

DEVELOPMENT OF ECOTOURISM IN SERBIA: THE IMPORTANCE OF ORGANIC FARMS¹

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Abstract

Ecotourism is extremely popular trend worldwide, but it is also important factor of sustainable development, necessary in all areas of human activity, including tourism. The organic ecotourism provides services based on sustainable development, with the emphasis on sustainable agriculture, conservation of ecosystems and natural resources, alternative energy sources, healthy nutrition and tradition preservation. Serbia has enormous potential in ecotourism due to the large number of protected resources, natural areas, parks and reserves, monuments and a large number of protected plant and animal species. Organic farms as active participants in ecotourism activities also include segments of food and wine tourism, offering a completely new experience with the possibility of active rest, education and awareness in terms of ecology and sustainability.

The results of this research show that there is an evident potential for the development of ecotourism on organic farms and organic producers are interested for this type of activities. However, several persisting problems limit organic producers to offer tourism activities. The main problem is access to finance, followed by registration process for conducting tourism activities and the lack of motivation and incentives from the State. This research has numerous limitations and further effort should be made to increase its quality and importance.

Key Words: ecotourism, organic farms, tourism activities, rural tourism, development potential

JEL classification: O13, Q10

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Introduction

Approximately one billion people worldwide use some form of tourism services every year and thus the question of sustainability in tourism is gaining on importance. The spirit of adventure is more evident in modern tourism, as well as greater demand for holidays that are filled with outdoor activities, cultural and recreational facilities. It was noted that most tourists avoid destinations with degraded environment, with the evident shift of tourists towards the eastern Mediterranean and Central and Eastern Europe (Lazić et al., 2013). According to Ubavić (2015), the most important areas of tourism in Serbia in the future will be: (1) city break; (2) business travel; (3) mountains and lakes; (4) cruise; (5) health tourism; (6) sailing; (7) events; (8) special interests; and (9) rural tourism.

An increasing number of tourists pay attention to the conservation of resources during their travel, which includes a visit to destinations with hotels that base their business on the principle of sustainable development, the choice of the beaches with the green flag, and the offer of healthy organic meals. Tourists primarily pay attention to this new type of offer in order to protect themselves and their family, to be sure of safety, quality and standard of tourism offer and to be sure of food safety and quality. They also want to spend their leisure time in the “green” natural environment, on the fresh air, away from city crowds and noise. Especially, tourists from urban areas often want to spend their free time in natural surroundings and want to return to their roots and connect with the nature. Having this in mind, organic farms, particularly those based on the principle of permaculture and biodynamic production are the ideal destination. Ecotourism as a segment of tourism as one of the fastest growing sectors of economy can represent important factor of sustainable development.

In order to meet the refined tastes of a number of tourists, to widen and enrich the offer and to provide an opportunity to acquire new experiences while traveling, tourism organizations are now offering experiences during which clients can use ecological transport, stay in eco-hotels and ethno-villages, volunteer on organic farms in exchange for accommodation and meals and use other numerous services. To a certain extent, this could be considered as an innovation in tourism offer. Companies operating in the field of tourism have recognized this trend long ago and are increasingly offering arrangements that are sustainable, eco-friendly, earth-friendly, energy-saving, green, natural, rural, etc.

The benefits of ecotourism for organic producers can be numerous. When organic farms open themselves for tourist visits they receive the opportunity for additional revenue and they can attract new customers. This can also motivate other farmers to turn to organic production. The development of tourism in the field of organic production can affect the growth of employment, since joining organic farms in tourism offer imposes the need to organize additional services that can enrich tourism offer. These activities range from tours and education of tourists to services of food and beverage, all in accordance with the principles of sustainable development and the use of environmentally friendly transport. Tourism industry has great economic importance for every country as it contributes to its overall economic development, increased employment, contributes to foreign exchange inflow and improves the balance of payments (Lazić et al., 2013). In addition, these tourists are aware of the natural surroundings, preservation of the natural resources and protection of the environment.

Worldwide, many organic farms are included in the tourism offer with accommodation, food and beverage, have a variety of activities to enrich the offer such as natural tours, horse riding or even the offer of volunteering on sustainable farms in exchange for accommodation and food. The global movement of WWOOF (World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms) connects the volunteers and tourists-organic farms in order to support sustainable development. Their goal is, “to promote culture and education based on trust and non-monetary exchange in order to build a healthy sustainable global environment” (source: <http://wwof.net/#wwof>). Forty nine farms in Serbia that operate according to the principles of sustainable agriculture offer this type of tourism services in WWOOF platform. Using this platform, an organic producer partially meets the need for additional work force at much lower costs, because the tourists who perform daily activities on the farm do it in exchange for accommodation or accommodation and meals. Tourists find the benefit in the reduction of vacation costs, since tourism services are offered in return for volunteering on a farm.

Serbia has a big potential in terms of development of ecotourism, due to the large number of protected resources, natural areas, national parks, reserves, monuments and a large number of protected plant and animal species. Since organic food has gained an increasing popularity worldwide including Serbia recently, there is the trend of increase of the cultivated land area under the organic production. However, this amount

is in Serbia significantly smaller compared to the total agricultural fertile land (Ljumović et al., 2015).

Unfortunately, this type of tourism in Serbia is insufficiently supported and promoted, there is no adequate infrastructure for the implementation of such programs, nor is there sufficient awareness of all stakeholders that could actively participate in the creation of this type of tourism offer and there is still relatively low level of environmental awareness. It goes without saying that unfavorable situation contributes to the lack of standards and legislation. Also, International Society for Ecotourism (TIES) does not recognize Serbia as ideal eco-trips in their recommendations of the environmental destinations in Europe.

Responsible tourism, sustainable tourism or ecotourism

Responsible tourism is any form of tourism that can be consumed in a more responsible way and it implies responsible behavior by tourists. The idea of sustainable tourism was developed by Jost Krippendorf. He used A.H. Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory and applied it to tourism "because the development of tourist needs in course of time is very similar to the development of human needs in general" (Krippendorf, 1987, p. 67). Although sustainable tourism has been adopted primarily by small, independent operators, a number of the world's larger tourism companies, from hotels to tour operators, are also restructuring their management and operations to reduce the consumption of water, energy and to improve the management of waste (Goodstein, 2006). According to World Tourism Organization, sustainable tourism is "Tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities". Sustainable tourism development requires the informed participation of all relevant stakeholders, as well as strong political leadership to ensure wide participation and consensus building. Sustainable tourism implementation is a continual process which requires constant monitoring of impacts, and the introduction of the necessary preventive and/or corrective measures whenever necessary. Sustainable tourism should also maintain a high level of tourist satisfaction and ensure a meaningful experience to the tourists, raising their awareness about sustainability issues and promoting sustainable tourism practices amongst them (UNEP&UNWTO, 2005). Ecotourism is a form of sustainable tourism. According to the International Ecotourism Society, ecotourism is "responsible travel to natural areas that conserves

the environment, sustains the well/being of the local people, and involves interpretation and education” (www.ecotourism.org).

Literature review

the concepts of agro-tourism, rural tourism and ecotourism are very often mixed, confused and used as synonymous. Agro-tourism involves tourism activities that happen on the farm or ranch. These activities can range from staying on the farm for a couple of hours or prolonged stay for several days, the use of farm services or products or involvement in the farm production etc. For many people that use this kind of services this is the only chance to connect with nature, to be included in the process of food production or to get informed about food production.

Rural tourism refers to all types of tourism carried out in rural areas that are not necessarily performed by an agricultural entrepreneur through the use of his farm (agritourist, direct sales in farm, educational farms), also including the initiatives of hospitality in rural villages (Sgroi et al., 2014, p. 409).

Ecotourism emerged as a bridge between tourism development and environmental protection (Wu et al., 2015) and presents a small fragment of tourism overall and only a subset of nature tourism - defined as tourism where appreciation of the natural environment, for example bird watching or game viewing, is at the heart of the trip (Goodwin, 2015). Ecotourism is a rational method for nature reserves to both realize ecological protection and to benefit their local residents (Wu et al., 2015). The framework of ecotourism consists of three primary, interdependent, and inseparable models for recreational use of nature: tourism in specially protected areas, ethnographic tourism, and rural ecotourism (Evstropéva & Korytnyi, 2016).

According to Wood (2002), ecotourism contributes to conservation of biodiversity; sustains the wellbeing of local people; includes an interpretation/learning experience; involves responsible action on the part of tourists and the tourism industry; is delivered primarily to small groups by small-scale businesses; requires lowest possible consumption of non-renewable resources and stresses local participation, ownership and business opportunities, particularly for rural people (p. 10).

The organic ecotourism provides services based on sustainable development, with the emphasis on sustainable agriculture, conservation of ecosystems, the conservation of natural resources, use of alternative energy sources, healthy nutrition, preservation of tradition and others. Organic farms are active participants in tourism activities, including ecotourism segment, as well as the segment of food and wine tourism. In order to meet the needs of tourists with different preferences they offer them a whole new experience with the possibility of active rest, education and awareness in terms of ecology and sustainability.

Ecotourism certification

Developed countries have standardized certification process for ecotourism development. Certification programs provide security for tourists and guarantee a certain quality of service, which is backed by a strong commitment to sustainable practices.

Blue Flags Awards system was introduced in 1985 and it was the beginning of the eco-labeling process in tourism. In 1998, Green Globe Standards were launched and its logo could be used by companies fulfilling certain requirements in the field of ecology and having their operations based on ecological principles. In the same year, the UNEP (United Nations Environment Programme) published the report on eco-labeling. A large number of eco-labels and eco-activities in tourism emerged during the nineties. Many Sustainable/Eco workshops were introduced, while numerous countries started with the introduction of organic certification in the field of tourism, in order to raise sustainable tourism to a higher standard and enable tourists' safety, quality and environmental standards when selecting destinations.

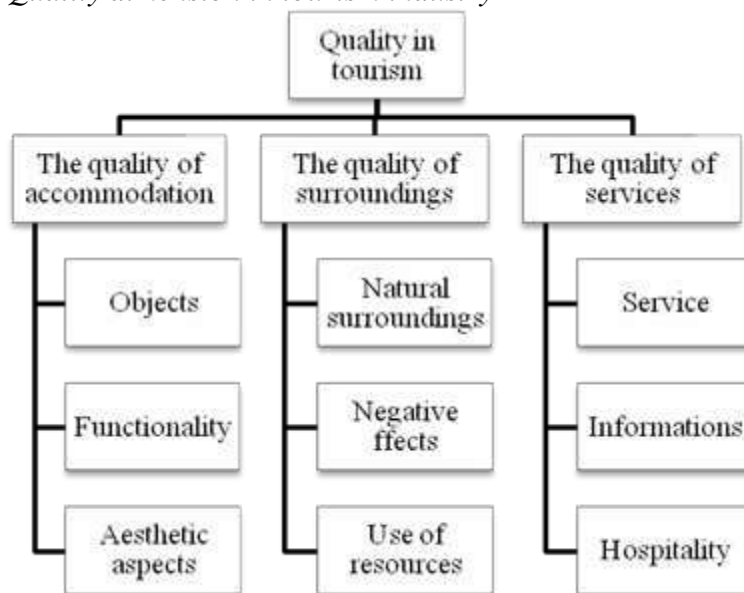
Like any other form of quality label, an ecolabel had to define transparent criteria for use and effective means to prevent abuse. Australia is unique in the development of the Nature and Ecotourism Accreditation Program (NEAP), one of the strongest program certifying tour operators (Font & Buckley, 2001, p. 8, p. 19).

Australia, Canada and many European countries, where Germany is highlighted, are good examples of a successful introduction of the certification system in the field of ecotourism. Serbia still does not strictly regulate the issue of ecotourism since there are no certification bodies to deal with the organic certification process in the field of tourism.

Nevertheless, when a tourist in Serbia decides to visit a sustainable farm, he/she has certain expectations from his/her host that include eco-organization of work on the farm, which is based on the principles of sustainable development including energy efficiency, efficient waste management, and sustainable use of resources, especially water. The preparation of the meals has to fulfill a number of requirements, e.g. raw material has to be organic, even that which is not produced on the farm and in addition it is necessary to use environmentally friendly dishes. On the other hand, environmental business sector prefers self-regulation and market-based instruments as opposed to external regulations and direct controls over output, pricing and production (Anton et al., 2004).

There is another set of standards relevant for tourist activities - ISO 9001. Despite the increasing popularity of international standards and increase of the number of companies that have international standards, these standards are not widely used in the sector of tourism. There is still an opinion that standards are written for production companies. However, the revision of ISO 9001 standard that were made in 2000 and especially the last revision of 2008 devoted special attention to adapting this standard to service industries.

Figure 1: *Quality dimension in tourism industry*



Source: *Romeiss-Stracke, 1995*

ISO standards are a tool of quality assurance and certification is the starting point of the whole process with the aim to rationalize business operations (Figure 1). Although enterprises in Serbia often decide to apply ISO standards, tourism industry is characterized by a low level of application of quality standards. This can affect the overall competitiveness and negatively affect the development of tourism in the country, given that the quality of service is the main condition for raising the competitiveness of any tourism destination.

Organic production as a development potential

On a global scale, organic production is interesting and important because it protects natural resources from pollution and preserves biodiversity. It also provides long-term maintenance and enhancement of soil fertility. At the country level, it can ensure sustainable socio-economic rural development. At the consumer level, organic production provides safety. Developing and transitional countries with optimal environmental conditions in rural areas have the opportunity to increase their supply of organic products on international market and thus boost profit without compromising the environment with dirty technologies, typical of these countries (Ljumović et al., 2015). Ecotourism creates opportunities for additional earnings for organic farms. Environmental quality of a destination is a prevailing issue in making travel-related decisions; it is a competitiveness factor among different tourism destinations with varying environmental quality (Mihalčić, 2000).

The agriculture in Serbia has favorable conditions for development and represents an important factor in total national economy. Rural areas occupy large percentage of the territory of Serbia and are still characterized by a preserved natural environment and good conditions for the organization of crop and livestock production (Paraušić & Cvijanović, 2014).

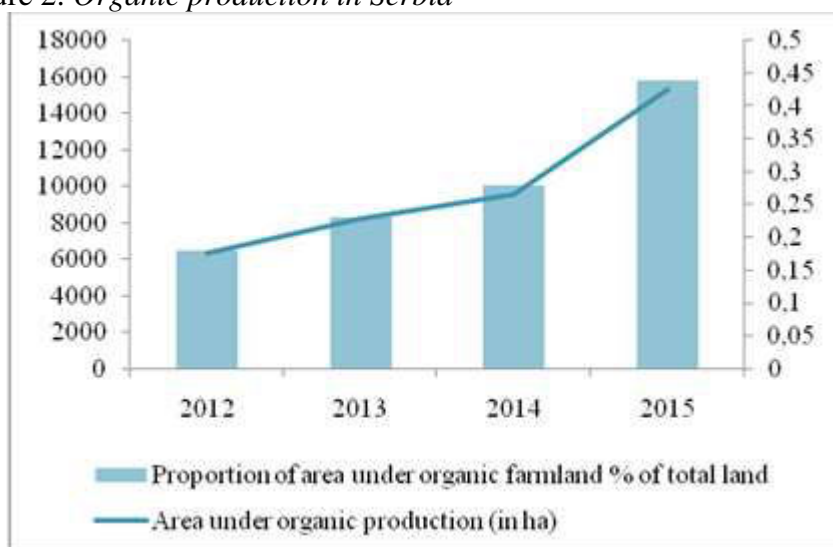
However, many farms do not base their activities on the principles of sustainable development. They do not take into account the optimal use of natural resources, such as land or water; they are growing monoculture with a series of negative consequences for the ecosystem; often use excessive amounts of chemical products such as pesticides, artificial fertilizers or aggressive treatment of the land. All these activities cannot be identified as environment or ecology friendly and therefore, tourist

visits to these farms certainly cannot be classified in the field of ecotourism.

In the area of ecotourism in organic agriculture, there are a number of requirements that a farm must meet. Above all, they have to own certificate on organic production. Also, they have to comply with all aspects of sustainable agricultural production: efficient management of limited natural resources (especially land and water resources); protection of biodiversity; sustainable management of pests and diseases; efficient use of land while improving its quality; respect of basic social and economic principles in agriculture.

It is estimated that in Serbia there are almost 230,000 ha of organic land, where 96% is used for wild collection, primarily for harvesting of berries, mushrooms and medicine herbs. Sector of organic production is slowly developing and every year there is an increasing number of farmers who are converting the land and are joining national system of the organic production (Ljumović et al., 2015). Latest report on organic production in Serbia shows that organic farming peaked in 2015 with record growth in total surface involved in the production, the number of producers and the number of animals bred. Organic production was performed on the total area of 15,298 ha (meadows and pastures included), including organic surfaces and the ones in the conversion period. Compared to the 2014, the total surface under organic production has increased for more than 60% (Simić, 2017). Currently there are two types of organic producers in Serbia (Figure 2). First group that accounts 334 organic producers in Serbia act as individual holders of organic certificate. A much larger group, subcontractors, is subject to the so-called group certification, in accordance with the Law on Organic Production. These producers are in a contractual relationship with companies that purchase the entire production, but also provide them with support, repro-material, and education.

Figure 2: *Organic production in Serbia*



Source: *Simić, 2017*

The Law on Tourism (prior version from 2005) defined services in rural tourism as the provision of accommodation and food in rural households, ethno facilities and farms; organization of tourism tours, picking herbs, horseback riding, fishing and other themed activities; tasting and sale of product; preparing and serving traditional dishes for compensation; production and sale of handicrafts, as well as organizing activities about introducing heritage, lifestyle and traditional culture of rural areas (Law on Tourism, 2005, art. 81).

Methodological framework for the research

To identify potential provider of ecotourism services, we used interview and a survey method. The hypotheses and a small survey were developed based on interviews with organic producers and employees in tourism offices. During the interviews, organic farmers stated that they started their activity for economic reasons and that they are currently content to a certain degree with the results they achieved.

Our primary idea was to determine what type of tourism activities are offered in the segment of ecotourism on organic farms. However, at the beginning of the research, we encountered a major problem. We could identify only small number of organic farms that offer tourism activities. Additional problem was that a number of them was not ready to

cooperate, so we could not get the answers. As you will see later, the response rate was only at the level of 24%. Having these limitations in mind, we decided to change the subject of the research, and try to determine the activities that have the potential to be included in the tourism offer on organic farms. At this stage of our research we are aware of numerous limitations of this analysis, the biggest one being the number of the respondents.

Most of the interviewed farmers stated that they are very interested in providing tourism services. Some of them plan to spread their activities in the field of ecotourism while certain number of farmers tried to provide tourism services but they encountered numerous problems. On the other hand, interviews with employees in tourism organizations show that the demand for this kind of services is growing and that offer is currently above the offer. Having analysed the material gained in the interviews and having in mind the potential number of organic producers involved in tourism, we decided to design small survey that will help us understand the capacity of organic farms for tourism and what activities in the field of tourism are interesting to organic producers. Based on this, we have formulated our hypotheses:

- H1: Organic producers are interested in providing tourism services.
- H2: Organic producers have the capacity to engage in tourism services.

For the purpose of data collection, structured questionnaires were distributed in three ways. We distributed them through database with email addresses of organic farms and by telephone questionnaire. The first method was inefficient, while the second was relatively efficient and about 35% of the sample was collected in this way. All other collected material included direct visit to the farms. To ensure reliability of the collected data, respondents were asked to give information about their identity and person for contact (this information are not disclosed in this research). Questions included in the questionnaire were stipulated in a way that allows further processing and statistical analysis.

The questionnaire consisted of two parts. In the first part, respondents gave answers to the questions that determined their basic characteristics and identity: name and address, type of registration, status of the farm, details about the certificate of organic farming and process of land conversion, primary activity, etc. The second part of the questionnaire contained questions that were used to test the capacity of organic farms

for tourism and to determine what activities in the field of tourism are interesting to organic producers. Each question in the questionnaire was given with concise explanation, in order to eliminate possible errors and ambiguity in answers. The survey covered selected rural areas in the territory of the Republic of Serbia, mostly in places where there are organic producers. The study included 67 respondents, while the response rate was at the level of 24%. The collection of primary statistical material was carried out from January to April 2017. Table 1 shows the distribution of the basic characteristics of the sample.

Table 1: *Frequencies of the basic characteristics of the sample*

| Question | Answer | Frequency | % |
|---------------------------------|-------------------------|-----------|------|
| Registration | Company | 0 | 0 |
| | Entrepreneur | 4 | 25 |
| | Farm | 12 | 75 |
| Do you own OP certificate | Yes | 16 | 100 |
| | No | 0 | 0 |
| Have you converted all the land | Yes | 12 | 75 |
| | No | 4 | 25 |
| Activity | Fruit | 10 | 62.5 |
| | Vegetable | 8 | 50 |
| | Crops | 8 | 50 |
| | Livestock | 8 | 50 |
| | Other | 2 | 12.5 |
| Region | Belgrade | 4 | 25 |
| | Vojvodina | 8 | 50 |
| | Šumadia and West Serbia | 2 | 12.5 |
| | South and East Serbia | 2 | 12.5 |

Source: *Authors own calculation based on the survey*

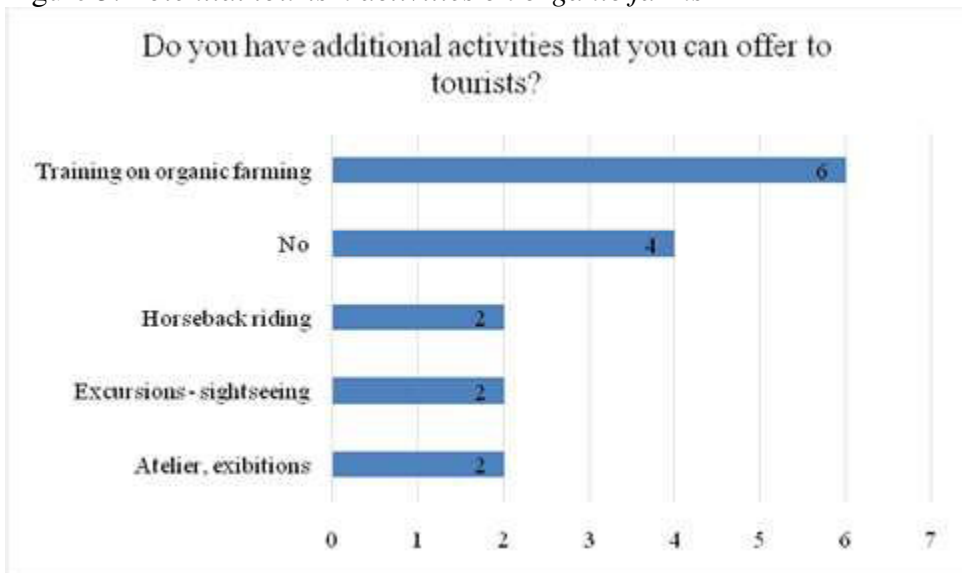
The vast majority of respondents (75%) are registered as a farm (natural person according to Serbian law). All of the respondents own the certificate on organic production, while 75% of them converted all land. It is interesting that some of them plan to acquire additional land in the following period, especially if they decide to get engaged in tourism activities. This will request additional conversion of the land. The question regarding activity was a multiple choice question with 62.5% of the producers cultivating fruits. However, most of them cultivate several types of cultures at the same time. The greatest number of respondents was from the statistical region of Vojvodina.

Results and discussion

Data analysis was performed by using MS Office Excel and SPSS.

We interviewed organic producers and wrote the questionnaire with a number of ideas for content that could be offered to tourists: trainings and workshops on organic production, the organization of children's excursions, working with children with autism who could visit the farm and thus could contribute to improving their health, organizing art workshops, exhibitions, sightseeing, etc. For organic farms with livestock, there is also a willingness to enter the field of tourism and the most interesting offer would be introduction of the indigenous Serbian race of animals, as well as horseback riding or volunteering by working with animals. All respondents stated that they have organized visits to their farms, primarily to provide education in the field of organic production. Visitors are mainly potential manufacturers that are willing to enter the process of education in order to launch their own business in organic production. Some farms have developed their own systems of visitor education. They are also linked with other manufacturers, so visitors can visit several farms, volunteer on them and find out the specifics of each manufacturer. Figure 3 presents respondents' answers to the question “Do you have additional activities that you can offer to tourists”.

Figure 3: *Potential tourism activities on organic farms*



Source: *Authors own calculation based on the survey*

Certainly the most interesting ecotourism offer in Serbia would be the visit to biodynamic farms. In the Balkan region there are only a few biodynamic organic farms, but a large number of farmers are interested in this type of organic farming, which is carried out in an independent production system, whose quality is guaranteed by Demeter certification. Biodynamic organic farms would certainly be the most attractive offer in Serbia, because they represent a sustainable system with a holistic approach to agricultural production.

Our results show that only 2 out of 16 respondents organize tourism offer on their organic farms. We must note that we identified a larger number of organic farms that offer tourism services, however, they were not willing to participate in the survey. The general problem with the research was low response rate, at the level of 24%. Farms that have tourism services offer training on organic production to their visitors, have meals and one of them occasionally organizes eco-happenings. Other respondents stated that they do not have tourism services on organic farms, but they are mainly interested in these activities. 50% of them claimed that they are willing to enter the market of tourism services on their farm. However, only 25% of respondents have the capacity for accommodation on their farms, and this accommodation is usually very modest. It is interesting that respondents who stated that they do not have the possibilities for accommodation are starting to consider this option for their farms. When we asked them if they serve meals on the farm, only two of them stated yes. These are farms that already offer some form of tourism services. On the other hand, other farms can offer mostly groceries they cultivate on the farm. Others do not even consider selling their products. It is interesting that 62.5% of respondents think that visitors are interested in participating in the daily activities on the farm, but none of the respondents offers this type of services.

Table 2: *Survey results*

| Question | Answer | Freq. | % |
|---|---------------|--------------|----------|
| Does your farm offer some form of tourism services? | Yes | 2 | 12.5 |
| | No | 14 | 87.5 |
| If the previous answer is negative, say if you would be interested in tourism services and tourism visits to your farm? | Yes | 8 | 50 |
| | No | 6 | 37.5 |
| Is there a possibility of accommodation in your household? | Yes | 4 | 25 |
| | No | 12 | 75 |

| | | | |
|---|-----------------------------------|----|------|
| Did you offer meals for guests? | No | 10 | 62.5 |
| | Yes, to go | 4 | 25 |
| | Yes, meals are served on the farm | 2 | 12.5 |
| In your opinion, are your visitors interested in participating in the daily activities carried out on the farm? | Yes | 10 | 62.5 |
| | No | 6 | 37.5 |

Source: *Authors own calculation based on the survey*

Conclusion

Primarily, this research was intended to determine what type of tourism activities are offered in the segment of ecotourism on organic farms. However, due to a number of limitations we encountered, we decided to change the subject of the research, and try to determine activities that have the potential to be included in the tourism offer on organic farms. After a series of interview, meetings and surveys with organic produces, our general conclusion is that this type of activities has a huge potential and that organic farms are extremely important in the development of ecotourism in the Republic of Serbia.

The results of this research show that eventough our hypotheses were changed, they were set right. There is an evident potential for the development of ecotourism on organic farms and organic producers are interested in this type of activities. However, there are several problems that limit this development. The main problem the organic produces face when they want to extend their offer to additional services is the access to finance and high expenses that they cannot cover. This is not surprising since some previous research, already mentioned in this paper determined access to finance as one of the most limiting factors for the development of organic producers. There are numerous problems with the registration process for conducting tourism activities. It is complicated and has numerous procedures concerning the categorization of objects and requirements that must be met. Farmers are already facing numerous problems in their core business, agricultural production, and are often not willing to engage in tourism as it imposes numerous requirements, obligations and higher level of responsibility. The lack of motivation and incentives from the State are additional problems.

Although in small amount and varieties, State incentives do exist. Organic producers can use State aid for tourism activities and have the possibility for incentives supporting construction and maintenance of facilities, supply of equipment and tools and promotion of non-agricultural activities. However, organic producers in Serbia need a comprehensive support in order to engage in tourism activities. The support should include not only financial incentives from the government, but other activities as well, such as support in the form of projects and programs in order to develop ecotourism activities, assistance in analyzing the current situation and finding effective solutions, and the help in decision-making, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of projects. These activities should include educational institutions, especially institutes and universities, associations, non-governmental organizations, local communities and require regional cooperation in order to encourage the development of organic ecotourism.

At this stage of our research, we are aware of numerous limitations of this analysis. Further effort should be made to include more organic farms in the research and to try to determine and quantify the significance of organic farms to the development of ecotourism.

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