objectives.

The study involved 12 participants from the local community of Ravni Kotari. A non-probability sampling strategy was employed, specifically the snowball sampling method. This approach was chosen due to the limited number of individuals with direct experience or knowledge of tourism development in the observed area (Guo et al., 2023; Ghadami et al., 2022; Kala & Bagri, 2018).

Snowball sampling is particularly suitable when the target population is not easily identifiable or accessible. Patton (2014) describes this technique as effective for identifying "information-rich cases" through referrals from initial participants. In the present study, the initial respondents were identified by representatives of the Ravni Kotari Tourist Board and the University of Zadar. These participants then recommended additional individuals.

The sample included a diverse range of stakeholders, including individuals engaged in tourism-related activities, residents, and community members interested in the area's future development. This diversity ensured a broader understanding of community perspectives and enabled the identification of both shared and divergent views.

The sample size of 12 participants is appropriate for this qualitative study, as the goal is to understand local stakeholders' views and experiences in depth rather than to make broad statistical claims. The quality and relevance of the data matter more than the number of people involved (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Guest et al. (2006) also found that main themes in interviews often appear after six interviews, and the most important topics are usually covered by the twelfth interview, especially when the study's goals are clear, and the participants share similar backgrounds.

The interviews were conducted in Croatian during April and May 2023. Each interview was audio-recorded with participants' consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim.

The interview process followed established qualitative interviewing guidelines, including building rapport with participants, ensuring ethical considerations, and maintaining neutrality throughout the conversation. Although the interviews followed a predefined structure, flexibility was maintained to allow for probing and the exploration of unanticipated topics, thereby enhancing the depth and richness of the data. Participants were informed about the study's purpose and assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses.

2.4 Analytical Approach

The collected data were analysed using qualitative thematic analysis, a widely used method for identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns in qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is particularly suitable for studies that aim to explore perceptions and experiences across a dataset.

According to Braun and Clarke (2022), thematic analysis involves a systematic process of familiarization with the data, coding, theme development, and interpretation. This approach allows researchers to move from raw data to meaningful patterns that capture the essence of participants' experiences.

In this study, the analysis followed a structured procedure:

1. Data familiarization: reading and re-reading the transcripts to gain an understanding of the content.
2. Initial coding: identifying meaningful segments of data and assigning codes.
3. Category development: grouping similar codes into broader thematic categories.
4. Theme refinement: reviewing and refining themes to ensure internal coherence and distinctiveness.
5. Interpretation: analysing the relationships between themes and linking them to the research objectives.

This analytical process also aligns with the principles of qualitative content analysis, which emphasize systematic coding and category development as key steps in data interpretation (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2023; Saldaña, 2015).

To support the data analysis process, the MAXQDA 2022 software was used. Computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software, such as MAXQDA, enhances transparency, organization, and efficiency in qualitative analysis (Rädiker & Gizzi, 2024). Kuckartz and Rädiker (2019) highlight that MAXQDA facilitates systematic data coding, the organization of categories, and the retrieval of coded segments for further analysis. Furthermore, it enables the integration of memos and analytical notes, which support the interpretative process. Software-supported qualitative analysis did not replace the researcher's interpretative role but rather enhanced analytical rigor by providing systematic tools for data handling.

The coding process followed a predominantly inductive approach, grounded in participants' narratives and recurring meanings identified across interviews. Interpretation was further informed by concepts related to sustainability, rural tourism development, authenticity, and community perceptions as outlined in the theoretical framework. Initial coding occurred at the semantic level, focusing on explicit statements and recurring ideas within the interview transcripts. For instance, statements such as „lack of support", „absence of planning", and „waiting for others to initiate development" were coded as institutional passivity, insufficient stakeholder coordination, and lack of strategic direction. In subsequent analytical stages, these semantic codes were interpreted at a more latent level and consolidated into the broader theme of fragmented governance and institutional inertia.

Coding and theme development proceeded iteratively, involving continuous movement between interview transcripts, generated codes, thematic categories, and emerging interpretations. Throughout this process, codes were repeatedly reviewed, merged, reorganized, or refined to ensure thematic coherence and clear distinctions between categories. For example, initial codes such as infrastructure problems, weak institutional support, and lack of tourism initiatives were initially treated as separate categories. After repeated comparison across interviews, these were integrated into a broader interpretative theme describing structural limitations of tourism development. Similarly, codes related to peace and tranquillity, a preserved lifestyle, and escape from urban life were grouped into a broader category reflecting the perceived authenticity and experiential appeal of the destination.

Throughout the analytical process, analytical memos and reflective notes documented emerging interpretations, conceptual relationships between categories, and recurring contradictions within participants' narratives. For example, reflective notes captured the paradox in which respondents perceived tourism as economically beneficial, yet also recognized that tourism-related transformations could gradually undermine the agricultural practices, rural lifestyle, and spatial authenticity underpinning the destination's appeal. These notes facilitated the transition from descriptive coding to more interpretative thematic analysis.

The use of MAXQDA facilitated systematic comparison between participants with varying levels of involvement in tourism activities. For example, respondents directly involved in tourism more frequently emphasized employment opportunities, income generation, and tourism growth. In contrast, those less directly involved expressed stronger concerns about spatial transformation, environmental degradation, and the loss of traditional lifestyles. These comparisons enabled a more nuanced interpretation of stakeholder heterogeneity within the local community.

3. RESULTS

This chapter presents the findings of the empirical research, focusing on local community perceptions of tourism development in Ravni Kotari. The findings of this study reveal that perceptions of tourism development in Ravni Kotari are structured around four interrelated thematic domains:

1. The current state of tourism development,
2. Tourism potentials and development directions,
3. Positive impacts of tourism development, and
4. Negative impacts and associated challenges.

These themes are analytically separated; however, respondents frequently articulated them as mutually interconnected dimensions of a broader development process.

3.1 Current State of Tourism Development

The findings indicate that respondents predominantly perceive the current state of tourism development in Ravni Kotari as unplanned, fragmented, and lacking a clear strategic framework. Development is largely seen as a spillover effect from nearby coastal destinations rather than the result of deliberate local planning. As one respondent stated, tourism in the area "*literally occurred due to the masses in the coastal cities*" (Respondent 06). This perception suggests that tourism development in Ravni Kotari is experienced less as a locally initiated development strategy and more as an externally induced process shaped by the overflow of coastal tourism dynamics. Such findings indicate a relatively passive developmental position of the destination within the wider regional tourism system.

A recurring issue identified by respondents is the absence of coordinated governance and stakeholder alignment. Although the respondents, when discussing the strategic framework, most often stated that "*everyone should have a certain role"* (Respondent 01), differences have been recorded. Some respondents believed "*many factors depend on the Tourist Board and the State, which should set some guidelines and specific standards and frameworks"* (Respondent 04). While respondents acknowledged that multiple actors, such as local authorities, tourist boards, and the state, should play defined roles, their cooperation was perceived as insufficient and ineffective. Respondents felt a lack of support and contemplated that the stakeholders should "*help these people organised themselves, provide some additional experiences, and think it can be an essential step for people to start a business"* (Respondent 08). Insufficient coordination among local authorities, tourism organizations, and community members may significantly constrain destinations' ability to develop coherent, sustainable tourism strategies. Some respondents emphasized the need for top-down strategic guidance, whereas others highlighted the importance of local initiative and proactivity. This divergence reflects a lack of clarity in governance responsibilities and strategic direction:

> *"I believe that a strategic direction should be made, roughly defining future directions, and, of course, within that strategic direction, each municipality and city should be given certain freedom. I think it would be best if we plan at some higher levels, which would then provide these local self-government units greater independence to determine the directions of the development"* (Respondent 11)

In addition, respondents frequently pointed to institutional inertia and limited stakeholder engagement. The absence of proactive initiatives at the local level was interpreted as a barrier to development, with some participants criticizing local institutions for waiting for external actors to initiate tourism programs instead of developing their own:

> *"There is some truth in that, but why doesn't a Tourist Board plan a full-day excursion - Aserija, Nadinska gradina, and a couple of other archaeological sites? Why wait for someone in Zadar to start a program for tourists from Zadar to come here? You start it!"* (Respondent 06)

The narratives of respondents reveal that governance-related problems are not merely administrative shortcomings but structural obstacles that limit the community's ability to shape tourism development actively. The coexistence of expectations for top-down strategic guidance and demands for stronger local initiative reflects uncertainty regarding governance responsibilities and institutional leadership.

The respondents considered that the inertness is directly related to the worrying state of the destination's infrastructure. Infrastructure was identified as a critical constraint on tourism development. According to respondents, the condition of infrastructure, as an essential part of the resource base and a prerequisite for tourism development, is low. Respondents described outdated and unreliable systems related to water supply, electricity, and digital connectivity:

> *"Our pipes are still the ones that were put in 20 or so years ago. Internet and electricity come from the power plant there, so if it rains, there can be a power outage because the cable gets wet somewhere, and the electricity drops. We are already used to such things."* (Respondent 10)

These findings suggest that respondents perceive infrastructure not only as a technical prerequisite for tourism development but also as an indicator of broader institutional neglect and uneven regional development.

These infrastructural deficiencies were perceived as a direct consequence of insufficient public investment and weak policy prioritization at higher levels of governance. Respondents found that decision-makers at the highest levels, particularly the government and political actors who determine daily policy, are responsible for this condition.

Environmental concerns also emerged as a central issue within this theme. When discussing the potential of natural heritage, Crno Brdo becomes unavoidable, as the respondents unanimously identified it as "an ecological time bomb in the middle of Ravni Kotari" (Respondent 01) because waste by-products from a nearby failed factory were moved to a private plot in the middle of agricultural lands. Crno Brdo represents a paradox that directly threatens further tourism development:

> *"If you want rural tourism, a healthy environment, ecology, I do not know what, whatever, then you have a man in Nadin who produces and receives awards for ecological wines. On the contrary, you have Crno Brdo in the immediate vicinity, which has been standing there for 15 years, and we have not been able to remove it."* (Respondent 06)

While tourism in Ravni Kotari is largely promoted through ideas of preserved nature, ecological quality, and rural authenticity, respondents simultaneously identify unresolved environmental degradation as a direct threat to the credibility and sustainability of such positioning.

Furthermore, the valuable cultural heritage has also not been sufficiently valorised in tourism, and therefore, the respondents reemphasized the responsibility of the decision makers:

> *"We have an archaeological site with some really valuable things. National Geographic co-financed that research, and then our city government cannot put up a sign that it is there. There is no marked path; it cannot be accessed at all."* (Respondent 06)

Despite these challenges, respondents acknowledged the area's comparative advantages, particularly its geographical location. The proximity to major tourist destinations, natural attractions, and transport infrastructure (Zemunik Airport) was identified as a strong foundation for future tourism development. Some respondents believed there was progress in tourism. However, "*it takes a whole set of people as it all turns around, and I think that the present generation will not experience any serious changes yet"* (Respondent 02). Progress can thus only be achieved gradually over time.

3.2 Tourist potentials and development directions

Respondents demonstrated a relatively high level of awareness regarding the key tourism potentials of Ravni Kotari, particularly its rural character and associated lifestyle. Respondents recognized the rural character of Ravni Kotari, among other things, in a close-knit community, as one of the main attractive elements for tourists who "*lack what people in the village have"* (Respondent 07). The respondents emphasized tranquillity that satisfies "*the ever-increasing need to spend time in nature, which provides them with fresh air, i.e., the escape from the roads"* (Respondent 12). A dominant finding is that respondents strongly associate tourism development with nature-based and experience-oriented trends, particularly the growing demand for peace, a clean environment, and escape from urban lifestyles. These attributes are seen as core elements of the destination's future positioning.

A consistent theme across interviews is the perception that agriculture should form the foundation of tourism development, since "*the tourism should rely on extensive agriculture, which is various, authentic, and then enhanced by modern achievements of technology"* (Respondent 01). Respondents emphasized that tourism should not replace traditional activities but rather complement and enhance them. In this sense, tourism is understood as an upgrade to agriculture, enabling diversification of income sources while preserving local identity.

In addition to agricultural resources, respondents identified significant yet underutilized cultural and historical assets. These potentials in the observed area, which could generate special tourism interests, such as cultural tourism, should be managed appropriately:

> *"There is this Kaštel, which is exceptionally preserved; there is a museum inside the Kaštel, and we are surrounded by many fortresses, such as Kličevica, which is also exceptionally preserved and located only two kilometres from Benkovac. We have Aseria, a city that is perhaps one of the most important archaeological sites not only in Croatia or Europe but globally."* (Respondent 02)

However, the findings also reveal a gap between recognized potential and actual development. While respondents demonstrated awareness of available resources, they simultaneously highlighted the lack of systematic planning, investment, and promotion necessary to transform these resources into concrete tourism products.

3.3 Positive impacts of tourism development

The positive consequences of developing tourism were perceived mainly in economic terms, as some respondents stated that "*there are no other positive impacts for tourism except the economic one"* (Respondent 02). Economic gains include employing people and constructing new facilities, i.e., long-term benefits for the local community members, which enable "*retired people to have something to do and get a certain income, while the second benefit offers more options for young people so that they do not have to leave the region for work"* (Respondent 09). Tourism was also recognized for its multiplier effect on the local economy, stimulating complementary activities and improving living standards. The multiplicative character of tourism was recognized in respondents' ability to perceive the power of tourism, stimulating the development and *"the improvement of the quality of life and the possibility to earn some money that would be invested in infrastructure or the environment"* (Respondent 04). In the case of Ravni Kotari, economic benefits such as employment opportunities, additional income sources, and infrastructure improvements appear to represent the dominant basis for positive community perceptions of tourism. This dominance of economic narratives suggests that tourism is primarily evaluated through its developmental and financial potential, while broader sociocultural and environmental dimensions remain secondary within community perceptions.

Beyond economic benefits, respondents highlighted certain sociocultural advantages. The respondents believe that the local population was refined by exposure to tourism and stated, "*it forces our people to be in contact with people worldwide and broaden their horizons through the arrival of visitors and meet other people"* (Respondent 06). This exposure was associated with increased openness, tolerance, and adaptability within the community. Contact with other religions, nations, and cultures thus affects the community's resilience and capacity to cope with the challenges of globalization.

In addition, some respondents suggested that tourism could help raise environmental awareness. While discussing the advantages of encountering different cultures, the respondents, although not explicitly mentioning positive ecological effects, stated that "*the level of awareness of tourists who come to Croatia regarding environmental protection is higher than ours"* (Respondent 11), and the local population could learn something from them.

3.4 Negative impacts of tourism development

Despite recognizing its benefits, respondents also identified several negative impacts and risks associated with tourism development. One of the most prominent concerns is the shift from traditional economic activities, particularly agriculture, to tourism-oriented activities. They stated that "*fewer and fewer people are engaged in agriculture, which is negative for Ravni Kotari"* (Respondent 10). This transformation was perceived as potentially harmful, as it may undermine the very resources that attract tourists to the area. For example, in some Ravni Kotari settlements, the breeding of domestic animals and livestock has been prohibited in certain areas:

> *"Earlier, people had large pastures, so sheep walked through the village. The car had to stop and let the sheep pass first. Now, the municipality has introduced a regulation that prohibits it. Domestic animals must not be kept near the house. Things slowly started to change and become oriented towards tourism."* (Respondent 05)

Respondents noted that regulatory changes and increasing tourism orientation have led to the gradual disappearance of traditional rural lifestyles. These findings reflect a broader paradox of rural tourism development, whereby tourism simultaneously depends on rural authenticity while contributing to the gradual transformation of the traditional practices and landscapes that constitute the destination's primary basis of attraction.

Interestingly, respondents did not perceive tourists themselves as the primary drivers of these changes. For example, "*the Germans who rented a house with a swimming pool and saw that the neighbour was taking sheep to pasture in the morning were ready to pay a man to come with him"* (Respondent 03). Local actors, particularly property owners and investors, were seen as key agents of transformation, often prioritizing short-term economic gains over long-term sustainability.

Environmental impacts were perceived as a potential rather than an immediate threat, given the area's early stage of tourism development. Some respondents expressed the view that the spatial capacity of Ravni Kotari may delay the negative environmental consequences commonly associated with mass tourism, since "*I do not expect this to happen in a short period, as this rural area is, regarding its area, much larger than the narrow coastal area"* (Respondent 11). However, others acknowledged that environmental degradation is inevitable if development remains unregulated.

A notable finding is that respondents often approached tourism development through a cost-benefit perspective, accepting potential environmental degradation as a necessary trade-off for economic development, since "*I think that tourism development would definitely affect both the climate and nature, but if we want to do something and earn something, we have to be ready for it"* (Respondent 02). The acceptance of environmental degradation as a necessary consequence of economic development indicates a predominantly pragmatic understanding of sustainability, prioritizing economic benefits over long-term environmental preservation.

At the same time, the findings also indicate the limitations of purely economic interpretations of tourism support, as several respondents simultaneously expressed concerns regarding authenticity loss, architectural transformation, and erosion of

traditional rural lifestyles. Sociocultural impacts were also identified, particularly regarding changes in local identity and the built environment. The sociocultural implications have been illustrated in the deviant behaviour that occurs when the local community contacts visitors from different cultural circles, "*with different lifestyles, under the so-called elitist name, which would probably lead to drug abuse and other things"* (Respondent 10). Most respondents considered that monetary gains and financial effects influence the higher tolerance of the local community, since "*I did not see it as a conflict situation because these are expensive holiday homes rented, and I expect more polite behaviour from those people"* (Respondent 08). They believed that Ravni Kotari attracts specific guests who are not prone to deviant behaviour.

The previously mentioned cultural heritage in its intangible part also includes the lifestyle and ambience of the rural area, which was increasingly neglected:

> *"These holiday homes, villas, and vast swimming pools are great, but this architecture and cube houses without roofs covered in white pebbles are unsuitable for the region. They do not fit here, in my opinion. You cannot make a mockery of a village made of stone houses. You cannot plant a concrete cube there."* (Respondent 02)

Respondents therefore interpreted spatial transformation not merely as a physical modification of the landscape but also as a symbolic disruption of local identity, rural aesthetics, and cultural continuity.

The findings also reveal relatively low direct involvement of the local population in tourism activities. In this study, only three respondents were directly involved in tourism, and one of them owned a family farm with an excursion site that can be perceived as 'rural' in the full sense of the word. One respondent rented a floor of his home, and another owned an apartment and a family farm located in the coastal area, not in Ravni Kotari. Among the remaining nine respondents, two were partially involved in tourism, having organised a festival that was perceived as an additional offer for the destination. In this sense, emphasizing the involvement of the extended family in the level of the tourist supply is important. Of the seven remaining respondents, one rented the holiday house located in Ravni Kotari, but it belongs to his uncle, who lives abroad. Finally, two of the remaining six respondents actively considered involvement in tourism. This limited level of engagement suggests that tourism development in Ravni Kotari is still in an early and uneven stage, with significant potential for broader community participation.

4. DISCUSION

The findings show that the local community in Ravni Kotari perceives early-stage tourism development as both an opportunity and a challenge. In line with the theoretical framework, which conceptualizes rural tourism as a multifaceted phenomenon encompassing several dimensions (Rosalina et al., 2021), the findings reveal a dual perception of tourism: while economic benefits are clearly recognized and strongly emphasized, structural, environmental, and socio-cultural challenges remain insufficiently addressed or only partially understood.

The study confirms previous research indicating that rural tourism can contribute to improved living conditions, employment opportunities, and reduced depopulation (Gao & Wu, 2017). Respondents clearly identified economic benefits as the most significant outcome of tourism development, highlighting job creation, diversification of income sources, and new investment opportunities. The positive impacts of tourism can also be analysed using SET, which posits that residents are likely to support tourism development when perceived benefits exceed perceived costs (Gannon et al., 2021; Hadinejad et al., 2019). In Ravni Kotari, favourable perceptions are primarily attributed to anticipated economic benefits, including employment opportunities, increased income, entrepreneurial prospects, and potential infrastructure improvements. At this initial stage of destination development, tourism is therefore regarded as both acceptable and desirable, as its advantages are more apparent and immediate than any negative consequences.

These findings are consistent with the theoretical understanding of rural tourism as a development mechanism capable of revitalizing rural economies (Ibănescu et al., 2018). Furthermore, the results extend the existing literature by emphasizing the perceived multiplicative effects of tourism, particularly its ability to indirectly stimulate related economic activities and improve the quality of life in the local community. However, in accordance with prior studies that describe tourism as a "double-edged sword" (Martínez et al., 2019), the findings also indicate that respondents demonstrate comparatively lower awareness of potential negative economic and environmental consequences, especially in the early stages of development.

Beyond economic aspects, the study reveals a significant structural limitation reflected in the lack of strategic planning and weak stakeholder coordination. While theoretical perspectives emphasize that rural tourism can foster cooperation among local actors and strengthen community networks (Yanan et al., 2024), respondents in this study perceived governance structures as fragmented and characterized by institutional inertia. From a stakeholder theory perspective, these findings indicate fragmented governance structures and insufficient stakeholder coordination within the destination (Nguyen et al., 2019). A lack of stakeholder cooperation, combined with conflicting interests, contributes to challenges in destination development, consistent with the findings of Khan et al. (2021). Local authorities and the tourist board are frequently identified as key stakeholders in the development of tourism infrastructure and the broader tourism sector, as well as in facilitating stakeholder connection and coordination.

In the case of Ravni Kotari, the early stage of development, combined with the absence of operationalized strategic instruments and measurable indicators, appears to limit the effectiveness of coordinated action. Although a strategic document outlines tourism

development in Ravni Kotari (Razović, 2022), the local population perceives this development as unplanned and spontaneous, suggesting that the objectives defined in the document are not applied in the day-to-day management of the destination. This finding reinforces the importance of moving from declarative to implementation-oriented strategic planning, particularly in areas identified by respondents as critical, such as infrastructure development and sustainable spatial management. Importantly, the findings suggest that the absence of coordinated governance may reinforce Ravni Kotari's dependence on external tourism flows from coastal destinations. In such a context, tourism development risks remaining reactive rather than strategically managed, limiting the destination's capacity to define its developmental priorities and tourism identity independently.

A further important insight concerns the recognition and utilization of local resources. Respondents demonstrated a relatively high level of awareness of the area's natural and geographical advantages. At the same time, cultural heritage, particularly its tangible and intangible dimensions, was perceived as insufficiently integrated into tourism development. This situation reflects a broader challenge frequently identified in rural tourism development, where communities recognize the symbolic and cultural value of heritage but lack the institutional capacity, strategic coordination, or financial resources necessary for its systematic tourism valorisation. This gap between resource recognition and effective utilization indicates that the transformation of local assets into marketable tourism products remains limited. The findings thus highlight the need for more systematic approaches to heritage interpretation and product development, especially in the context of experience-based tourism.

The results also point to a fundamental tension between tourism development and the preservation of traditional rural activities, particularly agriculture. In line with previous research (Zielinski et al., 2020), respondents expressed concern that the shift towards tourism-oriented activities may lead to the gradual abandonment of traditional practices, thereby undermining the destination's authenticity. At the same time, respondents emphasized that agriculture should remain the foundation of tourism development, positioning tourism as a complementary rather than a substitutive activity. This reflects a key theoretical paradox of rural tourism: the very attributes that attract tourists, authenticity, traditional lifestyles, and preserved environments, can be weakened by uncontrolled development (Chin et al., 2018).

This points to a structural contradiction characteristic of many emerging rural destinations: tourism development simultaneously depends on the preservation of rural authenticity while contributing to the gradual transformation of the agricultural practices, spatial forms, and everyday lifestyles that constitute that authenticity. This contradiction additionally reflects tensions between different stakeholder interests and development priorities. While some actors primarily view tourism as an opportunity for economic growth, others emphasize the importance of preserving local identity, agricultural traditions, and spatial authenticity, underscoring the complexity of balancing sustainability objectives in rural tourism destinations (Li et al., 2020). The findings therefore reinforce the importance of integrating agriculture and tourism in ways that preserve local identity while enabling economic diversification.

In terms of sociocultural impacts, the study supports theoretical claims that tourism can enhance social interaction, cultural exchange, and community openness (Ma et al., 2021). Respondents reported that contact with tourists contributes to greater tolerance, broader perspectives, and increased awareness of sustainability practices. However, these effects appear to emerge spontaneously rather than as the result of structured policies or strategic initiatives. At the same time, respondents identified potential negative sociocultural impacts, including changes in local identity, the emergence of deviant behaviours, and the transformation of the built environment through inappropriate architectural interventions. Concerns regarding inappropriate architectural development and spatial transformation are not interpreted solely as aesthetic issues but as indicators of deeper anxieties about the erosion of local identity and the loss of community distinctiveness.

Environmental impacts were predominantly perceived as future risks rather than immediate concerns, which can be explained by the relatively low intensity of tourism development in the area. Nevertheless, the presence of specific environmental issues, highlights the vulnerability of rural areas to ecological degradation (Ristić et al., 2019). Moreover, respondents' tendency to justify potential environmental degradation in terms of economic benefits reflects a pragmatic, but potentially unsustainable, cost–benefit perspective. This perception may represent a developmental risk, as delayed visibility of environmental pressures can lead to underestimating the long-term cumulative consequences of tourism expansion in rural areas. This finding underscores the importance of integrating environmental considerations into early-stage planning processes, as emphasized in sustainability-oriented tourism frameworks.

An additional insight from the study is that perceptions of tourism impacts vary with the level of individual involvement in tourism activities, consistent with previous findings (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2017). Respondents directly engaged in tourism tended to emphasize economic benefits, whereas those less involved were more sensitive to social and environmental implications. This finding highlights the heterogeneity of stakeholder perspectives and suggests that community attitudes towards tourism are not homogeneous but shaped by individual experiences and interests.

Given that Ravni Kotari is at an early stage of tourism development, many negative impacts commonly associated with more mature destinations, such as over tourism, excessive environmental pressure, and infrastructure overload, have not yet fully materialized (Li et al., 2020). This creates a window of opportunity to proactively guide tourism development in accordance with sustainability principles, rather than reacting to already established problems.

CONCLUSION

Tourism development in Ravni Kotari represents both a significant opportunity for socio-economic revitalization and a potential source of structural and sustainability challenges. Its future trajectory will largely depend on local stakeholders' ability to adopt a balanced, strategic approach that integrates economic, sociocultural, and environmental dimensions. Only through such an approach can tourism contribute to long-term rural development without compromising the fundamental characteristics that define the destination's identity and attractiveness.

From a practical perspective, the findings suggest several key implications for tourism planning and destination management in emerging rural destinations such as Ravni Kotari. First, local and regional stakeholders should strengthen participatory governance mechanisms to involve residents more actively in tourism planning and decision-making. Such approaches may help reduce perceptions of institutional passivity and fragmented governance. Second, greater emphasis should be placed on implementation-oriented strategic planning, supported by measurable indicators for sustainability, infrastructure development, environmental protection, and heritage valorisation. Respondents repeatedly emphasized inadequate infrastructure and insufficient institutional coordination as major developmental barriers, indicating the need for stronger public investment and long-term planning. Third, tourism development strategies should promote stronger integration between agriculture and tourism in order to preserve local authenticity and diversify rural economic activities. In this context, traditional agricultural practices, local gastronomy, and everyday rural lifestyles should be treated not only as complementary activities but also as core components of the destination identity. Finally, the findings suggest the need for clearer architectural and spatial planning guidelines to preserve the visual identity and cultural landscape of rural settlements. Such measures may help reduce tensions between tourism development and preservation of rural authenticity.

Several limitations of the study should be acknowledged. The relatively small sample size, although consistent with qualitative research standards, limits the generalizability of the findings. Furthermore, the focus on a single rural destination implies that the results are context-specific. Additionally, at an early stage of tourism development, certain impacts, particularly environmental ones, may not yet be fully visible or perceived by the local community.

These limitations open several avenues for future research. Longitudinal studies could examine how community perceptions evolve as tourism development progresses, while comparative analyses across different rural destinations could provide deeper insights into the role of contextual factors. Future research should also explore mechanisms to strengthen stakeholder cooperation and improve governance structures in rural tourism destinations.

In conclusion, tourism development in Ravni Kotari represents both a significant opportunity for socio-economic revitalization and a potential source of structural and sustainability challenges. Its future trajectory will largely depend on local stakeholders' ability to adopt a balanced, strategic approach that integrates economic, sociocultural, and environmental dimensions. Only through such an approach can tourism contribute to long-term rural development without compromising the fundamental characteristics that define the destination's identity and attractiveness.

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