THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE DEGREE OF KNOWLEDGE AND THE PERCEPTION OF THE IMPORTANCE OF THE ROUTE OF TOURIST ROUTES. CASE STUDY: TOURIST DESTINATION ARIESENI, ROMANIA

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Abstract: Tourism is a relatively recent economic activity, in the studied area, in spatial and structural expansion. Knowing the functioning mechanisms of tourism and the impact on the environment requires sustained efforts in order to identify them. In this context, the main objective of this study is to identify the relationship between the degree of knowledge and the perception of the importance of the development of tourist routes at the level of the local population, tourists and tourism service providers. Tourist routes are important structural elements in shaping and affirming tourist destinations with functions in the direction of extending the duration of the action and improving the tourist experience. To achieve this goal, the sociological survey method, based on the questionnaire, was used. The results highlighted the existence of direct interconditioning relationships between knowledge (high degree of knowledge) and tourist perception (good perception), regarding the existence of the destination and the importance of tourist routes. Moreover, the obtained results can be used by all the factors involved in the implementation and development of tourism at the local level.

Key words: tourism perception, tourist resources, the management of tourist routes

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INTRODUCTION

Tourism is a global activity with economic, social and cultural impact, which involves the movement of the population from an emission area to a tourist destination (Herman et al., 2020a; Ilieş et al., 2018). The tourist destination is an intensively touristed space that differs from the emission space by the wide range of objectives and by the specific arrangements. Tourist facilities are the results of human action aimed at facilitating the tourist act. Among them, the number and diversity of accommodation structures, public food facilities, health and leisure facilities, etc. stand out. A special category of tourist facilities in destination spaces is represented by tourist routes and circuits. They fulfill numerous roles and functions, including interconnecting tourist attractions; direct tourist flows along well-established

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routes; facilitates knowledge; contributes to increasing the retention rate of tourists; contribute to improving the image of the tourist destination; contributes to increasing economic efficiency; contributes to increasing social efficiency; contributes to increasing ecological efficiency. Considering the roles and functions performed, it is imperative, before implementing such structures in the field, to know the perception of the main actors involved in tourism (local population, tourist service providers and tourists) regarding the importance of tourist routes in touristic destination.

Knowing the perception of the importance of the development of tourist routes is particularly important in establishing the local tourism development strategy. The working hypothesis that started from the realization of the present study, aimed at the fact that a favorable perception contributes to a good understanding and acceptance of the arrangements to be implemented in the field, while the lack of knowledge of their importance and an unfavorable perception will represented a restrictive, sometimes insurmountable factor in the process of tourist planning. In this context, the aim of the present study is to know the perception of the importance of the development of tourist routes in the tourist destination Arieseni, Alba County, Romania. The emerging scientific questions concerned the degree of knowledge of the analyzed destination and the perception of the consulted target group regarding the roles and management of tourist routes, the relationship between perception and tourist knowledge.

Tourism represents an important economic alternative (Deng et al., 2002; Nepal and Chipeniuk, 2005; Mutana and Mukwada, 2018), with a major role in poverty alleviation (Chirenje, 2017; Anderson, 2015; Cole, 2008) and the sustainable development of a destination (Nurkovic, 2017; Ilieş et al., 2020; Stupariu et al., 2022). Its appearance and manifestation in certain areas was imposed against the background of urbanization, industrialization and scientific and technical progress, and implies the existence of optimal conditions for spending free time in the tourist destination area (Muntele and Iaţu, 2003).

The diversification of the tourist offers and the optimal exploitation of the tourist potential of a certain area, at a given moment, calls for sustained efforts from all interested factors (the local population, public authorities and service providers, etc.) in the direction of planning and arranging tourist routes and circuits. From a conceptual point of view, tourist routes and circuits represent the route or path on which potential tourists are guided to travel to carry out the tourist act, for the purpose of physical-psychic recovery, relaxation, rediscovery, contemplation, knowledge, etc. The touristic act involves traveling along a well-established route, during which the tourist will meet a series of objectives, the purpose of which is to arouse and maintain his interest (Dincă et al., 2012; Deac et al., 2019; Ilieş et al., 2015; Ilieş et al., 2018; Linc et al., 2019; Stupariu, 2017; Stupariu and Morar, 2018; Tătar et al., 2018;). The arrangement of tourist routes and circuits are intended to diversify and interconnect the tourist offer of a tourist destination, contributing to the preservation of historical, cultural and folkloric heritage; extending the retention interval of tourists in that destination and increasing the quality of life of the local population (Rátz and Puczkó, 1998; Kombol, 2000; Mousazadeh, 2022; Szucs and Koncz, 2020). In this context, some attention has been paid in the specialized literature to the methodology of route identification and design (Duarte-Duarte et al., 2021; Zheng and Liao, 2019; Liao and Zheng, 2018; Zheng et al., 2017; Cenamor et al., 2017), which through its design and architecture, play an essential role in capitalizing on relatively isolated tourist attractions by interconnecting them along travel routes.
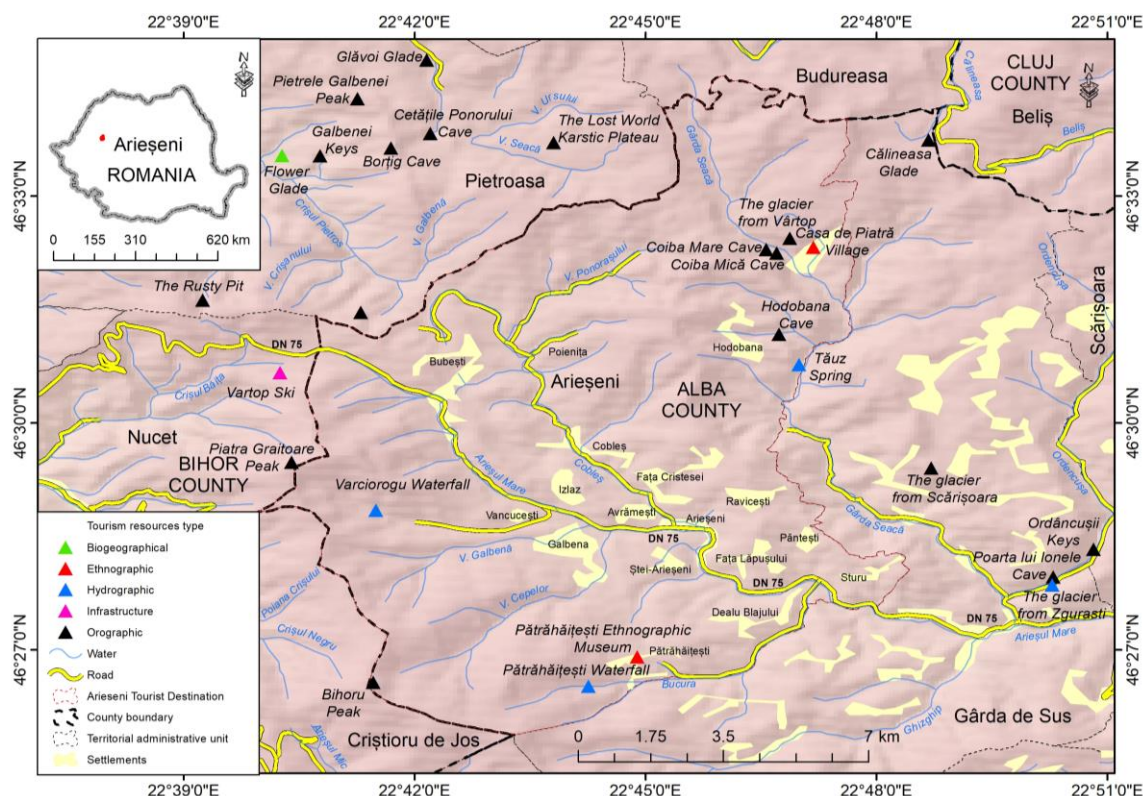

Figure 1. Areal study of the territorial administrative unit Arieseni

In this context, the present research, with an applicative character (the results obtained can be used in the planning and development strategy of tourist routes in the destination of Arieseni, Romania), complements previous research on perception (González-García et al., 2022; Herman et al., 2020c, 2022; Matlovičová et al., 2019; Prima, 2022) bringing as an element of novelty the proposed theme (the perception of the importance of tourist routes), the people consulted (tourists, the local population and service providers tourism) and the unexplored research area.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY
Areal Study
The Arieseni destination is located in North-West Romania, Alba County, at the contact between the Bihor and Vlădeasa mountain units, in the upper basin of the Ariesul Mare Valley. From an administrative point of view, it brings together 17 villages scattered spatially, whose specificity emerges from the defining particularities of the natural framework, among which the orographic and hydrographic ones stand out. The large number of natural (23 units) and anthropogenic (3 units) tourist attractions and their high degree of attractiveness have led to an intensification of tourism in this area, culminating in the inclusion of the locality of Arieseni in the category of resorts of local interest (Table 1).

The development of a specific infrastructure made up of 604 accommodation bases (1307 places), eight public catering structures (482 places) and a 1000 m long "Vârtop I" ski slope (Ministry of Tourism, 2022, https://turism.gov.ro/web/ autorizare-turism/). The converging effect of tourist flows is given by the arrangement of the road network, the national road DN 75, in the West-East direction and implicitly the orographic configuration, the Arieseni Depression being a gateway to the Apuseni Mountains, which interconnects the Beiuș Depression with the Cîmpeni-Bistra Depression. From the brief analysis of the tourist resources and the specific infrastructure, it can be seen that this tourist destination is able to support different types of tourism, among which stand out the mountain (focused on winter sports and hiking), rural and agritourism.

Data analysis
The data necessary to carry out the present study were obtained in the time frame of April 2022, in the commune of Arieseni, through the sociological survey method based on a questionnaire (Bryman, 2012; Chelcea, 2007; Wendt et al., 2019). The methodology used involved the consultation of tourists (42 people, 38.18%), locals (40 people, 36.36%) and tourist service providers (28 people, 25.45%) regarding the "Perception of the importance of the development of tourist routes", through the questionnaire method. From a structural point of view, the questionnaire was made up of thirteen items with reference to: the degree of knowledge (of local touristic objectives; of the role and importance of the development of tourist routes through the prism of economic, social and ecological efficiency; of the mechanisms through which the development of tourist routes contributes to improving the image of the destination) and the respondents' perception (regarding the extent to which the studied area is a tourist destination; the role and importance of the development of tourist routes; the management of tourist routes (the optimal size of tourist groups; the sources and forms of exposure of the information necessary for the performance of the act tourist; responsibility for the proposals, financing and arrangement and maintenance of future tourist routes) and the duration of the tourist stay.

Also, within the questionnaire, socio-demographic data relevant to tourism were captured, namely the nationality, gender, age, level of completed studies and domicile of the participants. Thus, 55 (50%) females and 55 (50%) males, aged over 18, of Romanian (99.09%) and Moldovan (0.91%) ethnicity participated in the present study. From the analysis of the respondents by age groups, it was found that the largest share of them was owned by the groups of people aged between 20 - 24 years (36.36%), 26 - 35 years (14.1%), 40 - 44 years (13.64%), while at the opposite pole were people aged between 55 - 59 years (1.82%), 65 - 69 years (1.82%) and 75 - 79 years (1.82%). Regarding the level of education completed by the respondents, the share of people with university education (49.09%), followed by those with high school education (40%), post-graduate education (9.09%) and gymnasium (1.82%) was noted.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS
The degree of knowledge of the importance of the development of tourist routes
Information is an essential premise in establishing the perception regarding the importance of arranging tourist attractions in a tourist destination (Herman et al., 2020b). In this context, the main aspects targeted were knowledge of the Arieseni tourist destination, respectively the existing tourist attractions; the role and importance of tourist routes; the mechanisms through which the development of tourist routes contributes to improving the image of the destination.

The knowledge of tourist resources is an important desideratum in the emergence and evolution of a tourist destination, along with others related to the knowledge of the infrastructure (technical and specific to tourism), tourist services, human resources involved in tourism, the local population, etc.

From the answers obtained following the consultation of the interviewed target group, a number of 26 units (tourist objectives) were known. From a typological point of view, they can be classified into natural resources (23 units, 18 orographic; 4 hydrographic; 1 biogeographic) and anthropogenic (3 units, 2 ethnographic; 1 infrastructure) (Figure 1, Table 1).

The most popular tourist resources among the respondents were: The Rusty Pit (40 people; 16 tourists; 15 locals; 9 providers), Varciorag Waterfall (34 people; 14 tourists; 14 locals; 6 providers) and Bihoru Peak (22 people; 11 tourists; 8 locals; 3 providers), while at the opposite pole were The glacier from Zgurasti, Casa de Piatră Village and Călineasa Glade, each being mentioned only once (Table 1).

Regarding the knowledge of tourist resources by category of respondents, a good knowledge was noted, at the level of each category (tourists, local population, tourism service providers), in direct relation to their percentage share (Table 1).

Table 1. The known tourist resources from the Arieseni destination

No	Latitudine	Longitudine	Resource type	Resource subtype	Name	Tourist service providers	Local populations	Tourists	Total
1	46.527099	22.654038	Natural	Orographic	The Rusty Pit	9	15	16	**40**
2	46.480793	22.691522	Natural	Hydrographic	Varciorag Waterfall	6	14	14	**34**
3	46.442806	22.690964	Natural	Orographic	Bihoru Peak	3	8	11	**22**
4	46.512901	22.783191	Natural	Hydrographic	Tauz Spring	4	10	8	**22**
5	46.441969	22.737594	Natural	Hydrographic	Patrahaitesti Waterfall	1	10	10	**21**
6	46.540754	22.781211	Natural	Orographic	The glacier from Vartop	5	5	7	**17**
7	46.558942	22.679489	Natural	Orographic	Galbenei Keys	5	7	4	**16**
8	46.537474	22.77839	Natural	Orographic	Coiba Mare Cave	6	7	3	**16**
9	46.511106	22.670783	Man-Made	Infrastructure	Vartop Ski	2	2	10	**14**
10	46.538249	22.776116	Natural	Orographic	Coiba Mica Cave	4	6	3	**13**
11	46.448422	22.748186	Man-Made	Ethnographic	Patrahitesti Ethnographic Museum	3	2	8	**13**
12	46.490042	22.811789	Natural	Orographic	The glacier from Scarisoara	3	6	2	**11**
13	46.491337	22.673303	Natural	Orographic	Piatra Graitaoare Peak	2	2	5	**9**
14	46.571487	22.68754	Natural	Orographic	Pietrele Galbenei Peak	1	4	3	**8**
15	46.466077	22.838258	Natural	Orographic	Poarta lui Ionele Cave	4	3	1	**8**
16	46.558989	22.671244	Natural	Biogeographical	Poiana Florilor/ flower glade	4	1	1	**6**
17	46.519549	22.778893	Natural	Orographic	Hodobana Cave	3	1	1	**5**
18	46.561845	22.73008	Natural	Orographic	The Lost World Karstic Plateau	1	2	1	**4**
19	46.579997	22.702585	Natural	Orographic	Glavoi Glade	1	2	0	**3**
20	46.472137	22.847007	Natural	Orographic	Ordâncuşii Keys	0	1	1	**2**
21	46.560601	22.694846	Natural	Orographic	Bortig Cave	1	1	0	**2**
22	46.524408	22.68829	Natural	Orographic	Hoanca Urzicarului Cave	1	0	1	**2**
23	46.563782	22.703312	Natural	Orographic	Cetăţile Ponorului Cave	0	1	1	**2**
24	46.464309	22.83803	Natural	Hydrographic	The glacier from Zgurasti	1	0	0	**1**
25	46.538701	22.786331	Man-Made	Ethnographic	Casa de Piatră Village	0	1	0	**1**
26	46.562395	22.811222	Natural	Orographic	Călineasa Glade	1	0	0	**1**

Knowing the role and importance of tourist routes in a destination area is an essential aspect on which the intention and decision to implement such tourist development elements depends. Thus, following the consultation of the respondents, it emerged that only 69.09% have knowledge in this regard. The most familiar with the importance of the routes were tourists (29.09%), followed by locals (26.36%) and tourist service providers (13.64%). The analysis of the share of respondents (30.91%) who do not know the role of tourist routes, on the three interviewed categories, showed us the existence of small differences that oscillated between 9.09% (tourists), 10% (locals) and 11.82% tourist service providers.

Another particularly important aspect targeted in the present study was the knowledge of the mechanisms through which the development of tourist routes contributes to improving the image of a tourist destination. Thus, starting from the knowledge and experiences acquired as a result of tourist consumption in other similar tourist destinations, the target group interviewed identified two main mechanisms through which the development of tourist routes contributes to the improvement of the destination image, namely: interconnection of objectives (50%; 20% tourists; 15.45% tourist service providers; 14.55% locals) and knowledge facilitation (53.64%; 22.73% locals; 20% tourists; 10.91% tourist service providers). The share of other mechanisms had a low value of 0.091%. The interconnection of objectives facilitates knowledge at the level of tourist destinations, at the same time contributing to the extension of the duration of the tourist act (implicitly the duration of the stay) and to the increase of tourists' satisfaction.
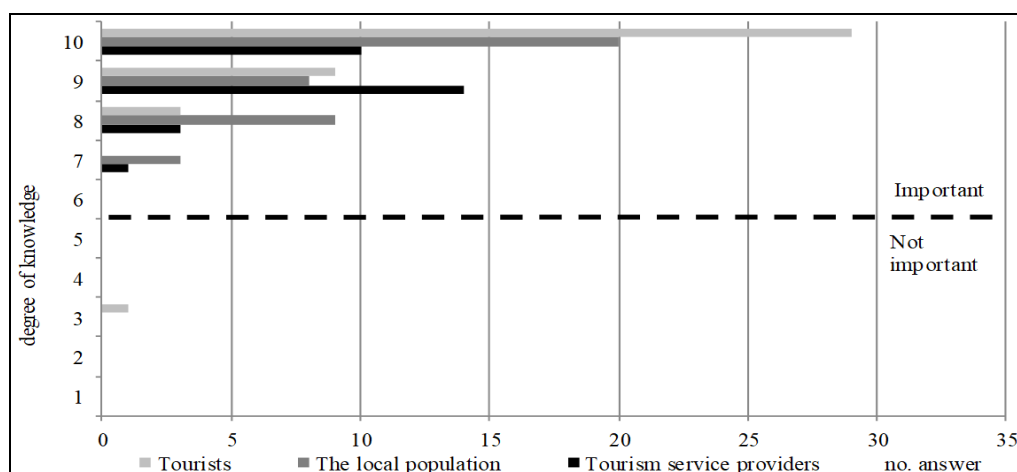

Figure 2. The perception of the importance of tourism in the development of the local economy

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Respondents' perception

Tourist perception is a subjective image regarding tourism that is formed at the level of the human individual as a result of his interaction with the other structural elements of the environment, thanks to the senses and reason (Bittarello, 2008; Herman et al., 2022c; Mura et al., 2016).

The perception of the main actors involved in tourism (tourists, locals and tourism service providers) is a particularly important aspect in establishing tourism development strategies at the local, regional and even national level. In this context, the present study focused on the extent to which Arieseni Commune is a tourist destination; the role and importance of the development of tourist routes; the management of tourist routes and the duration of the tourist stay.

The analysis of the measure in which the respondents appreciated the Arieseni commune as a tourist destination on a scale from 1 to 10 (where 1 = Not at all, and 10 = to a very large extent) showed us that 99.09% consider the studied area to be a destination touristic. The analysis by value intervals emphasized the importance of the upper classes "10" (53.64%, of which 26.36% tourists, 18.18% locals and 9.09 tourist service providers) and "9" (28.18%, of which 12.73% tourist service providers, 08.18% tourists and 7.27% locals), while the lower ranges were represented by class "3" (0.91%, represented by tourists) (Figure 2).

In order to establish the perception of the roles of tourist routes on a scale from 1 to 10 (where 1 = Not at all, and 10 = to a very large extent), eight measurement variables were used: a) interconnect the tourist objectives; b) direct tourist flows along well-established routes; c) facilitates knowledge; d) contribute to increasing the retention rate of tourists; e) contribute to improving the image of the tourist destination; f) contributes to increasing economic efficiency; g) contributes to increasing social efficiency; h) contributes to increasing ecological efficiency.

Table 1. The perception of the roles of tourist routes in the Arieseni destination

	not at all															to a very large extent														
	1			2			3			4			5			6			7			8			9			10		
	T	P	L	T	P	L	T	P	L	T	P	L	T	P	L	T	P	L	T	P	L	T	P	L	T	P	L	T	P	L
a) interconnect the tourist objectives	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	2	9	1	8	4	5	6	27	21	23
b) direct tourist flows along well-established routes	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	5	2	0	10	4	11	25	22	28
c) facilitates knowledge	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	2	1	2	4	1	6	14	5	5	22	21	25
d) contribute to increasing the retention rate of tourists	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	1	1	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	2	0	2	7	0	4	9	5	7	21	21	26
e) contribute to improving the image of the tourist destination	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	2	2	4	4	7	7	4	31	17	30
f) contributes to increasing economic efficiency	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	2	3	8	6	7	14	9	9	19	20	11
g) contributes to increasing social efficiency	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	2	2	1	6	3	10	3	4	14	9	13	15	9	17
h) contributes to increasing ecological efficiency	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	2	1	1	3	1	1	3	4	0	6	2	4	5	3	4	10	7	6	12	10	23
Total	0	0	0	0	0	1	3	1	0	3	2	3	6	3	2	5	6	5	13	12	18	50	20	37	82	51	61	172	141	183

Following the quantification of the answers, it emerged that 496, respectively 56% of the respondents consider that tourist routes are very important. A relatively similar situation was recorded in the analysis of the answers provided by each of the three samples, namely: tourist service providers 141 (60%); locals 183 (59%) and tourists 172 (51%) (Table 1).

The optimal size of tourist groups on tourist routes according to the respondents varies between 2 tourists (one local) and 50 tourists (two providers, two locals and four tourists). The analysis of this indicator by value classes showed us that 26.36% (45% of tourists, 38% of locals and 17% of interviewed service providers) appreciated the optimal size of tourist groups as being between 6 and 10 people, while what 19.09% considered that it would be between 21 and 30 people, respectively over 30 people. The analysis of answers by typological categories of respondents, highlights the existence of major differences between the tourist service providers, 7.27% opting for groups larger than 30 people and the other categories, tourists and locals (3.64% each), who opted for groups small between 2 and 5 people (Table 2).

Table 2. The perception of the optimal size of tourist groups on the tourist routes in the destination of Arieseni

The size of the group of tourists on tourist routes	2-5		6-10		11-15		16-20		21-30		over 30	
	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.
Tourist service providers	1.82	2	4.55	5	0.91	1	3.64	4	7.27	8	7.27	8
Population local	3.64	4	10	11	8.18	9	2.73	3	4.55	5	7.27	8
Tourists	3.64	4	11.82	13	6.36	7	4.55	5	7.27	8	4.55	5
Total	9.09	10	26.36	29	15.45	17	10.91	12	19.09	21	19.09	21

Regarding the provision of the information necessary to run the tourist act in the analyzed destination, the respondents considered that it is the responsibility of local public authorities (51.82%), local guides (43.64%) and tourist service providers (40%), followed by the population local (12.73%), NGO (5.45%) and someone else (3.64%) (Table 3).

Table 3. The perception regarding the sources of information in the destination Arieseni

	a) Public authorities	b) Tourist service providers	c) Population local	d) Local tourist guides	e) NGO	f) Another
Tourist service providers	13.64%	9.09%	2.73%	8.18%	1.82%	0.0%
Population local	23.64%	15.45%	7.27%	12.73%	0.91%	0.0%
Tourists	14.55%	15.45%	2.73%	22.73%	2.73%	3.64%
Total	51.82%	40%	12.73%	43.64%	5.45%	3.64%

According to the consulted target group, the most appropriate forms of information display for the Arieseni destination are: informative panels (51.82%); online environment (41.82%); through live speech, local guides (30.91%); informative indicators (29.09%); direction indicators (19.09%) and other forms (1.82%) (Table 4). Considering that information panels, information and orientation signs are important structural elements of the development of tourist routes alongside the travel route, markings, tourist attractions, etc., the importance of their development is noted.

Table 4. The perception regarding the forms of information exposure in the Arieseni destination

	a) Information boards	b) Informative indicators	c) Orientation indicators	d) Local tourist guides	e) On-Line	f) Other forms
Tourist service providers	10.91	5.45	2.73	4.55	12.73	0
Population local	20	10.91	6.36	10.91	10	0
Tourists	20.91	12.73	10	15.45	19.09	1.82
Total	51.82	29.09	19.09	30.91	41.82	1.82

The analysis of the perception of responsibility for the proposal, arrangement and maintenance of future tourist facilities highlighted the role of local public authorities, followed by that of tourist service providers, tourist guides, the local population, etc. If regarding the perception of the responsibility of local public authorities to propose, arrange and maintain tourist routes, opinions are unanimous among tourist service providers, residents and tourists, the situation is different regarding the other categories of actors involved (tourist service providers, tourist guides, local population, etc) (Figure 3).
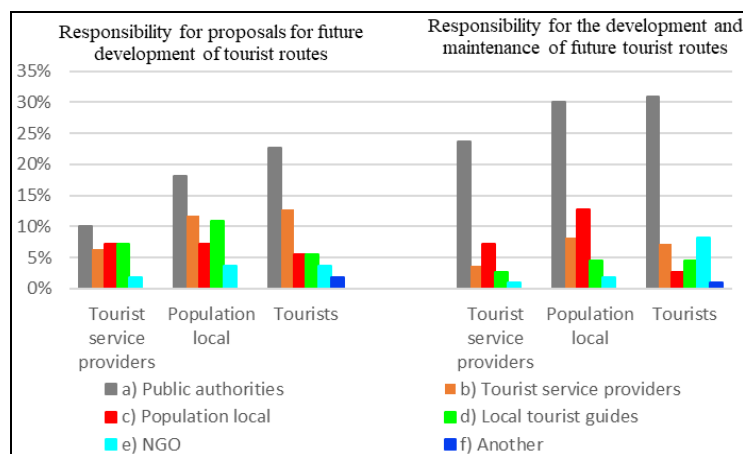

Figure 3. The perception regarding the responsibility of proposals, arrangement and maintenance of tourist routes in the destination of Arieseni
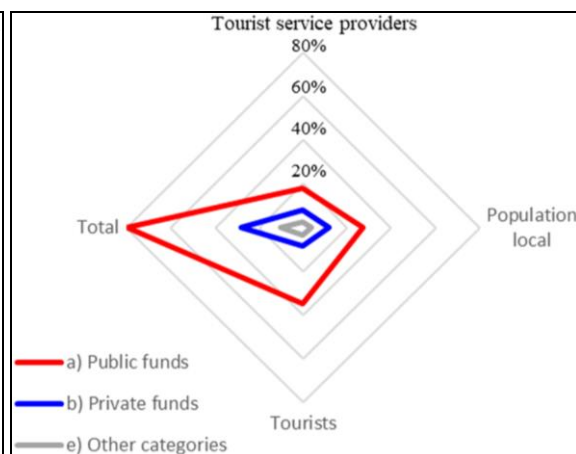
Figure 4. The perception regarding the sources of financing tourist routes in the Arieseni destination

The perception of the sources of funding for the tourist routes in the Arieseni destination highlighted the major share of public funds (80%, 34.55% tourists; 27.27%, locals; 18.18% tourist service providers), followed by private funds (28.18%, 11.82%, locals; 8.18% tourists; 8.18% tourist service providers) and other categories (10%, 3.64% tourists; 3.64%, locals;

Table 5. The perception regarding the duration of a stay in the Arieseni destination

	1-3 days	4-7 days	8-14 days
Tourist service providers	6.36%	16.36%	2.73%
Population local	8.18%	24.55%	3.64%
Tourists	10.91%	21.82%	5.45%
Total	25.45%	62.73%	11.82%

2.73% tourist service providers) (Figure 4). Starting from the experience of the respondents in the Arieseni destination, they assessed the duration of a stay as oscillating between four and seven days (62.73%); one and three days (25.45%) and eight and 14 days (11.82%) (Table 5). This indicates that this destination lends itself to holiday and weekend tourism. Moreover, this information supports the need for the development of tourist routes, through which the retention time would increase significantly, indirectly leading to an increase in the economic, social and cultural efficiency of tourism.

CONCLUSIONS

Following the conduct of the study regarding the perception of the importance of the development of tourist routes in the destination of Arieseni, several conclusions were drawn:

- The degree of knowledge of the Arieseni destination was good among the people interviewed, derived from the knowledge of the tourist attractions (100%); the role and importance of tourist routes (69.09%); and the mechanisms through which the development of tourist routes contributes to improving the image of the destination (over 50%).

- The perception of the existence of the Arieseni destination and the importance of the development of tourist routes was good (53.64% perceived the studied area as a tourist destination; 56.36% perceived the role and importance of the development of tourist routes).

- Regarding the perception regarding the management of tourist routes, this highlighted: the optimal size of tourist groups as between 6 and 10 people, 26.36%; the sources (51.82%, local public authorities) and forms of exposure (51.82%, informative panels; 29.09%, informative indicators; 19.09%, orientation indicators) of the information necessary for the development of the tourist act; responsibility for the proposals (22.73%, public authorities), the arrangement and maintenance (30.91%, public authorities) of future tourist routes, the sources of financing (80%, public funds) and the duration of the tourist stay (62.73%, between four and seven days).

Therefore, there is a direct inter-conditioning relationship between knowledge and tourist perception, thus the Arieseni tourist destination benefits from a high degree of knowledge among the interviewed people, doubled by a good perception regarding the existence of the destination and the importance of tourist routes. From the analysis of the perception regarding the management of the future tourist routes, the role of the local public authorities regarding the sources and forms of exposure of the information necessary for the development of the tourist act and the responsibility for the financing of the future tourist routes emerges. A special situation emerges from the respondents' perception regarding the optimal size of tourist groups and the duration of the stay, where opinions are divided between tourists, locals and service providers. A similar situation is presented by the perception regarding the responsibility of proposals, arrangement and maintenance of tourist routes, which highlighted the existence of an unequal distribution at the level of the main actors involved in tourism (providers of tourist services, tourist guides, the local population, etc.).

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