

ENCOURAGING SUSTAINABLE TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN MEDITERRANEAN THROUGH CONSUMELESS PLUS PROJECT: THE CASE STUDY OF ISTRIA COUNTY¹

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ABSTRACT

The Mediterranean area is one of the most important tourist destinations in the world, so the importance of planning tourism and its effects in this area is needed. The benefits of tourism are primarily valued in economic terms, but tourism can positively impact local or regional socio-cultural life and the local environment. In order to achieve these positive effects, in recent years, the principles of sustainable tourism have been implemented in the governance of tourist destinations in different ways. However, applying theoretical principles of sustainable tourism in practice is not a simple job. The example of the EU project Interreg Med ConsumeLess Plus is one example of how to bridge this gap. ConsumeLess Plus is a capitalization project of the ConsumeLess project, which transfers created ConsumeLess model to four new regions in the Mediterranean. The paper aims to present the application of the ConsumeLess model in Istria County.

KEY WORDS: sustainable tourism; Istria County; ConsumeLess Plus; ConsumeLess model, ConsumelessMedlabel

¹ original research paper

INTRODUCTION

The importance of tourism for Mediterranean destinations

Tourism has been recognized as an important industry contributing to the global economy since the second half of the 20th century (Orams, 1999). Besides, it is important to note that coastal and marine tourism are the oldest forms of tourism and the most important part of the tourism industry. In the past, people have chosen to live by the sea or water to benefit from this natural element, and over time, the coast has become more and more attractive as a tourist destination (Papageorgiou, 2016). Initially, this form of tourism was used by the rich population but, over time became available to a wider population (Honey & Krantz, 2007). Today Mediterranean coastal tourism is a growing sector (Drius et al., 2019).. Also, the economic sector of travel and tourism encompasses a number of other industries that are directly or indirectly linked to the travel and tourism sector. In 2019, this sector achieved 10.4% of GDP as a percentage of global GDP (WTTC, 2019). The Mediterranean area is an important tourist destination where a larger number of tourist arrivals and overnight stays are realized every year, looking to the end of 2019, i.e. until the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic (EU, 2012; UNWTO, 2022). This thesis is supported by the fact that 304.1 million international tourist arrivals were realized in the Mediterranean area in 2019. Moreover, in 2019, 21% of international arrivals were realized in the Mediterranean, which is the highest percentage compared to the rest of the world (UNWTO, 2022). According to Papageorgiou (2016) the coastal and marine part is a "home" which attracts an increasing number of human activities and facilities, which are mostly related to the tourism industry. However, the Mediterranean area must not be seen only as a tourist destination on which tourism will leave only positive consequences. In general, coastal Mediterranean tourist destinations have a problem with the arrival of a large number of tourists in a short period of time and small areas. As a consequence of such tourism, there is a serious negative impact on the environment, excessive construction of tourist facilities, excessive use of natural resources, waste problems and the like (Davenport & Davenport, 2006; Hall 2001).

Including the growing trend of coastal and maritime tourism in the tourism sector, it is important to plan this form of tourism to avoid the negative consequences of its growth (Papageorgiou, 2016; Drius et al., 2019). Also, it is vital to have in mind that the authenticity of products is one of the most important parts of sustainable tourism (Almuhri & Al-Azri, 2019), while mass and uncontrolled tourism threaten authenticity.

Labels in the context of sustainable tourism

Tourism companies began to voluntarily introduce some environmental tools in the early 1990s in order to emphasize the orientation of their business towards the principles of sustainable tourism (Ayuso, 2006; Kirk, 1998). The impact of the manufacturing industry on the environment has attracted research attention much earlier than service industries such as the tourism sector (Middleton & Hawkins, 1993). Twenty years ago, Font & Tribe (2001) concluded in their paper regarding the future environmental awards that a comprehensive award is needed that "all tourism and leisure companies can try to achieve, and for which they will gain clear benefits". Furthermore, they emphasized that award organizers need to manage the process in a way to provide "an overall umbrella award that consumers recognize, together with the support systems to transmit the message." (Font & Tribe, 2001). Furthermore, initiatives such as eco-labels, various certification schemes, awards, recognitions, various environmental management systems and codes of conduct have become increasingly prevalent in the tourism industry (UNWTO, 2002). During the 1990s, several studies found that adopting environmental tools, such as labels, was a competitive advantage for tourism businesses (Forsyth, 1995; Stabler & Goodall, 1997). However, as an additional motive for adopting environmental practices in tourism, the pressure of various stakeholders who are in indirect or direct interaction with tourist facilities is mentioned (Ayuso, 2006; Cheyne J & Barnett, 2001). In the 2000s, there were more than 100 eco-labels in tourism (Font & Buckley, 2001; Ecotrans, 2001); now, there are more than 150 different labels in the tourism sector related to sustainable tourism (Tourism Review, 2019). Tourism in the Mediterranean must face many challenges in order to provide good future living conditions for the local population and meet the needs and expectations of tourists.. Therefore, good knowledge of tourism from the economic, social and environmental sides is essential to managing destinations sustainably (European Commission, 2010). In this context, sustainable tourism labels are important, especially as rewards for quality destination management (Blancas et al., 2015).

The paper aims to describe the origin of the ConsumeLess Plus project and the used tools and methodology of project implementation in the example of Istria County. ConsumeLess Plus is a follow up project to the ConsumeLess project. Within the previous ConsumeLess project, the ConsumeLess model and a set of tools were created and tested. The ConsumeLess model was applied in five Mediterranean countries within the ConsumeLess project, involving about 30 destinations and 300 tourism facilities. The model is simple and ready to apply in new Mediterranean destinations. The ConsumeLess Plus project includes new destinations from four Mediterranean countries; Cyprus, France, Montenegro and Croatia. The ConsumeLess Plus project transmits a ConsumeLess model that increases the attractiveness and competitiveness of the destination while conserving resources at the destination. The project aims to assist the Mediterranean regions in rebuilding their destinations and encouraging small and medium-sized enterprises to apply the principles of sustainable development in their business. The goal is to minimize the detrimental impact on the ecosystem and reduce resource use such as water and energy. Reducing pollution and waste will positively affect the well-being of locals and visitors and the recovery of tourism after the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, the project aims to bring ConsumeLess destinations throughout the Mediterranean into a community that values the destination's natural resources, ecosystem, and cultural heritage, focusing on the local economy and community.

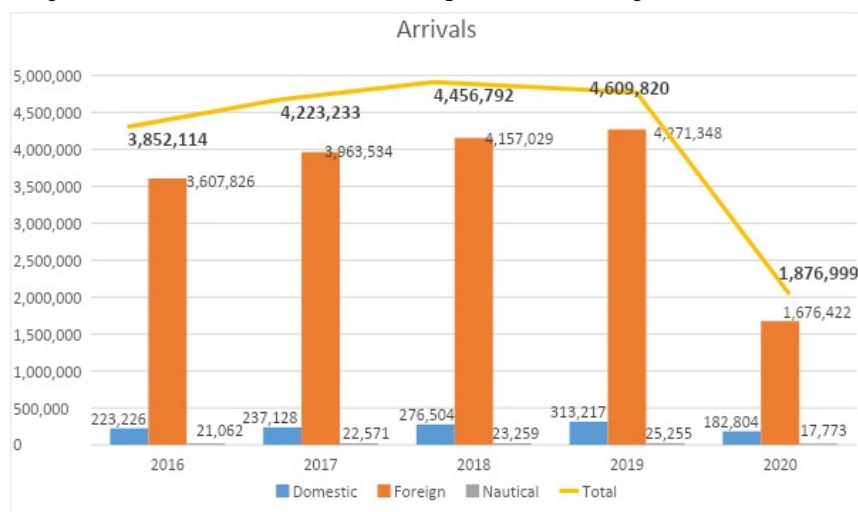
The ConsumelessMedlabel (Picture 1) was created using the criteria from other existing EU and regional eco-labels. The priority was the simplification of the approach during the implementation of the label. In addition, the goal was to involve many different stakeholders and raise awareness among the local communities about the label introduction in the territory, that is, to encourage sections in the area to behave positively related to saving water and energy, reducing waste and avoiding the use of plastics.



Picture 1. ConsumelessMed label
STUDY AREA - ISTRIA COUNTY

Istria County is the most developed tourist county in the Republic of Croatia and represents about cca. 30% of tourist arrivals in Croatia. The total area of Istria County is 3,130 square kilometres, and there are a total of 195.794 inhabitants in 2021 (CBS, 2021). In 2019, before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, in Istria County, a total of 4.609.820 tourist arrivals were realized. The following year, due to COVID-19, 41% of tourist arrivals were realized compared to the previous year in Istria County (ITB, 2021). Furthermore, in 2021, the number of arrivals increased compared to the year before, so a total of 3.499.669 tourist arrivals were realized (ITB, 2022). As it can be seen in Graph 1 from 2016, it is evident the growing trend of tourist arrivals in Istria County and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

Graph 1. Arrivals of domestic and foreign tourists in the period 2016-2020

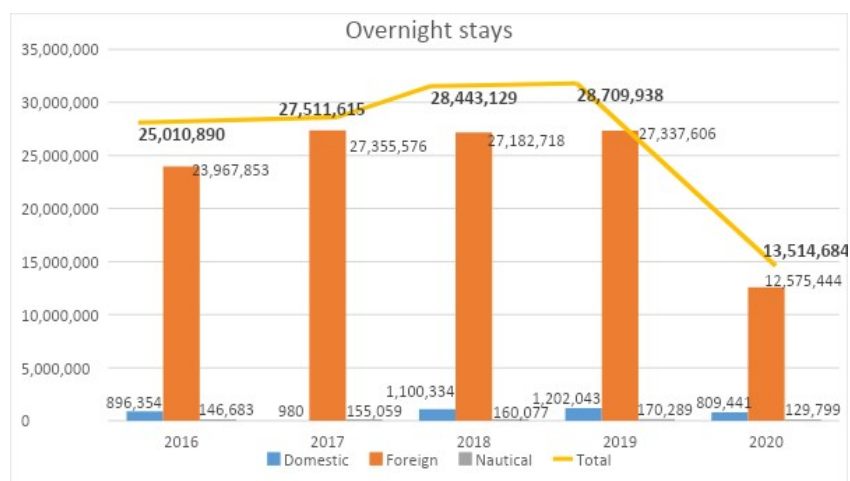


Source: Istria County Tourist Board, <https://www.istra.hr/hr>, Tourist arrivals and overnight stays in Istria by countries of origin for the period 2016–2020; Local action plan for the pilot area of ISTRIA COUNTY (2021), CONSUME-LESS PLUS Consume less in Mediterranean Touristic Communities, IPTPO, 2021

In 2020, the highest number of overnight stays in the Istria County was achieved by Rovinj with a total of 1,846,127 overnight stays, followed by

Medulin with 1,448,537 overnight stays, Poreč with 1,388,144 overnight stays and Umag with 1,273,200 overnight stays. The total number of overnight stays can be seen in Graph 2.

Graph 2. Overnight stays of domestic and foreign tourists in the destination from 2016 to 2020



Source: Istria County Tourist Board, <https://www.istra.hr/hr>, Tourist arrivals and overnight stays in Istria by countries of origin for the period 2016–2020; Local action plan for the pilot area of ISTRIA COUNTY (2021), CONSUME-LESS PLUS Consume less in Mediterranean Touristic Communities, IPTPO, 2021

The average length of stay in Istria County during 2020 was 7.2 days. There is a noticeable trend of increasing the length of stay compared to 2016, when the average length of stay was 6.5 days, the same was in the year 2017. In 2018, the average was 6.4, and in 2019 the average was 6.2 days.²

²ITB – Istria Tourist Board; Tourist arrivals and nights, by tourist offices, 2022, <https://www.istra.hr/hr/business-information/istra-u-medijima/statistika/arhiva-2021>, (10 May 2022).

METHODOLOGY

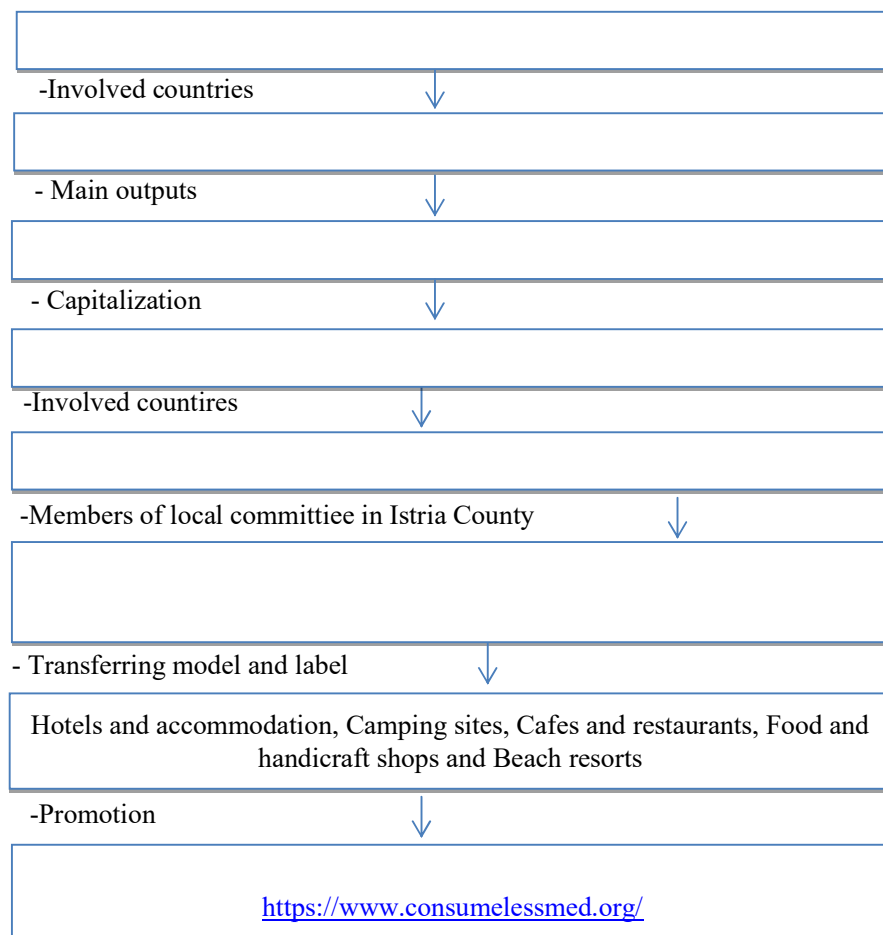
The ConsumeLess project was implemented from 2016 to 2020. The project has been implemented in five Mediterranean countries.³ Figure 1 shows the origin of the ConsumeLess Plus project. Project implementation in Istria County begins with forming a local ConsumeLess Plus committee. The first activity was signing a Memorandum of Understanding between representatives of the Local Committee and the project partner, the Institute of Agriculture and Tourism. The Local Committee is composed of representatives of the Associate Partner, the Administrative Department for Tourism of Istria County, and representatives of the City of Novigrad, the City of Poreč, the City of Rovinj and the City of Labin, and the Pula Tourist Board and Tourist Board of Central Istria. The main task of the Local Committee is to promote the label at the local level and through communication channels aimed at tourists to promote awarded tourist facilities.

After forming the Local Committee, Local Action Plans was made for ConsumeLess destinations in Istria County. The Local Action Plan for the pilot area of the Istria County provides a detailed identification of actions to be implemented to implement the ConsumelessMed model in the Istria County. The action plan includes:

- description of framework conditions in Istria County and destinations Novigrad, Poreč, Rovinj, Labin, Pula and Central Istria (destinations of the representatives of the Local Committee),
- a description of the participatory process organized to adjust the overall Action Plan,
- detailed description of activities envisaged for the implementation of the model in the Istria County,
- communication plan for the implementation of the awareness campaign.

³<https://consume-less.interreg-med.eu/>, (8 May 2022)

Figure 1. The process of implementing the ConsumeLess and ConsumeLess Plus project



Source: own elaboration

Finally, after the implementation, all facilities in the destination that fulfill the conditions are promoted on the online platform ConsumelessMed which

promotes all destinations and tourist facilities included in the project (Picture 2).



Picture 2. ConsumelessMed Platform

Source: <https://www.consumelessmed.org/> (8 May 2022)

The following activities were aimed at promoting the ConsumelessMed label. As part of that, five workshops were organized for tourist facilities interested in receiving the ConsumelessMed label. Afterwards, from 14 March 2022 - to 31 March 2022, the Open Public Call for the ConsumelessMed label within the ConsumeLess Plus project was published on the official web page of the Institute of Agriculture and Tourism, as well as on the official page of all included destinations and the page of the associated partner - Administrative Department for Tourism of the Istrian Region. The public invitation was intended to invite all tourist stakeholders interested in the label from Istria County to register their interest. The following categories of facilities are eligible for applying the label: Hotels and accommodation, Camping sites, Cafes and restaurants, Food and handicraft shops and Beach resorts. Assignment of the ConsumeLessMed

label is based on the created mandatory and voluntary label criteria, which differ depending on the type of tourist facilities.

RESULTS

The label is assigned to private or public operators (tourist service providers) who apply specific energy, water and waste sustainable management actions in their activities. The idea is that in doing so, tourists can choose those services/facilities that will minimize the consumption of water and energy and the generation of waste and that way, they can also participate in the process. Furthermore, they will have the opportunity to taste and get familiar with local products during their stay.

Until June 2022, in Istria County, 18 various tourist facilities have been awarded the ConsumelessMed label. The evaluation process on the field was held from 2nd to 9th May 2022 in different destinations by agreement with interested stakeholders. After the evaluations, in Consumeless community are included a total of 10 hotels (6 in Poreč, 3 in Rabac (Labin) and 1 in Novigrad; 7 accommodation facilities, private renters (2 in Rovinj, 1 in Porec, 2 in Central Istria and 2 in Pula) and Marina Veruda in Pula for which the criteria for cafes and restaurants apply. As the ConsumeLess Plus project is still ongoing at the time of writing this paper, the number of ConsumeLess Med labels will be probably higher at the end.

In order to promote good examples, six videos were created within the project, for the destinations that are members of the Local Committee (Poreč, Novigrad, Rovinj, Labin, Pula and Central Istria). Video of each destination will be available on the online ConsumelessMed Platform (Picture 2). The online ConsumelessMed Platform includes all Mediterranean destinations that have been included in the project so far, and now destinations from Istria County have joined. A short description of each destination is available and a video. In addition, news related to sustainable tourism was published on the Platform.

CONCLUSION

In the north Mediterranean, in Europe, tourism has a large impact on societies and represents a significant source of economic growth and job creation. Furthermore, the tourism industry in this area has a significant impact on the environment and the lives of the local population (Papageorgiou, 2016). In this sense, the future development of tourism and the growing tourist demand in the Mediterranean must be based on sustainable principles to preserve the natural heritage, communities and ecosystems (Andolina et al., 2021). EU project, ConsumeLess Plus, provides an opportunity for destinations and tourist facilities to become part of a sustainable community in the Mediterranean that promote sustainable development of tourist destinations. In the tourism sector, a frequent criticism of sustainable tourism development is also a problem with its implementation. Within this project, concrete suggestions are created on how to implement sustainable tourism in tourist facilities. The implementation of the ConsumeLess Plus project in Istria County contributes to the future development of sustainable tourism. It can be considered a good way to make the local population aware of the importance of developing sustainable tourism, as well as, tourist facilities. Their example of sustainable behaviour will encourage tourists staying in Istria County to focus on sustainability during their stay. In order for the implementation of the ConsumelessMed label to be as successful, it would be important to encourage other tourist facilities to get involved in this label. So far, hotels, accommodation facilities, private renters and cafes and restaurants are included, and it would be good to include camps, food and handicraft shops and beach resorts. In addition, in the future other Mediterranean destinations and beyond, are encouraged to join the idea that the ConsumelessMed label promotes. By involving more facilities, we encourage positive change in the tourist destinations in order to plan tourist destination development in a more sustainable way. Moreover, the awareness of the local population and

tourists who visit the destination is raised, all in order to preserve the environment and the destination itself.

Acknowledgements: This work was supported by the program Interreg Mediterranean - ConsumeLess Plus - A model 4 resilient destinations toward tourism recovery: Less is more. The authors reported no potential conflict of interest. We would like to thank all ConsumeLess Plus project team members in the Institute of Agriculture and Tourism and all international ConsumeLess Plus teams for their valuable contribution to the project implementation.

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