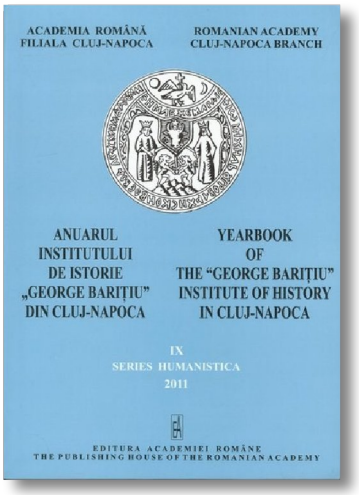

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Enikő Veress

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NATURAL CAPITAL AS A RESOURCE FOR DEVELOPMENT OF THE REMOTE AREAS IN ROMANIA. CASE-STUDY IN THE COUNTY OF BISTRIȚA-NĂSĂUD

Enikő Veress

Universitatea „Babeş-Bolyai" Cluj-Napoca
Facultatea de Sociologie şi Asistență Socială

Abstract. *In the last decades a greater interest has been shown to „non-traditional" sources for development, meaning here the non-economic forms of capital considered to be possible alternatives for those regions and areas that lack the economic capital. The paper intends to give an insight in the theoretical debates on the natural capital, the way this resource can be capitalised and introduced in the local economy. The second part of the paper presents a case-study from the Northern part of Romania, the county of Bistrița-Năsăud, where both local and county-level stakeholders have considered natural capital as one of the local resources that might be used in local development plans as well as for the enhancement of the local multiple identity.*

Key words: *enviromental, endogenous, local identity, "green" tourism, remoteness*.

In the first part of the paper, I would like to present briefly the conceptualisation of nature as it has recently appeared in environmental sociology, putting an emphasis on the concept of nature as a resource. In the frame of environmental sociology nature or natural environment is considered mostly as the "physical" environment, exposed to pollution and for this the main task of this branch of sociology is to conserve natural landscape in its original form and prevent the "use" of nature as a resource that can be capitalised. Even if there are probably more conceptualisations, I will take into consideration the main three acceptions, considered as present in environmental sociology as seen by van Koppen[1].

In the second part, I will briefly present the implication in local development, in the creation of new jobs and employment in an area close to the biosphere of the

[1] C. S. A. van Koppen, *Resource, Arcadia, Lifeworld. Nature Concepts in Environmental Sociology*, "Sociologia Ruralis", vol. 40, 3/2000, p. 339–366.

An. Inst. de Ist. „G. Barițiu" din Cluj-Napoca, Series Humanistica, tom. IX, 2011, p. 55–65

Rodna Mountains, situated in the Northern part of Romania, presenting the attitude of the local stakeholders, who see this natural resource (capital) as an endogenous source of developmenr that can be capitalised and used in the surrounding area of the biosphere especially through its conservation by the development of the „green" tourism, this way this remote area could transform its weakness (remoteness) into a strength through the opportunity of applying for EU funding regarding environment and nature.

1. CONCEPTUALISATIONS OF NATURE

We are in the fortunate position to say that there is a social theory of nature, so we might say that there is a theoretical base on which we can rely when trying to define nature as a resource or we might say as a form of capital that can be used in the local strategies of the more remote rural areas.

As it has been mentioned above, we will take into consideration three main concepts of nature as described by van Koppen in 2000. I will use the first acception, nature as resource later on in my paper.

Nature as a resource

Considered as being the predominant view in the environmental sociology, it has been used from the early 20th century as such in theories of human ecology, systemist theory, also by Catton's and Dunlop functionist model of environment, Habermas' theory on communicative action and the Marxist theory. More recently it has been also present in the Beck's theory on the risk society and it is as essential characteristic in the ecological modernisation theory.

In this acception, nature is considered to have three fundamental traits. Nature's values are considered to be *instrumental*, so nature is a means in relation with others, through this mean other values can be transformed. Secondly the concept of nature as a resource is a *material* one, nature is considered as being involved in the provision of material needs, first of all in foodstuff, but also the supply of energy and materials as well as the living environment. The third element, even if less important refers to the aestethetical and ethical aspect of nature, this is seen also from the comments of the theoreticians who consider these aspects as being "cosmetic"[2], so not so significant.

As it has mentioned before, nature as a resource is strictly connected to production and consumption. In the "economy" of nature it is very important to speak about its conservation, as without a sustainable use of nature we cannot speak about a sustainable endogenous resource of the local community. In order to be able to preserve nature Van Koppen considers that there are two aspects that must be taken into consideration and monitored carefully: the functions natural areas do and can have in human health, consumption and production. The other

[2] A. Schnaiberg, *The Environment. From Surplus to Scarcity*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1980.

issue we must speak about is the conditions under which the sustainable use of these functions is possible, how much is a carrying mechanism of an ecosystem. Both issues lead us to the field of science and technology, so it is not a pure "cosmetic" we are speaking here about.

Even if at first it seems that the adepts of the concept of nature seen as a resource line up very much on the basic ideas around this concept, they agree upon the causes and solutions of the modern environmental problems and the way society should handle them, literature shows that there are many disagreements between some theories in answering some problems. Just to give an example: Marxists and ecological modernists have opposing views on the role of the capitalist market in causing and/or solving environmental problems.

Even with these disagreements there is an accordance that this concept of nature is quite well-elaborated and most close to the natural sciences. Even so, there is an important uncertainty regarding nature and environmental problems, for example even if it was mentioned as being one of the key issues in this approach, that of determining the carrying mechanism of an ecosystem, there is still no operational way of determining it.

Nature as "Arcadia"

The Arcadian sense of nature goes back to Donald Worster, who has defined the Arcadian view of the relationship between humans and nature as "devoted to the discovery of intrinsic value and its preservation", as being opposite to the imperialist view. This Arcadian approach is also critical to "resourcism" (those who consider nature as a means for human consumption) and "reductionism" (those who reduce nature to a set of natural-physical-chemical phenomena). The theory that backs up this approach is provided by the members of the Frankfurt School, theory that is enrooted in the cultural history, with a set of four traditions (tradition of sympathy for animals, tradition of enjoying the beauty of landscape, tradition of natural history, religious tradition of worshiping life) that have an important influence upon several actual reglementations in environmental and ecological problems. In another aspect, in the promotion of the so-called "green" or ecological tourism this Arcadian approach of the nature is often used in the marketing by the local people who own pensions, small hotels in beautiful rural landscapes in order to attract people especially those who would come to this area to enjoy the "green and pleasant land", how Newby has characterized a few decades ago the English countryside.

If the topic of this paper were to present a full picture of the concepts of nature in the environmental sociology, I would have certainly stopped now at the radical environmentalists who advocate for the deep ecology and for the bio-egalitarianism and this way I could have made the reader feel more negative about the Arcadian approach. But as this paper proposes itself just to present the features of an approach for a better understanding on the social constructions around nature and the relationship between nature, human and society, I consider that it is not my

duty to present all the aspects of a certain approach, but to mention some of the elements of a certain approach the local stakeholders from the biosphere of the Rodna Mountains have mentioned as being a possible strength, the untouched nature is considered by the locals as a stronghold in the construction of the green tourism in the nearing.

Nature as a social construction

Emerging from research in the field of scientific knowledge, as well having basis in cultural anthropology, this approach of nature can be considered as being symbolically constituted. This approach to nature highlights the important role *man* plays in this context; it is rather a deconstructionist view as the main consideration of this approach is to demonstrate the high level on which nature relies on the social construct, on the measure man influences its ambience.

As a framework for research, this approach can be useful. In rural sociology it was used in the study of rurality and nature, as well as in that of the urbanisation. It is said that nature considered a social construct can be a further frame for the analysis of environmental problems and especially the social and cultural aspects.

I do not intend to rank the three approaches of nature, but I consider them as being important bases in the study of certain aspects of the relationships between man-nature-society. Especially when we consider nature as having the functions of production and consumption, we must take the concept of nature as a resource, with its three basic traits.

In our case-study, nature as a resource, natural capital is considered by the local communities as being one out of five basic vital resources that are necessary in the achievement of a sustainable livelihood. As De Haan has mentioned it, natural capital in the case of the remote areas and social categories under exclusion has a specific place, and near the human, physical, financial and social capital are vital for these communities. Natural capital in this case[3] includes resources like land, water, forests and pastures, but minerals as well. These assets or resources are mostly considered as being in the ownership of a community, so in the opinion of some people their denomination under the "umbrella" of capital might not seem proper. I define natural resources in our case as being a form of capital (and not "just" an asset) that is produced and fructified by the local communities presented as being also one of the few pillars the strategy of local and regional development relies upon.

2. PRESENTATION OF THE CASE-STUDY: THE RODNEI AREA FROM THE COUNTY OF BISTRIȚA-NĂSĂUD

First of all I would like to present the context in which this territory came into the focus of research. In 2007 a consortium of eight organisations from eight countries (UK, Hungary, Romania, Spain, France, Lithuania, Bulgaria and Italy)

[3] Leo de Haan, *Globalization, Localization and Sustainable Livelihood*, "Sociologia Ruralis", vol. 40, 3/2000, p. 300–319.

has started up a small collaborative project on employment in rural areas during February 2008–October 2010. The full title of the project is „New Sources of Employment to Promote the Wealth-Generating Capacity of Rural Communities", but was known by its acronym „RuralJobs". RuralJobs has approached the issue by quantifying the employment needs and potentials in different typologies of pilot areas within contrasting reference areas in six EU countries, evaluating the effectiveness of past and current policies in addressing these needs and potentials, and by systematic analysis of the results, providing guidelines on the better targeting of future rural development measures. The Romanian partner (the Faculty of Economical Studies and Business Management of the Babeş-Bolyai University from Cluj-Napoca) had the task to analyse a predominantly rural, remote and low GDP county within the North-West Development Region**.**

The choice for this county was made as it includes a great variety of relief forms and so the local economy of certain territories is quite different, based on the use of the specific endogenous "vital" resources.

One of the specific areas of the Bistrița-Năsăud County includes an unique territory in the Northern part, the Rodnei territory which also includes a biosphere.

The methodology of research has included both quantitative and qualitative methods. By quantitative methods we mean the secondary analysis of the previously existing data-sets as well as the collection of new data that were relevant to the topic of rural employment.

Qualitative methods embodied the application of 25 semi-structured interviews to local stakeholders of the county (representatives of formal institutions, entrepreneurs, NGOs involved in community development, etc.), the results of these interviews being subsequently analysed. Interviews were made during 2009.

Subsequent to the fieldwork a SWOT analysis was made of the studied county with regard to the possibilities of employment the endogenous and exogenous resources can provide. Results were presented in focus-groups with local actors we have previously interviewed and who on the basis of these results have named the most important (strategic) objectives, carrying out a SOR analysis.

In the Rodnei area we have interviewed the local mayor, the manager of the business incubator, the manager of the biosphere (former Natural Reserve) of the Rodnei Mountains and the owner of a small pension situated inside the natural park. Besides the local stakeholders, the county-level stakeholders have all pointed out natural assets, namely the Natural Park of the Rodnei Mountains as being a "winner" among the endogenous resources these remote areas own and on which their strategy for local development can rely on.

The Rodnei Mountains that include the highest peaks from the Eastern Carpathians (Rocky-Pietrosu Peak – 2.303 meters), are located in Northern Romania. Being included in the Northern group, also known under the name of the Carpathians of Maramureş and of Bucovina, these mountains indeed reign over the

landscape, the greatest differences in level being towards the Plateau of Maramureş, situated at North. From an administrative point of view, the park is expanded in the territory of the counties of Maramureş and Bistriţa-Năsăud.

The locals have fought for getting across the protected areas of the Rodnei Mountains since 1932, in this year they first succeeded (when it was printed in the Journal of the Council of Ministers nr. 1949/1932). Later this status has been reconfirmed through Law nr. 137/1995, and at this moment the Scientific Reserve Pietrosu Rodnei (182 hectares) has been established. From 1979 it has the status of Reserve of Biosphere in the frame of the program Man and Biosphere-Paris – supervised by the United Nations for education, science and culture. On the core of this Reserve through Law nr. 5/2000 the ***National Park the Rodnei Mountains*** was established, being defined as a protected area of national and international interest, being also included in network *NATURA 2000*.

As extent the National Park has a surface of 46.339 hectares, by this being the largest protected area from the North of the Eastern Carpathians. Its strengths are given through the geology and geomorphology of the mountains, as well as of many unique species of fauna and flora. The Natural Park is co-ordinated by the Ministry of Environment and Sustainable Development from Romania, but closely managed by the National Forestry Funds-ROMSILVA through its local county office Bistriţa. From 2004 there is an Administrative Board of the National Park, its headquarters being in the commune of Rodna, county of Bistriţa-Năsăud.

Just to have an idea of some "strengths" of the Park, here are some of the most significant areas, that attract the highest number of tourists**:**

- Mixed Reserve „Cave and grotto of the Blue Spring of the Iza" (100 hectares)
- Speological Reserve „The Cobasel Cave" (1 ha)
- Mixed Reserve „The springs of Mihăiesei" (50 hectares)
- Mixed reserve Bila-Lala (2568 hectares)
- Natural Reserve Bătrâna Spring (0,5 ha)
- Reserve Valea Cormaia (50 hectares)
- Botanical Reserve „The meadow with Daffodiles from the Mountain of Saca" (5 ha)

Besides the significant "quantity" (and "quality through its uniqueness") of the natural capital of the park, there is a significant cultural-historical capital that was mentioned to us by the local stakeholders we have interviewed.

So the majority of the settlements from the vicinity of the Park exist (and are documented) from the 13^{th}–15^{th} centuries: Rodna, Moisei, Năsăud, Borşa, Rebra etc.

Etnographically there are two distinct areas in the nearing of the Park: Maramureş at North and Năsăud at South, both being known as areas famous for the preserving of their traditions, folk traditional architecture.

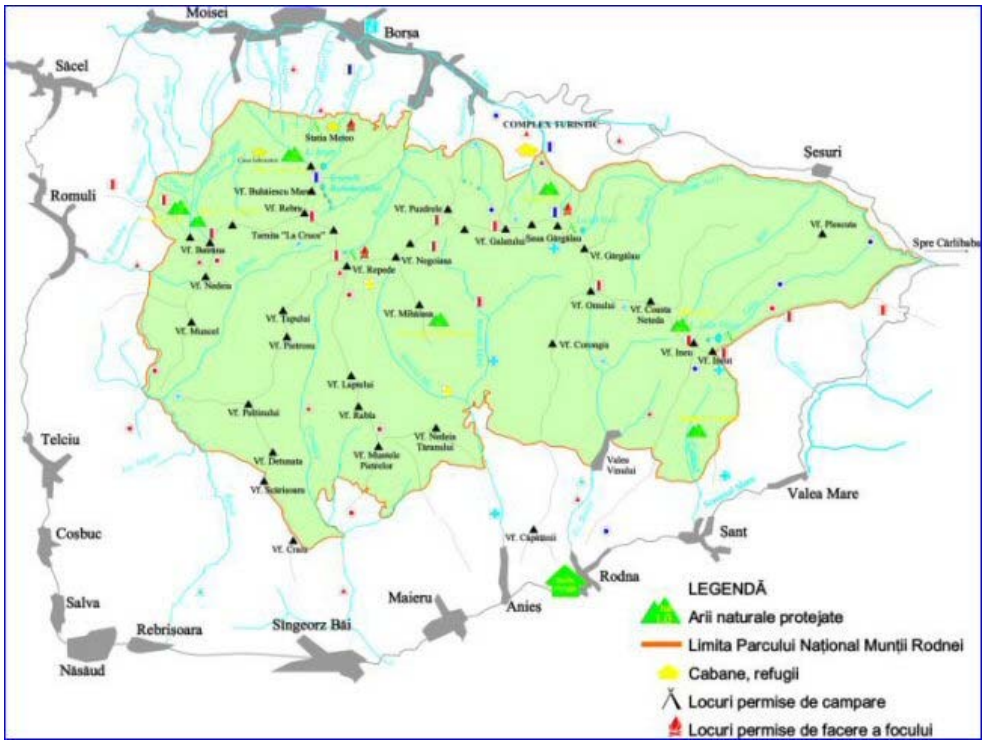
Another specific of the Natural Park consists in the existence of mineral springs that have therapeutical attributes (see the city of Sângeorz Baths that were famous for more than one hundred years for these traits, but in the last twenty years

it has gradually lost this strength because mostly of defectuous management). The territory of Maramureş from the vicinity is also famous for the traditional carving: wooden churches, wooden gates document the skills of the popular craftsman. Folk costumes and traditions are also "alive" and can constitute the "resources" the strategy of local development of these remote areas can rely on. In certain pastures that territorially belong to the Park, but it is in the vicinity of the shepherds who have large sheep-heard and practice transhumance (another "asset" that can constitute a base for the attraction of tourists who show interest in traditional agriculture). As the leading board of the Natural Park has told us, they have applied for entering the network PanParks which intends to ensure the preservation of the biodiversity, entering in this international network would prohibit any economic activity, such as grazing. This seems to be the main point of stress inside the local communities between the grazing shepherds and the management of the Natural Park. The first ones –as the local stakeholders have said – do not want to submit to this prohibition as they see no future in the promotion and practicing of different forms of economic activities that might eventuate in the case of production (and of course consumption) of the endogenous natural capital of the territory but rather in the promotion of animal-breeding and selling the products that originate from the sheep-breeding. The other conflictual point between the locals and the administration of the park is that related to the uncontrolled exploitation of the forests that are inside the Park. Timber industry is considered by the locals as being traditionally one of the few resources of sustainable livelihood, and disregard the restrictions imposed because of the specific status of the forests included in the Natural Park. As our interviewees have told us, sometimes even the guards disregard these restrictions…

3. **WAYS OF FRUCTIFICATION OF THE NATURAL CAPITAL OF THE NATIONAL PARK**

In the *Rodnei Mountains National Park* the natural capital is the basis for the development of several types of tourism, mainly branches of „green" tourism, but as you can see cultural tourism is also practised and successful and as local stakeholders (mainly the mayor of Rodna) have pointed out, local historical and cultural capital can also constitute the core for the development of the local economy, in this remote mountain area the local stakeholders have to identify and valorify vital non-agricultural resources for the development of the local communities, so that they can create and ensure employment for the local active population. Such elements of historical and cultural capital are the existence of the catacombs from the Roman times and the proto-Christian toombs and the Dominican basilica from the 13th century from Rodna. In the neighboring settlement, Valea Vinului there has been a mine (active until the end of the nineties from the 20th century) extracting gold from the Roman times, and the owner of the

pension from the settlement considers this heritage as a good resource on which the local people, who previously have depended on the activity of the mine (like the active population from Rodna as well) can build upon a sustainable livelihood in tourism, so creating an alternative to the „green" tourism in case the weather is for example not proper for trekking in the Natural Park of the Rodnei Mountains. They have even thought of making a museum inside the mine, that can include reliques of the mining period from the nearby villages, creating a museum where the whole family can spend some time-off.



Graph. 1. Map of the Rodnei territory[4].

But let us see how do the local communities fruitify for the moment the multitude of forms of existing local capital, namely the natural and cultural forms of it.

Leisure activities

Leisure tourism relies on the characteristics of the natural environment, the unique species of flora and fauna, lately the local communities have realised the importance of attracting people from different backgrounds, so as mountaineers are also taken now into the perspectiev of the locals, they have renewed the roads for

[4] http://www.parcrodna.ro/ (accessed on the 29th of November 2010).

those who are interested in hiking and trekking, so they can also observe the natural rarities of the Park. The existing species as well as the shephards who pass near the mountaineers belong to the local ambiance and can attract younger tourists. But there is a category (true at the moment not too significant) who consider the natural environment of the Rodnei Mountains as being a biodiversity that should not be touched, adepts of nature as „Arcadia", where the natural beauty, biodiversity should not be altered by tourists, by „laymen". The local stakeholders from the area we have interviewed, have mentioned that these people who put resistence to the „exploitation" of the natural capital of the Natural Park are not local but come from urban areas and usually have nothing but emotional links to the landscape. Another branch of leisure tourism is winter sports' tourism, in the area there are several ski-runs, and their specificity is that they are not „tamed", so they have maintained to a great extent their wilderness, but as the interviewees have mentioned, this is also a weakness as this way families having smaller children are negatively discriminated. More elaborated ski-trucks are in the spot-resorts from Borşa and Valea Blaznei.

Local people consider that as urban stress is more and more significant among the population from Romania, and the economic crisis somewhat limits the choices of the local people for choosing a place for relaxation, leisure tourism in the Natural Park can be developed at this stage as a „forced" choice for tourists, but with time they can develop an attachment to the natural beauties of the area.

Thermal (curative) tourism

Curative and/or wellness tourism is based on another trait of the local natural capital of the area. As local stakeholders have pointed out, the territory has been famous for several centuries for the curative and wellness traits of its baths, as well as for the springs that were good in curing certain medical problems. The most famous such medical bath is in Sângeorz-Băi, as the local interviewees have told us in the 19th century, it has been one of the "pearls" of the spa and thermal tourism in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. There are other settlements where the mineral springs also have "miraculous" curative effects: Rodna, Romuli, Parva, Cormaia, Maieru, Anies, Valea Vinului, Şant, etc.

Cultural tourism

As it has been mentioned above, besides natural capital, elements of cultural and historical capital can be also used for production. The diversity of the existing potential in many cases goes from the folk traditions of the local population to the historical architectural monuments, the woodcarving as well as the ethnographical heritage, etc. What differentiated this area from other ones is that because of its remoteness („modernity has not altered our genuine values") these traditions have remained „alive", so the practising of these activities for the tourists does not imply a straining. The cultural and historical specificity of the Năsăud and Maramureş area as well as monuments and museums, memorial houses (Liviu Rebreanu and

George Coşbuc) were pointed at by the local stakeholders as places where groups of pupils(and not just them) should be taken by their teachers, so to enforce their national and cultural identity.

Equestrian tourism

Another branch of tourism that seems rather successful and can be practised in the area of the National Park of the Rodnei Mountains is equestrian tourism. In the nearby town of Beclean horsebackriding is an important tradition of the local people, the local community relying on this historical traditional and the possibilities of establishing a Centre for Ecotouristic Horsekeeping(and riding), administered by the Romanian Directorate of Forestry-Romsilva – The Forestry Department of Bistrița.

As local stakeholders have related, there are programs of different levels of difficulty. In some of these tours the horseback riders can go through the most of the Park and can admire the touristic roads and natural amenities of the park as well as elements of the life of local people from the kraal, where tourists can eat dairy products made by the local shepherds together with these. Guides authorised by the Ministry of Tourism are accompanying groups of tourists, most frequent they come in the months of July and August.

Rural tourism and agrotourism

The rural space in the nearing villages has an important touristic potential. As the area has several traditional rural communities, the interviewees have mentioned this traditional character as an "asset", in many cases hostels and pensions were established near the farm (or even inside the farm), so the hosts could serve the guests with their local products, this way both "ends" of the foodstuff supply chain had benefited out of it. Tourists could also combine the different types of tourism, so in the time of "practising" rural tourism they could also enjoy the cultural and natural capital of the Natural Park and its surroundings. Actually this is not the only case, when we cannot delimit very strictly the different types of tourisms that are present in the area and that can be "consumed" simultaneously. This type of holidays (mostly summer holidays) spent in the core of nature can enhance the value of the unaltered nature, consulted sites and leaflets all mention the existence of traditions as a strength of the territory.

Ecotourism

This is the only branch of tourism that can ensure on the long run the conservation of biodiversity, those who are practitioners of it respect the natural values of the environment and want to contribute to its conservation. As members of the managing board of the Natural Park have told us and as it has been mentioned above, members of local communities do not agree totally with the restriction they have to obey in practising some local activities (namely logging and grazing inside the Natural Park), so this is a point of stress that representatives of different institutions involved in the local development all have mentioned. The

only "solution" to this problem is seen by the local actors in the identification (and exploitation) of new sources of income, sources that do not affect the natural environment and still can contribute to the materialisation of the sustainable livelihood locals are looking for., this way pressures will not be so big on the protected areas and the personnel who is administrating the Natural Park. This is even more important as the Natural Park cannot enter the PanParks network only if it is able to fulfil the main objective of sustainable conservation of biodiversity, so promote ecotourism. This is the kind of tourism practised by the more assertive tourists, but as the interviewed local actors have pointed that out: "there is still not enough interest from people from the urban".

4. **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

As we could see, the local stakeholders from the Rodnei area have realised the importance natural capital has in the promotion of the local development of the area and the creation of employment for the local people and have started to develop various branches of local "green" and cultural/historical tourism. As they have all agreed, for this remote area that lacks a significant amount of "traditional" economic capital, natural and cultural capital and any kind of such endogenous resources can be vital sources of sustainable livelihood and can substitute the economic capital, remoteness being considered by the local actors as being possible to transform into a "strength", as due to this characteristic of the Rodnei area the natural environment could preserve its traditional outlook, attracting this way people from places where this landscape has long been destroyed by the industrialisation. Actually members of the managing board of the Natural Park of the Rodnei Mountains have outspoken an opinion that exists among the locals, who are afraid that a too large (and uncontrolled) amount of visitors to the area might destroy the genuine values of the natural and social environment of the territory. At the moment of the field research though they have said that at least until that time there was no real danger of having too many tourists…