

# Rural tourism in function of economic development in the Slavonia and Baranja region

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## **RURAL TOURISM IN FUNCTION OF ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN THE SLAVONIJA AND BARANJA REGION**

### ***ABSTRACT***

*Rural tourism, as a significant factor in the sustainable economic and tourist development of rural areas, increasingly requires a strategic approach for overcoming the difficulties and managing its further development. Development solutions are essential for the revitalization of the rural areas of the Slavonia and Baranja region, especially due to the current developmental disparities of the five counties of this area compared to other counties of the Republic of Croatia. In order to identify the role of rural tourism in the economic development of some region, this paper analyzes the existing situation, the assumptions of rural tourism, the emerging forms of rural tourism in Slavonia and Baranja region and the strategic role of tourist communities in stimulating sustainable economic development. The analysis of the selected macroeconomic indicators shows the developmental disparities of the Slavonia and Baranja regions in relation to the Republic of Croatia. The aim of this paper is to analyze the existence of the strategic approach of development of the rural tourism in the Slavonia and Baranja region and to determine with conducted empirical research the existence of development strategies of rural tourism, and determine the potentials and obstacles of the further development of rural tourism in region Slavonija and Baranja. For the implementation of empirical research, as a surveyed population, tourist communities were selected from the Pozega-Slavonia, Osijek-Baranja, Brod-Posavina, Vukovar-Srijem and Virovitica-Podravina counties. Suitable statistical and mathematical methods were used to generate and interpret the results of the research. The results obtained identified the existence of strategic and developmental approaches, and identified the current difficulties and constraints for faster development of rural tourism in the function of economic development of this region. The scientific and applicative contribution of this work is reflected in the findings of empirical research.*

**Key words:** *Rural tourism, Rural tourism development strategy, Slavonija and Baranja region,*

## **1. Introduction**

One of the new forms of tourism in the Republic of Croatia is rural tourism. The Republic of Croatia has cultural, natural and gastronomic attractiveness, which represents a great potential for further development of rural tourism. The potential for rural tourism development in Croatia is reflected in the fact that the rural area occupies 91.60% of the overall surface area, and 47.60% of the population lives in rural area (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2001). Slavonia and Baranja region are mainly rural areas, and due to their cultural and natural resources and the growing number of family farms, there is a great potential for even greater rural tourism development, which may result in greater economic development of this region where macroeconomic development disparities in comparison to the rest of Croatia are visible. Rural tourism in Croatia is developing slower than in neighbouring European countries (Zaborski, 2018, 36), and the cause of slower growth, especially in the Slavonia and Baranja region, are numerous constraints resulting from war events, insufficiently developed transport infrastructure, lack of skilled staff due to large migrations and insufficiently organized promotions of tourist offer.

According to Demonja and Baćac (2012, 206), rural tourism has emerged as the need to preserve, revitalize and give new, added value to inherited heritage and to authentically promote traditional knowledge and skills through the organization of an attractive and original tourist offer.

In order to develop a sustainable rural tourism in a rural area, it is necessary to continuously and in the long term look at all the potentials and to create a tourist offer based on the principles of economic viability, which is also the basis for economic development. With strategic approach to rural tourism development, the idea of tourism services development can be developed in certain areas and determine the greatest potential for forming and organizing a future quality tourism offer.

Therefore, this paper explores the existence of strategic development of rural tourism in the Slavonia and Baranja region as the basis for transforming existing cultural and natural resources into a tourist product. The aim of this paper is to provide an overview of the existence of strategic management of rural tourism development, as well as an overview of the problems and potential of rural tourism development based on the results of empirical research.

## **2. Rural tourism - terminology, manifestations and features**

Rural tourism is a term that encompasses all tourist services, activities and types of tourism in the rural areas, including for example hunting, fishing, tourism in nature parks, winter, rural, eco-tourism, health, cultural tourism etc. The concept of a rural area is not strictly defined, but it includes areas prevalent by natural environment, rural environment, small settlements and villages, secession, isolated family farms where agriculture and forestry are the main economic branches (Baćac, 2012, 16).

One of the most common forms of rural tourism is agrotourism, which includes the following forms: family farms or agrotourism, tasting rooms, excursion sites, rural camps, ethno villages, folklore etc. Family farms are the most common form of rural tourism and offer services for overnight stays, catering services and other active vacation services at family farms. (Baćac, 2012, 18).

The basic features of rural tourism are the following: it is organized in an open space in direct contact with nature, allows interaction and participation in local small-business life activities, based on small entrepreneurship and growing slowly and organically, associated with local families, a complex model of rural environment, history, location etc. (Jelinčić, 2007, 275).

The development of rural tourism is also influenced by new trends in the tourist market and changes in the behaviour of tourists. One of the trends is the growing orientation of tourists to rural experiences and the avoidance of city tourist destinations. The most significant motivators motivating city-oriented tourists to "live the rural experience" are (Irshad, 2010, according to Sikiric et al., 2015):

- urban, hectic lifestyle and growing detachment from nature and natural environment create a desire to escape the city;
- growing "green thinking" trend
- growing desire for authentic experience;
- removal of transport, communication and political-economic barriers and others.

Croatia has all the features and potentials for rural tourism development, but there are certain problems and difficulties. According to Krajnović et al. (2011), the problems of insufficient and inadequate financial incentives by the public sector, the lack of recognition of rural tourism as a form of tourism that adds value to tourist destination, the lack of expertise in small family farms, the adoption of inadequate laws dealing with the issue of rural tourism, there is a very bad or inadequate marketing activity of unified business units (family farms in rural tourism) etc. According to the results of the research on the scientific project of the Ministry of Science, Education and Sports "Agrotourism - a component of sustainable development" (Krajnović et al., 2011), the main constraints on family farms' business in the development of agrotourism are insufficient system of measures and incentives, information on incentive programs, employment of non-family labour force, high VAT and high interest on loans. Part of the mentioned problems has been identified in the research results presented in Chapter 4 of this paper.

### **3. Rural tourism in the region of Slavonia and Baranja**

Slavonia and Baranja Region have all the factors contributing to the development of rural tourism. According to Ružić (2009), the bidding factors are divided into three main groups:

- Natural attractions: climate, hydrographic elements, terrain, flora and fauna, natural rarities, agriculture and ecological agriculture.
- Social attractiveness: cultural monuments, folk culture, housing and nutrition, folk customs, folk games, folk creations, cultural institutions and events, entertainment, sports and economic events.
- Traffic connection to the place of tourist residence and the connection to the tourist destination.

Offer of this region is numerous and diverse, and with their mobilization, preservation, nurturing and branding rural tourism increasingly evolves. Slavonia and Baranja region have different natural attractions, social attractiveness made up of different traditional beliefs and attitudes of the locals, and traffic connections secured through the airport, highway, public roads and the rest. Infrastructural progress has been made in the last 10 years, which enables the growth of various indicators of rural tourism growth. Some of the indicators of rural tourism growth are data on changes in the number of overnight stays, number of tourists and number of beds in the counties in this region. The most recent data is presented in the following two tables.

*Table 1: Accommodation capacities by counties (31 august 2017)*

COUNTY	NUMBER OF BEDS		INDEX 17./16.	NUMBER OF BEDS IN THE HOTELS		INDEX 17./16.
	2016.	2017.		2016.	2017.	
<b>VIROVITICA - PODRAVINA</b>	609	705	115,76	141	141	100,00
<b>POZEGA - SLAVONIA</b>	479	596	124,43	0	0	-
<b>BROD - POSAVINA</b>	995	1.093	109,85	339	299	88,20
<b>OSIJEK - BARANJA</b>	2.661	2.511	94,36	1.185	951	80,30
<b>VUKOVAR - SRIJEM</b>	1.463	1.872	127,96	486	698	143,60
<b>TOTAL SLAVONIA AND BARANJA REGION</b>	<b>6.207</b>	<b>6.777</b>	<b>109,18</b>	<b>2.151</b>	<b>2.089</b>	<b>97,12</b>
<b>SHARE SLAVONIA AND BARANJA REGION IN TOTAL REPUBLIC OF CROATIA</b>	<b>0,55 %</b>	<b>0,56 %</b>		<b>1,59 %</b>	<b>1,59 %</b>	
<b>TOTAL REPUBLIC OF CROATIA</b>	<b>1.133.751</b>	<b>1.207.427</b>	<b>106,50</b>	<b>135.236</b>	<b>131.152</b>	<b>97,00</b>

Source: authors according to the data [https://www.htz.hr/sites/default/files/2018-08/HTZ%20TUB%20HR\\_%202017%20FINAL.pdf](https://www.htz.hr/sites/default/files/2018-08/HTZ%20TUB%20HR_%202017%20FINAL.pdf)

In the Slavonia and Baranja region there is an increase in the number of beds in non-hotel accommodation in 2017 compared to 2016 in almost all counties. The share of accommodation capacities in the region has risen as compared to the total in the Republic of Croatia, but it is still small and it is necessary to increase the number of beds.

*Table 2: Tourist traffic, by counties, January 2019*

COUNTY	NUMBER OF TOURISTS		INDEX 19./18.	OVERNIGHT STAYS		INDEX 19./18.
	2018.	2019.		2018.	2019.	
<b>VIROVITICA - PODRAVINA</b>	884	749	84,73	2.139	2.005	93,74
<b>POZEGA - SLAVONIA</b>	1.184	1.432	120,95	2.693	3.209	119,16
<b>BROD - POSAVINA</b>	1.625	1.675	103,08	2.892	2.755	95,26
<b>OSIJEK - BARANJA</b>	4.948	4.361	88,14	10.437	8.963	85,88
<b>VUKOVAR - SRIJEM</b>	5.684	4.868	85,64	8.916	6.873	77,09
<b>TOTAL SLAVONIA AND BARANJA REGION</b>	<b>14.325</b>	<b>13.085</b>	<b>96,51</b>	<b>27.077</b>	<b>23.805</b>	<b>94,23</b>
<b>SHARE SLAVONIA AND BARANJA REGION IN TOTAL REPUBLIC OF CROATIA</b>	<b>6,80 %</b>	<b>6,30 %</b>		<b>5,09 %</b>	<b>4,72 %</b>	
<b>TOTAL REPUBLIC OF CROATIA</b>	<b>210.581</b>	<b>207.643</b>	<b>98,60</b>	<b>532.075</b>	<b>504.434</b>	<b>94,81</b>

Source: authors according to the data [https://mint.gov.hr/UserDocsImages/AA\\_2018\\_c-dokumenti/1903\\_statmint\\_1.pdf](https://mint.gov.hr/UserDocsImages/AA_2018_c-dokumenti/1903_statmint_1.pdf)

According to the data in Table 4. it is noticeable that in January 2019, as compared to January 2018, the number of tourists in the Slavonia and Baranja region decreased by 8.65%, and the number of overnight stays decreased by 12.09%. The number of tourists and overnight stays in the Slavonia and Baranja region is still low compared to the number of tourists and the number



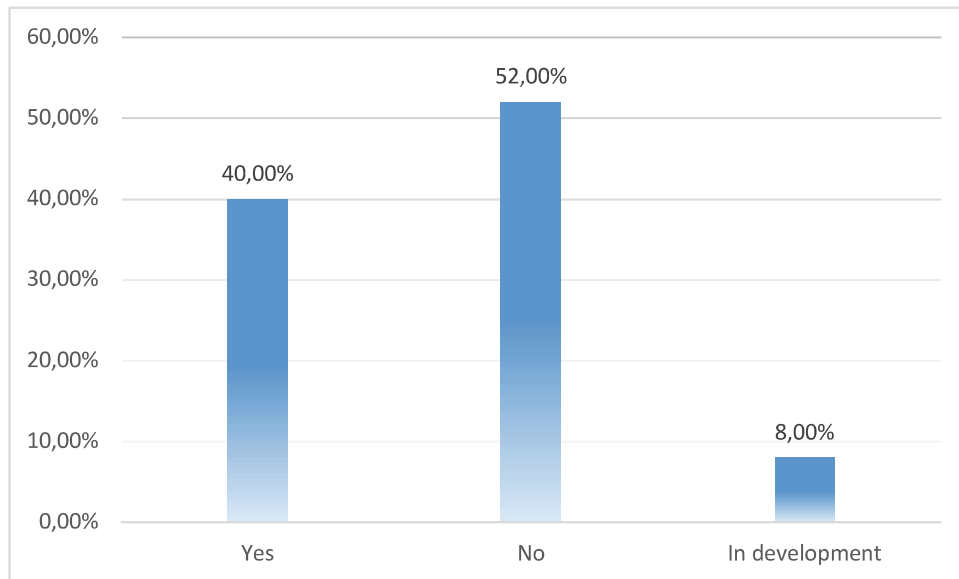
of overnight stays with the total number in the Republic of Croatia, and it is noticeable decrease of this share by 2019 compared to the same period of 2018. It is also evident that the number of tourists in the Brod-Posavina and Požega-Slavonia counties is growing, which may indicate the link between the existence of sustainable development strategies for rural tourism in these counties (see more in the results in section 4).

#### **4. Results of research on strategic management of development of rural tourism in the Slavonia and Baranja region**

In available official data and existing professional and scientific literature there are no data on research on the existence of strategic management of rural tourism development in Slavonia and Baranja regions. This paper presents the results of the research conducted on the Strategic Development of Rural Tourism in Slavonia and Baranja Region. The survey was conducted using a survey questionnaire created by Limesurvey. Invitation to participate in the research was sent via email at the beginning of March 2019. The research was conducted in five counties of eastern Croatia - Požega-Slavonia, Osijek-Baranja, Brod-Posavina, Vukovar-Srijem and Virovitica-Podravina counties. The samples included registered tourist boards in this area. A sample consisted of a total of 40 tourist boards, and 25 of them fully responded to the questionnaire, while 12 incomplete responses were not considered when analysing the results of the research. With 25 respondents, the response rate was 62.50%, and the sample is considered to be representative sample which is distributed across all counties. The questionnaire consisted of 10 questions that were divided into the area of existence of a sustainable rural development strategy / tourism strategy, its primary goals, the participants of the development and the way of monitoring the realization of the strategy; issues related to promoting rural tourism development, and the limitations and potentials of sustainable rural tourism development. The results were processed using the appropriate mathematical and statistical methods and are presented below.

In this research, a representative sample is made up of tourist boards as carriers of rural area / tourism development in towns and counties. Figure 1 shows the existence of a Strategy for Sustainable Development of Rural Area / Tourism (hereinafter referred to as the Strategy) in 40% of respondents. The lack of defined strategic rural tourism development is visible in 52% of surveyed tourist boards.

**Graph 1: The existence of the Strategy for Sustainable Development of the Rural Area / Tourism City / County**

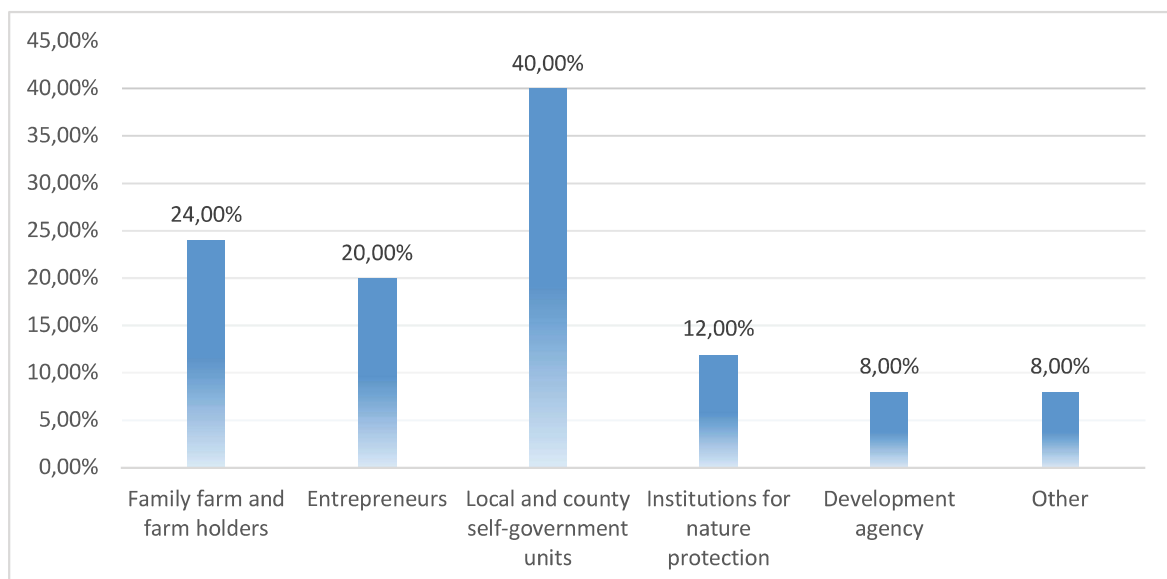


Source: by the author

The most development strategies are seen in Pozega-Slavonia (40%) and Brod-Posavina counties (40%), only two were reported in Osijek-Baranja County (20%), while Vukovar-Srijem and Virovitica-Podravina counties have no developed strategic or strategies are being developed.

Participants who, alongside tourist boards, participate or have participated in the development of strategies are presented in Graph 2.

**Graph 2: Participants/cooperation in strategy development**



Source: by the author



From the Graph 2 it is noticed that there is cooperation of tourist communities with other stakeholders and related institutions, which is essential for the further development of rural tourism. It can be noted that cooperation with the institutions of local and county self-government units is better than cooperation with entrepreneurs and development agencies. The development of strategies largely preceded the definition of planning goals (32%), resource analysis (agricultural, cultural, natural and other) (32%), and development potential analysis (28%). Cost-benefit analysis of projects (12%) as a basis for strategy development received the fewest numbers of responses.

In order to stimulate economic growth and development in rural tourism, it is necessary to analyse in advance the financial viability and economic justification and the sustainability of future investments in this activity. This should be included in the primary objectives of the strategy, and the implementation of the defined strategy should be followed by defined key indicators. According to the results of this research, the primary goals of existing strategies in this area are (order according to results):

- preservation of local culture and identity of the local community (36%)
- sustainable and long-term tourism development (32%)
- preservation of landscape and the natural "habitat" (28%), and
- preservation and sustainable development of rural economy (28%).

The least represented goal: the strategy needs to become a platform for safe and long-term investments for tourism entrepreneurs (12%).

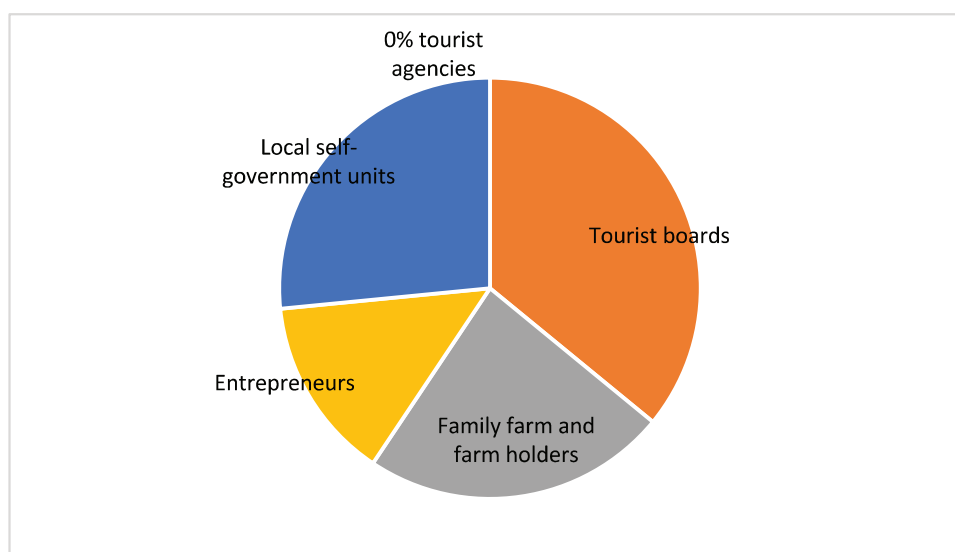
The realization of the strategy is monitored as follows:

- there is only a plan for implementing the Strategy without monitoring the effectiveness and realization (60%)
- there are quantitative indicators and defined target values (20%) or
- there are no quantitative indicators (20%).

The results show a greater focus on long-term preservation of local culture, landscape and sustainable development, while less focus is placed on creating conditions for safe long-term investments. This is also confirmed by the fact that the realization of only 20% of existing strategies is monitored through quantitative indicators and set target values.

Continuous growth and development of rural tourism require promotion of rural tourism. Graph 3 shows that, in the opinion of the respondents (they could choose from the two most frequent participants in the promotion), tourist communities and local self-government units are most involved in the promotion of rural tourism development in this region, followed by entrepreneurs and owners of family farms, while touristic agencies participated the least in the promotion.

**Graph 3: Participants in promoting of rural tourism development**



Source: by the author

Entrepreneurs and family farm holders, as holders and predominant providers of rural tourism services, perform self-promotion, but obviously without greater connection with tourist agencies. They need more financial and technical assistance in the organized promotion of both individuals as well as branding throughout the region in order to ensure a sustainable development of rural tourism that could stimulate sustainable economic development. However, insufficient promotion is not considered to be one of the major problems and constraints for better sustainable development of rural tourism in this area, as can be seen in the data presented in Table 3 where the arithmetic mean of evaluations provided by participants who were asked to evaluate on a scale from 1 to 5 (1 = not a problem / limitation, 5 = the biggest problem / limitation) which are the biggest problems / limitations for better sustainable development of rural tourism in their area.

**Table 3: The biggest problems / limitations for a better sustainable development of rural tourism in the region of Slavonia and Baranja**

Factor	x
Insufficient Promotion	3.08
<b>Insufficient incentives and support</b>	<b>3.84</b>
Too high VAT	3.68
<b>Lack of financial resources</b>	<b>4.2</b>
Lack of labour force	3.4
Insufficient interest of entrepreneurs and family farms for further development	3.2
Insufficient networking of rural tourism stakeholders	3.72
<b>Inadequate training of labour force in rural tourism</b>	<b>3.84</b>
<b>Lack of vision for long-term sustainable business</b>	<b>3.84</b>
Tourist infrastructure (bicycle paths, tourist signalling)	3.4
Insufficient use of funds from the EU funds	3.64
<b>Insufficient resources of tourist boards</b>	<b>3.84</b>
Lack of operational and financial support from competent state institutions	3.56

Source: by the author

The following are seen as the biggest problems or limitations of sustainable development of rural tourism: insufficient funding, support and incentives, and lack of vision for long-term business, insufficient resources of tourist boards and insufficient education of the labour force in rural tourism. These results point to the need to provide additional sources of funding to strengthen the resources of tourist communities and educate the labour force in rural tourism. It is necessary to systematically plan and organize education for all stakeholders, in particular to define the measures and programs of education by the local community and the county for the providers of tourist services, as evidenced by the data presented in Table 4, according to which the quality labour force is considered the least rated potential for sustainable tourism development in the region of Slavonia and Baranja.

**Table 4:** *The greatest potential for sustainable development of rural tourism in the region of Slavonia and Baranja*

Factor	<i>x</i>
Quality labour force	3.16
Rural area (mountains, lakes, rivers, forests etc.)	4.36
<b>Rural heritage (tradition, architecture, history, villages etc.)</b>	<b>4.56</b>
Rural life (crafts, events, local food etc.)	4.36
<b>Rural activities (horse riding, fishing, walking etc.)</b>	<b>4.56</b>
Strategic management of sustainable development of rural tourism	3.2

Source: by the author

Rural heritage and rural activity are seen as the greatest potentials, while strategic management of sustainable rural tourism development and quality labour force are considered the weakest potential of sustainable rural tourism development.

## 5. Conclusion

In Slavonia and Baranja region, the strategic approach to rural tourism development is still insufficiently present, as is evident in the results of the survey conducted on a sample of 40 tourist boards in five counties. Strategic development of rural tourism is not based solely on the existence of a rural tourism development strategy, but also on the mutual cooperation of all rural tourism stakeholders, including local and county self-government units, various support institutions and tourism entrepreneurs and rural tourism providers. Particularly necessary is cooperation in monitoring the realization of the strategy and set goals in order to ensure sustainable economic growth, in addition to preserving the local culture and the landscape. The biggest problems, i.e. limitations for better sustainable development of rural tourism in this area. are insufficient funds, grants and incentives, lack of vision for long-term business, insufficient resources of tourist boards and insufficient education of the labour force in rural tourism. While rural heritage and rural activity are considered the greatest potential of this area, quality labour force is considered to be the smallest potential.

Considering the results of the research carried out, the strategic sustainable development of rural tourism should be based on the development, implementation and monitoring of the implementation of the rural tourism development strategy and should be seen in the context of the overall rural development. It is therefore necessary to network and balance the interests of the local community, tourist service provider and tourists. Serious strategic approach to sustainable rural tourism development can ensure minimizing damage to the environment, optimizing tourists' satisfaction, and developing the long-term economic and social

development of rural areas. In Slavonia and Baranja region, which has a rich rural area, rural heritage, rural life and rural activities, it is necessary to find a model of strategic rural tourism development based on human resource education in the direction of optimal and sustainable use of existing rural tourism resources in order to ensure sustainable economic growth and development. All this includes financial, legal and other support from the state and competent ministries in order to enhance the competitiveness of eastern Croatia.

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