

THE ECOTOURISM CERTIFICATION SYSTEM (ECS) 2004 - 2008

1. The Ecotourism Certification System in 2004

Although work on establishing an ecotourism certification system started even before setting up AER in 2003, within the frame of the Initiative Group for Ecotourism, the most important results were provided within the project ***Ecotourism certification – a tool for nature conservation and sustainable development*** funded by the Romanian Environmental Partnership Foundation (2004 - 2005).

AER considered of critical importance to create the Ecotourism Certification System as a mechanism for putting into practice the basic principles of ecotourism, in order **to ensure nature conservation and sustainable development of local communities through tourism**. This is an important step in the wider context given that since March 2003 the World Tourism Organization has recommended governments to support the initiatives that promote the certification in sustainable tourism.

The Ecotourism Certification System developed by AER has adapted the international experience to the Romanian context. It is based on the *Nature and Ecotourism Accreditation Programme* promoted by the Australian Ecotourism Association (NEAP is the first accreditation system in ecotourism) and on *Nature's Best* developed by the Swedish Ecotourism Association (the first accreditation system in ecotourism in the northern hemisphere).

The Ecotourism Certification System addresses three different categories of applicants:

- ecotourism programmes / tours provided by tour-operators or guides (i.e. eco-tours of maximum 15 participants),
- small-scale accommodation structures in rural and natural areas (eco-lodges and guesthouses of maximum 25 rooms),
- eco-destinations (one or several communities within natural areas).

AER has identified a series of benefits that can be brought by implementing the Ecotourism Certification System, such as:

- helps clients to better identify those products that can offer awesome nature and rural culture experiences,
- raises the level of trust in the Romanian ecotourism product on the international tourist market,
- becomes a marketing tool for tour-operators and destinations,
- enhances the quality of the ecotourism services,
- contributes actively to nature conservation and leads to sustainable local development,
- supports local administrations of protected areas for development of low impact tourism,

- offers a platform for common activities between the business sector and nature conservation entities.

The final draft of the Ecotourism Certification System was elaborated after a continuous process of consultation with AER members, both business and nature conservation oriented. During August and September 2004, a series of consultation sessions involved the Ministry of Environment and Water Protection, the National Tourism Authority, the National Institute for Research & Development in Tourism and the University of Bucharest.

By the end of 2004, AER Executive Board decided to start a one-year trial period for implementation of the Ecotourism Certification System. Therefore, a few AER members were invited to be evaluated in 2005.

2. The Ecotourism Certification System in 2005

In September 2005, the first tour was tested directly in the field. A tour in the Danube Delta run by Inter Pares, a small tour-operator, was selected. The evaluation of the tour was positive, with minor improvements needed.

Furthermore, legal insight into Romanian legislation in the certification area was necessary. Therefore, Cerasela Barboni was hired as an independent legal adviser in order to identify and design a certification mechanism in compliance with the Romanian legislation. Cerasela produced a few options that were put forward for discussion by AER to be applied in 2006.

3. The Ecotourism Certification System in 2006

AER's legal adviser, Cerasela Barboni, worked on the certification process during 2005 and 2006. The certification process was developed in three steps:

1. identification of a certification mechanism / body (October-November 2005)
2. development of the certification process and its implementation body (March-June 2006)
3. evaluation period (June-November 2006)

AER decided to set up an administrative Certification Department as a new body within the Association. This department was designed to administrate and facilitate the whole certification procedure. Under the coordination of this department, the following were achieved:

- drawing up a procedure for the Ecotourism Certification System;
- reviewing the certification criteria;
- launching an evaluation programme based on the reviewed criteria;
- writing a 56 page manual for assessors in ecotourism certification;
- preparing self-evaluation forms for tours, accommodation and eco-destinations;
- preparing evaluation forms for assessors;
- preparing application forms for tours, accommodation and eco-destination;
- preparing a guide for applicants on the certification procedure.

AER established a target: to run 10 evaluations by autumn 2006.

The self-evaluation forms and the guide for applicants were posted on AER's website for easy access and implementation of the evaluation programme in June-August 2006. The evaluation forms and the training manual were presented at a workshop for evaluators held on 7th-9th June 2006, Zărnești, where 15 independent evaluators were trained by AER in preparation for

the evaluation process. All the evaluators have either a nature conservation or tourism background.

On 16th June AER launched the evaluation programme based on the reviewed criteria. The certification programme was made up of three steps:

1. Self-evaluation (June-July, 2006). The applicants performed the self-evaluation of their product.
2. Assessment (July-October, 2006). After the self-evaluation, the applicants that wished to continue the certification process were assessed by the independent evaluators trained by AER.
3. Decisions (October-November, 2006). The evaluators' conclusions for each evaluated product were submitted to the Evaluation Committee, who analysed every assessed product and took the decision to grant (or not) the Eco-Certified logo (see below).



At the end of the evaluation process, the Committee granted the certification logo to one of ten assessed products. For the other nine the Committee decided to grant the certification logo under the condition of fulfilment of certain measures. This was achieved by the end of November when seven more assessed products received the certification logo at the AER General Meeting of 1st-3rd December 2006 in Sibiu. The 8 entities assessed in 2005 and 2006 are:

1	Carpathian Tours (tour)
2	DiscoveRomania (tour)
3	Equus Silvania (guesthouse)
4	Equus Silvania (tour)
5	Inter Pares (tour)
6	Mosorel Guesthouse (guesthouse)
7	Stefan cel Mare Equestrian Centre (tour)
8	Tioc Nature & Study Travel (tour)

The Evaluation Committee included three persons in 2006: Luminița Tanasie (WWF – DCP), Mihai Zotta (National Forest Administration – Protected Area Department) and Cerasela Barboni (AER – Certification Department).

At the AER General Meeting of 1st-3rd December 2006 were invited the applicants that passed through the certification process, the evaluators and the Evaluation Committee members. The entire process was discussed and it came as a necessity to improve the procedure, to simplify the evaluation forms and to establish a better communication between the Committee and the evaluators.

Taking into consideration the success of the certification programme, AER was recommended to continue the implementation of the ECS in 2007 with some amendments to the certification procedure.

Moreover, the Ecotourism Certification System was officially presented at the International Tourism Fair in Bucharest on the 20th October 2006, as “Best Practice in Tourism”.

AER has set the priority to review the evaluation programme results by the end of March 2007.

4. The Ecotourism Certification System in 2007

A meeting about the certification procedure took place on 31st March in Zărnești. All the evaluators were invited to this meeting to discuss: the certification procedure, the evaluation guidebook and the interpretation of the evaluation criteria which had proved difficult to quantify.

The evaluators and the evaluation committee, following an analysis of the system and certification procedure, decided to improve the basic criteria for tours and accommodation.

In May 2007, the Ecotourism Certification System was presented at the Global Ecotourism Conference in Oslo, Norway, by AER President, Andrei Blumer, invited as a guest speaker.

At the end of September 2007, Kalnoky’s Guesthouses in Miclosoara were evaluated and, at the same time, 8 guesthouses in the PAN Park Retezat-Hateg area were evaluated. According to a partnership established between PAN Parks Foundation and AER, the certified businesses obtained both awards: Eco-Certified in Ecotourism and PAN Parks.

In 2007, the Evaluation Committee included: Carmen Chasovschi (tourism expert and consultant for GTZ – German Technical Cooperation), Mihai Zotta (National Forest Administration – Protected Area Department) and Andrei Blumer (AER President).

A few other potential guesthouses and tours were identified in Maramureș, the Saxon Villages area, Retezat and Apuseni mountains and the Danube Delta but they will be evaluated most likely in 2008. No destinations have been evaluated so far because there are no eco-destinations ready for certification in Romania yet. However, AER has been working with potential destinations: Retezat National Park region, Apuseni Mountains, Măcin National Park region and the Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve.

To sum up, nine ecotourism entities were evaluated and obtained the Eco-Certified logo in 2007. These are:

1	Kalnoky's Guesthouses
2	Anita Guesthouse
3	Codrin Guesthouse
4	Dora Guesthouse
5	Dumbravita Guesthouse
6	Iancu Guesthouse
7	Iris Guesthouse
8	Mara Guesthouse
9	Ulpia Traiana Guesthouse

It is worth mentioning that the last eight guesthouses are based in Retezat National Park Region, the first PAN Park in Romania (www.panparks.org).

In December a workshop was held between EU green certification expert Mrs Dagmar Diwok and AER representatives in order to harmonise the EU accommodation criteria and the ecotourism criteria of AER. Over 20 common criteria have been identified during the analysis, although there are some differences in approach: the EU Flower can be awarded to hotels, bed-and-breakfast and campsites, while the Eco-Certified in Ecotourism logo can be awarded only to small-scale accommodation up to maximum 25 rooms. One of the common decisions after the workshop was to have mutual promotion of both systems.

5. The Ecotourism Certification System in 2008

On 21st February 2008 took place the joint certificate-award ceremony for PAN Parks and AER certificates for 8 accommodation structures (guesthouses and cabins) in Retezat National Park. This is the first park in Romania that has joined the PAN Parks network. The ceremony took place at the Visitor Information Centre in Nucșoara. Amongst the guests were representatives from: PAN Parks, AER, members of the Park administration, members of the Retezat tourist network (tour-operators, Retezat Tourism Association, the 8 guesthouses), representatives of the local and county authorities, and journalists from the local and national media (see picture below).



In March 2008 AER, together with the EU green certificate specialist, Dagmar Diwok, held a joint workshop in Tulcea promoting both certificates: the EU Eco-Label for green accommodation structures and AER ecotourism certification (Eco-Certified). The workshop was addressed to businesses from Tulcea and Danube Delta interested to become more environmental friendly. This workshop was the first public event for a common promotion of the two certification systems.

Since January 2008, AER has been part of an international Leonardo da Vinci project ***Eco-Destinet, A Network Developing a European Quality Label for Ecotourism Destinations*** that has as main objective to realize a common platform for the ecotourism certification systems in Europe. The project is a partnership between CNR – Istituto di Biometeorologia, (Florence), PRISMA Centre for Development Studies, The European Network for Sustainable Rural Tourism Development ECOTRANS, the European Centre for Ecological and Agricultural Tourism (ECEAT), the Bulgarian Association for Rural and Ecotourism (BARET), Euracademy Association (Greece), the University of Helsinki – Ruralia Institute – and AER.

At the Annual General Meeting of the AER members from December 2008 it was decided that as of 2009 the certification system will use the name "Eco-Romania", will be valid for three years and will use a new logo (see below):



This new logo will feature both on the promotional materials of the members with certified products and on their website, along with the text: *This tour / guesthouse has been certified through the "Eco-Romania" certification system.*

The decision was taken that, starting with 2010, AER should promote only those members who have at least one certified product. The new coordinator of the certification programme is Florentina Florescu.