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Could tourism be the real gold mine?

Roşia Montană, a village located in Romania's Apuseni Mountains, achieved international notoriety in 2013, following months of street protests against the potential destruction of its natural and cultural heritage. This ancient gold mining area became the site of intense contestation as a Canadian company was set to start open-pit mining operations. Seeking the redevelopment of this area by means of tourism microentrepreneurship, heritage conservation, and environmental stewardship, local organizations put forward an agenda seeking UNESCO World Heritage Site recognition of its heritage. Using a qualitative, ethnographic approach, the purpose of this paper is threefold: explore the nuanced negotiation in the socio-political arena of the pros and cons of UNESCO recognition; examine the real potential of heritage tourism to protect natural and cultural sites from destruction; and, finally, propose strategies to integrate the existing inventory of off-the-beaten-path cultural experiences provided by local tourism microentrepreneurs in the regional and national tourism product.

Keywords: heritage tourism; UNESCO; microentrepreneurship ; Romania

Introduction

This paper is a case study of the Roşia Montană community and the campaign for UNESCO recognition of the community's natural and cultural heritage. For over two decades, local activists mobilized against a proposed goldmine, arguing in favor of economic revitalization through community-based tourism (micro)entrepreneurship. Despite the uneven battle, where the company had state support, unmatched PR budgets and a legal team, the community NGO succeeded in using the existing Romanian law to challenge in court every irregularity in the permitting process, halting the mining project. Moreover, the community gained widespread support from the Romanian civil society that sided with the locals, with tens of thousands of people joining protests and petitioning the government to nominate the community for UNESCO recognition. Succeeding governments hesitated in following through with the nomination, and in 2018, the decision of the social democrat government to

withdraw the candidacy, raised concerns that the community would have to start from scratch with the decade-long nomination process. However, despite the challenges faced by the community, in July 2021, the Roşia Montană Mining Landscape was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage list, under criteria II, III, and IV.

Given the bottom-up approach to UNESCO recognition, led by the local community, the case of Roşia Montană lends itself to analysis on the role community-based tourism microentrepreneurship and how the UNESCO label itself can play a role in driving the economic development of formerly monoindustrial areas or facilitate the process of divesting from extractive industries, in the pursuit of economic models that center on environmental stewardship and heritage preservation.

The present study is qualitative, descriptive in nature, with an analytical and projective character. The results and recommendations are intended to be not only a basis for the redevelopment of the Rosia Montana area but instructive to other similar potential redevelopment projects. The first author conducted one month of ethnographic field research in 2019, interviewing 30 local community members and activists. Over half of the study participants were engaged in tourism, hospitality, and heritage preservation microenterprises (citation). Additional data come from newspaper coverage of the case between 2011-2014, totaling 180 articles, along with company documents, such as the Environmental Impact Assessment report and company website content.

Acknowledging that the UNESCO label may also expose communities to some unwanted consequences of tourism, the case of Roşia Montană offers an important opportunity to evaluate the challenges to planning and tourism development in the site and the characteristics of the potential market post-UNESCO recognition. Furthermore, the authors will propose a set of actions to enhance the Roşia Montană cultural, recreational, and tourism-related product as part of the local development strategy.

A brief history of the region

Roșia Montană is located in what is known as The Golden Quadrilateral in the Apuseni Mountains in Transylvania, Romania. Archeological evidence suggests that gold has been mined in the area for over two millennia. The earliest documents to attest to the existence of the community is a set of wax tablets, dating back to February 6, 131 AD, that was discovered over the 17th and 18th centuries in the Roman mining galleries in the surrounding mountains (Egresi, 2011). These documents, selling and buying contracts, to be more precise, refer to the community by its Roman name of Alburnus Maior, since at that time, this area of today's Romania was a part of the Roman province of Dacia.

The Roman occupation of Dacia ceased in the third century CE. Much later, historical sources suggest that mining restarted in the area around the 13th century as Hungarian kings colonized Transylvania. However, the Roman mining galleries, kilometers of them remained intact, and archaeologists found further proof of settlement, including stone foundations of dwellings, sanctuaries, altars, and a necropolis at Hop-Găuri. One of the most spectacular finds, according to Rusu-Bolindet (2018), are the buildings from Carpeni that have “hypocaust installations (heating beneath the floor and inside the walls)” (26).

Mining continued in the area through a variety of methods, usually smaller-scale operations and artisanal mining. This all changed as Romania fell under communist rule in the mid-20th century. The gold rush of the era led to intensive mining and little consideration for parts of the archaeological heritage of the area. However, over 7 km of Roman mining galleries have been spared and can still be visited today.

Case overview

With the fall of Communism rule in 1989, Romania entered a transition phase characterized by what we can aptly call savage capitalism, materialized in rushed privatizations of formerly state-owned industries. Mining was significantly affected as the industry saw dwindling state support for modernization and investment in safety measures. By the late 1990s, many mining operations had closed. Roșia Montană was no exception, with

the state-operated mine closing its doors in 2006. However, a few years before, a Canadian Company owned by Gabriel Resources showed interest in further exploring the remaining gold reserves. Roşia Montană Gold Corporation (RMGC) was created 1997, where Gabriel Resources owns 80.69% of the shares, with the remaining 19.31% owned by the state-run mining company Minvest Roşia Montană S.A (RMGC, 2015). With unemployment looming over their heads, many local people welcomed the prospect of a mining operation that would function for about a decade and a half after opening and which the company framed as a project of “sustainable development” (RMGC, 2017). RMGC claimed it would create thousands of jobs, contributing about \$5.3 billion to the Romanian economy throughout the life of the mining project. Moreover, the company promised an environmental guarantee of \$146 million, claimed it would clean historical pollution, and eventually invest \$70 million in heritage conservation. However, as the company laid out its plans to tear down four mountain tops, essentially dissolving three villages, Roşia Montană, Corna and Gura Cornii, and leaving behind a 5-mile diameter open cyanide tailings pit, a part of the local community began organizing to oppose the mining project (Buţiu, 2009).

The first organization to emerge in September 2000 was Alburnus Maior, constituted as 300 families came together to reject what they saw as the destruction of both cultural and natural heritage. Alburnus Maior and their supporters argue for an alternative to gold mining using cyanide. Namely, as Buţiu (2009) notes, “rural and cultural tourism”, the development of small “agricultural, crafting, and even mining enterprises, but mining that does not affect the local environment” (p. 423). Almost immediately, another NGO was created, Pro Roşia Montană. Strongly backed by RMGC, this organization claimed to represent 80% of the local population and functioned both as a lobbying tool for the company and as a challenger for the NGO Alburnus Maior.

Save Roşia Montană campaign

Alburnus Maior debuted a nation-wide campaign called “Save Roşia Montană,” which included, among other ideas, a proposal to nominate the site for the UNESCO World Heritage list, both as a means to prevent ecological destruction through extractive industries and as

an impetus for a redevelopment of the community that is compatible with heritage preservation in situ and with environmental stewardship. In parallel, Alburnus Maior led a legal battle against the mining company, taking on the role of a watchdog over the permitting process, contesting irregularities as they surfaced, and challenging in court the urbanism and environmental permits issued for RMGC by local and regional authorities. The mine failed to open until the end of August 2013, when the Romanian government led by the prime-minister Victor Ponta attempted to fast-track a draft law that would allow RMGC to forcibly expropriate and remove the locals who opposed the mine. A nationwide wave of protests ensued, with tens of thousands of people protesting this legislative attempt on the streets of the capital and in Cluj-Napoca and other Romanian towns. The wave of protest spread beyond national borders and the Romanian diaspora mobilized in what were often creative forms of protests such as flash-mobs in major European capitals, echoing Alburnus Maior's call to stop the mine and have the site inscribed on the UNESCO WHS list.

After three months of sustained protests, the draft law was repealed and the mine did not open. In 2014, the mining company fired most of its local employees, and in 2015 the company requested arbitration in front of the World Bank, demanding \$4.4 billion in compensatory payments from Romania. The arbitration is ongoing.

The bottom-up UNESCO recognition agenda

The UNESCO World Heritage Site designation, stemming from the 1972 Convention, is a tool aimed to protect and preserve natural and cultural heritage considered to have outstanding value for humanity as a whole (UNESCO, 1972). The WHS designation has since been applied to numerous sites and consequently became the subject of much scholarship, with particular emphasis in the areas of heritage preservation and tourism.

Evaluations of the impact of this UNESCO "label" (Yang et al., 2010) on sites around the world yielded a whole spectrum of arguments, ranging from its benefits for the tourism industry and local economies to criticism over the commodification of heritage and the exploitation of local populations and their natural and cultural environment.

On the positive side, the WHS designation can, in fact, contribute to the preservation and rejuvenation of sites. While local and state governments are expected to invest in the process, low-income countries can expect a certain degree of financial assistance from UNESCO itself (Poria et al., 2011). Furthermore, given the international prestige of the UNESCO “brand” (Boyd & Timothy, 2006), the inscribed sites can expect to attract more affluent, international visitors whose expenditure positively impacts the local economies (Buckley, 2004; Hall, 2006). This is particularly important for countries that derive the bulk of their foreign currency from the tourism industry (Li et al., 2008). More, the UNESCO brand, as Evans (2001) notes, carries the equivalent prestige of Michelin stars in the restaurant world, prompting nations to use it as a hook in marketing campaigns aimed to increase tourism revenue (Timothy, 2011).

However, the WHS designation per se does not always go hand in hand with a willingness to pay more or even an increase in the number of visitors, therefore having relatively little impact on the local economy (Rodwell, 2002; Poria et al., 2011). More, the WHS label, coupled with haphazard management and unregulated growth, has been shown to have potentially devastating and alienating effects on local culture and environments. Scholars point out the case of the Laotian site of Luang Prabang. In 1999, the Unesco Courier boasted: “Luang Prabang - a ghost town returns to life” (Engelmann, 1999). The former royal capital of Laos saw an infusion of resources and effort into the revitalization of its material and immaterial heritage, following its designation as a WHS in 1995. By 2011, however, scholars were decrying the increasing pressure of heritage tourism, which led to a spike in real estate prices that pushed the original Laotian inhabitants away from the historic site, therefore negatively impacting the immaterial heritage of the place, the interconnectedness of community spirit with their built environment and institutions (Reeves & Long, 2011). Other destinations also found themselves faced with the need to manage an increasingly congested space around WHS attractions that severely impact the ability of local people to remain on and around the site (du Cros, 2006) but also the visitors’ experience on the site (McKercher & du Cros, 2002; du Cros, 2008). Additionally, over visitation of WHS attractions can also impact the local environment by increasing traffic congestion, decreasing air quality, and an increased amount of waste left behind by the visitors (du Cros, 2008).

Politics of world heritage

In the post-UNESCO recognition phase, as the community of Roşia Montană maps its path to redevelopment through tourism microentrepreneurship, we anticipate potential conflict stemming from the issues mentioned above, the same issues that other UNESCO site communities have faced. Practitioners and scholars may want to consider the politics of heritage, which may create divisions between locals and outsiders (see Poria and Ashworth, 2009).

The UNESCO label may have added a layer of protection against culturally and environmentally destructive economic development, yet its long-term effects will depend on several contextual factors, such as the availability of funding, marketing strategies, and the ensuing popularity of the location (Frey 2011). Meskell (2002) and D'Eramo (2014) offer a more pessimistic picture of the post-UNESCO recognition reality of the host communities, highlighting the risk of amplifying conflict and the museumification of sites, respectively.

Consequently, we propose models of tourism development that center on community-based entrepreneurship and permatourism. Both options seem to complement the bottom-up approach the community took in securing UNESCO recognition.

The way forward

With the threat of environmental mayhem gone, and lured by the prospects of heightened visibility for the region after securing the WHS label, it is only natural that locals feel they are entitled to pursue the economic route of tourism as the region's main economic driver going forward. Indeed, tourism can generate much-needed employment, public tax, foreign exchange, and business opportunities in less-developed areas like Roşia Montană (UNWTO, 2018). However, concerns are often raised with inequalities in income distribution and harm to the social and cultural fabric of host communities (Gmelch, 2012; Telfer, 2002; Turner & Ash, 1975). For example, Gmelch (2012) notes that locals are limited to low-paid unskilled jobs in the food and accommodations sectors, with little prospect of upward progression into managerial positions, usually handed over to foreigners or local elites (Gmelch, 2012). This

would represent only a slight departure from the rejected scenario of steady jobs in the mine, would not fulfill the aspirations of locals, and would likely be met with the same resistance as before.

On the bright side, scholars agree that the shortcomings of top-down intensive tourism development can be mitigated through appropriate planning and active participation of the host community in the decision-making processes (Davis & Morais, 2004; Weaver, 2004). A call for sustainable tourism development in lieu of mass tourism projects has been advocated and generally supported by residents, visitors, and some public sector entities (Nicholas, 2007). This represents a significant shift from the above scenario wherein locals are seen merely as a source of labor or passive *tourées* in destination systems (Cohen, 1988). In this new paradigm, local participation in the industry by way of micro or communitarian tourism entrepreneurship is lauded by academicians as a vital mechanism towards self-reliant and determined community development (Nyaupane, Morais & Dowler, 2005).

Accordingly, tourism microentrepreneurship contributes to the competitiveness of destinations in several different ways (Bowen, 2021; KC, LaPan, Ferreira, & Morais, 2021; Espinoza-Sánchez, Peña-Casillas, Cornejo-Ortega, 2022). For example, visitors increasingly seek immersive experiences with host communities, where they do what locals do, eat what locals eat, and hang out with locals to learn their stories (Destinations International, 2019). In this vein, there might be an opportunity to complement Roşia Montană's formal cultural tourism proposition with hands-on, unscripted creative tourism experiences offered by local artpreneurs (Duxbury & Richards, 2019). Creative tourism is particularly well suited to small remote towns for the unique elements of the locale can be embedded in the experience making it distinctive and inexorably connected to the destination (Bakas, Duxbury, & Albino, 2021). Moreover, in recent years, Romania has witnessed a surge of creative entrepreneurship that works to elevate local flavors and slow living, ranging from foraging trips to photo documentaries of Romania's remaining authentic kitchens. By virtue of its long history and its geography, Roşia Montană could capitalize on this trend and diversify its touristic offer, namely by designing experiences that invite visitors to enjoy local, seasonal flavors and nature tourism. This would add to an already tightly-knit group of micro-

entrepreneurs committed to cultural preservation, architectural restoration, and environmental stewardship. (Nagy & Segui, 2020). In addition to contributing to the uniqueness and authenticity of the destination, diversification of the tourism product also affords locals economic opportunities that might offset some of the post-recognition site gentrification documented elsewhere by Reeves and Long (2011). Moreover, locals gain agency, self-determination, and entrepreneurial self-efficacy, which might empower them to pursue other outstanding entrepreneurial opportunities in the destination system (KC et al., 2021).

Ferreira, Morais, Brothers, Brookins and Jakes (2021) propose the permatourism framework to design equitable tourism systems by creating and energizing symbiotic relationships between players in the formal and informal sectors in the destination's economy. At the ground level, tourism authorities are starting to show some interest in integrating alternative experiences in the conventional tourism product to enhance destination competitiveness (Freeze, 2021). A requirement for this ideal scenario, however, is that the local network of microentrepreneurs cooperates to complement formal sector offerings, which is not always easy to attain. It was encouraging to observe that the few micro hoteliers already active in Rosia Montana pass-off guests to competing businesses when they are at full capacity, which suggests that they understand the value of coopeting (i.e., cooperating and competing) for enhanced destination system performance (Ferreira et al., 2021). KC, Morais, Seekamp, Smith, and Peterson (2018) observed this informal code of conduct among wildlife tourism microentrepreneurs in North Carolina, but on a much more established network.

Conclusions

To sum up, this case-study explores the nuanced negotiation in the socio-political arena of the pros and cons of UNESCO recognition all the while examining the real potential of heritage tourism to protect natural and cultural sites from destruction. The authors also propose strategies to integrate the existing inventory of off-the-beaten-path cultural experiences provided by local tourism microentrepreneurs in the regional and national

tourism products. Finally, the case of Roșia Montană gives hope to other communities around the world, whose lifeways are threatened by polluting extractive industries, that the real “gold” might reside on the surface in the form of civically engaged communities carving out sustainable livelihoods through tourism microentrepreneurship.

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