

FH JOANNEUM Gesellschaft mbH

Master Thesis - HTSM

**Which Future for the “Amazing Amazon of Europe”?
Proposals for the Strategic Tourism Development of a
Transboundary UNESCO Biosphere Reserve**

Submitted in the Master's Degree Program

Health, Tourism & Sports Management

**Mentors: DI Stefanie Schuster & Prof. (FH) Mag. Mag. Dr. Harald A.
Friedl**

Submitted by: Philip Ursnik Zuran, BA

August, 2021

The Statutory Declaration

I hereby declare that the present bachelor's thesis / Diploma thesis / Master's thesis was composed by myself and that the work contained herein is my own and that I have only used the specified resources. I also confirm that I have prepared this thesis in compliance with the FH JOANNEUM Standards for Good Scientific Practice and Prevention of Research Misconduct. I declare in particular that I have cited all formulations and concepts taken verbatim or in substance from printed or unprinted material or from the Internet according to the rules of good scientific practice and that I have indicated them by footnotes or other exact references to the original source. The present thesis has not been submitted to another university for the award of an academic degree in this form. I understand that the provision of incorrect information may have legal consequences.

Philip Ursnik Zuran, (Place, Date)

Die eidesstattliche Erklärung

Ich erkläre ehrenwörtlich, dass ich die vorliegende Masterarbeit selbstständig angefertigt und die mit ihr verbundenen Tätigkeiten selbst erbracht habe und keine anderen als die angegebenen Hilfsmittel benutzt habe. Ich erkläre zudem, dass ich mich bei der Erstellung der Arbeit an die Richtlinie der FH JOANNEUM zur Sicherung Guter Wissenschaftlicher Praxis und zur Vermeidung von Fehlverhalten gehalten habe. Insbesondere erkläre ich, dass ich alle aus gedruckten, ungedruckten oder dem Internet im Wortlaut oder im wesentlichen Inhalt übernommenen Formulierungen und Konzepte gemäß den Regeln für gutes wissenschaftliches Arbeiten zitiert und durch Fußnoten bzw. durch andere genaue Quellenangaben gekennzeichnet habe.

Die vorliegende Originalarbeit ist in dieser Form zur Erreichung eines akademischen Grades noch keiner anderen Hochschule vorgelegt worden.

Ich bin mir bewusst, dass eine falsche Erklärung rechtliche Folgen haben kann.

Philip Ursnik Zuran (Ort, Datum)

Acknowledgments

At this point, I would like to thank all the people who accompanied and supported me on my way to the finished master thesis.

I would like to thank my supervisors Prof. (FH) Mag. Mag. Dr. Harald A. Friedl and DI Stefanie Schuster for their patience and valuable feedback. They always supported me with words and deeds and helped me to overcome challenges, which I have faced during the time of writing.

I would also like to thank Iskriva as well as all the respective tourism boards involved, for their help and cooperation.

In addition, I would want to express my gratitude to my parents and my sister for their sound advice and sympathetic ear. They have always been willing to help me in times of need. Finally, without the help of my friends Natascha Dockal, Raphael Kammerhofer, Daniel Kröpfl and Nico Haberl, I would not have been able to finish this thesis. They provided fascinating conversations, discussions as well as enjoyable distractions from my study.

Abstract

Problem statement

The “Amazon of Europe” region is a five country designated UNESCO Biosphere Reserve, which in its framework connects three rivers (Mura, Drava and Danube) into a shared ecosystem connecting the countries Austria, Croatia, Hungary, Serbia and Slovenia. After the designation as a Biosphere Reserve in 2012, has the region aspired touristic development and has, until today, established and presented its touristic flagship product – the “Amazon of Europe Bike Trail”. The intention is, through further touristic development, to establish the Makro-destination “Amazing Amazon of Europe”. This development necessitates strategic decisions as well the knowledge of internal and external factors in order to be able to design and formulate adequate strategic decisions for prosperous touristic development. Therefore, this thesis investigates the basis for future strategic decisions for the tourism development of the “Amazon of Europe” region.

Research Question

“Which proposals can be derived from the analysis of the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats of the region “Amazon of Europe” in terms of strategic decisions for future tourism development?”

Methodology

With the help of a scientific literature research, results for the theoretical background knowledge of the master thesis were generated. The empirical section utilizes the SWOT Analysis for identifying the regions strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats and TOWS Matrix for the identification of the relationship between these factors, through which strategies can be derived.

Results

The results of the thesis portray the identified Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats of the respective region as well as four different proposals, which could be integrated as strategies into the future touristic development of the “Amazon of Europe” region.

Table of Contents

The Statutory Declaration	2
Die eidesstattliche Erklärung	3
Acknowledgments.....	4
Abstract.....	5
Table of Figures.....	9
1. Introduction	13
1.1. Problem Statement	15
1.2. Goals of this Master Thesis	18
1.3. Limitations of this Master Thesis	18
1.4. Research Question and Sub-Question	20
1.4.1 Main Research Question	20
1.4.2 Sub-questions.....	20
1.5. Methodology Summary	23
1.6. Thesis Structure.....	23
2. Methodology.....	24
2.1. Desk Research	24
2.2. Search terms used for the literature search	26
2.3. Quality factors for Literature	28
2.4. Compliance for research standards	29
3. The Region.....	30
3.1. Geography.....	30
3.1.1. Territorial Units for Statistics of the Region.....	33
3.2. Geology	36
3.3. Climate	38
3.4. Demography.....	39
3.5. Landscape of the participating countries.....	52
3.5.1. Austria	53
3.5.2. Slovenia	55
3.5.3. Hungary	59
3.5.4. Serbia.....	64
3.5.5. Croatia	67
3.5.6. Conclusion for the NUTS regions	73

4.	Destination.....	75
4.1.	What is a Destination?	75
4.2.	What is Destination Development?	77
5.	Biosphere Reserve.....	83
5.1.	What is a Biosphere Reserve?	83
5.2.	What are the characteristics and framework conditions of a Biosphere Reserve? 85	
6.	Strategic Decisions	90
6.1.	What are Strategic Decisions?	91
6.2.	Strategic Decisions Making Process	94
7.	Empirical Methodology.....	102
7.1.	SWOT Analysis.....	102
7.1.1.	Theoretical Background of the SWOT Analysis	103
7.1.2.	Development of Criteria for SWOT according to theoretical background... 104	
7.1.3.	Gathering Data according to defined criteria	107
7.2.	Data analysis using SWOT Analysis	108
7.2.1.	Internal Factors	110
7.2.2.	External Factors.....	152
7.2.3.	Execution of SWOT Analysis.....	173
7.3.	TOWS Matrix	176
7.3.1.	Theoretical Background of TOWS Matrix.....	176
7.3.2.	Execution of TOWS Matrix (Results)	179
8.	Discussion.....	182
9.	Conclusion.....	194
9.1.	Summary	194
9.2.	Answering of the Research Question.....	196
9.3.	Practical Recommendation	203
9.4.	Critic on	205
9.5.	Further research questions	209
10.	Literature List	212

Table of Figures

<i>Figure 1: Interreg Danube Transnational Programme. (n.d.). Future Transboundary UNESCO Biosphere Reserve "Mura-Drava-Danube" (TBR MDD). Retrieved from http://www.interreg-danube.eu/approved-projects/amazon-of-europe-bike-trail</i>	<i>31</i>
Figure 2: Interreg Danube Transnational Programme. (2019). Visual representation of the NUTS 3 area in the region "Amazon of Europe"	34
Figure 3: Own representation: List of participating NUTS 3 regions including the UNTS 3 ID, name in original language, name in English and referencing code for this thesis. Based upon the data forwarded by Iskriva and the respective tourism boards.....	35
Figure 4: BGR Geoviewer. (n.d.). Visual representation of soils with pin in Pecs (HU) for orientation purposes. Retrieved from https://geoviewer.bgr.de/mapapps4/resources/apps/geoviewer/index.html?cover=geologie_igme5000_ag&tab=geologie&lang	36
Figure 5: BGR Geoviewer. (n.d.). Visual representation of highly active porous aquifers with pin in Pecs (HU) for orientation purposes. Retrieved from https://geoviewer.bgr.de/mapapps4/resources/apps/geoviewer/index.html?cover=geologie_igme5000_ag&tab=geologie&lang	37
Figure 6: Kottek, M., Grieser, J., Beck, C., Rudolf, B. & Rubel, F. (2006). World Map of Köppen-Geiger Climate Classification updated. Meteorol. Z., 15, 259 -263. : Close up of the World Map of Köppen-Geiger climate classification.	38
Figure 7: Own representation: Total population of NUTS regions 2018-2020. Based upon the data forwarded by Iskriva and the respective tourism boards.	40
Figure 8: Own representation. Distribution of NUTS population. Based upon the data forwarded by Iskriva and the respective tourism boards.	42
Figure 9: Own representation. Age structure of the region "Amazon of Europe" on NUTS 3 level. Based upon the data forwarded by Iskriva and the respective tourism boards.	44
Figure 10: Own representation. Number of residents in the region according to age groups on NUTS 3 level. Based upon the data forwarded by Iskriva and the respective tourism boards.	47
Figure 11: Own representation. The "Amazon of Europe" age structure on NUTS 3 level. Based upon the data forwarded by Iskriva and the respective tourism boards.....	48
Figure 12: Own representation. Landscape of the Austrian East Styrian County within the borders of the "Amazon of Europe" region.	53

Figure 13: Own representation. Landscape of Slovenian Pomurska County within the borders of the "Amazon of Europe" region.	55
Figure 14: Own representation. A linear village by the name Dolga Vas (Long Village) in the Slovenian Pomurska County.	56
Figure 15: Own representation. Highway A5 in the Slovenian Pomurska County.....	57
Figure 16: Own representation. Landscape of Hungarian County– Zala.	60
Figure 17: Own representation. Landscape of the Hungarian County Somogy.....	61
Figure 18: Own representation. Landscape of Hungarian County Baranya.....	61
Figure 19: Own representation. Landscape of Serbian West Bačka District.	64
Figure 20: Own representation. Landscape of Croatian Osijek-Baranja County.	67
Figure 21: Own representation. Landscape of the Croatian Virovitica-Podravina County....	68
Figure 22: Own representation: Landscape of the Croatian Koprivnica-Križevci County:....	69
Figure 23: Own representation. Landscape of the Croatian Varaždin County.	70
Figure 24: Own representation. Landscape of the Croatian Međimurje County.....	71
Figure 25: Butler, R. W. (1980). THE CONCEPT OF A TOURIST AREA CYCLE OF EVOLUTION: IMPLICATIONS FOR MANAGEMENT OF RESOURCES. The Canadian Geographer/Le Géographe Canadien, 24(1), 5–12. doi:10.1111/j.1541-0064.1980.tb00970.x. Visual representation of the life cycle.....	79
Figure 26: UNESCO (n.d.). Visual representation of zoning in Biosphere Reserves. Retrieved from https://en.unesco.org/biosphere/about	87
Figure 27: Based upon Bhushan, N. & Rai, K. (2007). Strategic decision making: Applying the Analytic Hierarchy Process. Kent: Springer. Visual representation of a Strategic-decision making-process.	97
Figure 28: The basic SWOT Diagram. Sarsby, A. (2012). A useful guide to SWOT Analysis. Nottingham: Pansophix. Retrieved from https://www.cii.co.uk/media/6158020/a-useful-guide-to-swot-analysis.pdf	102
Figure 29: Transforming SWOT inputs in strategic responses - TOWS. Sarsby, A. (2012). A useful guide to SWOT Analysis. Nottingham: Pansophix. Retrieved from https://www.cii.co.uk/media/6158020/a-useful-guide-to-swot-analysis.pdf	103

<i>Figure 30: Helpful or Harmful. Sarsby, A. (2012). A useful guide to SWOT Analysis. Nottingham: Pansophix. Retrieved from https://www.cii.co.uk/media/6158020/a-useful-guide-to-swot-analysis.pdf.....</i>	109
<i>Figure 31: Own representation. North and South route of the "Amazon of Europe Bike Trail" along with the starting point (Mureck, AT) and finishing point (Mohacs, HU) pinned. Based upon the data forwarded by Iskriva and the respective tourism boards.</i>	112
<i>Figure 32: Own representation. The provisional border of the "Amazon of Europe" region, according to the ten kilometre belt along the bike trail. Based upon the data forwarded by the respective tourism boards.</i>	113
<i>Figure 33: Planned design for the info board. Stuhec, V., Assistant Project Manager, personal e-mail, 16th June 2021.</i>	114
<i>Figure 34: Own representation. Signalization of the "Amazon of Europe Bike Trail" in the town of Bad Radkersburg, Austria</i>	114
<i>Figure 35: Own representation. Accommodation within the "Amazing Amazon of Europe" destination. Based upon the data forwarded by Iskriva and the respective tourism boards.</i>	116
<i>Figure 36: Own representation. Tourist arrivals and over-night stays in the "Amazon of Europe" region from 2018 to 2020. Based upon the data provided by Iskriva and the respective tourism boards.</i>	119
<i>Figure 37: Own representation. Tourist arrivals and over-night stays of the respective counties. Based upon the data forwarded by Iskriva and the respective tourism boards. .</i>	120
<i>Figure 38: Own representation. Tourist arrivals and Over-night stays of the respective counties. Based upon the data forwarded by Iskriva and the respective tourism boards. ..</i>	121
<i>Figure 39: Own representation. Location and dispersion of restaurants within the "Amazon of Europe" region. Based upon the data forwarded by Iskriva and the respective tourism boards.</i>	124
<i>Figure 40: Own representation. Nature attractions within the respective counties. Based upon the data forwarded by Iskriva and the respective tourism boards.</i>	127
<i>Figure 41: Own representation. Culture attractions within the respective counties. Based upon the data forwarded by Iskriva and the respective tourism boards.</i>	129
<i>Figure 42: Own representation. Festival and Events of the "Amazon of Europe" region on NUTS 3 level. Based upon the data forwarded by Iskriva and the respective tourism boards.</i>	131

<i>Figure 43: Own representation. Bridges of the "Amazon of Europe" region. Based upon the data forwarded by Iskriva and the respective tourism boards.</i>	133
Figure 44: Pisane Zgodbe (2020). Bridge "Ižakovski Most" along the river Drava in the Municipality of Veržej in Slovenia. Retrieved from http://www.pisanezgodbe.si/s-kolesom-ob-muri-po-prekmurski-strani/	134
<i>Figure 45: Own representation. Tourist information centres of the "Amazon of Europe" region. Based upon the data forwarded by Iskriva and the respective tourism boards.</i>	135
<i>Figure 46: Own representation. Visitor centres of the "Amazon of Europe" region. Based upon the data forwarded by Iskriva and the respective tourism boards.</i>	137
<i>Figure 47: Own representation. Medical centres and hospitals of the "Amazon of Europe" region. Based upon the data forwarded by Iskriva and the respective tourism boards.</i>	138
Figure 48: Own representation. Bike shops and rentals within the "Amazon of Europe" region. Based upon the data forwarded by Iskriva and the respective tourism boards.	145
Figure 49: Own representation. Wellness centres and spas within the "Amazon of Europe" region. Based upon the data forwarded by Iskriva and the respective tourism boards.	147
Figure 50: Own representation. Hiking Trails within the "Amazon of Europe" region. Based upon the data forwarded by Iskriva and the respective tourism boards.	148
Figure 51: Own representation. Adventure and Motoric Parks within the "Amazon of Europe" region. Based upon the data forwarded by Iskriva and the respective tourism boards.	149
Figure 52: Interaction matrix. Wehrich, H. (1982). The TOWS matrix—A tool for situational analysis. Long Range Planning, 15(2), 54–66. doi:10.1016/0024-6301(82)90120-0	178

1. Introduction

The transboundary Biosphere Reserve Mura-Drava-Danube is a river ecosystem connecting and involving the five countries: Austria, Croatia, Hungary, Serbia and Slovenia. It is an over 20.000 km² wide area with fertile soils (Kögel-Knabner & W. Amelung, 2014) and oceanic warm tempered humid climate (Ahrens & Henson, 2015). This information indicates potential for developing summer tourism, given the pleasant climate and dry summer months as well as good soil and vast water reserves where many activities could be performed.

However, even though the region provides fertile soil, pleasant climate and aquifers, which contain enormous amounts of water and are a suitable source for quality drinking water, the region faces many social challenges. Due to the emigration of younger people and better medical support, the region has to deal with an aging population. Furthermore, the employment rate tells us that it is lower than the average of the respective countries, at 55,05 per cent (Interreg Danube Transnational Programme, 2019, p. 21), which implies not only a danger for the population, in general welfare and financial stability, but also in their quality of life.

Since the designation of the region as a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve in 2012 (UNESCO, n.d.), it is operating within the framework and conditions of the UNESCO. Therefore, it was developed to be a model region, where conservation and preservation of nature goes arm in arm with sustainable regional development (Keep.eu, 2021). According to UNESCO, Biosphere Reserves have to fulfil three functions. These are conservation, sustainable development and logistic support (Pool-Stanvliet, Stoll-Kleemann & Giliomee, 2018). A Biosphere Reserve is generally divided into three zones – core, buffer and transition zone. Every zone has its specific characteristics as well as limitations (UNESCO, 2017). By examining the criteria for these zones, a

conflict of interest can be detected in how nature conservation can be upheld, while trying to establish development on the other hand.

Since it was possible to establish a common Biosphere Reserve in 2012, the stakeholders of the five countries plan to develop a transboundary touristic destination too. To start this development a first flagship product, the “Amazon of Europe Bike Trail” was introduced in 2018. It offers more than 1250 km of bike paths in form of two routes (north and south) and 27 stages along the rivers Mura, Drava and Danube (Amazon of Europe Bike Trail, n.d.). These stages connect already existing bike paths into one trail. The bike trail offers a cycling experience through the first worldwide five-country Biosphere Reserve, as well as many other activities as bird watching, horse riding, canoeing, discovering of local culture, culinary treats and customs (Amazon of Europe Bike Trail, n.d.). Furthermore, 548 accommodations of different types (4*, B&B, camping etc.) hold 15.907 available beds (Interreg Danube Transnational Programme, 2019, p. 43) which led to almost ten million overnight stays in 2017 (Interreg Danube Transnational Programme, 2019, p. 35). Yet, important to disclaim is that these numbers display the “Amazon of Europe” region before the worldwide Covid-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, this tells us that there lays potential to further develop tourism in the region, as well as the desire to do so.

In 2020 the region planned to establish the Makro-destination “Amazing Amazon of Europe”, merging the whole Biosphere Reserve into one touristic destination (Interreg Danube Transnational Programme, n.d.). Due to the Covid-19 pandemic this development was delayed.

Important to note is that the term “Amazon of Europe” indicates the region along the rivers Mura, Drava and Danube. This region is also labelled as TBR MDD or Transboundary Biosphere Reserve Mura-Drava-Danube in other

literature. The term “Amazing Amazon of Europe” specifies the construct of a destination within this region. For better understanding purposes only the terms “Amazon of Europe” and “Amazing Amazon of Europe” will be used within this thesis.

There is already some visible tourism going on as well as potential is being displayed and correspondingly the idea is to establish the Makro-destination “Amazing Amazon of Europe”. It will be furthermore elaborated how these aspects are connected to destination management, strategies as well as tourism development.

1.1. Problem Statement

As priorly described the “Amazon of Europe” is a region in Central Europe, which is about to become a touristic destination. This region has been designated as a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve since 2012. It combines the fundamentals of nature conservation and sustainable development (Waterton, n.d.). It additionally acts as a testing and learning ground, which represents a visible conundrum considering the conservation and learning ground on one hand and the development and testing ground on the other. However, in the process of engaging this transition, it would be paramount to relativize the development of a destination in a touristic aspect, especially in the means and limits of a Biosphere Reserve, considering its vital role in the whole development. It is possible to find many different definitions of touristic destinations considering different aspects, yet the most conspicuous is offered by Beirmann (2003): *“...a city, town, or other area that is significantly dependent on revenues from tourism, or a country, state, region, city, or town which is marketed or markets itself as a place for tourists to visit”*. Considering the goal of the region, this definition is not sufficient. It cannot be determined how a touristic destination is regulated, restricted or managed as one. To

elaborate these framework conditions, it would be furthermore required to understand which networks lay behind it and how it is managed.

Considering, that the region has been determined to be a touristic destination, it should be also managed that way. Therefore, according to Foris, Florescu, Foris & Barabas (2020, p. 1), there is a necessity to make strategic decisions. To thoroughly understand this facet, elaboration of what exactly a strategic decision is and what is needed to make one needs to be done in order to suffice the means of the thesis.

Throughout history, strategic decisions were focused on advancing and optimizing the competitiveness (Peterlin, Pearse & Dimovski, 2015, p. 273). But nowadays strategic decisions seem to be much more complex. According to Management Study Guide (MSG), strategic decisions do not only concern the activities in question but involve the whole environment in which they operate (n.d.). MSG also claims that strategic decisions are thoroughly connected to resources, whether acquiring new ones or organizing and relocating existing ones. Meaning that the destination in question should in one hand possess resources which could be mobilized and on the other have the possibility to acquire new ones on demand. Important to further discuss is the nature and extent of these resources.

Another element to consider is claimed by Altiok (2011) who explains that strategic decisions coordinate the economic entities' mission towards the vision, being therefore portrayed as a roadmap. The question arises how does one utilize that roadmap, or simply, how does one make a strategic decision? The Corporate Education Group (2020) offers a simple five step model to answer this question. It starts with 1) defining the problem, 2) gathering information, 3) developing and considering all possible options from which to choose from, 4) choosing the most suitable option and 5) implementation and

monitoring of the impacts. Along this model, there are many other ones to choose from. For better understanding purposes this straightforward and transparent model has been chosen to illustrate the process.

It is up until now clear that the region has a potential to develop a touristic destination, yet as follows for this case, it would firstly be needed to identify its core problem as well as collect all possible data on tourism development and management. Henceforth, based on those findings possible options could be developed and further implemented.

According to Goranczewski & Puciato (2010, p.45) in order to be able to begin and proceed any development, the strengths and weaknesses as well as possible other aspects of importance need to be clarified and integrated, to assure success to the endeavour. In the light of the aspired development the core obstacle remains the identification of the regions strengths, weaknesses as well as other factors of importance, upon which the development is based. The dispute, on how these strengths, weaknesses and other factors are to be identified remains open, due to several options which can be utilized. It is however, in favour of many strategists, to utilize two tools in particular. These being the SWOT Analysis and TOWS Matrix. These tools are often used in combination, as the SWOT Analysis allows the identification of internal Strengths and Weaknesses as well as external Opportunities and Threats (Gurl, 2017, p. 1146), whereas the TOWS Matrix incorporates these findings, discovers relationships between them and applies them in strategy formulation and design (Weihrich, 1982, p. 54).

With the existing potential for touristic development, it would therefore be crucial to decide upon a strategic tool which has the ability to grasp the extent of not only the elements of the region and the aspects of the Biosphere

Reserve, but furthermore the extent of strategic decisions incorporated in the aspired touristic development of the region alone.

1.2. [Goals of this Master Thesis](#)

The goals of this thesis are to 1) give a theoretical background on touristic destinations and their development, strategic decisions and Biosphere Reserves, 2) gather relevant data as a basis for strategic decisions in the process of developing a touristic destination in the region "Amazon of Europe" and 3) using this data for applying a SWOT Analysis and TOWS Matrix to establish a basis for future strategic decisions and design proposals for the touristic development of "Amazing Amazon of Europe".

1.3. [Limitations of this Master Thesis](#)

The study aims to understand and elaborate the topic of tourism development and strategic decisions within the scope of an international transboundary Biosphere Reserve. Through the process of research and analysis, the below stated limitations were encountered.

Limitations in the primal stage of this thesis lay mainly in the language barrier, due to the reason of connecting five countries with five different languages. This limitation is to be anticipated from the beginning on as the respective area of interest actively connects five different countries, their languages as well culture and other. As language and language understanding is vital to not only data collection and analysis, but furthermore for communication between management, stakeholders and the active community it is important to minimize the impacts of this limitation as extensively as possible. Therefore, a translation aid will be used, in form of an online translator, where it is possible that some information might get lost or lose its significance.

A further limitation is desk research, where only literature will be used for the purpose of the thesis. Through an early extensive literature research, it has been made evident that a clear lack of previously conducted studies as well as a lack of literature in general regarding the touristic development within Biosphere Reserves exists. Additionally, even though the aspect of strategic decisions has been researched and studied extensively, a lack in the connection to touristic development could be found, which might hinder the future investigation as well as strategy and proposal formulation and design. Lastly, an absence of literature regarding the SWOT Analysis and TOWS Matrix could be detected, even though they represent one of the most popular strategic management tools to date. As desk research and therefore literature represent the main source of information and knowledge for this thesis, this aspect represents a vital limitation, which needs to be handled with great caution whilst considering the best possible outcome of the research.

Besides, in order to adequately research the methodological segment of this thesis and to get sufficient data from all countries, the respective tourism boards will be contacted. However the possibility stays that not every tourism board has all the data, or in the same range as the others, which may lead to gaps in information and data. That remains plausible, due to the reason, that the respective tourism boards did not or could not gather and collect the data in the same manner, under the same circumstances and with the same criteria, making the attainable data questionable to representativity and comparability. Furthermore, the data, gathered by the tourism boards, could be collected only on a larger statistical area, which borders do not correspond to the area of the respective "Amazon of Europe" region. This additionally affects the data set provided by the tourism boards as well as impacts the comparability and representativity of the data alone.

Additionally, as this thesis is limited to solemn data gathering and analysis, the author will not materialize the researched results. Due to the fact, that the

implementation of the interpretations developed as well as further research fields or other strategic instruments are not taken into account but are mentioned in the conclusion chapter for further research questions. This thesis and the results are therefore limited to the “Amazon of Europe” as mere proposals for future strategic decisions and will not be enacted upon in a wider sense.

1.4. Research Question and Sub-Question

In order to specifically research this topic within the scope of this master thesis and to limit it in terms of time, the following research questions were developed based on the above problem statement and goals:

1.4.1 Main Research Question

Which proposals can be derived from the analysis of the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats of the region “Amazon of Europe” in terms of strategic decisions for future tourism development?

Thesis: This question will be answered through the Master Thesis.

1.4.2 Sub-questions

1. Which present or future tourism trends occurring in central Europe would be relevant for the destination “Amazing Amazon of Europe”?

Thesis of sub-question 1: Due to the Covid-19 Pandemic, cycling tourism and nature tourism are seen as a great opportunity, as is the opportunity for nature lovers who want to travel sustainably, due to the development of sustainability in travel possibilities.

To be assumed because: One ongoing trend, according to Forbes (2019), is and will be travelling with the aspect of sustainability. Environmental consciousness has been even more popular since the outbreak of the worldwide Covid-19 pandemic. Booking.com (2020) discloses that 53 percent of people wish to travel more sustainable or travel somewhere more eco-conscious. Furthermore Booking.com (2020) states that 53 percent of people would not like to travel without a vaccine. It seems clear that safety is put first whilst travelling. If there is a possibility to protect oneself while traveling in a time of a global pandemic, many will choose to do so. Yet further questions arise how the restrictions will be handled and when will people begin to travel freely again. Lastly, many trend analyses showed the upcoming rise of nomadic travel or working and traveling as well as trying to connect to nature (Amadeus, n.d.; Booking.com, 2020; Euronews, 2020). It is therefore likely to see an ascent in people working and traveling and on the other hand see more activities which can be done in nature. According to the European Parliament (2020, p. 11) and the Covid-19 and urban mobility analysis, cycling was the one response that Europeans gave most frequently when being confronted with the problems of mobility. And the European Cyclist Federation (2020, p. 1) believes that the global pandemic offers a realistic chance to change people's behaviour, not only in regard to cycling in particular but also a possibility to diminish air pollution and to choose better ways of transportation.

2. What are the key components, that need to be considered during the touristic development of the destination "Amazing Amazon of Europe" regarding the Biosphere Reserve framework?

Thesis of sub-question 2: The key components of the destination development regarding the Biosphere Reserve framework are the cooperation between human activity and the ecosystem. Furthermore, of importance, are

ecotourism, the aspect of learning and the need for local people to be aware of the Biosphere Reserve.

To be assumed because: According to UNESCO, the three pillars of Biosphere Reserves are nature conservation, social and economic development as well as logistic support for research, communication and education (UNESCO, 2017). There are currently more than seven hundred Biosphere Reserves in the world, all following these principles (UNESCO, n.d.). The most common component of touristic development and Biosphere Reserves is undoubtedly ecotourism (Monidno & Beery, 2018; Ianos, Stoica, Talanga & Vaidianu, 2012; Xu, Lü, Chen & Liu, 2009; Hoppstadius, 2018; UNESDOC, 2002). There are many paths that are shared between Biosphere Reserves and ecotourism, yet it is important to emphasize that only sustainable and ecological conscious tourism has a place in Biosphere Reserves (UNESDOC, 2002). On that account, ecotourism does not only have a nature conservation role, or as according to Mondino & Beery (2018) a networking role between stakeholders, but furthermore an educational aspect for environmental education. As argued by Nolte (2013) does education about environment and especially about Biosphere Reserves raise the awareness to local people. This may cause the local people to become major stakeholders in tourism (Xu, Lü, Chen & Liu, 2009) as well as have an impact on the interaction between human interaction and the ecosystem (UNESDOC, 2002).

3. What are the outcomes of the SWOT analysis and TOWS matrix in regard to the region Amazon of Europe destination development?

Thesis: This will be answered through the Master Thesis.

1.5. Methodology Summary

The methodology will be completed through a thorough literature review. Literature research will be conducted online on topic specific websites and scientific databases. The main target of the research will be journals, monographs and anthologies, where an examination and investigation regard the topics tourism development, destination development and management as well as on strategic decisions and the region itself will be executed. Furthermore, literature will be obtained through tourism boards of the respective countries and/or counties along the region "Amazon of Europe". These tourism boards will be contacted via E-Mail and asked to provide any possible data on the region "Amazon of Europe" or Makro- destination "Amazing Amazon of Europe" in order to guarantee that the information will represent a realistic picture and will be received from the first hand.

1.6. Thesis Structure

This thesis begins with an *Introduction* where the background, problem statement as well as research questions and theses are stated and presented. It follows with the *Methodology* where a thorough description of it and how it will be conducted is given. The thesis continues with chapters describing *the Region, Destination, Biosphere Reserves* and *Strategic decisions* where each topic will be thoroughly presented and examined. Later, the thesis describes and illustrates the characteristics of the *SWOT Analysis* and *TOWS Matrix*, presents the influencing characters as well as other factors in question are presented and furthermore exhibits the results of both the analysis and matrix. Finally, the thesis portrays a *Discussion* together with revealing and interpreting results in the *Conclusion*.

2. Methodology

2.1. Desk Research

In order to answer the research questions in a targeted manner, a comprehensive literature review is required, which will plead as basis for the applied methodology.

In the first step, a selective literature search is executed to become familiar with the topic (Samac, Prenner & Schwetz, 2011, p. 32). This involves searching for the destination and strategic destination development specific websites and institutions. Examples are the website of UNESCO, several EU websites regarding tourism or regional development as well the websites of the tourism boards involved. Furthermore, newspaper and blog articles, from the involved counties, as well as statistics portals, such as statistic offices in the respective countries, Eurostat, OECD, Statista.com or Our World in Data, will also be consulted in order to point out the topicality and relevance of the subject (Hulagabali, 2014, p. 1).

The second step is a structured literature search in scientific databases using keywords resulting from the first step of the research (Stickel-Wolf & Wolf, 2013, p. 154; Karmasin & Ribing, 2017, p. 105). The databases Science Direct, Research Gate, Taylor & Francis, SpringerLink, EBSCO, SAGE Journals, Emerald Insight and Google Scholar are searched.

Special attention will be given to journals that focus extensively on the topics of the research area. Examples are the Journal of Sustainable Tourism, Tourism Review International, Tourism Management, Annals of Tourism Research and Journal of Destination Marketing & Management, as these contain many relevant publications.

Furthermore, a search in the libraries of the FH JOANNEUM, the Karl-Franzens-Universität Graz and in the Austrian and Slovenian library network around the topics of destination management, destination and tourism development is carried out. Monographs and anthologies in print and electronic editions are searched for.

The third, most important source of literature and data will be the tourism boards of the respective counties along the Amazon of Europe. These tourism boards will be contacted through E-Mail, which will happen in April 2021 and asked to share any possible information in association with attractions, infrastructure or the Makro-destination "Amazing Amazon of Europe" itself. If the author does not know the language of the boards in contact, the question will be translated with the help of the online translate website DeepL. The contacts of the tourism boards will be gathered through online research or with the help of the company Iskriva, a non-profit organization, which is the lead partner in the EU project "Amazing Amazon of Europe". This information will be further evaluated regarding finance, marketing, logistics as well as any strategic components in association with economics, demographics, politics as well as organizational and environmental elements.

Data was gathered on the NUTS 3 level by the responsible local party. NUTS (Nomenclature of territorial units for statistics) are areas, designated by the European Commission, for the purpose of statistical data gathering (European Commission, n.d.). The provided data from the tourist boards and other has been then compared to the official data of the European Union on the NUTS 3 level, which is available online on the European statistical office – Eurostat. The data was compared to data from Eurostat to ensure data availability in order to make it comparable and usable. It is important to note that, however, some provided data, which was contributed by the local tourism boards or the lead partner in the touristic development Iskriva, is missing or deviates from the one available on Eurostat. Therefore, to further assure comparability and usability, data was adapted from Eurostat.

A literature management program such as Citavi or Zotero is not used, instead the source manager of Microsoft Word is used.

2.2. [Search terms used for the literature search](#)

The following search terms are used for literature search. In aspiration of comprehensive research keywords are listed and used in both English and German language.

Destination, Destination Management, Destination Development, Management, Management of Destinations, Development, Development of Destinations, SWOT, SWOT Analysis, TOWS, TOWS Matrix, Amazon of Europe, Amazing Amazon of Europe, AoE, AAoE, WWF, UNICEF, Tourism, Sustainable Tourism, Bike Tourism, Rural Tourism, Key Performance Indicator, Tourism Industry, Marketing, Tourism Marketing, Sport Tourism, Branding, Destination Branding, Strategic Decisions, Strategy, Strategic Management, Tourism Branding, Economics, Demographics, Politics, Organizational and Environmental elements, Biodiversity Conservation, Man and the Biosphere Programme, Interdisciplinary Science, Protected Areas, Socio-ecological Systems, Spatial Zonation, Sustainable Development, Trade-Offs, UNESCO, rural, peripheral, ICDP, Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats, Context, Sensitivity, Geography, Demography, Climate, Geology, Demography, NUTS, Population, Age groups, Employment, Framework, Landscape, Austria, Slovenia, Croatia, Hungary, Serbia, alluvial forests, Hospitality, Accommodation, Restaurants, Attractions, Amenities, Access, Marketing, Products, Service, Networks, European Union, EU, European Commission, Legislation, Social stability, GDP, Economic growth, Health risks, Tourism trends.

Main search terms combinations are:

Destination management AND SWOT, Destination development AND SWOT, Destination AND Development, Destination AND Management, Development of destinations AND SWOT, Destination AND SWOT, SWOT AND Strategy, SWOT AND Strategic Management; along with other keywords in other possible combinations.

The following search terms were used for the literature search. In an effort to be comprehensive, keywords are listed and used in both English and German.

Destination, Destinationsmanagement, Destinationsentwicklung, Management, Management von Destinationen, Entwicklung, Entwicklung von Destinationen, SWOT, SWOT-Analyse, TOWS, TOWS Matrix, Amazonas von Europa, Amazing Amazon of Europe, AoE, AAoE, WWF, UNICEF, Tourismus, Nachhaltiger Tourismus, Fahrradtourismus, Ländlicher Tourismus, Key Performance Indicator, Tourismusindustrie, Marketing, Tourismusmarketing, Sporttourismus, Branding, Destination Branding, Strategische Entscheidungen, Strategie, Strategisches Management, Tourism Branding, Ökonomie, Demographie, Politik, Organisations- und Umweltelemente, Biodiversitätserhalt, Man and the Biosphere Programm, Interdisziplinäre Wissenschaft, Schutzgebiete, Sozio-ökologische Systeme, Räumliche Zonierung, Nachhaltige Entwicklung, Trade-Offs, UNESCO, ländlich, peripher, ICDP, Stärken, Schwächen, Chancen, Bedrohungen, Kontext, Sensibilität, Geographie, Demographie, Klima, Geologie, Demographie, NUTS, Bevölkerung, Altersgruppen, Beschäftigung, Rahmenbedingungen, Landschaft, Österreich, Slowenien, Kroatien, Ungarn, Serbien, Auwälder, Gastgewerbe, Beherbergung, Restaurants, Attraktionen, Annehmlichkeiten, Zugang, Marketing, Produkte, Service, Netzwerke, Europäische Union, EU, Europäische Kommission, Gesetzgebung, Soziale Stabilität, BIP, Wirtschaftswachstum, Gesundheitsrisiken, Tourismustrends.

The most important keyword combinations are:

Destinationsmanagement UND SWOT, Destinationsentwicklung UND SWOT, Destination UND Entwicklung, Destination UND Management, Entwicklung von Destinationen UND SWOT, Destination UND SWOT, SWOT UND Strategie, SWOT UND Strategisches Management; zusammen mit anderen Schlüsselwörtern in anderen möglichen Kombinationen.

2.3. [Quality factors for Literature](#)

In order to select high quality and relevant literature, it is reviewed for its relevance, quality, and timeliness of research prior to its use (Samac, Prenner & Schwetz, 2011, p. 48). Care is taken to use literature that is as current as possible. The temporal filter is limited to the last ten years in order to take advantage of the most current development regarding nature conservation and current travel trends. However, a lack of development in management literature regarding SWOT Analysis and TOWS Matrix is detectable, therefore, older literature may be utilized. Therefore, for general information or definitions around tourism, strategic management or descriptions of regions, the time span can be increased, yet the literature should preferably have been published from the 2000s onwards. This excludes articles where there is no more recent research (Stickel-Wolf & Wolf, 2013,p. 154).

Relevance is verified by reviewing keywords and screening abstracts. In the case of journals, the methods used is also considered, as well as a clear text structure, unambiguous questions and study designs used. For monographs and edited volumes, the most recent edition is always used. Further selection criteria are the publisher, the authors, the foreword, and introductions by recognized experts in the field (Karmasin & Ribing, 2017, p. 106).

Subsequently, the place of publication, occasion, and authorship are checked. In doing so, it is evaluated whether other publications exist in the topic area, which institutions were used for publication, and whether there is a possible conflict of interest.

In the next step, the content is reviewed and evaluated in order to decide on relevance and quality. For this purpose, the table of contents, the introduction and the abstract are read. If the review is positive because the respective source deals with the topic in adequate depth in terms of content, it is included in the bibliography (Franck & Stary, 2006, p. 46).

In the case of grey literature, such as newspaper or blog articles, the credibility of the publishing institution is checked. In addition, attention is paid to the quality of the content or form (Karmasin & Ribing, 2017, p. 107).

2.4. [Compliance for research standards](#)

Research standards of the respective academic institution FH JOANNEUM Bad Gleichenberg assure that this work is written with the highest standard of honesty, integrity and responsibility. The same standards are guaranteed while conducting research and citation. As far as indispensable, the principle of acknowledging people in regard of their work is held upright. Furthermore, the ethic of avoiding any amount of plagiarism is maintained with the upmost respect.

To furthermore ensure the data and rights protection within the selected research method, the data, which has been gathered and forwarded by the respective tourism boards and Iskriva, will not be shared in any way or manner. The data will be processed transparently, fairly and lawfully and its intention will be kept to its original purpose. The data will not be modified, nor minimised,

however, upon proper explanation, not used if not necessary. Additionally, the data will be securely stored according to record management requirements.

The fact that the given data set was not obtained by the individual tourism boards for the purposes of this study still has to be addressed. The data set was used within the scope of the thesis solemnly due to its existence and because it was possible for it to be forwarded by the respective tourism boards. It is crucial to note that the given data set did not fully meet the thesis's means; nonetheless, the portions that could be used were employed, while the remainder was left undisturbed. Despite the fact that the data set was not acquired for the purposes of this study and did not completely match the frame, it was treated with the highest care, decency and respect.

Since no research on humans is carried out in this work and the topic does not deal with taboo subjects in society, an ethics proposal is not submitted.

3. The Region

3.1. Geography

As stated, prior, the Amazon of Europe is a region within Central Europe flowing along the rivers Mura, Drava and Danube and involving five countries along. The rivers form a 700km long river corridor of free-flowing water which provides for almost 1.000.000 hectares of land (Amazon of Europe, n.d.). The region geographically starts in Mureck in the South-East of Styria in Austria. And it stretches along the rivers south and north until it reaches the eastern regions of Serbia, where the county of West Bačka District, which includes the major towns Apatin and Sombor, lays. This peripheral area of the respective five countries is visible in the figure below.

Future Transboundary UNESCO Biosphere Reserve „Mura-Drava-Danube“ (TBR MDD)



Figure 1: Interreg Danube Transnational Programme. (n.d.). Future Transboundary UNESCO Biosphere Reserve ‘‘Mura-Drava-Danube’’ (TBR MDD). Retrieved from <http://www.interreg-danube.eu/approved-projects/amazon-of-europe-bike-trail>

The region alone spans over 20.788 km² (Interreg Danube Transnational Programme, 2019, p. 10). However, since 2018 the county of Varaždin has joined the Amazon of Europe, due to the counties immense interest in the bike trail, the regions flagship product. Considering this, as well as the fact that since the socio-economic analysis conducted in 2017 there has been no exact measurement of the area, it is not possible to determine how much the region alone measures. Yet, however big the region might actually be, distinguished smaller is the area of the actual Biosphere Reserve within the region (core zone). This core zone, visible in figure 1 above, which measures 8.499,42 km² (Interreg Danube Transnational Programme, 2019, p. 13) resembles the heart of the Biosphere Reserve. It is surrounded by the buffer and transition zone, which add up as the biggest part of the Biosphere Reserve. Within the buffer and transition zone the bike trail is implemented. As mentioned previously, the exact measurement of the area is up to date unknown, however a ten-kilometre-wide belt around the bike trail has been determined to be suitable for

research purposes. The border of the ten-kilometre-wide belt also coincide with the borders of the destination “Amazing Amazon of Europe” which is in development. This agreement has been made with all the counties and the respective NUTS-3 regions involved and has since been a framework for data collection and action implementation (Dolinar, U., Head of Iskriva, personal e-mail, December 1st, 2020). This agreement, which has been made with the respective NUTS-3 regions, carries several benefits, however, the most evident is seen in the amount of surface incorporated in the region by the five countries.

The region “Amazon of Europe” represents on average 2.5 percent of the surface of the countries involved (Interreg Danube Transnational Programme, 2019, p. 12), which speaks for a considerable amount of area involved in a region bound to nature conservation and sustainable regional development.

The country with the largest area is Hungary with seven percent of the involved Hungarian NUTS region being part of the “Amazon of Europe”. Following Hungary are Croatia with 2.5 percent of the involved NUTS, Serbia with 2 percent and Slovenia with 1,4 percent of the surface of the involved NUTS being involved in the region bound to conservation of nature. The smallest section is represented by Austria with a total of 0,2 percent of its NUTS area being involved (Interreg Danube Transnational Programme, 2019, p. 12). It is important to note that the amount of surface regarding Croatia does not correspond to the actual amount. This is due to the posterior cooperation of the county of Varaždin as well as the unconducted analysis of the area after the merger. Considering this fact, the total surface of Croatia’s NUTS is higher than portrayed here. On the other side it is visible that in comparison to other countries, Austria involves only a petite amount of its surface into the “Amazon of Europe” region. The reason of why Austria only involves such a minor part of its general surface to the region is simply geographical. Due to the fact that the bike trail only involves a small part of its route within Austria, it is also logically derived that it can account for a smaller area to the region.

However, Austria's involvement must not be underestimated, as the country itself bears a lot of experience in nature conservation on its national level (Umweltbundesamt, n.d.), due to the fact that it has more than 1.400 locations nationwide bound to nature conservation. This therefore implies a large amount of Know-how, which can be provided to the cause of this region.

3.1.1. Territorial Units for Statistics of the Region

To better understand the previously mentioned data collection and administrative jurisdiction, it is important to understand how the region is organized and limited. The region is constructed of parts of five countries, however, to accurately gather data and information, the whole area is divided into territorial units for statistics, also called NUTS. The Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics (NUTS) is a geocode standard for referencing country subdivisions for statistical purposes. The standard, which was introduced in 2003 and is established and governed by the European Union, only applies to EU member states. The European Union's Structural Funds and Cohesion Fund distribution systems, as well as locating the region where goods and services subject to European public procurement legislation are to be supplied, depend on the Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics (Eurostat, n.d.).

Eurostat established a hierarchy of three NUTS levels for each EU member country in accordance with each member state, however, some levels' subdivisions do not necessarily correspond to administrative divisions within the country. As abbreviated in the European Union's Interinstitutional Style Guide, a NUTS code begins with a two-letter code referencing the region. The country's subdivision is then referred to by a single number (1, 2 or 3).

In the most recent list of the NUTS classification, 104 regions at NUTS 1, 281 regions at NUTS 2, 1348 regions at NUTS 3 level are enlisted (Eurostat, n.d.).

To elaborate, the NUTS classification (Nomenclature of territorial units for statistics) is a hierarchical structure for dividing the EU's economic territory for the purposes of:

- European regional statistics collection, growth, and harmonisation
- Analyses of the regions' socio-economic conditions
 - NUTS 1: socio-economic areas of great importance,
 - NUTS 2: basic regions for the implementation of regional policies,
 - NUTS 3: small areas with various diagnoses.
- Construction of EU regional policies

The region “Amazon of Europe” is for the purposes of better data collection divided into eleven NUTS 3 areas, which are illustrated on the following figure. Important to note is that the map below does not include the county or NUTS of Varaždin, due to the fact, that it was constructed before the merger of this NUTS in 2017.

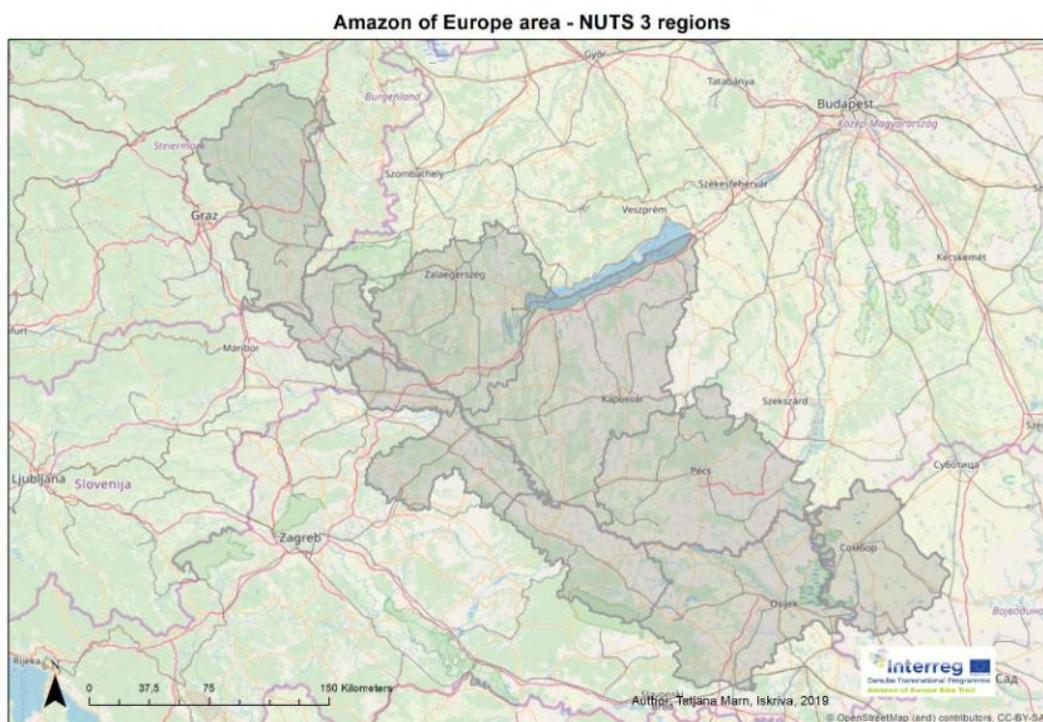


Figure 2: Interreg Danube Transnational Programme. (2019). Visual representation of the NUTS 3 area in the region "Amazon of Europe".

The NUTS areas in the region “Amazon of Europe” are called and coded as presented in the following table. In the table, the primary ID, according to the NUTS classification is seen. Followed, are the areas called by their native language, as well as the according translation of the names into english. Finally, for better referencing purposes, the code, which is used within this thesis to reference the according NUTS area, is provided.

NUTS 3 ID	Name in original language	Name in English	Code for easier referencing
AT 224	Oststeiermark	Eastern Styria	AT 1
SI 031	Pomurska	Pomurska	SI 1
HR 046	Međimurska županija	Međimurje County	HR 1
HR 04B	Osječko-baranjska županija	Osijek-Baranja County	HR 2
HR 045	Koprivničko-križevačka županija	Koprivnica-Križevci County	HR 3
HR 048	Virovitičko-podravska županija	Virovitica-Podravina County	HR 4
HR 044	Varaždinska županija	Varaždin County	HR 5
HU 223	Zala	Zala County	HU 1
HU 232	Somogy	Somogy County	HU 2
HU 231	Baranya	Baranya County	HU 3
RS 121	Zapadna Bačka	West Bačka District	RS 1

Figure 3: Own representation: List of participating NUTS 3 regions including the UNTS 3 ID, name in original language, name in English and referencing code for this thesis. Based upon the data forwarded by Iskriva and the respective tourism boards.

It is important to note, that the statistical units operate to gain and collect data of its area. They do not represent autonomous areas, but rather work with each other in providing information to sufficiently manage and govern the region as whole.

Furthermore, will the respective counties henceforth be referred as NUTS regions, for better understanding purposes. Additionally, the specific code (code for easier referencing) will be provided along when referring to a specific NUTS region as well as the associated names will be optionally provided to not confuse or disorganize the further analysis.

3.2. Geology

The analysis of the region should involve its foundation. Underneath the surface of the region, we can find sedimentary rocks from the Neogene era. On it, on the North and East of the region, lays Chernozem and Arenosols, one of the most fertile soils one can find according to Kögel-Knaber & W. Amelung, 2014. It measures high contents of humus and is characterized by high water bearing capacity (Kögel-Knaber & W. Amelung, 2014). On the North-West of the region Planosols are most commonly found. A soil with less intensive agricultural land use ability, however used to a great extent for grass and planted crops. Those are however characterized with humble yields (IUSS Working Group WRB, 2015, p. 168).

On the south of the region, we can find Luvisols, soil with a large amount of clay in it. They are mostly used for easy crops like sugar beet, or in higher areas as tree plantation areas (IUSS Working Group WRB, 2015, p. 166).

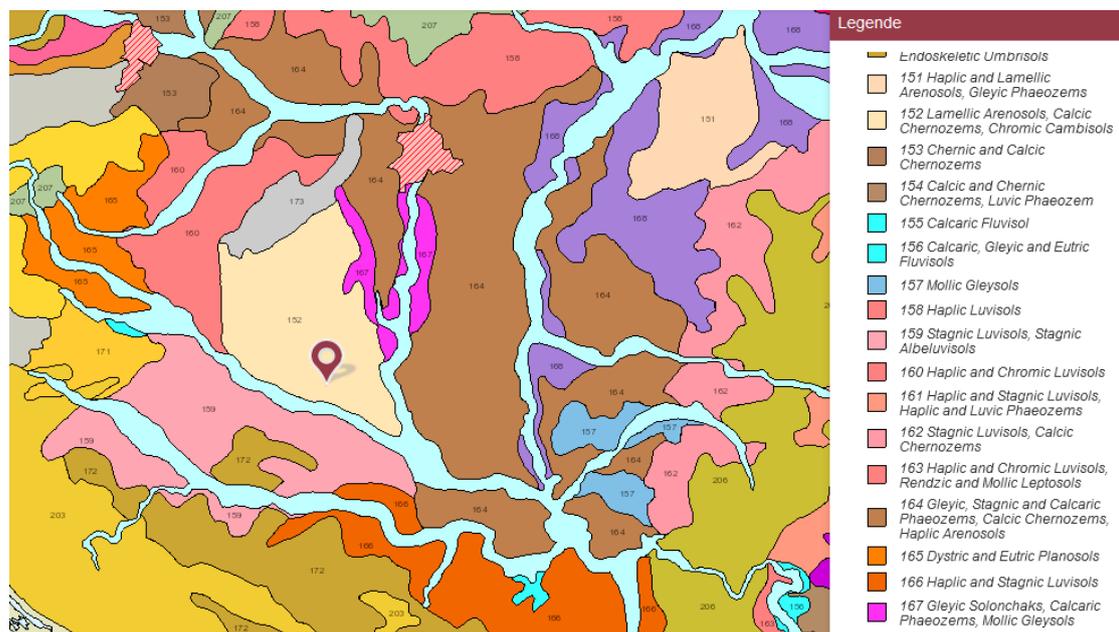


Figure 4: BGR Geoviewer. (n.d.). Visual representation of soils with pin in Pecs (HU) for orientation purposes. Retrieved from https://geoviewer.bgr.de/mapapps4/resources/apps/geoviewer/index.html?cover=geologie_igme5000_aqs&tab=geologie&lang

In the combination with highly productive porous aquifers (EGDI, n.d.) it creates high fertility and supports agriculture in the region. This great extent of geological characters also indicates to the enormous wetlands this region has to offer.

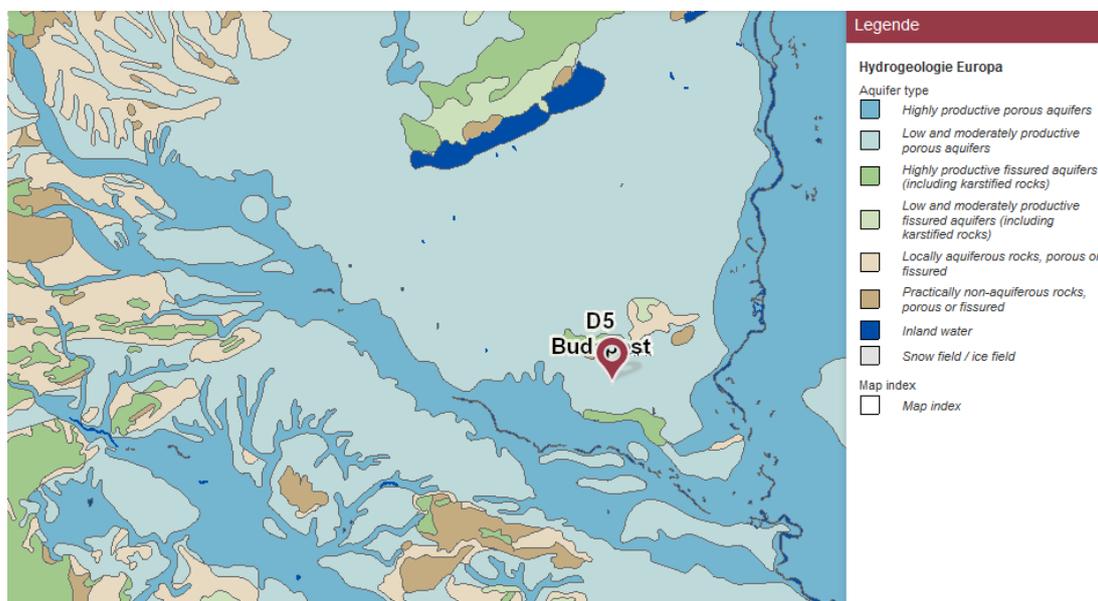


Figure 5: BGR Geoviewer. (n.d.). Visual representation of highly active porous aquifers with pin in Pecs (HU) for orientation purposes. Retrieved from https://geoviewer.bgr.de/mapapps4/resources/apps/geoviewer/index.html?cover=geologie_igme5000_aqs&tab=geologie&lang

In the figures above, both the representation of soils (Figure 4) and aquifers (Figure 5) are visible. Both of the figures have a pin included in the town of Pecs, Hungary for better referencing possibilities. It is very clear, that some countries, like Hungary and Serbia, have better soils for agricultural purposes. The aquifers, however, seem to be similar or same in all countries involved. This is due to the rivers Mura, Drava and Danube that flow through this region and represent the lifeline of it. Nevertheless, it is impossible to describe a region on the account of soil and aquifers alone. It is debatable if geology or climate (which will be presented next) is of greater importance. It is however, undoubtably, that both play a major role in the region and the life of the residents itself.

3.3. Climate

The region Amazon of Europe offers an Oceanic (Cfb) climate type on the Köppen climate classification, meaning it has a warm tempered humid climate (Climate Change & Infectious Diseases, n.d.). To elaborate, this represents mild winters and hot dry summers. This climate usually gets four to five dry months, usually during the summer (Ahrens & Henson, 2015). This region also gets a reliable and constant amount of precipitation on an annual basis. However, due to the near distance of the Mediterranean Sea, some of the regions may experience a Csb or Warm-summer Mediterranean climate (Britannica, n.d.). This indicates to hotter or dry summers and warmer winters with more precipitation.

In the combination with the geological characteristics and the attributes with this climate the vegetation mainly consists of coniferous and deciduous central forests. Furthermore, the large quantities of precipitation imply to positive impacts on agriculture and water reserves as well as the general flora and fauna of the region. On the figure below, the extent of the Cfb climate can be seen. Furthermore, it is visible and comprehensible how and to what extent the Mediterranean Sea influences the region and its climate characteristics.

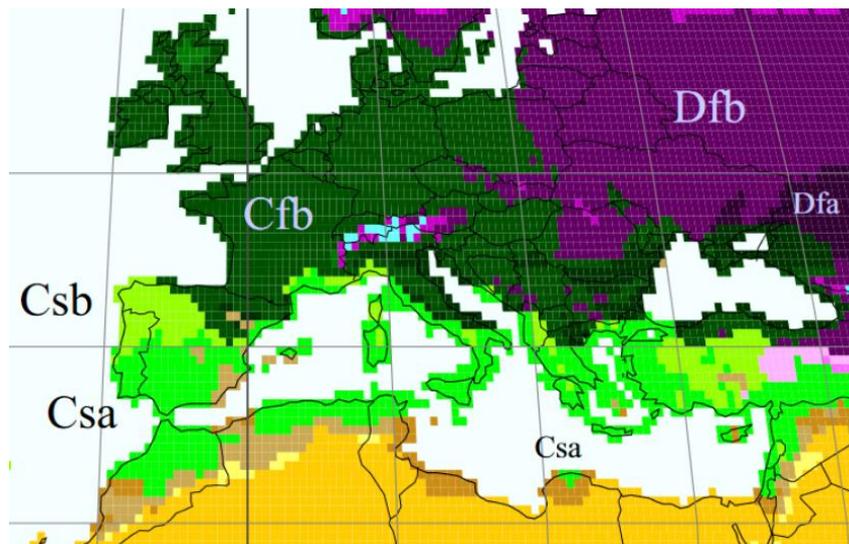


Figure 6: Kottek, M., Grieser, J., Beck, C., Rudolf, B. & Rubel, F. (2006). World Map of Köppen-Geiger Climate Classification updated. *Meteorol. Z.*, 15, 259 -263. : Close up of the World Map of Köppen-Geiger climate classification.

This indicates enormous potential not only for land use but also leisure activities. Given the pleasant summer conditions, many activities could be based on this. For instance, the conditions seem to be very suiting for general bicycle trips, which furthermore shows and highlights its relevance to the touristic aspect.

3.4. Demography

The demographics of the region “Amazon of Europe” are very versatile, due to the involvement of five countries with different degrees of development. Therefore, a structured description and analysis of 1) the region and its demographics alone and 2) the respective countries and the affiliated NUTS divided, will follow. Important to note is that the description of the countries alone will only involve the data of the respective NUTS 3 regions that are involved in the region “Amazon of Europe” and not the whole country. This step is taken to guarantee relevance of the data. Therefore, slight differences may occur if one were to compare the whole country instead.

It is further important to disclose that the data presented was gathered on the NUTS 3 level of the participating countries. This is of substantial meaning due to the fact, that the participating NUTS 3 are of greater scale than the area that is involved into the “Amazon of Europe” region. Therefore, deviations may occur, which can distort the actual state of the region. This is of utmost importance, and it is critical to bear in mind whilst approaching the data. This inadequacy will be highlighted again whilst presenting the data below.

As mentioned above the region measures above 20.788 km² (state of 2017), however, how much exactly is up to date not possible to determine. Nevertheless, on this area 2.236.757 people lived in 2018, 2.216.938 in 2019 and 2.202.157 in 2020, according to available data. This gives an average of 106 people per square kilometre (km²) in the year 2020 (if the 20.788 km² are taken into consideration, due to the fact that it is the last exact measurement

of the area). The population of 2020 was taken into the equation to ensure the actuality of the statement. It is however important to mention that the actual average is possibly less than the stated, due to the bigger area involved in the region. Further deviations may occur, due to the fact that it is not possible to determine, how many people live within the borders of the "Amazon of Europe" region. It is also important to note that the data was collected on the respective NUTS 3 level, which does not correspond to the actual borders of the "Amazon of Europe" region. It is in addition to that possible, that the data, which was gathered on a NUTS 3 level, by the respective tourism boards, was not collected in a unified manner or under the same circumstances, which may impact the presented results.

In the following figure the total population of the NUTS regions from 2018 until 2020 will be presented.

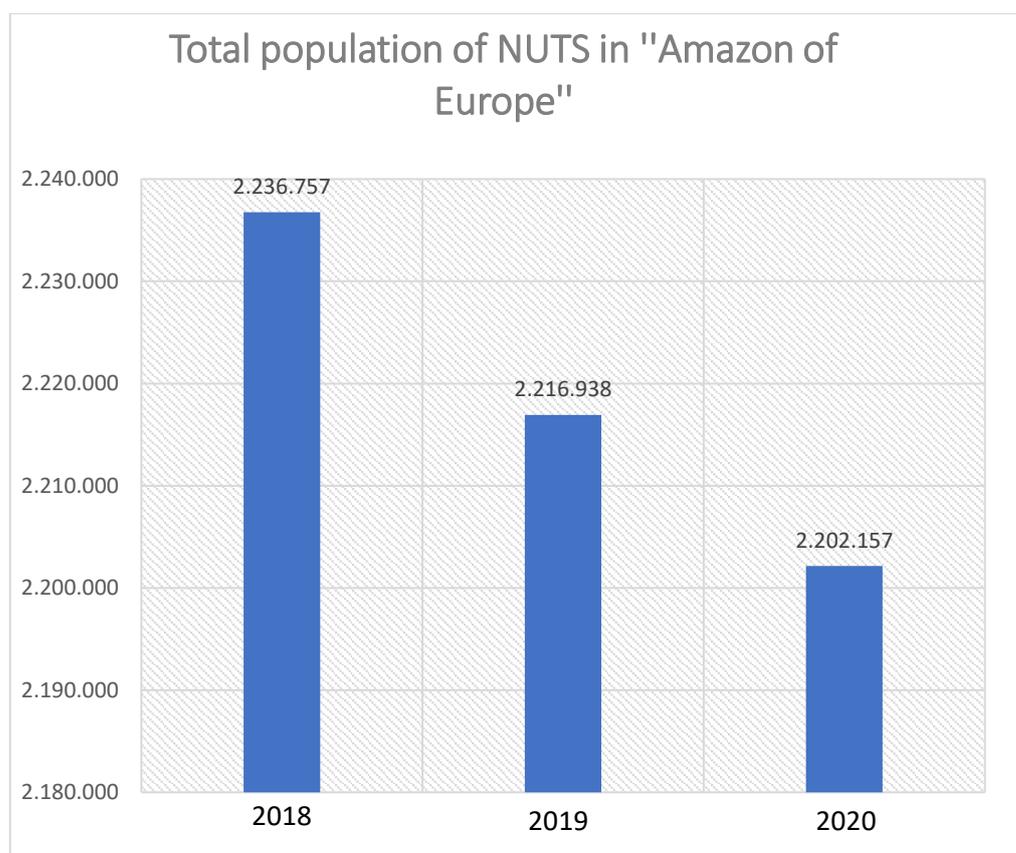


Figure 7: Own representation: Total population of NUTS regions 2018-2020. Based upon the data forwarded by Iskriva and the respective tourism boards.

This table shows a trend of steady decline of the general population in these NUTS 3 areas. Reasons for this trend may lay in the high emigration, which can be visible in peripheral areas, due to the lack of employment possibilities or lower standards of living and quality of life (European Parliament, 2019, p. 2). This, however, is most probable caused by a lack of work possibilities and the emigration of younger aged people into bigger cities. This trend can be witnessed almost all around the world. This, on the contrast, causes a set of other problems with which the region has to cope. Higher emigration can cause a shortage in working force or people who are willing to invest into infrastructure or product development. This implies a high risk for the region not only in the economic but social and cultural aspect, which are crucial.

To clearly specify how the population transcended, a detailed representation of the population of the respective NUTS regions will be given below. Through this representation it will be possible to visually illustrate which of the respective NUTS went through the largest changes as well as where the largest accumulations of populations are to be found. A comparison of the years 2018, 2019 and 2020 will be given to assure the actuality of the representation.

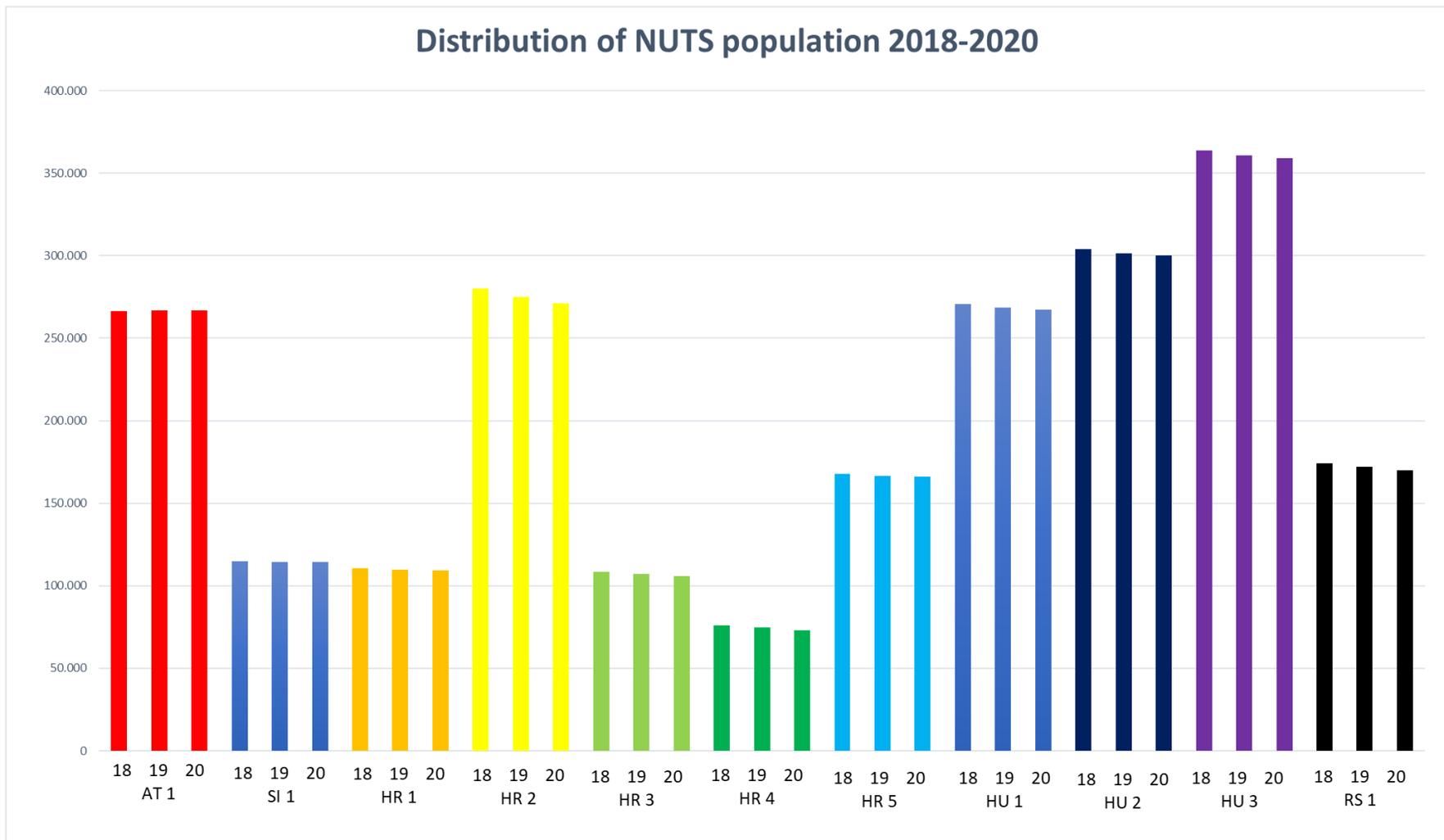


Figure 8: Own representation. Distribution of NUTS population. Based upon the data forwarded by Iskriva and the respective tourism boards.

These charts visualize that all NUTS 3 regions have been noticing movements in population distribution. However, the NUTS region HR 2 (Osijek-Baranja County) has recorded the largest quantity of negative migration of all. Second to that is the NUTS region HU 3 (Baranya County). It is furthermore visible that the only NUTS region, that has recorded positive migration, is AT 1 (Eastern Styria), however is the surplus of immigrant account for less than 1000 which makes the significance of this surplus questionable.

Important to state is that the data was gathered on the NUTS 3 level. This is of significant importance as the borders of the “Amazon of Europe” region do not correspond to the borders of the NUTS 3 regions. To clarify, the region is embedded inside of these NUTS 3 regions, however this data represents an area of far greater extension as the “Amazon of Europe” region alone.

Nevertheless, it is possible to claim that the region follows a trend of negative migration (European Parliament, 2019, p. 7), causing a deficit in population, which represent possible workforce, investors or decision makers. However, important to disclose is the fact of uneven population distribution along these NUTS regions. This assumption can be backed by the data provided in the charts above. It is possible to see that the NUTS in Hungary, especially the HU 3 (Baranya County) accounts for the largest accumulation of population. The fact, however, that the data was obtained on NUTS 3 level, makes the significance of these claims severely questionable. It is due to this fact, that makes an assumption of this nature extraneous and inconsequential, yet the evidence of the trend of negative migration cannot be ignored.

To continue the demographic analysis of the region “Amazon of Europe”, the age structure will be presented further. The age structure will be giving a representation of how the population is structured in regard to age. This structure will be presenting 3 groups according to pre-set parameters. These

are people younger than 15, people in the age from 15 to 64 and people older than 65. The age group from 15 to 64 was chosen, due to the fact that people of that age are being considered able to work. Through this component the further employment rate might be obtained.

YEAR	total together		
	2018	2019	2020
Number of residents in the region aged 0-14 years	310.224	306.857	303.496
Number of residents in the region aged 15-64 years	1.479.563	1.455.552	1.433.363
Number of residents in the region aged 65 years and above	446.970	454.529	465.298
Total count of residents	2.236.757	2.216.938	2.202.157

Figure 9: Own representation. Age structure of the region "Amazon of Europe" on NUTS 3 level. Based upon the data forwarded by Iskriva and the respective tourism boards.

The table above clearly shows that the strongest age group of the region is the one between 15 and 64 years old. This comes to no surprise because this age group also includes the largest range of age. Not insignificant is the count of residents of age 65 and above. Through the years from 2018 to 2020 the total number of elderly people has steadily increased. On the other hand, the total amount of people under 15 is steadily declining from the same time span. This leads to the conclusion that the region, along with the prior mentioned trend of negative migration, experiences a trend of ever older growing population (Willekens, 2015, p. 36). Simplified, this means that in the region there are continuously fewer young people and vice versa continuously more elderly. This might have an abundance of reasons, however the most evident seem to be that families are having less children or that they are moving towards more populated cities (AAL Europe, n.d.). According to AAL Europe (n.d.) another reason might also be that the health services have improved over time, therefore more elderly people can have better health status.

To get a more detailed and structured view on how the age structure is constructed, a representation of the age structures of all involved NUTS regions of the region "Amazon of Europe" regarding the years 2018 to 2020

will be given. There it will be visible, if in any of the NUTS the age groups have fluctuated drastically or have stayed stable. Furthermore, it will be possible to see, if the trend of older getting population can be detected trough all counties or not. Additionally, it will be possible to detect, if the occurrence of declining the total amount of young people (people aged under 15) is detectable in the respective counties.

	AT - Eastern Styria			SI - Pomurska			HR1 - Međimurje County		
YEAR	2018	2019	2020	2018	2019	2020	2018	2019	2020
Number of residents in the region aged 0-14 years	37.482	37.522	37.489	15.284	15.204	15.134	17.945	17.724	17.598
Number of residents in the region aged 15-64 years	176.536	175.870	174.967	74.954	73.728	73.087	72.755	71.546	70.727
Number of residents in the region aged 65 years and above	52.500	53.520	54.515	24.538	25.355	26.017	19.756	20.267	20.805
	HR2 - Osijek-Baranja County			HR3 - Koprivnica-Križevci County			HR4 - Virovitica-Podravina County		
YEAR	2018	2019	2020	2018	2019	2020	2018	2019	2020
Number of residents in the region aged 0-14 years	39.547	38.652	37.824	16.038	15.796	15.595	11.155	10.940	10.569
Number of residents in the region aged 15-64 years	187.332	182.464	178.063	71.128	69.730	68.384	50.416	48.925	47.500
Number of residents in the region aged 65 years and above	53.266	53.940	54.990	21.288	21.550	21.907	14.560	14.656	14.774

	HR5 - Varaždin County			HU1 - Zala County			HU2 - Somogy County		
YEAR	2018	2019	2020	2018	2019	2020	2018	2019	2020
Number of residents in the region aged 0-14 years	24.043	23.703	23.381	34.753	34.610	34.395	41.173	40.795	40.444
Number of residents in the region aged 15-64 years	111.981	110.702	109.686	178.550	175.793	172.828	200.064	196.910	193.554
Number of residents in the region aged 65 years and above	31.744	32.253	32.818	57.331	58.245	60.048	62.601	63.724	65.952
	HU3 - Baranya County			SR1 - West Bačka District			Total together		
YEAR	2018	2019	2020	2018	2019	2020	2018	2019	2020
Number of residents in the region aged 0-14 years	50.191	49.745	49.315,00	22.613	22.166	21.752	310.224	306.857	303.496
Number of residents in the region aged 15-64 years	241.350	237.477	234.247	114.497	112.407	110.320	1.479.563	1.455.552	1.433.363
Number of residents in the region aged 65 years and above	72.180	73.482	75.547	37.206	37.537	37.925	446.970	454.529	465.298

Figure 10: Own representation. Number of residents in the region according to age groups on NUTS 3 level. Based upon the data forwarded by Iskriva and the respective tourism boards.

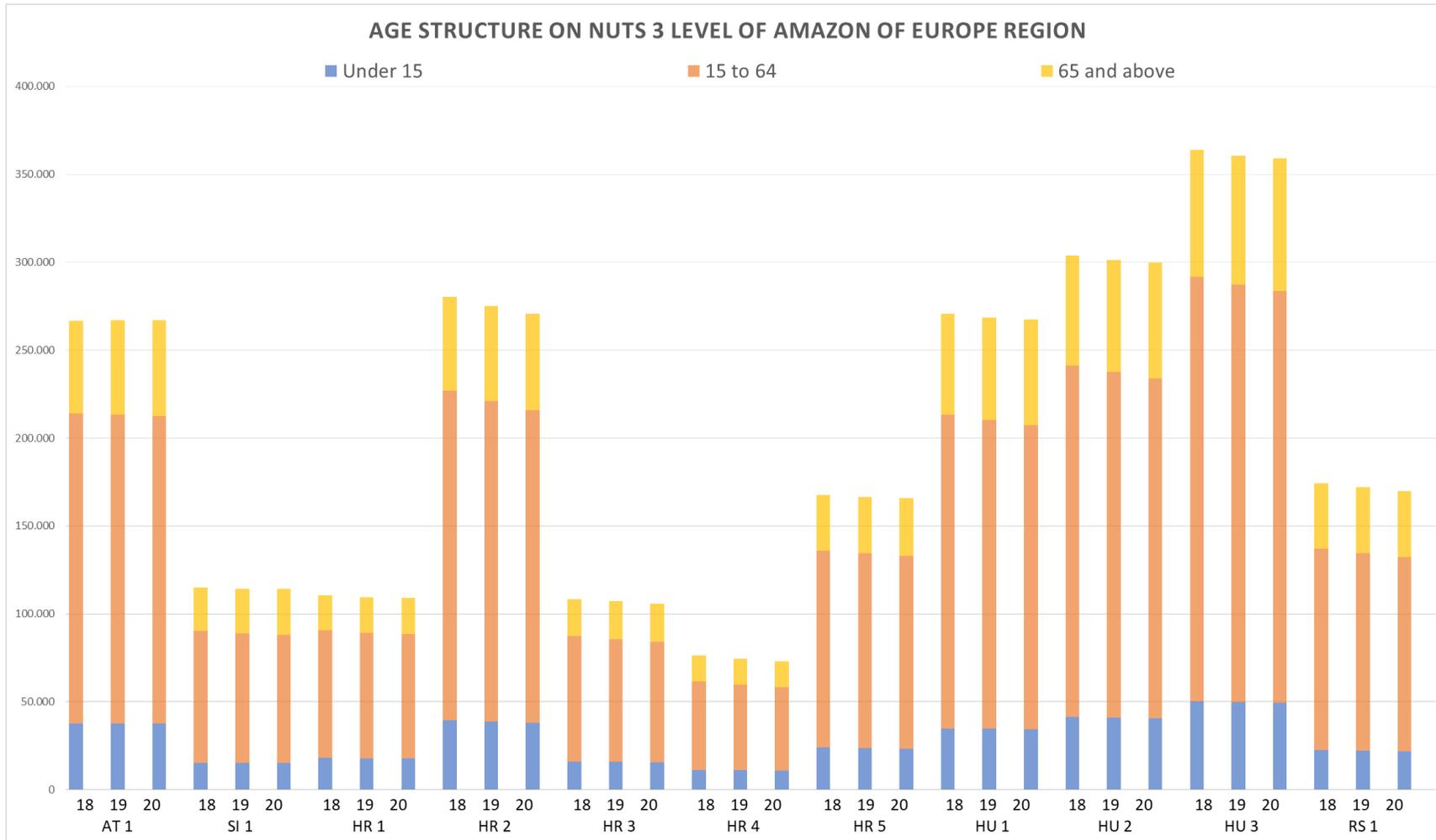


Figure 11: Own representation. The "Amazon of Europe" age structure on NUTS 3 level. Based upon the data forwarded by Iskriva and the respective tourism boards.

The above displayed table with the data of all included NUTS from the years 2018-2020 and the corresponding visualisation both show the age structure of the respective NUTS. It is undoubtedly true, that the age group 15 to 64 years is most represented of all, however it is the age group that concerns the widest range of ages. It is also visible that none of the NUTS's population has fluctuated drastically, but that rather shows a steady and persistent change of state, especially regarding the total count of people younger than 15 years. To continue, in this notion it is possible to determine that a decline in younger people is visible in all NUTS of the "Amazon of Europe" region. The only exception is the NUTS of West Bačka District (RS 1), where a slight fluctuation of younger people can be detected. On the other hand, without exceptions, the trend of increasing older people can be seen in all involved NUTS of the region.

Possible explanation for these occurring trends can be very versatile, however, as previously mentioned, the most evident seem to be that families do not have as many children anymore and/or they are moving out of the peripheral areas (England & Azzopardi-Muscat, 2017, p. 9). Evidence, that speaks for the latter can be seen in the data presented above, as the age group between 15 and 64 also steadily declines. Therefore, it is possible to imply that whole families are moving out of these areas. Reasons for that might be a lack of career possibilities as well as a desire for better social and economic conditions which are crucial for better life quality. However, this moving of people poses possible risks and threats to the region. One of them being a lack of work force, investors and/or decision makers. Along with that, social and cultural capital can be diminished or wiped out, which could possibly hinder the in the future aspired development.

However, on the other hand, possible other reasons than the moving of younger people out of peripheral areas might be caused by the rising of elderly people in the region. An overall reason for longer life expectancy, according by United Nations (2005) is better and easier attainable health care and

improved hygiene among the general society. Along those several other could be identified like improved nutrition and diet habits, exercising habits as well as changes and improvement in general lifestyle. However, even if all the above reasons could improve and reduce death rates, they cannot reduce ageing and age-related diseases (Brown, 2015, p 1). According to Jaul & Barron (2017, p. 4) disability, dementia, cardiovascular diseases and cancer are one of the most common age-related diseases. This may present a challenge, due to the fact that the region's population is growing older and as stated by Jaul and Barron, ageing cannot be stopped. It may be assumed that because the population is growing older, the general population will become more ill, which would very much hinder any possible development that region aspires. However, any proof or data to back this claim could not be found, therefore, it is not possible to say to what extent the longer life expectancy will impact the region. It may therefore be seen as an irrelevant aspect to the future tourism development regarding the "Amazon of Europe" region, however, as it may impact the region in the future, it could pose as an additional observation point onto which further observation and research could be directed.

It is important to furthermore note that the data was gathered and presents the state of the NUTS 3 regions into which the "Amazon of Europe" region is embedded. The fact that the borders of the NUTS 3 regions do not correspond to the borders of "Amazon of Europe" may cause a distortion and the fact that the data may not correspond to the actual state of the region alone. Due to the fact that data for the "Amazon of Europe" region alone was not possible to be obtained, this data on the NUTS 3 level was used. It is important to note this when engaging into the data, as anomalies may occur in the actual state of the region.

However, not only does the age group of 15 to 64 year old represent the largest age group in the population structure of the region, but it is also a vital part in examining the employment rate of the region. According to the OECD (n.d.)

the employment rates are a measure of how well available labor resources (people looking for work) are being utilized. It is measured as the employed to working-age population ratio. The working age population is defined as those between the ages of 15 and 64. This indicator is seasonally adjusted and expressed in thousands of people aged 15 and above, as well as employed people aged 15 to 64 as a percentage of the working age population.

In the case of the “Amazon of Europe” region, however, it is not possible to determine the employment rate. It was not possible to obtain the required data regarding the employment rate of the respective NUTS regions in a high enough degree to assure the representability and comparability of the data. The only data regarding the employment rate that was possible to obtain was on a national level. However, as this data is not representative and it is not possible to derive an accurate employment rate that would correctly disclose the actual state of the region, it is not possible to determine an employment rate for this region. Further research and/or investigation would be therefore needed to accurately and scientifically determine the employment rate of the “Amazon of Europe” region.

To summarize, the demographics of the “Amazon of Europe” region paint a very versatile picture. This is due to the fact, that the region involves five countries. It is, nevertheless, possible to determine, that the region faces a steady decline in the general population, which is mostly caused by emigration. This, however, may cause future problems in the regions aspired future development. Furthermore, the region faces two demographic trends out of various reasons. On one hand, there is a steady decline in the amount of people under 15 and on the contrary, a steady increase in people over 65. Reasons for that may vary, however, the most conspicuous are the migration of younger people and families generally having less children as well as better and more attainable health care and improved hygiene habits.

To conclude, it is once again crucial to remember that the data was gathered on a NUTS 3 level, which does not correspond to the borders of the respective “Amazon of Europe” region, therefore deviations from the actual state may appear. To be able to grasp the characteristics and conditions of the region even better, the landscape of the respective region will be presented in the next chapter.

3.5. [Landscape of the participating countries](#)

In order to fully grasp the extent and conditions of the region, it is needed to comprehend the landscape of it. Therefore, in the following chapters the landscape of the counties of the respective countries will be portrayed and characterized. In addition to that, numerous visualisations will be applied for better understanding purposes. Topics that will be included are the extent and type of settlements and road, following with woodland and agricultural land use. Additionally, historical and/or modern special features will be presented as well as their impacts described. It will be further elaborated, which of these factors has a significant impact for the region.

To ensure relevance and applicability, the area of the analysis will be limited according to the borders of the “Amazon of Europe” region, which is limited to a ten-kilometre-wide belt around the “Amazon of Europe Bike Trail”. This measure is taken, due to the fact that the borders of the respective NUTS regions do not coincide with the borders of the “Amazon of Europe” region. As it was mentioned in the chapters above, it is currently not possible to determine the exact size of the region, however, to ensure the suitability of this measure, the ten-kilometre-wide belt was chosen as the area of analysis.

3.5.1. Austria

Austrians' area represents the most North-West part of the region "Amazon of Europe". Along the rivers some mentionable municipalities are visible, like Mureck (Start of the Bike Trail) as well as Bad Radkersburg. However, in the ten-kilometre-wide belt, an abundance of settlements is detectable. Nevertheless, the size of these respective settlements does not resemble cities, therefore it is to conclude, that these are smaller in size.

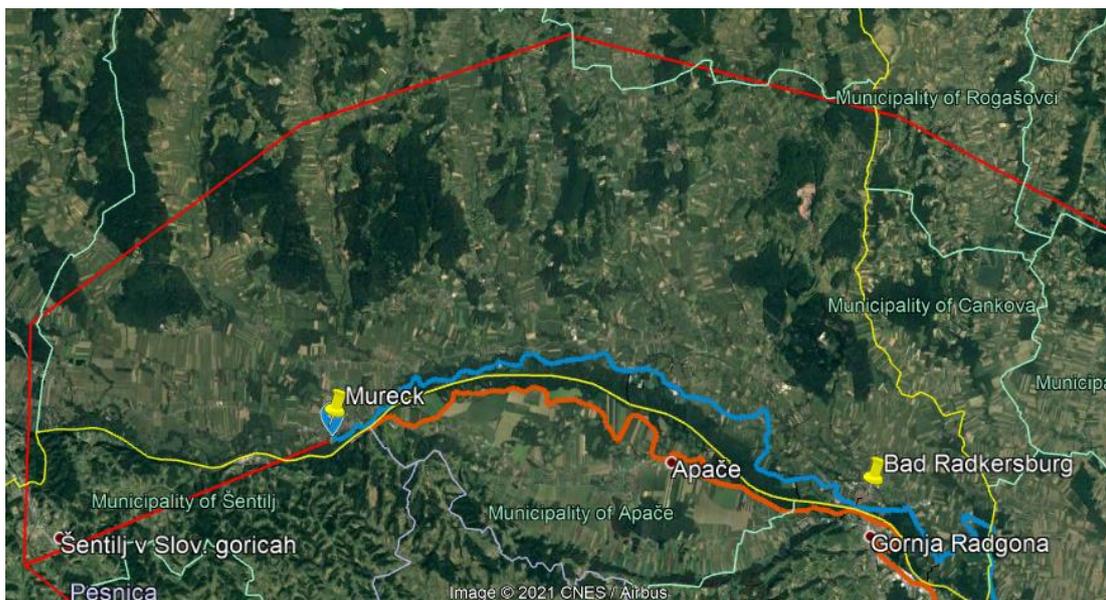


Figure 12: Own representation. Landscape of the Austrian East Styrian County within the borders of the "Amazon of Europe" region.

In the figure above the yellow line represents the borders of the respective countries. The blue line represents part of the North route of the bike trail. Furthermore, the area inside the red line is considered to be the ten-kilometre-wide belt, which represents the area of the "Amazon of Europe" region.

It is visible in the figure above, how the municipalities are scattered in the area giving a sense of them being rather villages than actual municipalities. This notion has also been confirmed through the in-depth examination of this respective area. Through this examination, two municipalities could be determined, along with several other villages. The municipalities are the before mentioned Mureck and Bad Radkersburg. These two municipalities are also

pinned in the figure above for better referencing possibilities. On the other hand, other smaller villages can also be found in this area. They mostly take the shape of nucleated villages, where the homes are often clustered together in groups. Therefore, villages like that also go by the name grouped villages (Sociology Discussion, n.d.). This is of significance for the Austrian county as it portrays the fact, that the population is scattered within the area, with two major saturation in the identified municipalities. There are also no major highways visible in the area, yet on the other hand, the area seems very well accessible through a tight road network. This is of importance when considering the international accessibility of the Austrian county. It may be said that this county is not as well accessible to international guests, however, it cannot be ignored that, except for the highway connection, the region is nevertheless well reachable through regional roads. The area is furthermore flat, as no major hills and heavy terrain can be detected. What is on the other hand detectable are the vast areas of woodland and agricultural activity. The area has an abundance of widespread forest areas. Those mostly consist of coniferous and deciduous central forests (EGDI, n.d.). On the other hand, the area records far reaching arable land used to sow and reap diverse agricultural crops. This is remarkable for the county itself, as it speaks for firstly the immensity of available natural areas as well as for the connection between the humans and the nature itself, portrayed through the array of arable land. Furthermore, noteworthy is the surface of the area, which remains flat and acts in the aspect of the bike trail as a promoting factor.

Austria involves only one of the countries NUTS 3 in the “Amazon of Europe” region, however, it is not the smallest in size of all included. Following the description of the landscape of the respective County Slovenia will be presented.

3.5.2. Slovenia

The region in Slovenia is special, due to the fact that both the North and South route of the bike trail lead through the area of the Slovenian Pomurska County. This creates a unique situation where the belt that regards the borders of the region becomes 20 kilometres wide, stretching both north and south. There are several larger municipalities that can be detected in the area, however most of the living space are resembled in larger villages.



Figure 13: Own representation. Landscape of Slovenian Pomurska County within the borders of the "Amazon of Europe" region.

In the figure above the yellow lines represent the border lines of the respective countries and the red lines represent the borders of the "Amazon of Europe" region borders. It is important to distinguish the difference between the blue and orange lines visible on the figure above. The blue one represents the North route of the "Amazon of Europe Bike Trail" and the orange one represents the South route. Furthermore, the yellow pins represent the larger municipalities of the Slovenian Pomurska County, which will be further elaborated.

The most significant municipalities in the Slovenian Pomurska County are Murska Sobota, Gornja Radgona, Ljutomer, Lendava and Velika Polana. The respective municipalities are also pinned in the figure above. Furthermore,

other settlements are visible, however, those are smaller in size. Most of them take the shape of either of nucleated or linear villages (figure below).



Figure 14: Own representation. A linear village by the name Dolga Vas (Long Village) in the Slovenian Pomurska County.

In the figure above a classic structure of a linear village is visible, where the houses are lined along the road, parallel to each other. Usually, the arable land is at close distance from the house, which is also visible in the figure above.

This is of importance for the respective county, not only in the aspect that it offers several larger municipalities, where the population as well as other infrastructure and services might be located, but also in the significance of the village shape, which speaks for the dependency of local arable land as well as

the formidable size of it. Even though the area is also flat, the landscape of the Slovenian Pomurska County is very diverse. Stretching from the West of the County, some hills and other elevated areas are visible, however, emerging towards the East the landscape evens out and becomes a flat und unspectacular area. This is worth noting in the aspect of the bike trail, as not only does it provide a flat and effortless terrain to ride, but furthermore, additional chances of observing divergent contours of the terrain as well as the pristine nature of it. Worth mentioning, however, is that this County includes a highway that runs through the region. This is a very important information in regard to the actual accessibility of this Slovenian County. It speaks for the uncomplicated access for international guests, which is remarkable for the future development of tourism. Furthermore, this Slovenian Pomurska County provides a very intertwined system of roads, making it well accessible not only by car but also other means of transportation.



Figure 15: Own representation. Highway A5 in the Slovenian Pomurska County.

It is very clearly visible that woodland is found not as often as in the Austrian county compared to the size. It is possible to detect woodland all the way along the river Mura. The reason for this occurrence is the fact that the woodland along the river is Riparian Forest (Natura Mura, n.d.), which is a restricted area and belongs to the conservation area of the Biosphere Reserve. Some woodland, furthermore, made up by coniferous and deciduous central forests

(EGDI, n.d.), can also be detected towards the West (Gornja Radgona), where the elevation is higher than the rest of the NUTS, making it not so favourable for arable land. However, this is not reason enough for this region to have an abundance of arable land on which agriculture is being utilised. Important to note is that Slovenia was formerly a member of the state of Yugoslavia, which endured Communism. As part of this communist regime the agrarian characteristics changed. Farms in private ownership became collective farms where multiple farmers administered their property as a joint venture in agricultural production (Petranović, 1988). However, due to the mediocre amount of crops which were produced and the general problems of the Yugoslavian centralized system and ownership, this system was abandoned and the land, that was prior owned by a collective administration (Serbian: Kolhoz/колхоз) was privatized again. During this privatization, every indulged farmer got a share, what would also explain the large amount of smaller farms that are to be found in the respective County. It is remarkable to detect the boundness to nature in this respective county. Not only in the notable woodland, which is part of the protected area, it is also visible how dependent the population is to local agriculture. Even though the endeavors of the communist regime did not have its intended effect, agriculture remarkably remains one of the most important activities.

The Slovenian County is found to be very versatile, similar as the Austrian County. Larger municipalities can be found in both, however, there were only two in Austria and several more in Slovenia. It is nevertheless significant to find several larger municipalities in the small range of the ten kilometer belt of the respective region. Both of the Counties have vast determinable woodlands as well as experience a flat surface. Worth mention is the detected dependency on nature and agriculture, visible through the vastness of arable land. Even more significant is the terrain, as it portrays an effortless surface for the bike trail, along with exceptional nature. The major difference, however, is that the Slovenian County has an access to the highway but the Austrian does not. Furthermore, worth mentioning, is the fact that Slovenia has been

part of Yugoslavia, which has endured the Communist regime. Even though Yugoslavia fell apart, its influences can still be seen today.

To continue from the West of the “Amazon of Europe” region towards the East, the landscape of the respective Counties of Hungary will be presented in the following.

3.5.3. Hungary

Hungary, in comparison to Austria and Slovenia, includes three of the countries NUTS regions in the “Amazon of Europe” region. These are the counties Zala, Somogy and Baranya. These counties are also the largest of the respective counties involved.

The Zala County is the smallest of the three respective counties, therefore, it may come to no surprise that in this county only two larger municipalities, by the name Lenti and Letenye (which are visible in the figure below), could be detected. Nevertheless, there are many other settlements. However, they take the form of nucleated villages. and only a few of them represent linear villages.



Figure 16: Own representation. Landscape of Hungarian County–Zala.

However, on the other hand, the county Somogy and Baranya are bigger in size, and also more municipalities of larger scale could be found in these areas. In Somogy, three municipalities, by the name of Csurgo, Nagyatad and Barcs could be identified and in the Baranya County four larger municipalities (Harkany, Siklos, Nagyharsany and Mohacs) were determined.

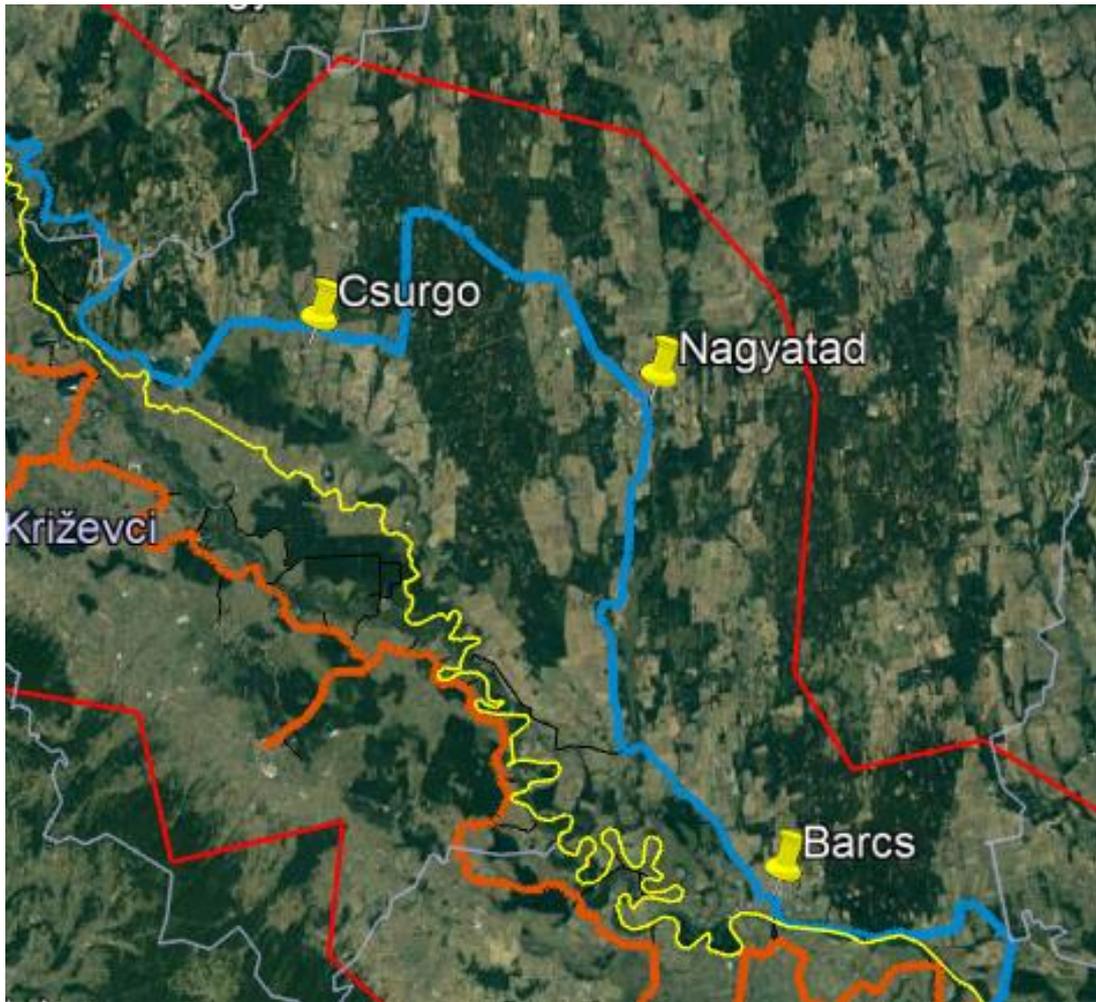


Figure 17: Own representation. Landscape of the Hungarian County Somogy.

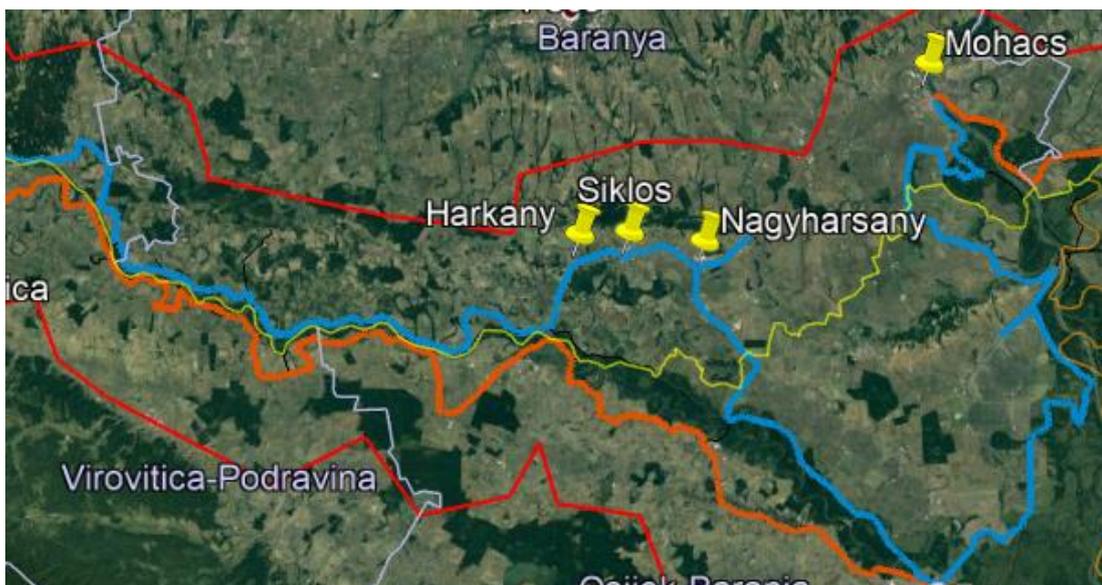


Figure 18: Own representation. Landscape of Hungarian County Baranya.

Additionally, to the larger municipalities, several villages could be determined in both Somogy and Baranya. Most of the determined villages take the form of nucleated villages, nevertheless linear villages could also be identified among them. It is worth noting, that within the borders of the ten kilometre belt several municipalities could be determined in the Hungarian counties. Even more remarkable is the presence of extensive villages and settlements along. This is of remarkable importance, not only for the aspect of population dispersion, but in the aspect of the bike trail and tourism development. It not only states, that the population is fairly displaced within the borders, but furthermore imply the accessibility of infrastructure to other possible aspects of importance in tourism.

These municipalities and villages are fairly good connected with a road system and additionally, two separate highways run through the area. One highway links Letenye (Zala County) with Budapest, the capital city of Hungary, and the other connects Pecs and Mohacs (Baranya County) with the Hungarian capital. The same highway that runs through Zala County also runs through Somogy County, however, due to the fact that it does not connect the area inside the "Amazon of Europe" region it is not relevant. What furthermore seems to be very common are the characteristics of the terrain in the "Amazon of Europe". The respective counties also lay in Pannonian Basin (European Commission, n.d.), which makes the terrain appear flat with no to little mentionable elevations. The impressive accessibility of the three respective counties represent significance, especially in the aspect of international and national travel. Through the vast highway and road system it is noticeable that travel to and within is of no difficulty. Furthermore, the terrain presents an exceptional importance in the aspect of tourism development regarding the bike trail, as the flat surface presents an effortless circumstance for it.

Of greater relevance, however, are the vast wood and arable lands which are represented inside these counties. The counties Zala and Somogy have

considerable amounts of land covered in woodland, which is made up of alluvial forest (European Commission, n.d.; Natura2000, n.d.), in comparison to Baranya County, which has almost none too little amounts of land, which is covered in forests. The majority of the land is however, used for arable land in all of the respective counties mentioned. This is also very clearly visible in the figures above, where the landscapes of the respective counties are displayed. What is also very clearly visible is the number of smaller farms, which also has its reasons of Hungary being a country of past communist regime. Similar as in Slovenia, Hungary used to produce agricultural crops in collective farms, which were later privatized and divided into many smaller pieces amongst farmers (Petranović, 1988). It remains remarkable how the dependency and incorporation of nature is seen through all of these counties so far. Not only does the local population depend on the agriculture and their arable land, but it also furthermore portrays a wide range of pristine and spacious nature. This is worth noting as not only does the nature positively affect the tourism, it is also part of the nature conservation framework, which additionally adds value to not only local population but also national and international guests.

Hungary was discovered to include three counties into the “Amazon of Europe” region. Within these three counties Zala, Somogy and Baranya, several larger municipalities could be determined, which speaks for the remarkable population dispersion as well as accessibility to infrastructure. Furthermore, a highway connection to all three counties could be identified, which speaks for the well-established accessibility of the respective counties. The extraordinary accessibility is remarkable in the aspect of tourism development, as it allows effortless travel to and out of the region. Furthermore, the influence of the Pannonian Basin is detectable through the flat surface of the counties. On them an array of woodlands as well as arable land can be found, speaking for the connection to nature and its importance to the region. Furthermore, not only does the terrain contribute to the attractiveness of the bike trail, but it also furthermore displays pristine nature

as well as the dependency and connection of the local population towards nature.

In the following the “Amazon of Europe” regions most eastern area will be described within the respective NUTS of Serbia.

3.5.4. Serbia

Serbia and its West Bačka District, lay on the far East of the “Amazon of Europe” region. Serbia is also one of the countries that involves only 1 county into the implementation of the “Amazon of Europe”. Within the county two municipalities (which are pinned in the figure below) are included in the “Amazon of Europe” region. These are Sombor and Apatin, which are visible in below.



Figure 19: Own representation. Landscape of Serbian West Bačka District.

In the figure above, the yellow line represents the border between Hungary and Serbia, whereas the thin orange line represents the border between Serbia and Croatia. The blue line, as already previously mentioned represents the North route of the "Amazon of Europe Bike Trail", while the thicker orange line represents the South route of the bike trail. The latter is also the one which runs through the Serbian West Bačka District. However, despite not being of larger scale, numerous other settlements could be found. Those have the form of nucleated villages dispersed in the area or linear villages, which are mostly visible around the municipality of Sombor. This is of significance, as even though the Serbian county does not account for a lot of included area, it is still possible to detect two larger municipalities. Furthermore, several other settlements and villages could be found, which does not only speak for the fairly even dispersion within the borders, but also for the accessibility of infrastructure, which is of vital importance for tourism development.

All those villages are fairly good connected through a road system, however, it is important to note, that this county does not have a highway connection, therefore are transportation possibilities limited to local roads. This aspect is, similar to the Austrian county, worth noting as in the aspect of tourism development, accessibility is of vital importance, not only for local and national guests, but also for international guests, which are traveling to this area. The terrain itself is of very even elevation and no higher sections in the terrain itself are notable. This, however, is undoubtedly derived from the area being part of the prior mentioned Pannonian Basin (European Commission, n.d.), which stretches from all Hungary towards Serbia. This even terrain, on the other hand, provides a good basis for agricultural activity. There are also smaller amounts of forests and woodland (alluvial forest (European Commission, n.d.; Natura2000, n.d.)) visible, however mostly saturated along the rivers, where land is not as appropriate for arable use. This area, however, does not only bears significance to the agricultural aspect of the county, which is evidently present, but furthermore supports the notion of tourism development with the flagship product of a bike trail, as the surface presents an effortless terrain for

this endeavor. Otherwise, this area has a vast amount of fields where agricultural activity is being utilized. Additionally, it is important to add, that the Serbian country was, as Slovenia and Hungary, part of the Yugoslavian state and therefore under the communist regime (Petranović, 1988). Meaning, that the land was used for collective farms and as the privatization of this land materialized, the land was divided into many small pieces of land resulting in a vast majority of smaller scale farmers.

Serbia has been found to incorporate one county in which two larger municipalities can be found. Other settlements were able to be determined, however those are smaller in size and in form of nucleated villages. It is, nevertheless, worth mentioning, that the area's population is evenly dispersed and furthermore allows easier access to infrastructure, which is of vital importance in tourism development. Where there are no settlements, an abundance of arable land as well as alluvial forests could be found, speaking to the closeness of nature as well as dependency of local farmers. Due to the Pannonian Basin, the terrain remains flat, similar as to the Hungarian counties. Not only is the flat terrain suitable of arable land, but it is also furthermore an impressive addition to the bike trail tourism product, which is incorporated in the tourism development to this region. Additionally, no highway connection could be determined, which implies the dependency of local roads and lower development of this region. This is of further significance, as even though the terrain presents a favoring factor to the tourism development, the possible accessibility for not only national but international guest as well is of utmost importance for the regional tourism development.

As the portraying and description of the most eastern part of the "Amazon of Europe" region concludes with the description of the respective NUTS of Serbia, the analysis will continue back towards the West where the last participating country, Croatia and its respective NUTS will be portrayed and elaborated.

3.5.5. Croatia

Croatia is the country that actively involves the most of its NUTS regions in the respective “Amazon of Europe” region. Those are Međimurje County, Osijek-Baranja County, Koprivnica-Križevci County, Virovitica-Podravina County and Varaždin County.

As the analysis until now proceeded from the West to East of the “Amazon of Europe” region along the North route of the bike trail, the remaining analysis will be conducted along the South route of the bike trail from East to West. Therefore, the manner of the analysis of the respective Croatian counties will also proceed in the course of East to West.

The most eastern laying Croatian county is the Osijek-Baranja County. In it also the only of the mentioned Croatian counties that has a border to Serbia. In this county several larger municipalities could be determined. Those are Osijek, Petrinjevci, Valpovo Belišće and Donji Miholjac. In the figure below these municipalities are visible as well as the rest of the Croatian Osijek-Baranja County.

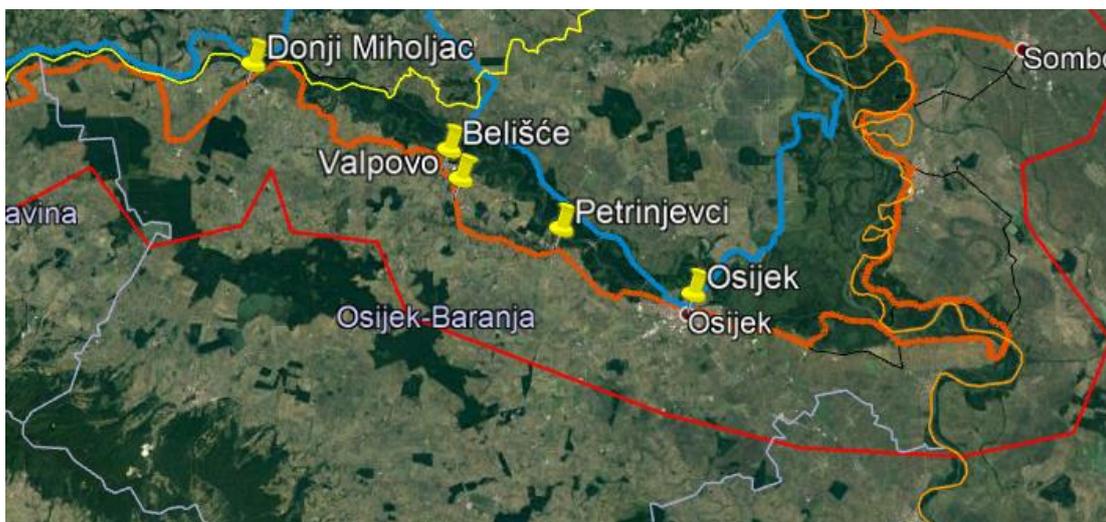


Figure 20: Own representation. Landscape of Croatian Osijek-Baranja County.

It is visible that these municipalities are evenly distributed within the area. Nevertheless, several other settlements surround these. Some of these are bigger, some smaller, however, the majority of them take form of nucleated villages and just a few of these are of linear form. Furthermore, the terrain on which these settlements lay seems to be very even and flat, without any major elevations regarding in the area within the “Amazon of Europe” region. This is undoubtedly the impact of the Pannonian Basin (European Commission, n.d.) on which the area lays.

Further West lays the Croatian Virovitica-Podravina County. In contrast to the Osijek-Baranja County, only two larger municipalities could be determined in this area. These are Virovitica as well as Pitomača.

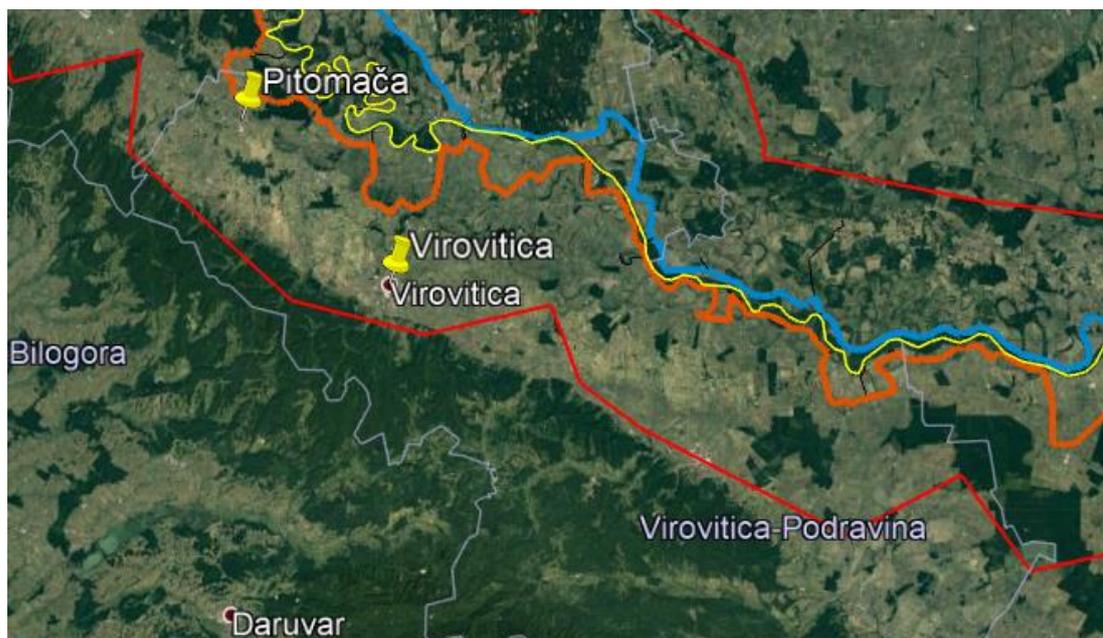


Figure 21: Own representation. Landscape of the Croatian Virovitica-Podravina County.

In the figure above, the Virovitica-Podravina County is clearly visible. As in other visualisations the yellow line represents the national border and the red the border of the “Amazon of Europe” region. It is also visible how the blue

(North route) and orange (South route) line run through the region along the river. Pinned are the prior mentioned larger municipalities of this county, Virovitica and Pitomača. It is also very clear that these two municipalities both lay in the western half of the respective county. The other half, however, is not as densely populated. There it is possible to find settlements however, those are in form mostly nucleated and vaguely in linear forms. Similar to the Osijek-Baranja County, the Virovitica-Podravina County lays in the Pannonian Basin, which accounts for the unspectacular flat terrain (European Commission, n.d.).

West of the Virovitica-Podravina County the Koprivnica-Križevci County settles. In this county, similar to the Virovitica-Podravina, only 2 larger municipalities could be determined. One of these bears the same name as the name of the county itself – Koprivnica and the other goes by the name Đurđevac.



Figure 22: Own representation: Landscape of the Croatian Koprivnica-Križevci County:

In the figure above it is very clearly visible that the larger municipalities are evenly distributed within the area of the county. Surrounding these municipalities are several smaller and bigger nucleated as well as linear villages, which speak for an evenly distributed population within the area. The terrain, however, seems to be getting slightly more rigid and interesting within this area. Some elevated areas along the borders of the region are visible, yet the rest of the terrain remains of flat nature. However, the general elevation of this county is slightly higher than the ones of the previous mentioned Croatian counties.

Further west of Koprivnica-Križevci County, the Varaždin County is located. Within the area of this county also two larger municipalities could be determined. One of them is the city of Varaždin and the other being Ludberg.



Figure 23: Own representation. Landscape of the Croatian Varaždin County.

It is very clearly visible that the city of Varaždin is very densely populated in comparison to Ludberg, which seems to be of smaller scale. However, these two municipalities were identified as the larger ones in this counties area. The distribution is similar to the Koprivnica-Križevci County, however, the surroundings of the city of Varaždin seems to be more densely populated than

the rest of the area. Nevertheless, the rest of the area is also populated, however the settlements take the form of nucleated villages. Linear villages are also to be found, yet the majority of them is located in the surroundings of the city of Varaždin. Similar as the terrain of the Koprivnica-Križevci County, the terrain of the Varaždin County paints a more interesting picture. It is visible that the area is surrounded by elevated areas, nevertheless, the central part of the area, where the municipalities could be determined, remain flat, which is to be led back to the impacts of the Pannonian Basin (European Commission, n.d.).

The last of the respective Croatian counties is the Međimurje County. This county is located in the farthest West of the Croatian respective counties which are involved in the " Amazon of Europe" region. In this area, which is visible below, three larger municipalities could be determined. Those are Čakovec, Prelog and Mursko Središće.



Figure 24: Own representation. Landscape of the Croatian Međimurje County.

Similar to the previous counties, the Varaždin County has the larger municipalities evenly distributed. Between these municipalities several settlements in form of nucleated and linear villages are visible. Most interesting in this area is the state of the terrain. In the west of it a clear elevation is visible. The surrounding area, however, seems to keep flat, similar to the other Croatian counties involved.

The identified larger municipalities as well as the characteristics of these respective counties is of remarkable significance to the aspired tourism development within the “Amazon of Europe” region. Through the identification of the larger municipalities, it is visible that the population seems to be fairly dispersed as well it indicate existing infrastructure, which is important to the overall touristic development. Furthermore, the identified terrain does not only represent an additional supporting factor to the bike trail, but it also implies the spectacle of pristine nature and surface, which is a furthermore advantage for the bike trail as well as general tourism within the region.

Due to reasons of similarities the points of land use and road connections will be given in a collective matter. Through all Croatian counties it is distinguishably clear that the cities, municipalities and villages are fairly good connected through an interwoven road system. Furthermore, all of the respective counties have a highway connection, which makes these counties one of the best connected in the “Amazon of Europe” region. This is of utmost significance, not only for the Croatian counties, but furthermore for the whole “Amazon of Europe” region itself. The interwoven road system implies improved accessibility for national and local travel, whereas the highway connections signify the accessibility for international travel, which is crucial for tourism and tourism development.

On the other hand, the most land in the respective counties is used for agricultural activities. Nevertheless, also woodlands and forests, in form of coniferous and deciduous central forests as well as alluvial forests (Natura2000, n.d.), can be found, however, their extent is limited, due to the fact that most of the woodland grows along the river, which is flowing along the border. It is also important to mention, that due to the fact that Croatia was a former member of the state of Yugoslavia, it endured the communist regime. With it came agricultural laws, where the farmers were members of a collective farm (Petranović, 1988). However, this system did not survive and as a result of the privatization of the farm land, the land got divided into many small pieces, which in return resulted in many small farmers. This is the leading fact of how there are so many smaller farms in these areas. Hence, this presents the gravity with which nature is implicated in the Croatian counties alone. Furthermore, significant is the reliance of the population on its local agriculture as well the magnitude of nature connection within the counties. These aspects imply pristine nature as well in the combination with the flat terrain, not only suitability for agricultural activities, but further significance for the tourism development within the region.

3.5.6. Conclusion for the NUTS regions

To summarize the “Amazon of Europe” and its involved counties have several larger municipalities, that were mentioned. However, on the other hand, the area is nevertheless quite populated with settlements, mostly in the form of nucleated villages. Only a modest amount of the settlements found were of linear form. The significance of this statement cannot be understated as it implies the fair dispersion of population within the region as well as the accessibility of infrastructure, which is further of utmost importance for tourism development. The region is otherwise fairly good connected through an interwoven road system. Furthermore, almost all of the respective counties also have a connection to a highway, which speaks for the good connection as well as the accessibility of the region. This is noteworthy as the significance

of the road and highway system imply the effortless accessibility for guests and tourist, not only on a local and national but furthermore, on an international scale. This cannot be understated, as several factors of tourism development depend on the accessibility to the region alone. It was possible to detect, that the Pannonian Basin runs through the most of the "Amazon of Europe" region, making it very flat and even. Only a few elevations could be determined, however those are mainly located at the outer border of the region. As the region is very nature-bound, vast woodlands of coniferous and deciduous forests as well as alluvial forests could be detected, however, the majority of the land is covered in an abundance of arable land where agricultural activities are conducted. The flat terrain as well as the abundance of nature have a significant implication in the tourism development, based upon the flagship bike trail which this region is offering. Not only does the terrain provide an effortless surface for the bike trail integration and activity, but it furthermore provides an abundance of natural features, which are also under nature conservation. In the aspect of agriculture, the importance of the communist regime, that four out of five countries endured, needs to be emphasized, as the collective farms and the later performed privatization of land vastly impacted the character sits of farming in the area. This impact can still be seen today, as the arable land is divided into many smaller pieces of surface. However, additionally, it implies the significance and dependence, that agriculture has on the region and on its population. Therefore, this connection to nature has be further emphasized as well as remarkably noted.

Up until now, not only have the demographic and landscape characteristics and conditions have been elaborated as well as the characteristics of the region's climate and geology, but also it has been made clear that the region aspires to become a touristic destination, it is furthermore important to understand how the "Amazon of Europe" region fits in the framework of a destination. Therefore, in the following chapter, an in-depth description of what a destination is and how destination development is carried out as well to what extent it can impact the area, will be given.

4. Destination

4.1. What is a Destination?

It has been mentioned before that the region “Amazon of Europe” aspires to become a touristic destination. Yet to thoroughly grasp what the context of a destination means, an adequate definition of the term is needed, to be able to continue the means of this thesis in a sufficient manner. There are many different definitions of what a destination is, as mentioned before. The most evident is stated by Beirmann (2003) which states that a touristic destination is:

“...a city, town, or other area that is significantly dependent on revenues from tourism, or a country, state, region, city, or town which is marketed or markets itself as a place for tourists to visit”.

This definition gives a good first glance at how a touristic destination is to be seen. However, many aspects are not included into this framework, which has been given by Beirmann. It does not include the purpose of visit which a tourist might have, as well as it does not mention the duration of the intended stay. Also, it excludes the touristic products, infrastructure or other cultural and natural values that might be of importance. What seems seemingly most important is the lack of mentioning the management of the destination itself. Management of a destination includes many obligations. It has part in controlling the environmental impacts of tourism as well as land-use planning, zoning controls and business permits, regulation ventures as well as daily and development activities (Global Development Research Centre (GDRC), n.d.).

As mentioned in the definition above a destination is significantly influenced by the revenues of tourism, which makes it complex and complicated. Also, of significant importance are local tourism businesses like hotels, restaurants or attractions. Therefore, the governance structure of these destinations, which are operated by local authorities and Non-Governmental Organizations

(NGOs), community representatives and academia as well as local chambers of commerce, form what is commonly known as DMOs or “Destination Management Organizations”. They often take the shape of local councils, tourism boards or development organizations (GDRC, n.d.). An improved and optimized definition of a destination, adopted by Beirmann (2003), Zemla (2016), Sotiriadis (2021, p. 42), WTO (n.d.) and GDRC (n.d.) might therefore say:

“A touristic destination is a physical location or area which receives tourist flows, provides infrastructure, tourism products as well as attractions and contributes tourism resources to make the location or area recognizable and accessible. It furthermore transfers a touristic image and implements marketing channels for its cultural and natural values which represent the purpose of visit for the minimal duration of one night. All these tasks are handled by DMOs (Destination Management Organizations) who are in charge of the destination’s resources, expectations and goals”.

Since this definition has been optimized and improved it will be used in the further context and purpose of this thesis. To further analyse and explain the idea of the thesis the term Macro-destination will be elaborated.

Coming from the Greek word “Makro” the adjective describes something of a large scale (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Therefore, the term Macro-destination implies that the destination “Amazing Amazon of Europe” is of greater scale than common destinations. Out of the fact, that this destination connects and actively involves five countries and represents the first worldwide five country Biosphere Reserve, this term is used suitably. Despite the fact of the region being of large scale, the “Amazon of Europe” is an EU-Project, therefore, it implies cooperation between countries, identifying common threats and

possibilities as well as optimal use of finance. It addresses challenges and opportunities distinctive to geographical areas and it optimizes the implementation of existing legislation (McMaster & Zwet, 2016, p. 47). It is hence an integrated framework advocated by the European Council (European Commission, n.d.) where the participating countries profit of a strengthened cooperation granting economic, social and territorial growth.

This tells us that the “Amazing Amazon of Europe” provides infrastructure and other touristic resources at a much larger scale. Therefore, this not only means a more crucial task for the management but furthermore implies the necessity and importance of destination development to accurately and fully implement any set goals and strategies.

4.2. [What is Destination Development?](#)

In the chapter above the term destination has been clarified and it has been further made clear that the destination “Amazing Amazon of Europe” is in requirement of development. Development itself and destination development in particular include a multitude of disciplines. Those mostly involved are economics, communication, history, politics, hospitality, business and retailing as well as transportation (Manhas, Manrai & Manrai, 2016, p. 26). This makes the field of tourism an international industry which captures the complex interaction between diverse environmental and non-environmental factors. These factors affect each other as well impact the destination itself.

The tourism industry has been steadily growing over the last few decades, with international tourist arrivals topped 1.5 billion globally in 2019 for the first time (UNWTO, n.d.). Many regions have embraced the tourism industry, normally as part of wider regional development policies, due to a rise in demand met by a general increase in business activities. Tourism has spread to almost every part of the globe, with particular growth in Europe’s periphery, where many communities, that were previously reliant on the primary sector, are now

adapting to the tertiary (service) sector of economy, which includes tourism. Many achievements have been recorded in case studies of tourism (Gallarza & Gil Saura, 2020) yet on the other hand many more societies have been frustrated by the false optimism provided by tourism (Hall, 2007). This indicates that the tourist development does not hold the ultimate salvation in means of better quality of life or economic growth. It therefore represents a helping hand which regions or destinations may or may not implement, yet that it is important to note that the kind of lifeline bears risks and might not achieve the desired results that were aspired.

Communities that have little remaining resources to leverage, other than the vastness that surrounds them, have sometimes turned to tourism growth as a tactic or strategy after everything else has failed (Hall, 2005). Despite mixed results, tourism continues to be a tool for regional development, but a more thoughtful approach is needed according to Romão & Neuts (2017), namely, an awareness that tourism growth is limited and should only be used as part of regional development strategies. There is a need to reconsider the policy framework that supports tourism growth, and to shift from a growth paradigm that often values increasing visitor numbers as the main objective, without contemplating the capacity of destinations to cope with tourism growth or other policy objectives, to one that better reflects the policy integration required to overcome significant interconnected policy challenges, such as climate change. The anticipated outcome is a future in which tourism's success is evaluated not just in terms of tourist numbers, but also in terms of the good impacts that tourism can have at the destination, as well as the advantages that tourism can bring to local economies and communities. The tourist industry should be assessed on its success in generating jobs, contributing to the local economy, and giving benefits to destinations, communities, and local people.

However, on the other hand it is important to emphasize that touristic development is a multidimensional concept. Besides the economic factor, factors of society, politics and culture have to be taken into account.

Businesses with a tourism emphasis can be found in remote areas all over the world (Ateljevic, 2009). While employment is one indicator of tourism development (Winchenbach, Hanna & Miller, 2019), Hall & Boyd (2005) claim that many peripheral destinations have limited tourism potential due to a lack of access to transportation networks, intelligence, political power, and resources. Therefore, small-scale supply can only compete in major markets with limited capital, making internationalization difficult. Many communities will be able to benefit from tourism growth but assessing the impact of tourism is difficult. In reality, few studies (e.g., Lundmark, 2006; Müller, 2006) have actually provided evidence of the degree to which tourism contributes to regional growth in rural and peripheral areas.

Attempts in understanding the impacts of development and the change that it bears have already been made decades ago when Butler (1980) developed his concept of the life-cycle.

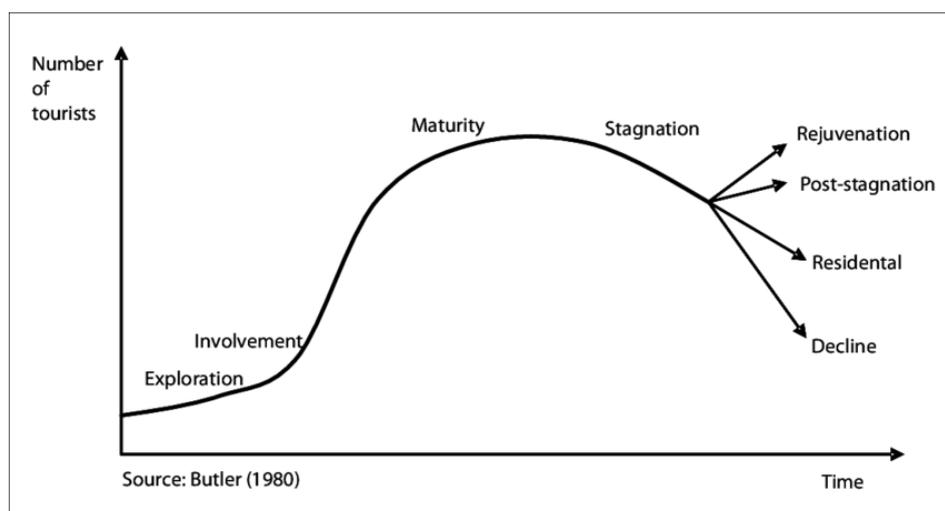


Figure 25: Butler, R. W. (1980). THE CONCEPT OF A TOURIST AREA CYCLE OF EVOLUTION: IMPLICATIONS FOR MANAGEMENT OF RESOURCES. *The Canadian Geographer/Le Géographe Canadien*, 24(1), 5–12. doi:10.1111/j.1541-0064.1980.tb00970.x. Visual representation of the life cycle.

Up until today it still represents the most prominent theory of tourism growth. This theory focuses on the different phases a destination can go through and it gives a generic and flexible method for describing changes of a destination. Nevertheless, it lacks the ability to illustrate tourism as a difficult and complex system. On the other hand, according to Noreen Maree Breakey (2005) no evident patterns are visible whilst researching the development of destinations in the recent years. The only patterns which could be identified were patterns of visitor spending, levels of occupancy as well as supply of accommodation. This speaks for the general complexity of tourism development. In its essence, tourism development can be generalized, yet the framework that Butler offers is not "one size fits all". It is important to note this notion in the further steps and illustration of tourism development. The higher the value contributed and the lower the leakage rate, the more goods or value elements from an area may be incorporated. This is because tourism, aside from providing pure services, does nothing to dynamize the economy, especially if those services are offered at a very low level, and instead leads to the displacement of labour by low-cost immigrants. It would be of further discussion, how the leakage rate could be minimized, as well as how realistic it is for the case of the "Amazon of Europe" to suffer from the displacement of labour force, due to low-cost immigrants.

The "Amazon of Europe" presents a difficult environment for tourism developers. Communities have been forced to follow new development directions as a result of economic downturn. However, on one hand tourism benefited greatly from the European Union regional development funding (Stoffelen & Vanneste, 2017). This explains why many regions and destinations turned to tourism development in times of economic hardship. The fact, that the European Union is inclined toward funding development speaks for the conviction that development adds value to the region or destination in the tourism sector and drives many DMOs towards embracing it.

Following this notion, destination development should be used for creating strategies and plans in order to increase tourism for the destination, yet it is of utmost importance to primarily investigate the region upon its suitability for tourism ventures, so one might not “water a stone and expect it to grow”. Through this aspired development, however, spending is encouraged which increases the local revenues and GDP (Gross Domestic Product). How such a concept can be designed is explained by Manhas, Manrai & Manrai (2016, p. 27), who state that a destination goes through different phases which characterize it. Although a tourism destination goes through different phases and there are no evident patterns as Noreen Maree Breakey (2005) claims, three steps of development can be applied to every destination as claimed by Manhas, Manrai & Manrai (2016, p. 28). In the first step the developers and decision makers analyse which tourism resources the destination has to offer. Upon that step, the type of tourists is assessed, which is supposed to be attracted to the destination. And finally, the developers decide through which channels the target group will be contacted to reach their favoured result. These steps illustrate a very vague approach to destination development, yet they offer seemingly enough insight to understand that the process itself is very complex. These steps alone are in no manner sufficient to conduct successful development of a destination, however, as generic steps, they form a basis onto which a tailored approach can be derived and implemented.

Withal, the importance of tourism growth is increasingly recognized at the local level, whether in terms of its contribution to the local economy (Löffler, 2007) or its potential in the development of social, political, and cultural capital (Schmallegger, Harwood, Cervený, & Müller, 2011). Tourism growth in rural and peripheral areas is typically the product of a mixture of top-down government policies (creating protected areas and supporting tourism infrastructure) and bottom-up enterprise e.g., tourism entrepreneurship and community initiatives (Ateljevic, 2009).

Tourism developers, those who aspire and implement change and development, are key change agents whose creative activities contribute to their own business survival and, in turn, to the survival of their communities. Their creativity can be seen on three levels: in the broadest sense, their recognition of tourism as a new opportunity; in the narrowest sense, their product creates choices that attracts customers; and, in the middle, their engagement with other stakeholders in the community and area, which allows them to obtain new ideas and connections in the tourism sector and elsewhere (Fullerton, 2013). Given the high rates of attrition in the tourism industry, especially in times of hardship caused by the worldwide Covid-19 pandemic, where the numbers in tourism fell desperately, such multidimensional innovative behaviour is critical for business survival. If more and more regions search out endogenous growth opportunities, rising business survival in rural and peripheral areas is critical.

In order to assure the growth of tourism or survival of tourism based businesses, some tools need to be used and implemented into the process. According to Goranczewski & Puciato (2010, p.45) the most prominent and widely used tool in assessing a destination or economic entity is the so called SWOT Analysis, which thoroughly analyses the strengths (S), weaknesses (W), opportunities (O) and threats (T) of the entity in question. SWOT Analysis allows an accurate diagnosis of internal potential in relation to external influences. Along the SWOT Analysis a further eminent tool is the TOWS Matrix, which allows cross-matching between strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (Weihrich, 1982, p. 52) to optimize strategies pertaining internal and external factors. These tools provide enough in-depth insight to determine the standing point of a destination or business entity to allow the draft of further steps which are to follow.

The question still remains how the concept of a destination can be integrated into the Biosphere Reserve framework, which the “Amazon of Europe” is, under the UNESCO Man and Biosphere Programme. Therefore, the following chapter will answer the questions regarding the framework of a Biosphere Reserve and how it operates and furthermore under which conditions a destination could operate within the UNESCO framework.

5. Biosphere Reserve

5.1. What is a Biosphere Reserve?

In this age of globalisation, regions and local communities are becoming increasingly essential to humanity. Being able to connect with the place in which they reside provides a sense of identity and direction, as well as satisfying the human need for a familiar, manageable environment. Local participation allows residents to participate directly and effectively in decision-making in periods of rapid development and continuous change. This explains, in part, the increased interest in regional development performance.

At the same time, after the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio, global sustainable development has become a top priority for national governments. Although, sustainable development, a combination of ecological, economic, and socio-cultural elements in today's decision-making processes, that considers the needs of future generations, must first be accomplished and demonstrated on a more local level (Matsuura, 2003). Meaning, wanting to achieve change and development it is firstly needed to be done on a small scale where it can be better controlled and implemented and then work toward the global goals. All this resembles a learning process where key change agents, DMOs and/or locals learn to overcome hardships and work towards a common goal. They form a network between them which allows them to share knowledge or ask for help in

resolving struggles. This process can then be repeated and implemented on a bigger, more substantial scale.

The UNESCO Man and the Biosphere Programme (MAB), with its global network of Biosphere Reserves and voluntary participation principles, was one of the first to address this topic. Until today, 714 Biosphere Reserves in 129 countries have been registered (UNESCO, n.d.).

Biosphere Reserves are a framework within the UNESCO Man and the Biosphere Programme (MAB) that aims to foster a land management policy that balances human-nature interactions. While protected areas are generally the centre of any Biosphere Reserve, it differs from a protected area model in that it considers the entire range of landscapes, bound within the geographic limits of the management area, to nature conservation (UNESCO, n.d.). This means, that the whole area, which is designated as a Biosphere Reserve, is concerned with conservation and preservation of its flora and fauna.

The Biosphere Reserve concept was first proposed in the 1970s, and it is now focused on adaptive management across a landscape using a new approach to zonation of core, buffer, and transition zones, to balance conservation and growth. It began as a strictly scientific initiative and has evolved into a global network of model regions for sustainable development. The initial goal of the program was to learn the fundamental scientific principles needed at an international level for the conservation of natural resources and environmentally sustainable biosphere use (Walter, Precht & Preyer, 2005). As a result, the MAB Program was the first international environmental project that shows the relation among humans and the environment.

How this zonation framework works, as well as how the relation between human interaction and the natural environment is operated, will be illustrated in the following chapter.

5.2. What are the characteristics and framework conditions of a Biosphere Reserve?

Biosphere Reserves are "learning environments for long-term growth" (Batisse, 1982, p. 102). They serve as 'test beds' for interdisciplinary approaches to understanding and addressing changes in social and ecological processes, as well as avoidance of conflicts and biodiversity management. They are locations that provide local solutions to global problems. Biosphere Reserves can be terrestrial, marine, and/or coastal habitats (Nyhus & Adams, 1995, p. 33), whereas each site individually promotes solutions that balance biodiversity conservation with long-term use. This implies that the Biosphere Reserve framework can be implemented regardless of the chosen habitat. Of importance seems the long-term aspect of nature conservation as well as sustainable development which is communicated very strongly. However, this implies a complexity, that cannot be achieved through a designated framework alone.

Local communities and other interested parties are involved in the planning and management of Biosphere Reserves (UNESCO, n.d.). The focus of those, who plan and manage, lays on the optimal implementation of three functions a Biosphere Reserve is designated to accomplish.

These three key "functions" that Biosphere Reserves incorporate are:

- biodiversity and cultural diversity preservation,

- socially, economically, and environmentally sustainable economic growth,
- supporting production with logistical support, testing, tracking, education, and training facilities.

These three main functions are incorporated within three zones inside the Biosphere Reserve framework. In these three zones, the above mentioned functions are being sought after and carried out.

Biosphere Reserves are primarily divided into three interconnected areas, known as the core zone, the buffer zone, and the transition zone, to carry out the complementary tasks of biodiversity conservation and sustainable use of natural resources.

To clarify:

Core Zone - It consists of a strictly protected zone that contributes to landscape, biodiversity, animal, and genetic variation conservation.

Buffer Zone - It surrounds or adjoins the core area(s) and is used for activities that promote scientific study, monitoring, training, and education while adhering to sound ecological practices.

Transition Zone - Communities in the transition zone promote socio-culturally and environmentally sustainable economic and human activities.

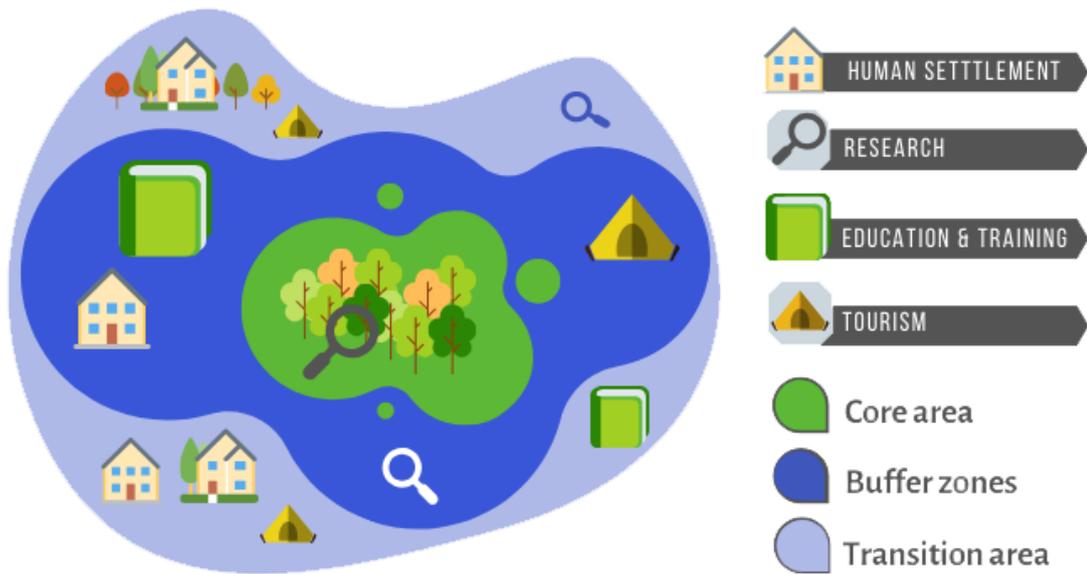


Figure 26: UNESCO (n.d.). Visual representation of zoning in Biosphere Reserves. Retrieved from <https://en.unesco.org/biosphere/about>

The zone definition is meant to be adaptable, and it can be used in a number of ways to meet local needs and conditions. In a Biosphere Reserve, ownership conditions differ as well. Biosphere Reserves are often made up of legally protected public property, such as a previously declared national parks, wilderness areas, or wildlife refuges. The core region, on the other hand, may be privately owned or controlled by Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) (UNESCO, n.d.). The term Biosphere Reserve can therefore be seen as a hypernym, meaning it can implement already existing protected areas as well as regions without a label. It joins together not only areas of surface but also humans as well as economy, politics and culture and steers the path towards conservation of nature and sustainable development making the framework a very complex and intertwined concept but also a very promising and influential notion.

For better understanding purposes a more sufficient description of the zones will be given below.

The core zone includes protected areas because they serve as a reference point for the natural state of the habitats represented by Biosphere Reserves. The information gathered in these core areas can be used to determine the long-term viability of activities or the preservation of environmental quality in the surrounding areas. They are safe havens for conserving biological diversity, monitoring minimally disrupted habitats, non-destructive testing, and other low-impact activities (such as education). In addition to its conservation role, the core area contributes to a variety of ecosystem services that can be quantified in terms of development functions (e.g., carbon sequestration, soil stabilization, supply of clean water and air, etc.) and work opportunities, which can also help in achieving the conservation goals (e.g., environmental education, research, environmental rehabilitation and conservation measures, recreation and eco-tourism). Managers of the core areas can contribute resources to projects built with Biosphere Reserve residents, businesses, and other partners. (UNESCO, n.d.; Waterton, n.d.)

The buffer zone is either parallel to or surrounds the core area. The activities are planned in such a way that they do not obstruct the core area's conservation goals, but rather aid in their protection. The buffer zone could be a testing ground for new ideas, or it could be a place where natural vegetation, agricultural land, wetlands, fisheries, or ranch land are managed to improve overall production efficiency while preserving natural processes and biodiversity (UNESCO, n.d.). Education, training, tourism, and leisure facilities may be located in the buffer zone (Waterton, n.d.). In several Biosphere Reserves, the buffer zone is thought to be an area where human activity is less intense compared to the transition zone. Buffer zones can have their own intrinsic, "stand-alone" functions for preserving anthropogenic, biological, and cultural diversity, in addition to the buffering role related to core areas. They may also play an important role in connecting biodiversity components in core areas with those in transition areas in a broader spatial sense.

The transition zone, also known as the "Area of Cooperation," is the vast outer area of a Biosphere Reserve where people live and work in a sustainable manner while using the natural resources of the area. The phrase "area of cooperation" emphasizes the importance of cooperation in achieving the Biosphere Reserve's goals (UNESCO, n.d.). Local communities, environmental organizations, scientists, civil societies, cultural groups, companies, and other stakeholders come together here to agree to work together to maintain and use the area in a sustainable manner that benefits the people who live there and the environment in which they all operate. It is a centrally located region of sustainable development that may include a range of agricultural operations, villages and other land uses, and in which local governments, management agencies, scientists, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), cultural groups, economic entities, and other stakeholders collaborate to manage and expand the area's resources in a sustainable manner (Waterton, n.d.).

The UNESCO Man and the Biosphere Programme's Biosphere Reserve (BR) model represents a move towards more accountable conservation (Coetzer, Witkowski & Erasmus, 2013, p. 9). Biosphere Reserves are an effort to balance environmental sustainability with long-term growth by expressly acknowledging humans and human interests in the conservation landscape while preserving the ecological values of existing protected areas. However, according to Coetzer, Witkowski & Erasmus, 2013, p. 14 incorporating dual 'conservation' and 'development' objectives in practice is difficult, with few examples successfully meeting all of the model's requirements. With simultaneous conservation and development goals, the challenge for Biosphere Reserves authorities is to recognize changing patterns and respond accordingly, avoiding unfavourable transition before it leads to permanent damage.

Following this conception, the core concept behind Biosphere Reserves is that humanity and nature should coexist and achieve sustainable and beneficial growth for all, and that learning is an integral part of this process. The Biosphere Reserves serve as a semi-protected testing grounds for interdisciplinary research aimed at better understanding and coping with change and the interplay between social and ecological systems. The question arises, if the Biosphere Reserve, due to its protection and research qualities, makes the area more worth living in, which could also possibly have a positive impact on the negative migration, that the region has been facing. It would be possible, that due to the nature of the Biosphere Reserve, people would decide to keep living in this area, or that it would work as a catalyst, resulting in positive migration into the area.

Biosphere Reserves include areas that have been designated as protected areas or other formal conservation designations. Overlapping classification, on the other hand, does not necessarily imply a combined effort to defend. Where sensitive environments exist, the Biosphere Reserve model's "growth" and "resource-use" criteria may not favour them, necessitating ongoing re-evaluation. Therefore, strategic decisions seem to be fundamental to ensuring that the Biosphere Reserve goes in the right direction.

6. Strategic Decisions

If Julius Cesar (100BC – 44BC), the most known Roman emperor, would not have been the strategist he was, he could have never turned the Roman Republic into the Roman Empire. He, therefore, used his strategies not only to gain military but also political power, which later granted him the role of Roman emperor.

And would he not have written his experiences of his campaigns down, then centuries later one of the most known military strategists of modern time, Napoleon Bonaparte (1769 – 1821), could not have studied them, which ultimately brought him historical fame.

Strategies are often associated and related to military actions, because they were used in this context for centuries. However, in the last century the term broke through towards the economic battlefield, once again assuring its importance and significance.

6.1. [What are Strategic Decisions?](#)

The term "strategy" is derived from the Greek word "strategos" (Meriam-Webster, n.d.), which is a military term that refers to a general scheme of arrangement and commanding an army to combat an opposing army. It would be possible to assume that business-people enjoy comparing themselves to their military counterparts. As a result, they started to consider creating a strategy as a plan to organize and use available resources, including human, physical, and financial ones, in order to facilitate and ensure the fulfilment of their own goals.

As this thesis portrays a basis for strategic decision-making in regard to the "Amazing Amazon of Europe" Makro-destination, it implies that the destination is managed strategically. Therefore, inevitable to this notion, a description of strategic management is given below.

Strategic management is described as the guiding method of an organization in competition with other organizations (Grant et al., 2011, p.4), or according to Kabeyi, the establishment of organizational strategies in relation to market and business environment opportunities and challenges (2019, p. 28).

According to Parnell (2014, p. 13) there are four fundamental components of strategic management:

- analyse the climate by evaluating the internal and external factors that have an impact on the economic organization. This involves analysing market competitiveness and the effect of globalization on the financial output of the economic organization,
- formulation of strategy, which includes making strategic decisions about an economic entity's goals, strategies, and methods of achieving those objectives,
- execution of the plan, which includes decisions about the economic entity's organizational structure, type and source information systems, and last but not least, the control mechanisms to be applied,
- assessment and monitoring, which applies to the processes in place to ensure that strategic planning contributes to the achievement of economic organization goals. The act of evaluating is simply the comparison of anticipated results and actual outcomes.

Managers do this by outlining the economic entity's future, contemplating a plan to step towards the company's needs, and analysing how efforts contribute to the achievement of goals for the long term (Mintzberg, Lampel, Quinn & Ghoshal, 2003, p. 16), unlike economists who do not. The way to achieve this aspired long term success, managers work with well contemplated strategic decisions, which lead the economic entity towards the desired goals.

Not only in present times, but also in the past, research in the area of strategic decisions was a matter of concern. Respectively, we can see that March and Simon assumed that decision-making is synonymous with entity management already in 1958 (March & Simon, 1958). The high complexity of an organization necessitates a comprehension of decision-making. Managers are often forced to choose from a wide variety of options, some of which are controversial and

uncertain, and they must do so rationally so that the entity and its shareholders profit from their decisions.

Over time, it was clear that using the word "strategic" has always helped to complicate rather than explain the sense of the term. Strategic decisions, according to Nutt & Wilson (2010), have the following characteristics:

- they are complex issues that are difficult to define exactly,
- seeking a realistic solution requires an understanding of the problem,
- they seldom have a single best answer, but rather a variety of options,
- the solutions trigger prioritization concerns,
- solution benefits are difficult to evaluate in terms of their efficiency, in part due to the lack of a consistent final end point against which effectiveness can be measured,
- strategies are correlated with high levels of complexity and uncertainty,
- there is a significant risk in achieving hoped-for benefits,
- strategic decisions are fraught with competing interests, prompting key actors to exert political leverage to ensure that a decision is made in their favour.

Mintzberg et al. provides a definition of the term's "strategy" and "strategic decision." He defines strategy as a model or plan that integrates major objectives of an organization and sequences of action into a coherent whole (Mintzberg, Lampel, Quinn & Ghoshal, 2003, p.10), while strategic decisions, on the other hand, are those that decide a company's overall direction and profitability based on anticipated, unexpected, and unknown changes from a variety of sources. The true goals of the organisation are therefore defined by strategic decisions. They define the resources that will be available to the organization in order to achieve its goals, as well as how those resources will be distributed.

There is a high probability to misinterpreting the term "strategy" as "plan" or "program." However, the concept of the term "strategy" is more complicated, yet on the other hand it contributes to better economic efficiency (Magretta, 2012). This is due to the high amount of impact a strategic decision can have within a strategy. It can change the whole direction of an entity or can even impact the survival of it.

Henceforth, strategic decisions contribute significantly to the success of an economic entity and represent a great value as well as responsibility to those who make them and those who it affects. Therefore, a strategic decision cannot be made in an instance. As mentioned, a strategic decision bears risk within itself, yet greater risk may lay on decisions made by impulse. Reason for that may be various, mostly because of not knowing all the facts and factors included. The quality of a strategic decision lays in the fact that it is well thought through even though it bears a lot of uncertainty and risk. In the following chapter, the so called strategic decision-making process will be illustrated and elaborated.

6.2. Strategic Decisions Making Process

Problems with extremely high stakes, involving human expectations and judgments, and whose solutions have long-term consequences need a practical approach to their solution. At the strategic level, a variety of strategies are used to make decisions. However, problems at this stage are often inadequately defined and described in ambiguous, fuzzy, and perplexing terms (Bhushan & Rai, 2007, p. 3), while problem-solving methods based on sound mathematical concepts can only be applied to structured and well-formed problems. This conflict between problem and solution approaches frustrates many decision-makers, causing them to lose faith in analytical techniques.

To solve such problems in a fair amount of time and money, several variables must be juggled. The emphasis should be on creating a systematic approach for addressing strategic-level decision-making issues, which are currently dealt with improperly.

Making a long-term decision in today's increasingly unpredictable world necessitates a detailed understanding of probable or potential future scenarios, as well as the ability to balance a vast range of independent and dependent parameters. However, decision-makers are being given less time to make high-risk, long-term decisions. The world is becoming increasingly chaotic, disordered, and unpredictable, necessitating the development of more and better analytical methods for making such decisions (Bhushan & Rai, 2007, p. 3). As a result, in today's world, a rigorous, systematic methodology based on scientific principles is needed to analyse and make appropriate decisions.

For instance, every nation or company in the world exists in some form of association with other nations and/or companies; none of them can therefore exist in isolation. Furthermore, various countries and/or companies may have competing national or business interests (Bhushan & Rai, 2007, p. 4). As a result, each nation or company feels threatened by other nations and/or companies, necessitating the development of methods to assess the danger. According to Gluck, Kaufman & Walleck (1980) from the Harvard Business Review, decision-makers (DM) must determine the scope of the danger or competition that their country or business faces from the competition. Following the assessment of the challenge, strategies or courses of action (COA) are developed to address it and achieve strategic goals within the context of execution policy.

In order to evaluate alternative strategies, a methodology with a scientific foundation is also needed. After a large number of strategies have been developed, they must be analysed in terms of the most likely future scenario, and conclusively the best one must be chosen and implemented. The decision-makers require guidance or, at the very least, some kind of framework in order to select certain methods that will be suitable for future crisis and contingency situations.

It is important to note, that a structured framework turns the strategic decision-making process to a controllable and traceable operation. To summarize Altiok (2011) the decision-making process should resemble a roadmap, with clear signs and indicators of past as well as future steps. On the other hand, it is important to remember, that according to Mintzberg, Lampel, Quinn & Ghoshal (2003, p. 10) the process should entail the organizations major objectives integrated into a coherent goal through a sequence of actions. Meaning, that a well-structured framework, that provides the basis for best practices, which would result in secure, reliable, cost-effective and most important efficient solutions, to overcome problems should be in place. For better understanding purposes, this conceptual framework should illustrate variables, simplify the characteristics and be user-friendly, for it to be successfully implemented in diverse economic entities and their various departments (if specifically needed). Therefore, such a strategic decision-making process could be portrayed as follows:

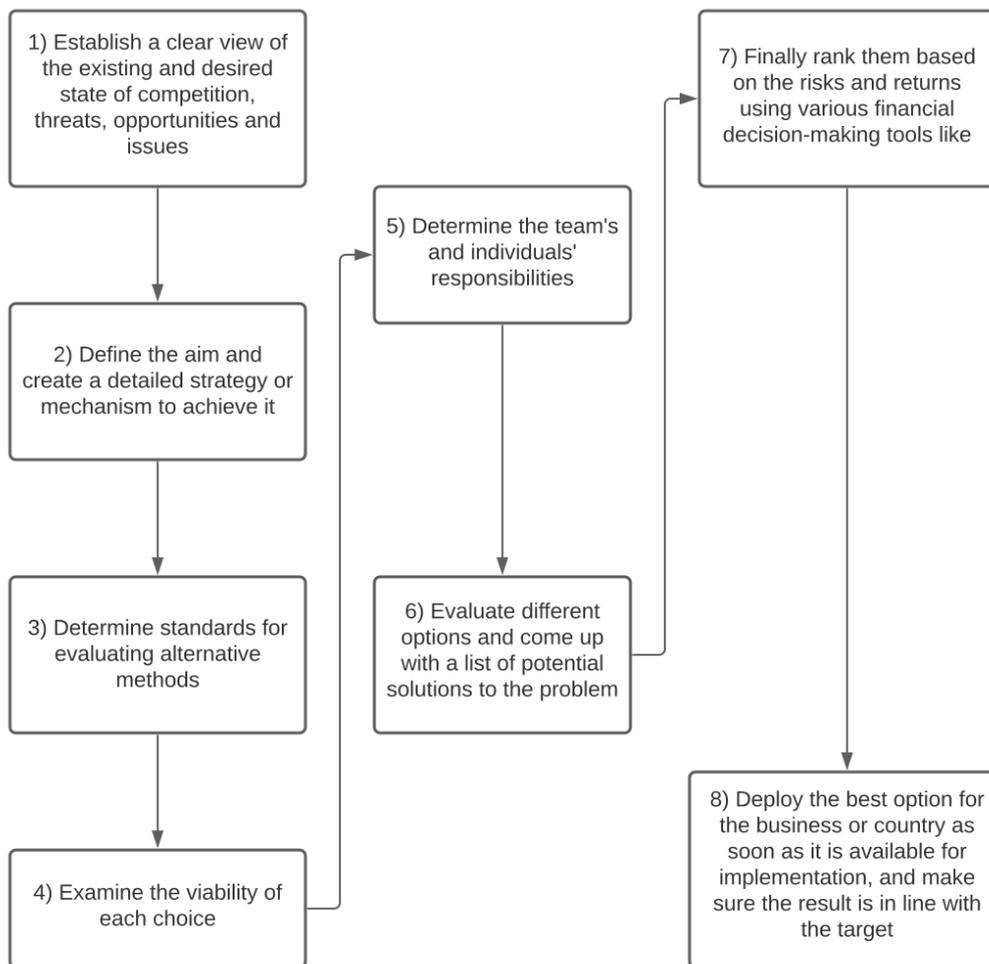


Figure 27: Based upon Bhushan, N. & Rai, K. (2007). *Strategic decision making: Applying the Analytic Hierarchy Process*. Kent: Springer. Visual representation of a Strategic-decision making-process.

- 1) This includes environmental and trend scanning, projections and forecast creation and scenario manufacturing,
- 2) In this step alternative approaches are analysed, and the most optimal outcomes are considered. It lays a basis for decisions and includes the comprehension of risks and returns,
- 3) In this instance criteria for evaluation are identified,
- 4) To check the usefulness of each alternative the limitations and restrictions need to be examined as well as necessary capabilities and knowledge to execute it analysed,

- 5) In this step the team's and individual roles are identified and established. It is important that in this step the decision makers, experts on the subject and financial consultants and analysts are determined,
- 6) The various alternatives are being evaluated upon multiple criteria, which has been set before-hand, as well as being compared upon their optimality on this step,
- 7) On this instance numerous financial decision-making tools can be implemented. The most popular and widely in use are the ROI or Return on Investment, the Payback period, the NPV or Net Present Value, Internal Rate of Return as well as the Benefit-Cost Ratio. Through these tools the alternatives are ranked upon the risks and returns,
- 8) On the last step the best ranked decision is being implemented and monitored in order to achieve the designated goal.

This approach gives a thorough idea of how a strategic decision-making process can be constructed and is in regard of its complexity and integration of various components suitable for the use on a case of a destination. The theory behind the model can also be derived onto the case of a destination, as it also approaches high stake problems with several variables. As it has been emphasized before, a destination is utterly complex and needs a detailed understanding of it. Out of all these reasons, this model represents an applicable method of strategic-decision making in regard of it.

However, to guarantee the aspired results of secure, reliable, cost-effective and efficient solutions some further aspects need to be taken into account.

- a) A methodology or system for predicting future events or scenarios. Scenario-writing necessitates not only a grasp of today's facts, but also creative forays into the future.
- b) An environment in which future-oriented plans can be developed.
- c) Techniques for assessing circumstances and comprehending system behaviour.

- d) Methods for incorporating expert input into the SDM (strategic decision-making) process.
- e) A methodology for selecting the right strategy from a collection of alternatives.

According to Bhushan & Rai (2007, p. 5) these listed features need to be contained in a framework of the process. Making this, the previously mentioned pitfalls might be eliminated, or possible alternative decisions could be designed. These features furthermore contribute to the adaption of the process onto the entity itself creating a tailored-like setting for resolving complex problems.

Following the notion that the model above is suitable for the case of a destination; further aspects of the strategic decision-making process will be elaborated.

Competition and threats push companies and economies to make quick decisions in the face of a constantly shifting chaos pattern (Stacey, 1993, p. 11). Strategic decisions have a major impact on long-term success or failure. Therefore, it is important to choose the right decision.

To clarify, strategy involves “fitment” (Bhushan & Rai, 2007, p. 5). Internal capabilities of an organization must be compatible with the external world in which it functions. All strategic planning models are built on the internal-external framework, with the underlying premise that internal factors are controllable and external factors are uncontrollable.

On the other hand, according to Bhushan & Rai (2007, p. 5), decision-making involves “choice”. An executive or decision-maker may have more than one

option available to achieve the objective or goal (choice function implies a set of choices). Typically, the decision-maker chooses the best option based on his knowledge, instincts, and judgment. This leads to contextual and subjective decision-making that may or may not be optimal.

Therefore, to combine what was said, strategic decision-making (SDM) entails matching internal skills to the external environment by selecting the best option from a variety of possibilities. Scientific research aids in the quantitative evaluation of different options and provides the decision-makers with a reasonable basis for choosing the best choice. However, there are some possible pitfalls that need to be taken into account while making strategic decisions.

It is of utmost importance that the respective decision-makers are aware of pitfalls that might occur or hinder, during or after, the decision making process. This is due to the practicality of it. Assuming that one is aware of those issues that can hinder or in any way affect the process, one can address them priorly, to diminishing their impact or exclude them. This way, not only the process becomes safer on one hand, but on the other hand, the decisions may take upon a stronger stand and will be easier to implement. Out of all these reasons it is therefore of crucial importance that the decision-makers are aware of possible issues beforehand of making decisions (Clark & Krentz, 2006, p. 63). The most crucial issues within the strategic decision-making process are:

1. Uncertainty: Coping with uncertainty caused by a lack of information and a high level of difficulty.
2. Self-fulfilling and self-defeating prophecies: Dealing with the fact that things are not set from the outside but are heavily influenced by decisions.
3. Fragmentation: Dealing with the fragmentation of the policy-making mechanism into separate but linked regional functional groups.

Developing innovative methods to accomplish a specific goal necessitates a high level of imagination as well as sound judgment. It necessitates an inherent ability to see into the future, with exceptional foresight and the ability to navigate an array of variables that could shift in the future. Understanding the future and taking into account all of the variables in the face of uncertainty in order to develop a realistic plan for achieving a goal is a daunting challenge. This task cannot be completed ad-hoc, based solely on someone's intuition, experience, and judgment, particularly if the risks of a specific strategy choice are extremely high, and an uncertain or incorrect choice may result in catastrophic consequences later.

Decision-makers must anticipate potential contingencies or crisis situations before devising alternate solutions (Taneja et al., 2014, p. 79). A crisis is characterized as a critical stage or turning point that occurs over a relatively short period of time. As previously mentioned, the decision-makers needs a scientific framework in order to come up with potential solutions for dealing with different crisis situations. This necessitates a detailed understanding of potential crisis situations, how to prevent them, and how to deal with them if they arise.

In order to correctly and sufficiently assess the future it is vital to analyse the status quo or the actual standing point of the entity. It has been previously mentioned that strategic decision making entails matching internal skills with the external environment. These factors are also the main components of the SWOT Analysis as well as the TOWS Matrix. Therefore, to be able to decide and enact upon the right decision, a SWOT Analysis and SWOT Matrix seems inevitable in the process. How a SWOT Analysis and TOWS Matrix looks like and how one is conducted, will be presented and illustrated in the following chapter.

7. Empirical Methodology

7.1. SWOT Analysis

The SWOT Analysis is a strategic planning tool that focuses and evaluates strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (Gürel & Tat, 2017; Friedl, 2017). It includes internal (organizational) factors and external (environmental) factors. The analysis is conducted in a 2x2 matrix, and each quadrant is filled with the information which is relevant to the respective title.

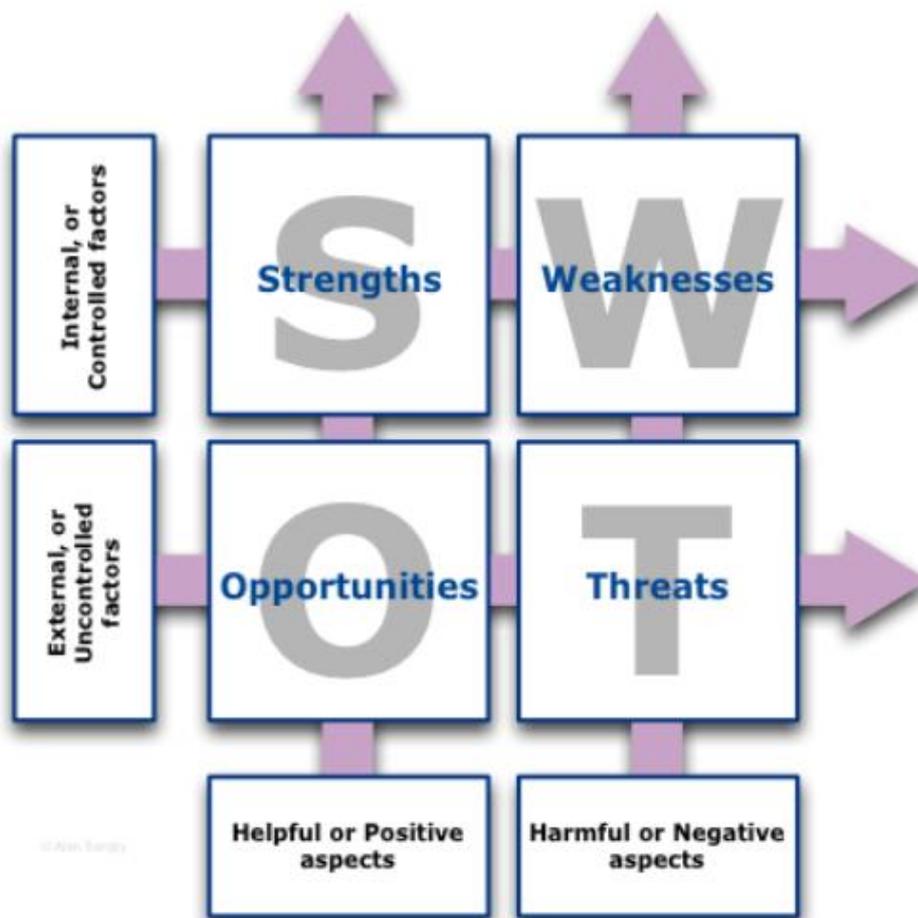


Figure 28: The basic SWOT Diagram. Sarsby, A. (2012). *A useful guide to SWOT Analysis*. Nottingham: Pansophix. Retrieved from <https://www.cii.co.uk/media/6158020/a-useful-guide-to-swot-analysis.pdf>

Yet, it is not possible to execute exact decisions on the SWOT Analysis alone. The TOWS Matrix is the next step in order of creating strategies. It provides means to strategic development in logically combining internal and external factors. This creates a four field matrix with the combinations Strengths-

Threats (ST), Strengths-Opportunities (SO), Weaknesses-Threats (WT) and Weaknesses-Opportunities (WO) (Kulshrestha, D.S., & Puri, P., 2017).

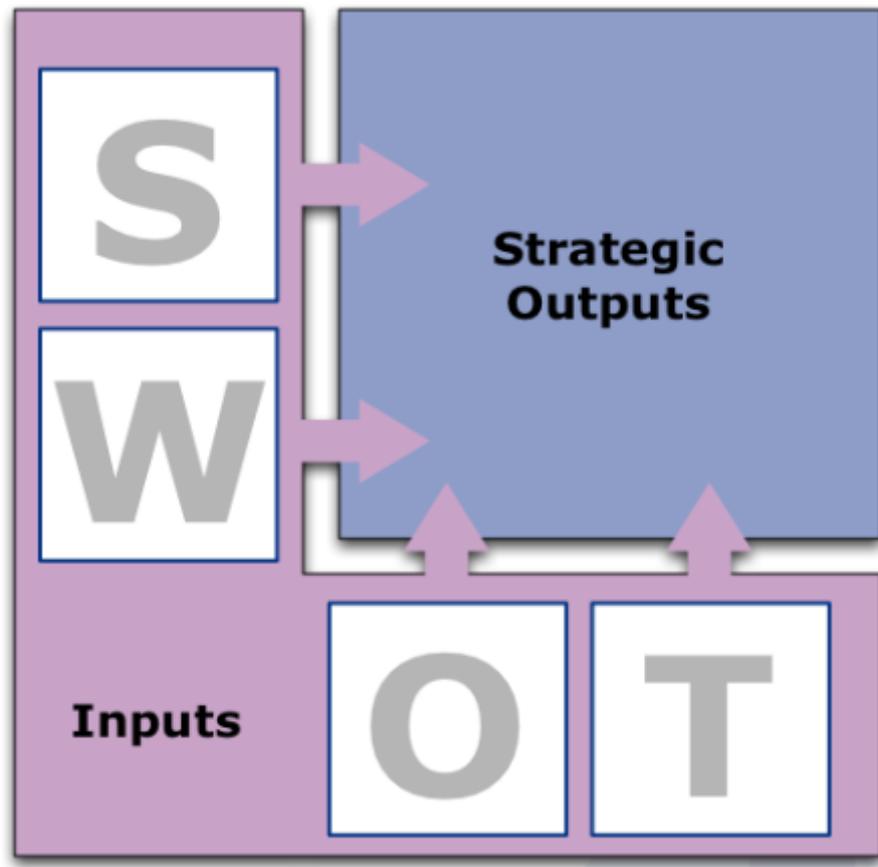


Figure 29: Transforming SWOT inputs in strategic responses - TOWS. Sarsby, A. (2012). *A useful guide to SWOT Analysis*. Nottingham: Pansophix. Retrieved from <https://www.cii.co.uk/media/6158020/a-useful-guide-to-swot-analysis.pdf>

7.1.1. Theoretical Background of the SWOT Analysis

The SWOT Analysis has its origins in the 1960s where the importance of strategic planning has become clear to business policy makers at the Harvard Business School as well as other business schools across the US (Friedl, 2017, p. 1205). According to Gürel & Tat (p. 1001, 2017) the research of Kenneth Andrews took the SWOT Analysis into the concept of strategic planning. Through his research the SWOT Analysis became a tool for an effective management process, which is still used today.

Yet on a broader scale of research, which is not focusing on the operational or strategic management of companies or in terms of this thesis, a touristic destination, two further, much older sources of the same notion appear. Questions of internal and external determining factors were already answered by the oracles of Delphi. Their motto "Know yourself" states the belief that strategic decisions should be based upon a precise analysis of circumstances (Friedl, 2017, p. 1205). On the other hand, a more politically influential work was created by Sun Tzu. In his work "The Art of War", has the Chinese military strategist and philosopher described the importance of analysing not only one's own weaknesses and strengths but furthermore the ones of the opponent too in order to draft auspicious war strategies (Lu, 2010).

These works put strategic planning into sincere perspective, showing its long history yet straightforward utility. It makes clear that the analysis of strengths and weaknesses is almost ancient, however the research of Andrews has turned the SWOT Analysis into an effective management tool which is still extensively being used today.

7.1.2. Development of Criteria for SWOT according to theoretical background

The SWOT Analysis method attempts to answer the question of strategy formulation from two perspectives: an external assessment (of risks and opportunities of the environment) and an internal assessment (of strengths and weaknesses in an organisation) (Gurl, 2017, p. 1146). The various degrees of control attainable within each viewpoint distinguishes the two perspectives. The external environment's complex and unrestricted nature can significantly impede comprehensive strategic planning, while internal factors are – or should be – more easily manageable for the organization in question.

Within the context of regional development, the SWOT Analysis is designed to highlight the dominant and deciding factors (Karppi, Kokkonen & Lähteenmäki-Smith, 2001, p. 17), both within and outside of the project's target territory, that are likely to influence the project's progress, as well as to generate appropriate strategic guidance by linking the project to its surroundings. Simply put, the strategy's goal is to increase the amount of information available and thus reduce uncertainty.

To fully grasp and be able to utilise the SWOT Analysis, its jargon or nomenclature needs to be fully understood. It includes several terms that need to be elaborated. This presents the further basis for the utilization of the SWOT Analysis.

The SWOT Analysis examines and determines data into Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats according to being internal or external factors. Those represent the four quadrants of the SWOT 2x2 matrix (Sarsby, 2012, p. 10). In the SWOT Analysis, internal and external factors are being used and accordingly elaborated, however, to explain what an internal or external factor is, it is crucial to understand what a factor alone represents.

Factor - An example for a factor is relevant data or information that has influence over a result (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). SWOT Analysis is primarily a data and information gathering structure that keeps track of input variables. In practice, each of the four boxes holds a list of factors, usually in the form of a bullet-point list.

To continue, the elaboration of the terms Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats according to Sarsby (2012), will be further elaborated for better understanding purposes.

Strengths - Internal variables that support an Opportunity or overcome a Threat as well as offer an advantage are called Strengths. Some examples of Strengths are

- Financial advantages. A strong balance sheet, positive cash flow, and a favourable credit rating.
- Advantages in technology and production (plant, machines and associated techniques).
- Marketing, sales, and reputation all benefiting from excellent customer service.
- Employees who are talented, dedicated, and well-trained.

Weaknesses – Internal variables that prevent an entity from taking advantage of Opportunities and increase its vulnerability to a Threat. Some examples of Weaknesses are

- Financial flaws, such as high debt-to-income ratios
- Technology that is outdated or inflexible.
- Long delivery times or inadequate client communication as examples of customer service flaws.
- Employee morale or a lack of skills.

Opportunities - Opportunities are uncontrollable external factors. Opportunities occur from a variety of causes, including competitors exiting the market, new social trends, and technology advancements. Even apparent restrictive legislation might be perceived as a positive opportunity if it reduces competition. Opportunities might be tangible (i.e., products and features) or intangible (i.e., improving your reputation or increasing your influence).

Threats – Threats refer to external variables over which there is no control over. Threats can take numerous forms, such as a new competition, stringent regulation, or aggressive takeovers. Threats can be both tangible and/or intangible. A hostile takeover attempt, restricted legislation, or even theft (of property and assets) could all pose a tangible threat. Intangible dangers

include, for example, the inability to obtain licenses (in many forms) or the risk of losing reputation or brand damage.

If an economic entity wants to be competitive in the marketplace, it must first understand the factors that influence its growth and development. They will devise appropriate strategies to deal with any anticipated situation once they are aware of both positive and negative consequences within and outside the company's environment. As a result, the most critical activity for an organization before launching any strategic development is to examine internal and external factors, as well as it is crucial that the stakeholders understand differences between strengths and opportunities, as well as weakness and threats.

7.1.3. Gathering Data according to defined criteria

According to the defined criteria above it is of utmost importance to distinguish between the internal and external factors in this project. To be able to do that, a set of data has to be given, which needs to be distinguished to be accordingly implemented.

The data of the region, which is to be analysed was provided from the management of the respective statistical units (NUTS 3) of the region "Amazon of Europe". The set of provided data includes various figures which illustrate the socio-economic picture of the region from the years 2018 to 2020.

Upon prior set measures, all the components of the data were looked at and decided if it is an internal or external factor. Those measures were described in the chapter above. To sum up, the division into internal or external was made upon the fact if the region or the management of the region can have an impact on it or not. The data was furthermore marked as such and written down in a spreadsheet for further examination.

Several internal as well as external factors could be identified through this process. They will be presented more elaborately in the following chapter, where the internal and external factors will be presented and thoroughly described.

7.2. Data analysis using SWOT Analysis

As previously mentioned, the SWOT Analysis takes the form of a 2x2 matrix, where the data is summarized in the according quadrant in form of bullet points (Gürel & Tat, 2017, p. 995). To ensure that the matrix is universally approachable, the quadrants are determined beforehand, to eliminate any possible confusion of false utilization of this tool.

As the SWOT Analysis is a 2x2 matrix it is dividable into two columns and two rows. In terms of the SWOT objective, the columns in the SWOT diagram distinguish between elements that are helpful and those that are harmful (Sarsby, 2012, p. 11). It is vital to note, that whether a factor is beneficial or harmful is determined by the SWOT Analysis's objective.



Figure 30: Helpful or Harmful. Sarsby, A. (2012). *A useful guide to SWOT Analysis*. Nottingham: Pansophix. Retrieved from <https://www.cii.co.uk/media/6158020/a-useful-guide-to-swot-analysis.pdf>

Helpful factors are those that aid the achievement of the desired goals; therefore, the Strengths and Opportunities count as helpful. On the other hand, harmful factors are those which hinder the achievement or involve a negative impact. Harmful factors are Weaknesses and Threats.

The SWOT Analysis can, however, also be divided into rows which represent the internal and/or external factors. These terms will be additionally elaborated in the further chapters, along with the respective factors that were identified for the case of the “Amazon of Europe” region, which will be used and implemented into the SWOT Analysis.

7.2.1. Internal Factors

The SWOT diagram's rows designate which aspects, characteristics or conditions the respective entity has influence over and which one not. Internal factors are those that can be controlled. Those are represented in Strengths and Weaknesses. Whereas, on the other hand, external factors are those that remain out of the reach of one's control, represented as Opportunities and Threats (Gürel & Tat, 2017, p. 995).

In the following, the internal factors for the case of the "Amazon of Europe" region, which were determined, will be presented as well as further elaborated with various visualisations in form of graphs and charts or landscape visualisations which were created and taken from the desktop version of the Google Earth Pro programme in order to enhance understanding possibilities.

According to the beforehand set criteria as well as the previously described characteristics, these following factors were determined as internal factors in regard to the "Amazon of Europe" region.

- Hospitality
 - Accommodation
 - Restaurants
- Attractions
 - Nature attractions
 - Culture attractions
 - Festivals & events
- Amenities
 - Infrastructure
 - Tourist information centres
 - Visitor centres
 - Medical centres

- Access
 - By air
 - By Bus
 - By train
 - Border policies
- Marketing
 - Channels
 - Frequency
 - Target group
- Products and Services
 - Bike Trail
 - Bike shops
 - Wellness & Spa
 - Adventure parks
 - Thematic and/or hiking trails
- Networks
 - DMOs
 - DDO
 - Stakeholders

7.2.1.1. Bike trail

Even though the bike trail is a sub-point of the products factors, which are available within the “Amazon of Europe” region, it will be presented and illustrated as the first point. This will be done due to the impact of the bike trail on the destination development, as it is the ten-kilometre-wide belt around it (REVITAL, 2020, p. 7), that defines the region and destination “Amazing Amazon of Europe”. Through this measure the framework for the future analysis will be provided, as the analysis will limit the research within the boundaries and borders of the “Amazing Amazon of Europe” destination.

As briefly mentioned before, the “Amazon of Europe Bike Trail” is the first worldwide transboundary bike trail, which runs through five countries. The bike

trail is 1250 kilometres long (Amazon of Europe Bike Trail, n.d.b) and it connects already existing infrastructure into this transboundary bike trail. The bike trail can be divided into the North (blue) and South (orange) route (Amazon of Europe Bike Trail, n.d.c) and furthermore into 27 stages (Amazon of Europe Bike Trail, n.d.). Both the North and South route begin in the town of Mureck (Austria) and end in the city of Mohacs (Hungary) (Amazon of Europe, n.d.b). Both the cities, Mureck on the West and Mohacs on the East of the region are pinned in the figure below. Furthermore, both the North (blue) and South (orange) route are visible below.

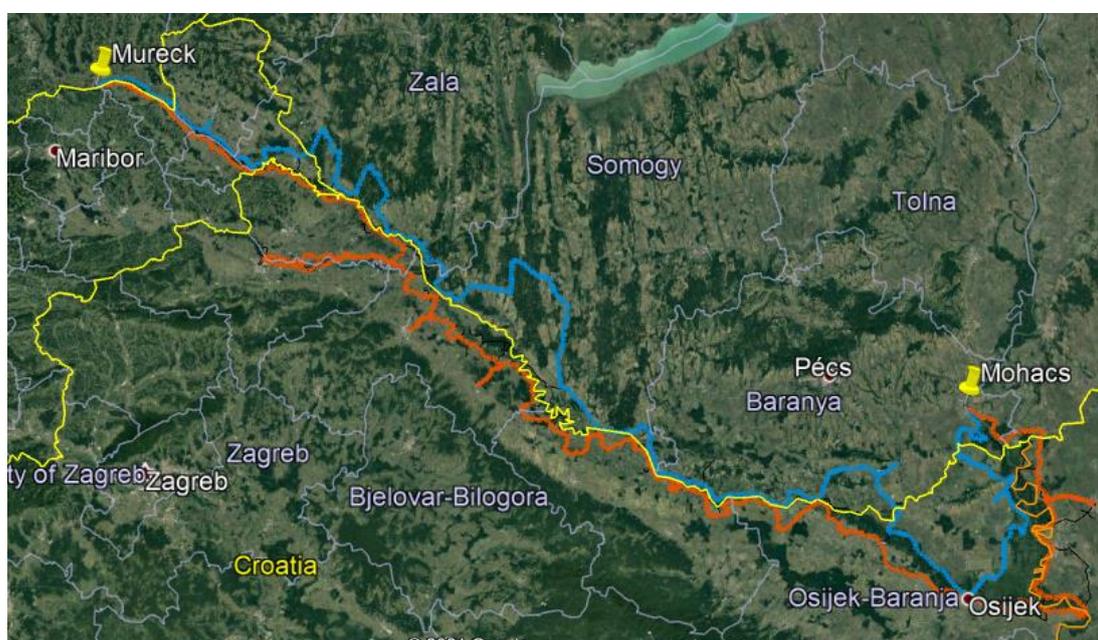


Figure 31: Own representation. North and South route of the "Amazon of Europe Bike Trail" along with the starting point (Mureck, AT) and finishing point (Mohacs, HU) pinned. Based upon the data forwarded by Iskriva and the respective tourism boards.

This bike trail was introduced in 2018, as the flagship product of the "Amazing Amazon of Europe" destination. The respective bike trail is crucial to the "Amazing Amazon of Europe" destination, as it is the ten-kilometre-wide belt (thinner red line visible in the figure below) that defines the borders of the destination (REVITAL, 2020, p.7). It furthermore represents the first bookable product of the destination itself. It is important to remember, that this marked territory is only a mere representation of where the borders of the destination

should provisionally be. It is up until to date not specifically determined where the borders of the region and destination are and with this problem it is also not possible to determine the actual size of the region itself. However, with the help of a computer programme it was possible to draw this contingent line, in order to limit the area of research and analysis. Below this provisional, however plausible area, can be seen and within the continued analysis of internal as well as later external factors, this marked area within the red lines will be used.

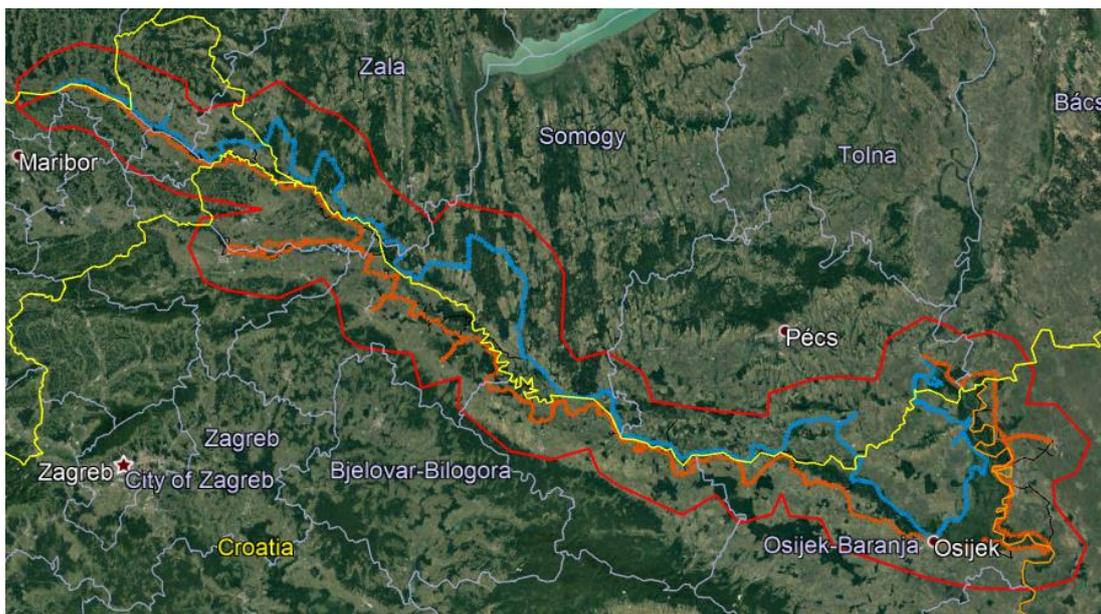


Figure 32: Own representation. The provisional border of the "Amazon of Europe" region, according to the ten kilometre belt along the bike trail. Based upon the data forwarded by the respective tourism boards.

Within the scope of the bike trail, the bike trail itself does not contribute to new infrastructure, however, on the other hand it utilizes and connects already existing roads, bike paths and trail into the infrastructure that presents the bike trail itself (Amazon of Europe Bike Trail, n.d.b). To assure, that the users of the bike trail do not go off trail, several signalizations and info boards are designed and offered to aid the cyclists. Below, these signalizations are portrayed, for better understanding purposes.



Figure 33: Planned design for the info board. Stuhec, V., Assistant Project Manager, personal e-mail, 16th June 2021.



Figure 34: Own representation. Signalization of the "Amazon of Europe Bike Trail" in the town of Bad Radkersburg, Austria

The visualisations above illustrate the both the North and South route of the “Amazon of Europe Bike Trail”, as well as the provisional borders of the “Amazing Amazon of Europe” destination. Furthermore, visible are the already existing as well as designed and planned markings and info boards of the bike trail itself. Following the analysis of internal factors, the factor of Hospitality, and within the aspects of accommodation and restaurants, will be elaborated.

7.2.1.2. Hospitality

To continue, the hospitality offer regarding accommodation and restaurants will be elaborated, within the borders of the “Amazon of Europe” region. A detailed description of the accommodation offer within the region will be given first, presenting where and how many possibilities are being offered as well as which type of accommodation is available within the area. Also, the number of available beds will be presented as well as the dispersion of the accommodation to analyse if there are possible saturations of offers or any locations with a small quantity of offers. The analysis will furthermore include the respective tourism figures regarding tourist arrivals, over-night stays and occupancy rate. It is however important to note, that this data was gathered on a NUTS 3 level by the respective tourism boards. Through the analysis, various lacks of data and information may occur as well as deviations of the actual state, as the counties border do not correspond to the borders of the respective “Amazing Amazon of Europe” destination.

Accommodation

According to the data provided by the tourism boards, 555 different accommodations can be found within the area of the “Amazon of Europe” region. However, through qualitative analysis, it was possible to determine, that not all of these accommodations are located within the ten-kilometre-wide belt of the destination borders. Below, all the accommodations as well as the

borders that define the "Amazing Amazon of Europe" destination (thin red line) are visible.

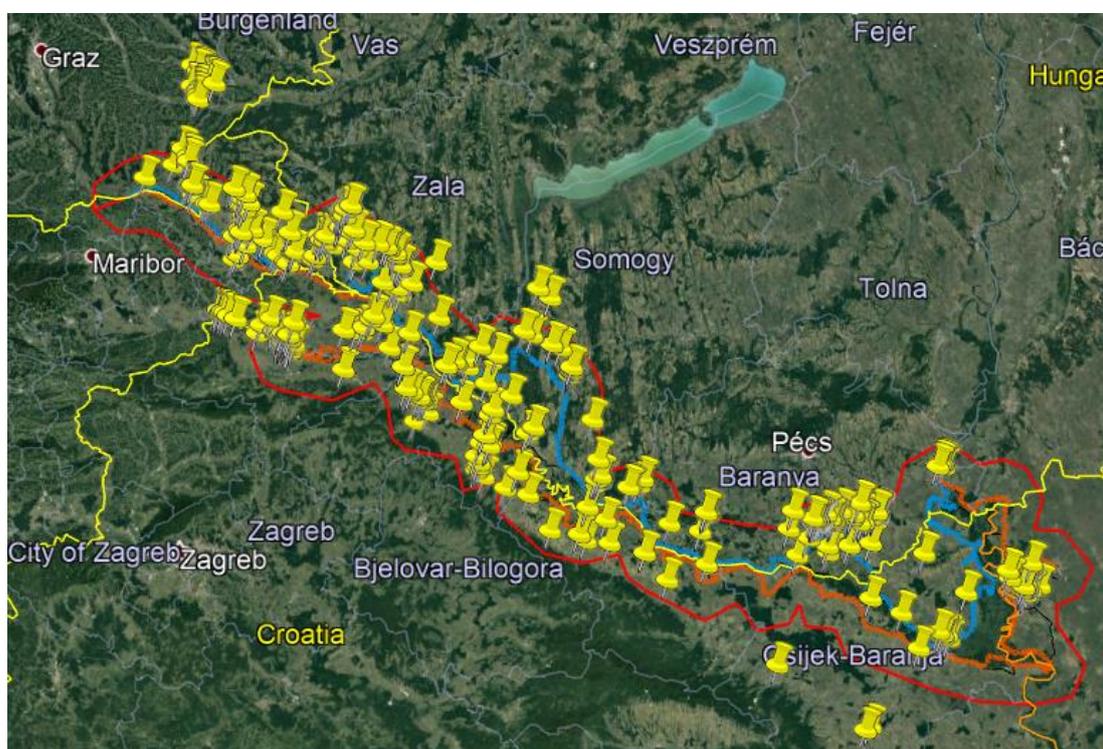


Figure 35: Own representation. Accommodation within the "Amazing Amazon of Europe" destination. Based upon the data forwarded by Iskriva and the respective tourism boards.

In the figure above however, certain accommodations are visible, that do not fit within the framework of the ten-kilometre-wide belt, therefore they are not suitable to be included in the analysis of the destination. The total amount of these irrelevant accommodations, which were mostly located in the Austrian county Eastern Styria as well as the Croatian Osijek-Baranja County and Varaždin County, is 33 resulting in the total accommodation possibilities within the borders of the "Amazon of Europe" region to be 522. These accommodations are divided into different categories, which are hotels (five to one stars), hostels, camping and glamping sites, camper stations, B&Bs and touristic farms as well as private accommodation (Amazon of Europe Bike Trail, n.d.). Of interesting notice is, that in the region "Amazon of Europe" no hotels with five stars could be determined, however, it would be questionable if the according clientele, according to the Amazon of Europe Strategic

Marketing Plan (2020, p. 16) would be the target group of the respective destination, to claim, that this observation would be of greater relevance.

To continue, the location of the accommodations within the destination will be further elaborated as well as possible saturations of them determined as well as areas with less accommodations identified.

According to the visualisation above, the accommodation possibilities are fairly even distributed with slight saturations at major municipalities (Amazon of Europe Bike Trail, n.d.c), which were described in the chapter 3.5 – Landscapes of the participating countries. However, even though the accommodations are fairly even distributed, it is visible that the western half of the region offers more possibilities than the south one. Moreover, there seem to be three areas within the “Amazing Amazon of Europe” destination, which do not offer an abundance of accommodation. All of them are located in the south half of the destination, which is probable cause of the seeming lack of accommodation in comparison to the western half (Amazon of Europe Bike Trail, n.d.b). The first area is located in the Hungarian Baranya County, through which the North route of the bike trail runs. On the other hand, the seemingly larger area without accommodation possibilities is the Croatian Osijek-Baranja County. It is important to note that the latter registers a lack of accommodation only in its area between the borders Virovitica and the municipality Osijek of the Osijek-Baranja County. The last area, which does not record an abundance of accommodation is the Serbian West Bačka District (Amazon of Europe Bike Trail, n.d.b). It is however important to emphasize that the data was collected on a NUTS 3 level by the respective tourism boards of the regarding counties. Especially in regard to the Serbian county the accuracy of the data gathering might be questionable, due to the fact that the tourism board recorded accommodation possibilities only in the municipality of Apatin and none in the municipality of Sombor, which is due to the formidable size of the municipality questionable. Moreover, the tourism board generally recorded

only a humble amount of accommodation possibilities, which further implies the questionability of the gathered data. Questionable also, seems the amount of accommodation provided in the Austrian Eastern Styria County. Even though it is located in the western half of the destination, the county also records a humble amount of accommodation possibilities in the area included in the destination, however, on the other hand, involved accommodation located at much farther distance than the actual borders of the region. Nevertheless, it might be arguable, that the distance of the bike trail, which covers the area of the Austrian county, presents a doable amount. Under these circumstances it might be arguable that there is not a lot of demand present, therefore a symbolic amount of accommodation was provided.

Nevertheless, these fairly well dispersed accommodation possibilities contributed to 2.856.219 tourist arrivals and 10.145.807 over-night stays in 2018, with an average occupancy rate of 21%. In 2019 there were 2.998.488 tourist arrivals and 10.426.058 over-night stays, with an average occupancy rate of 25% registered and in 2020 1.927.095 tourist arrivals and 6.715.206 over-night stays, with an average occupancy rate of 18% were registered.

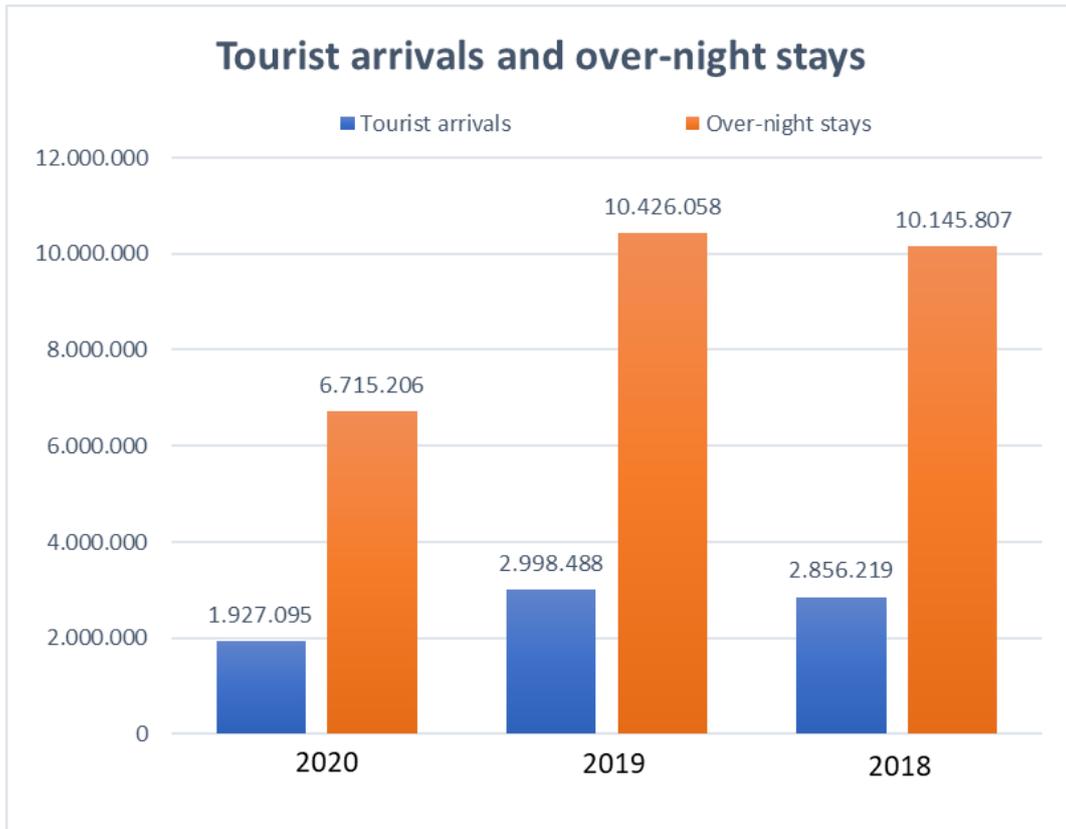


Figure 36: Own representation. Tourist arrivals and over-night stays in the "Amazon of Europe" region from 2018 to 2020. Based upon the data provided by Iskriva and the respective tourism boards.

The data from 2018 to 2020 was chosen to assure the actuality of the data itself. In the figure above the numbers of tourist arrivals and over-night stays are visualised. It very clearly visible that both the tourist arrivals as over-night stays rose from 2018 to 2019 and then massively dropped from 2019 to 2020. The same occurrence is detectable with the occupancy rate. The most probable reason for this phenomenon is the worldwide Covid-19 pandemic, which started in 2020 and caused many restriction regarding social interactions as well as travel habits and permissions. Many borders stayed closed, due to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, which very much impacted any possible leisure travel plans or habits. Resulting out of this is the massive decline in both tourist arrivals as well as over-night stays in the region. According to Eurostat, in 2020 52% less over-night stays have been recorded in Europe in comparison to 2019 (Eurostat, n.d.). As the region "Amazon of Europe" involves 5 countries and as those countries are independent, they have also taken different measures regarding the pandemic. Following this notion, an elaboration follows which of the countries and the respective counties have received the most tourist arrivals and reported the most overnight stays and vice versa.

	2020		2019		2018	
	Tourist arrivals	Over-night stays	Tourist arrivals	Over-night stays	Tourist arrivals	Over-night stays
AT - Eastern Styria	807.955	2.493.056	989.130	3.006.549	974.579	3.008.900
SI - Pomurska	221.961	739.972	347.645	1.078.273	311.940	982.465
HR1 - Međimurje County	40.986	105.920	82.914	200.928	77.060	189.803
HR2 - Osijek-Baranja County	47.849	119.298	111.195	234.029	100.415	202.287
HR3 - Koprivnica-Križevci County	7.253	17.856	18.924	35.010	19.591	40.124
HR4 - Virovitica-Podravina County	0	0	0	0	0	0
HR5 - Varaždin County	45.696	92.450	81.720	187.803	71.653	81.926
HU1 – Zala County	438.921	1.401.680	812.632	2.743.084	790.724	2.743.060
HU2 – Somogy County + HU 3 Baranya County	303.296	1.690.679	529.384	2.841.984	485.922	2.809.198
SR1 - West Bačka District	13.178	54.295	24.944	98.398	24.335	88.044

Figure 37: Own representation. Tourist arrivals and over-night stays of the respective counties. Based upon the data forwarded by Iskriva and the respective tourism boards.

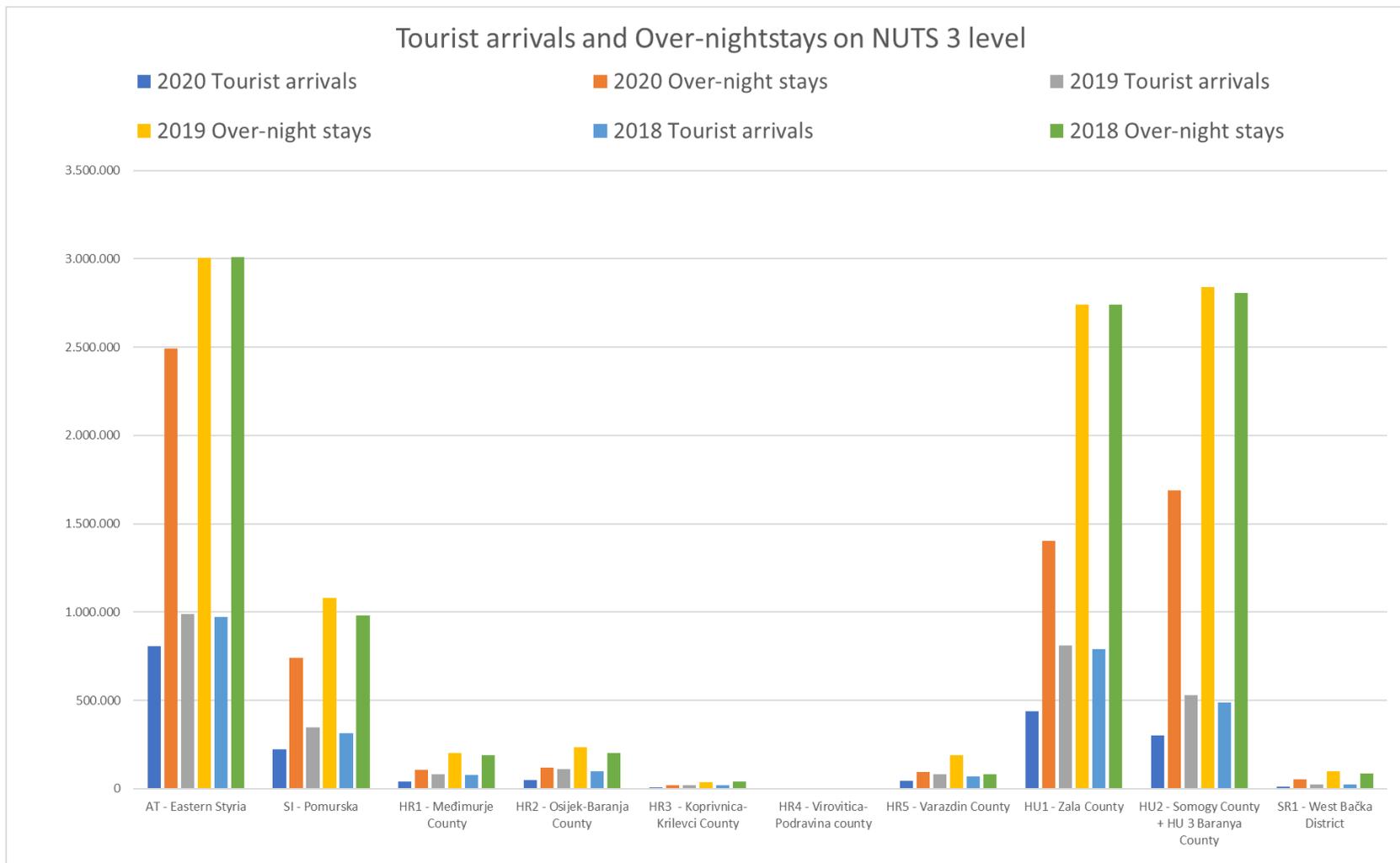


Figure 38: Own representation. Tourist arrivals and Over-night stays of the respective counties. Based upon the data forwarded by Iskriva and the respective tourism boards.

On the figure above the tourist arrivals as well as over-night stays of the respective counties are being displayed. It is clearly visible, that the Austrian Eastern Styria County recorded the most tourist arrivals as well as over-night stays in the time span from 2018 to 2020. On the other hand, the counties with the least recorded tourist arrivals and over-night stays is the Croatian Koprivnica-Križevci County. It is important to note here, that the Croatian Virovitica-Podravina County and the respective tourist board did not provide or contribute any data regarding tourist arrivals or over-night stays for the years 2018 to 2020. Of further importance is the fact that the data of the Hungarian Somogy County and Baranya County, got delivered in a collective manner, not distinguishing the figures between the respective counties. It is important to keep in mind, that the Hungarian counties are of formidable size, therefore, it can be derived, that the recorded numbers do not represent the actual state of the respective "Amazon of Europe" region. Therefore, the representativity of the data regarding tourist arrivals and over-night stays remains questionable. Nevertheless, due to the fact of available accommodation within the borders of the "Amazon of Europe" region, it is possible to claim, that some of the tourism figures were recorded within the region, however it is not determinable how much exactly. Therefore, additional caution is needed while engaging into the analysis of the provided data.

It is however important to note, that in the context of tourist arrivals as well as over-night stays and occupancy rate, two components have an impact on the presented data. The first one being the fact, that the data was gathered on a NUTS 3 level, meaning that the data contains information of the whole respective county and not only the area limited to the "Amazon of Europe" region. Due to this reason, especially the data about tourist arrivals and over-night stays may be influenced and therefore may not portray the actual state of the region alone. The second element that needs to be considered is the fact that not all respective tourist boards of the involved counties involved, were able to acquire and forward all the information needed to sufficiently conduct the analysis. This is especially important while considering the data of the

Croatian Virovitica-Podravina County, as they have not been able to provide any data regarding tourist arrivals, over-night stays or occupancy rate of the years between 2018 and 2020. Nevertheless, it is possible to claim, that the 522 accommodations are fairly even distributed. It is however inevitably noticeable, that the accommodations are saturated near the larger municipalities along the bike trail. As mentioned, the types of accommodation are versatile, therefore an abundance of possibilities is given for potential guests to choose from. However, even due to the many possibilities and good distribution of accommodation the numbers of tourist arrivals and over-night stays dropped, especially considering the years 2019 to 2020. Reason for that lay mainly in the worldwide Covid-19 pandemic, which caused travel restrictions, which further had immense impacts on the accommodation sector. In the following, the restaurants of the “Amazon of Europe” region will be further elaborated.

Restaurants

To continue, the restaurants within the “Amazon of Europe” region will be portrayed. A detailed description will be given of how many restaurants there are in the region, where these restaurants are located, and which type of cuisine is being offered. It will be furthermore elaborated if any visible saturations of restaurant are detectable or, if vice versa, there are any areas where the density of restaurants is smaller. This is important due to the fact that the data was gathered by the respective tourism boards of the NUTS 3 regions. Furthermore, only the relevant restaurants for the “Amazon of Europe” region is enclosed in the further analysis. Below in the figure the location and dispersion of the restaurants in the region is visible.

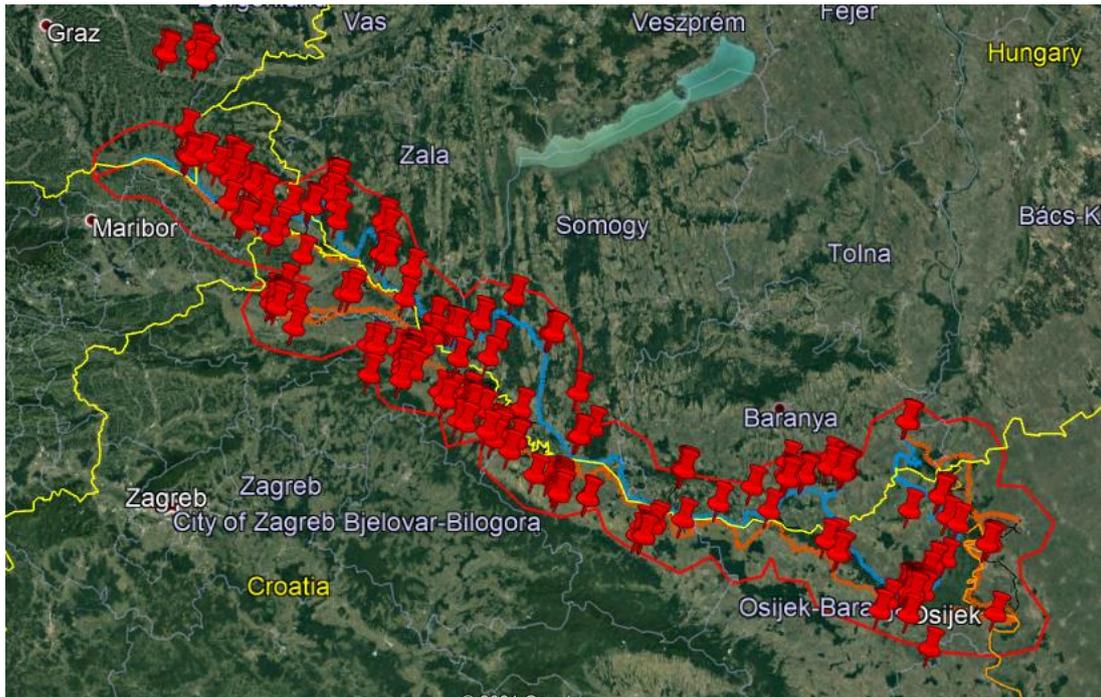


Figure 39: Own representation. Location and dispersion of restaurants within the "Amazon of Europe" region. Based upon the data forwarded by Iskriva and the respective tourism boards.

In the figure above the total amount of 334 restaurants recorded by the respective tourism boards are portrayed. However, due to the fact, that the region "Amazon of Europe" is limited by the ten-kilometre-wide belt (REVITAL, 2020, p. 7), some of these restaurants are not relevant for the "Amazon of Europe" region, as visible above. The total count of the irrelevant restaurants is 14 and the majority of those are visible in the Austrian county. Therefore, the total amount of relevant restaurants within the region "Amazon of Europe" is 320.

From of the figure above, two saturations regarding the location can be determined. Firstly, it can be clearly distinguished, that there are more restaurants in the western half of the region, than compared to the eastern half. Furthermore, especially the Croatian Međimurje County, Koprivnica-Križevci County and Vadaždin County register a high volume of restaurants in their area (Amazon of Europe Bike Trail, n.d.c). And secondly, a saturation of

restaurants along the larger municipalities are visible. On the other hand, however, areas with a lower volume of restaurants can be determined. Those are located in the eastern half of the region. The first area with a lower density of restaurants is the area between the border of the Croatian Virovitica-Podravina County and the municipality of Osijek. Only a few restaurants could be detected in this area, making it a potential risk in regard of restaurant coverage. The second area where the density of restaurants is low is the area of the Serbian West Bačka District (Amazon of Europe Bike Trial, n.d.c). In this respective area only 4 restaurants were determined by the respective tourism boards. As this number presents a formidable low volume of restaurants for the area, the representability as well as the process of data gathering remain questionable. Nevertheless, do the restaurants in the “Amazon of Europe” region seem to be fairly even distributed, giving the impression of adequate coverage with only a few areas which face a lack of it. On further analysis, it was possible to determine the type of cuisine these restaurants provide. Most common were restaurants that provide local cuisine, fish dishes or a la carte menus, followed by pizzerias and other fast food restaurants (Amazon of Europe Bike Trail, n.d.a). On the other side, some restaurants provide cold cuts as well as wine tastings to go along. It is therefore determinable, that the region offers a variety of dish types, which seem very encouraging in regard to different wishes the possible guest might have.

To conclude, 320 different restaurants could be determined within the borders of the “Amazon of Europe” region. The restaurants give the impression of a fairly good distribution in regard to their location, with only a few areas, which are not as densely covered. These locations might, however, have a negative impact on general tourism. Nevertheless, it is possible that not all restaurants could be determined within the region by the respective tourism boards. It is however possible to claim, that the restaurants offer a great variety of dishes. This presents an important addition to the development of the destination. Important to mention is that the restaurants, which were taken into consideration, lay within the ten kilometre range from the bike trail.

Nevertheless, further away from the border, more possible restaurants may lay. Those are however, not in the “Amazon of Europe” region and therefore not included in the analysis. Furthermore, important to emphasize is the fact, that similar as the accommodations were, also restaurants got impacted by the worldwide Covid-19 pandemic. Due to limitations of social gathering, many restaurants remained closed during the pandemic. Therefore, it would be important to verify, whether the respective restaurants opened, prior to arrival.

Hence the aspects of accommodation and cuisine, as well as accommodation, have been elaborated, the next chapter will include and elaborate the aspects of attractions within the “Amazon of Europe” region.

7.2.1.3. Attractions

According to Cambridge Dictionary (n.d.) attractions are something that makes individuals want to visit a specific location or conduct a specific activity. The attractions that were identified for the “Amazon of Europe” can be divided into nature attractions, culture attractions as well as festivals and events. These categories were chosen, as they embody the above mentioned definition and are therefore of relevance for the “Amazon of Europe” region. The identified attraction has been limited within the ten-kilometre-wide belt to assure relevance to the respective region.

Natural attractions have identified characteristics that attract tourists due to the natural beauty of the landform or the landscape in which the attraction is located (Achieving in Tourism, n.d.). The following are some of the natural attractions:

- Lakes and rivers,
- Mountains,
- Caves,

- Coastal features.

In the “Amazon of Europe” region a total of 49 natural attractions could be determined. These are fairly even distributed, nevertheless some counties record more natural attractions and some counties none. How the distribution of nature attractions is distributed within the respective counties is visible in the figure below.

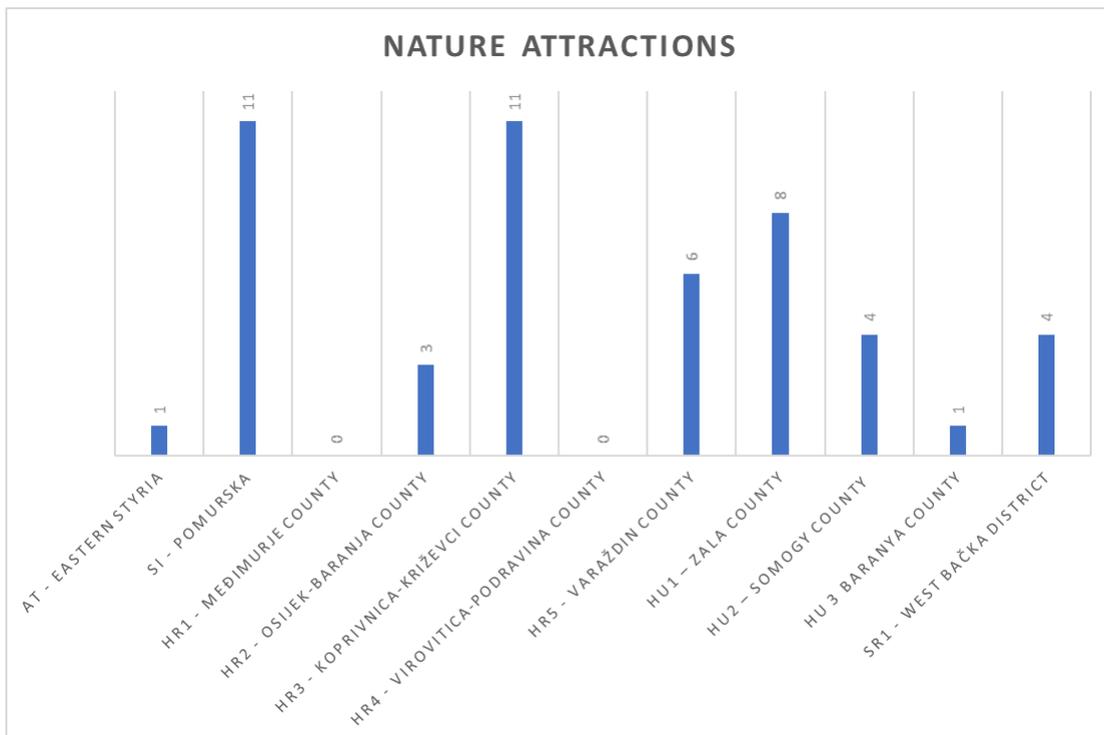


Figure 40: Own representation. Nature attractions within the respective counties. Based upon the data forwarded by Iskriva and the respective tourism boards.

It is clearly visible, that the Slovenian Pomurska County as well as the Croatian Koprivnica-Križevci County record the most natural attractions, which is 11. The least natural attractions are recorded in the NUTS of Međimurje County and Virovitica-Podravina County, with a total of zero natural attractions. It is important to note that the respective tourism board of the Virovitica-Podravina County did not provide any data in regard to any attractions, yet it remains possible that there are some located in the respective county. Furthermore, to

continue in this notion, all the data presented was gathered and forwarded by the tourism boards of the respective counties. Therefore, a possibility exists, that not all nature attractions were detected and gathered in the same manner or under the same circumstances and/or criteria. However, this possibility remains fairly minor.

To provide an example, some of the natural attractions that were identified will be listed in the following for better understanding purposes. In Slovenia, natural attractions worth mentioning are the Island of Love as well as the mineral springs in Radenci. Another natural attraction worth mentioning is the Vindija Cave in Croatia as well as the Arboretum of Budafa in Hungary. These examples have been chosen due to their diversity in order to provide the notion of an array of possible natural attractions.

To continue, the cultural attractions of the region "Amazon of Europe" will be elaborated. According to UNWTO (United Nations World Tourism Organisation) (n.d.), cultural attractions are locations where travellers can take in the physical and intellectual products of humans. Culture encompasses everything created by people in its widest meaning; nonetheless, certain accomplishments leave a stronger imprint than others. Examples for cultural tourism are:

- archaeological and architectural treasures,
- culinary activities,
- historic heritage sites,
- monumental landmarks,
- museums,
- religious venues.

Within the “Amazon of Europe” region 80 different cultural attractions could be determined. The cultural attractions are not as evenly distributed as the respective natural attractions within the counties, as visible in the figure below.

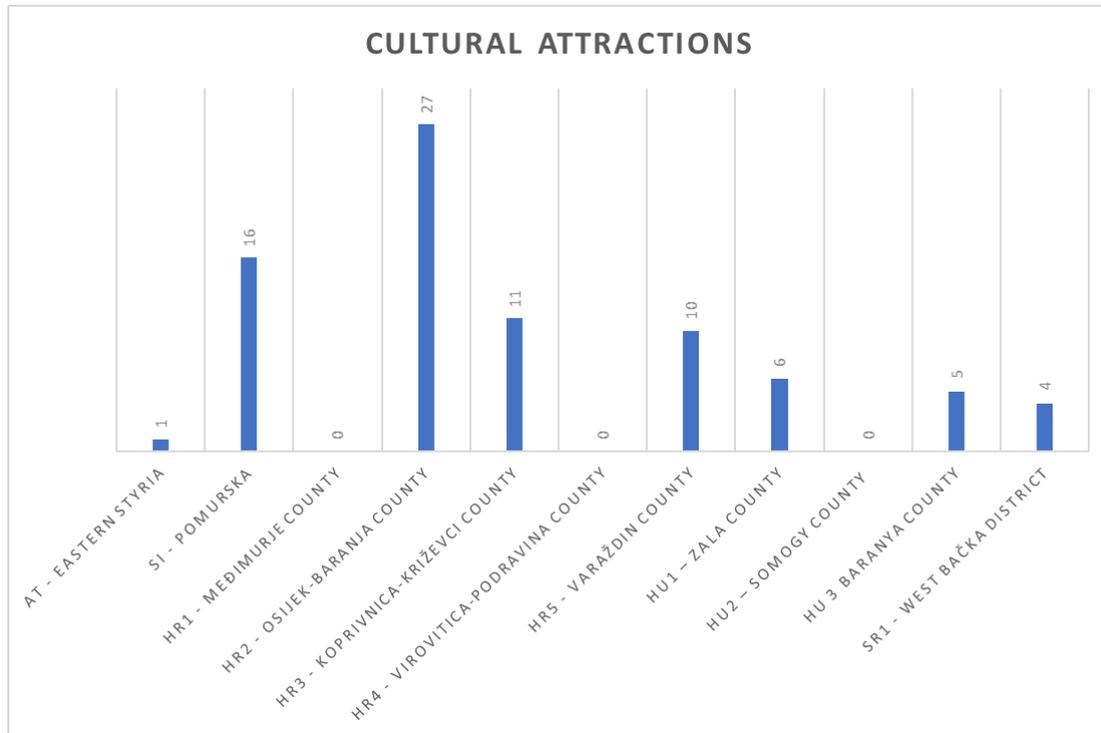


Figure 41: Own representation. Culture attractions within the respective counties. Based upon the data forwarded by Iskriva and the respective tourism boards.

It is visible in the figure above, that the culture attractions are not as evenly dispersed as the nature attractions. The most cultural attractions could be detected in the Croatian Osijek-Baranja County. The least cultural attractions could be detected in the Međimurje County, Virovitica-Podravina County and Somogy County, with a total of zero cultural attractions. It is important to note that the respective tourism board of the Virovitica-Podravina County did not provide any data in regard to any attractions, yet it remains possible that there are some located in the respective county. Furthermore, to continue in this notion, all the data presented was gathered and forwarded by the tourism boards of the respective counties. Therefore, a possibility exists, that not all culture attractions were detected and gathered in the same manner or under

the same circumstances and/or criteria. However, this possibility remains fairly minor.

To provide an example, some of the cultural attractions that were identified will be listed in the following for better understanding purposes. In Croatia the most worth mentioning cultural attractions would be the reformed Christian church in Lug as well as the museum of Slavonia. In Slovenia worth mentioning are the castle of Gornja Radgona as well as the famous mill on the Mura River. In Hungary, Csömödér Forest Railway (the longest narrow-gauge rail network in Hungary) counts as one of the best cultural attractions to see.

To continue, the festivals and events of the “Amazon of Europe” region will be presented. Within the region a total of 107 event and festivals could be determined. The following presentation will further categorize the festivals and events into outdoor sports events, cultural events and ecological events. According to Cambridge Dictionary (n.d.) an event is a meeting, party, trade exhibition, or conference, which is an activity that is scheduled for a specific purpose and generally involves a large number of people, whereas a festival indicates a unique day or time, generally in remembrance of a religious event, with its own social activities, cuisine, or rituals, or an arranged collection of special events, such as musical concerts or plays, that take place in one location (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.).

Festivals and events distinguish themselves by the fact, that a festival represents a collection of events, whereas an event represents a special occasion on one day. This is important to remember, as the further analysis will present outdoor sports, cultural and ecological events. To clarify, outdoor sport events emphasize the physical activity, whereas cultural events emphasize on indulging into the cultural activity of the event and further the ecological events emphasize on ecological friendly activities. In the figure

below these events can be portrayed and illustrated in how many and where these events can be found.

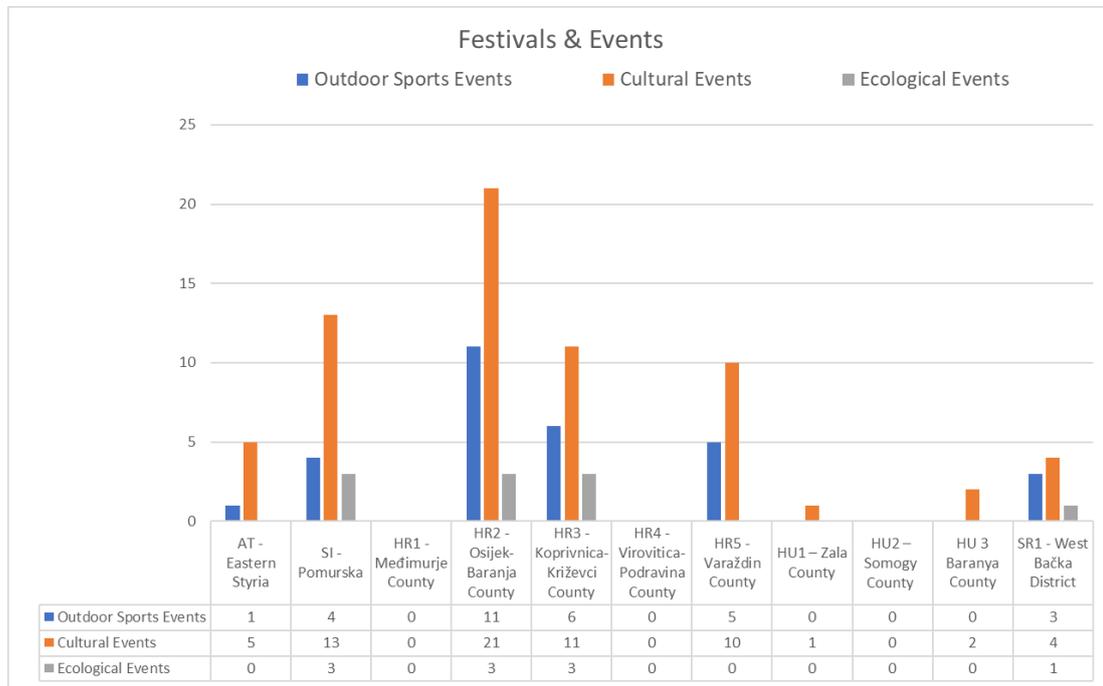


Figure 42: Own representation. Festival and Events of the "Amazon of Europe" region on NUTS 3 level. Based upon the data forwarded by Iskriva and the respective tourism boards.

In the figure above it is very clearly distinguishable that the Osijek-Baranja County records the most cultural as well as outdoor sports events within the "Amazon of Europe" region. It is also possible to claim, that the amount of ecological events within the region sustains a meagre volume in comparison to the other categories. It is important to note that the respective tourism board of the Virovitica-Podravina County did not provide any data in regard to any attractions, yet it remains possible that there are some located in the respective county. Furthermore, to continue in this notion, all the data presented was gathered and forwarded by the tourism boards of the respective counties. Therefore, a possibility exists, that not all culture attractions were detected and gathered in the same manner or under the same circumstances and/or criteria, however, this possibility remains fairly low.

To provide an example, some of the festivals and events that were identified will be listed in the following for better understanding purposes. In Serbia, the most worth mentioning are the International Day of Danube, the Deer & Beer festival and the Danube half marathon. In Slovenia, the Day for Change, the Pomurje Sport festival and the Street food festival in Murska Sobota are elaborate examples. In Croatia, examples for events and festivals worth visiting are the World without Borders, the Night of Wine and Art as well as the sport event Pannonian Challenge.

To conclude, a quite large volume of events can be detected within the borders of the “Amazon of Europe” region, which is limited by the ten-kilometre-wide belt around the bike trail. It is possible to claim, that a general emphasis on festivals and events can be detected, even though that they seem to be the least well dispersed across the region. Unlike the cultural and nature attractions, which might be lower in volume, however, are better dispersed, therefore, are not to be diminished in attractiveness and relevance for the region. To finalize, it is possible to detect an added value to the region through the offer and vastness of events within the region.

7.2.1.4. Amenities

According to the Cambridge Dictionary (n.d.) amenities are anything designed to make people's lives in a town, hotel, or other setting more pleasant or comfortable. For the case of the “Amazon of Europe” region, these following amenities could be identified

- Infrastructure,
- Tourist information centre,
- Visitor centre,
- Medical centres

These amenities will be further elaborated and visually supported.

Infrastructure

Under infrastructure any systems or facilities that aid society are understood, according to Cambridge Dictionary (n.d.). These are, therefore, also any facilities and/or services for the function of economies, or general anything that aids areas, cities or countries. For the "Amazon of Europe" region as relevant infrastructure, mainly the road system was identified, as it represents an important aspect of the bike trail alone. However, as already mentioned in the chapter 3.5 – Landscapes of the participating countries, the region, within the ten-kilometre-wide belt, already has a fairly well and interwoven road system to offer. Furthermore, almost all of the respective counties have a connection to a highway, which does not only speak for the good connection of the counties and region itself, but moreover indicates to the easy accessibility of the region. On the other hand, of importance, in the aspect of the bike trail, would bridges further identify as an integral part of the infrastructure. Mostly out of the reason, that the region consists of two river banks and the bridges would allow possible guests to take advantage of possible offers on the other side of the river bank, of which they would be currently located. On the figure below the bridges in the "Amazon of Europe" region can be seen.

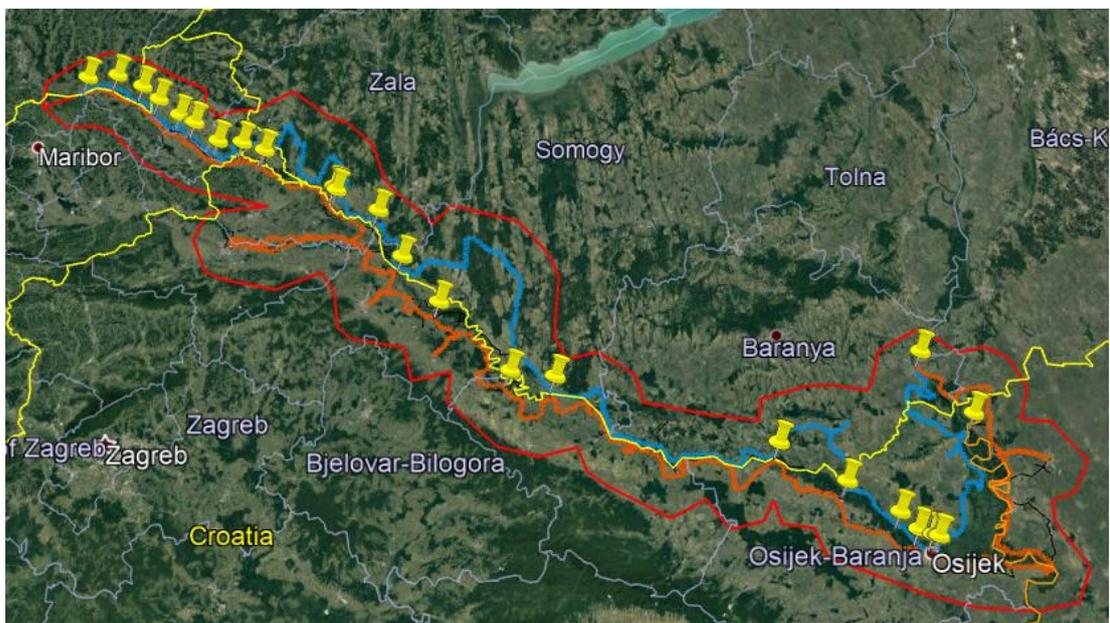


Figure 43: Own representation. Bridges of the "Amazon of Europe" region. Based upon the data forwarded by Iskriva and the respective tourism boards.



Figure 44: Pisane Zgodbe (2020). Bridge "Ižakovski Most" along the river Drava in the Municipality of Veržej in Slovenia. Retrieved from <http://www.pisanezgodbe.si/s-kolesom-ob-muri-po-prekmurski-strani/>

In the figure above, the bridges of the "Amazon of Europe" region are visible. The total amount of bridges in the respective region is 27. It is determinable, that the bridges are fairly even dispersed in the region, giving the guests plenty of possibilities of treating themselves with offers on both sides of the river banks. The only area, where a lack of bridges might be detectable is the area of the Virovitica-Podravina County as well the area Barany County. In that area only a small volume of bridges could be determined, making it not as good connected as the other counties. In the following, the tourist information centres within the region "Amazon of Europe" will be elaborated.

Tourist information Centre

To continue the aspect of the amenities, the tourist information centres of the "Amazon of Europe" region will be presented. Tourist information centres are a vital part of the touristic amenities in the region, due to the important task they have to perform. According to Collins Dictionary (n.d.) tourist information centres are an agency that provides information, to visitors who are visiting a region for pleasure or curiosity, such as recommendations for sights to see, lodging, and so on. In the figure below, the tourist information centres of the region are visible.

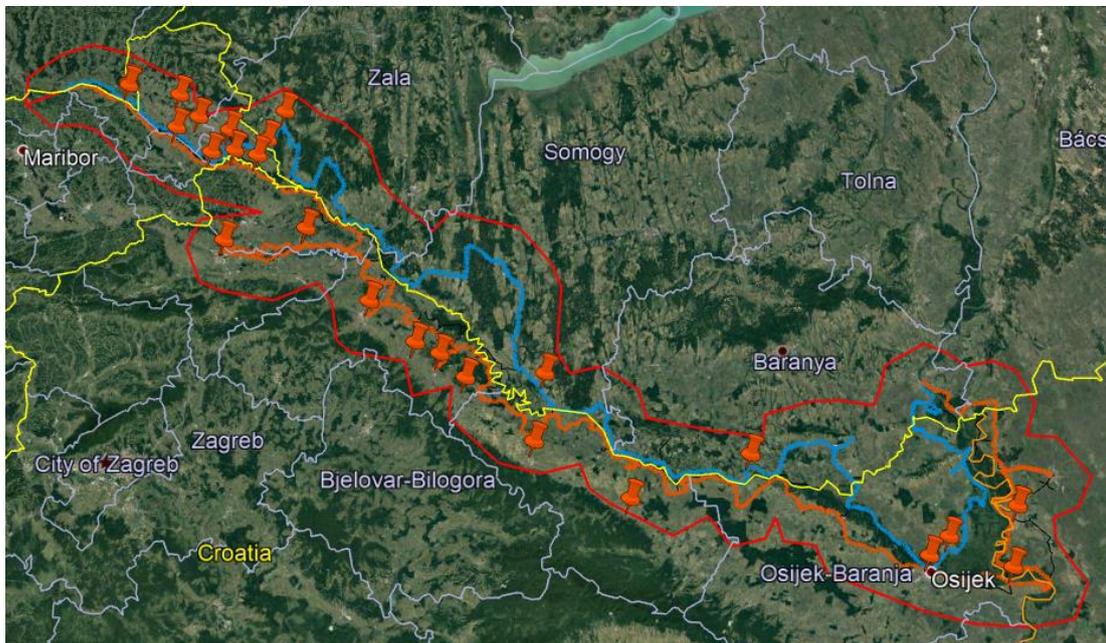


Figure 45: Own representation. Tourist information centres of the "Amazon of Europe" region. Based upon the data forwarded by Iskriva and the respective tourism boards.

The total of tourist information centres in all of the respective counties is 25. All these information centres are located within the "Amazon of Europe" region borders in order to assure relevance and are furthermore, mostly located at larger municipalities. In the figure above, it is however, very clearly visible, that the respective counties of Hungary do not provide an abundance of information points where information could be provided. In closer inspection, only 1 tourist information centre per Hungarian county can be detected, which in comparison

to the other respective counties of the “Amazon of Europe” region, represent a very meagre volume of information points. Furthermore, all the data presented was gathered and forwarded by the tourism boards of the respective counties. Therefore, a possibility exists, that not all tourist information centres were detected and gathered in the same manner or under the same circumstances and/or criteria. However, this possibility remains fairly minor for this occurrence. To summarize, however, it is possible to say that the region provides a considerable amount of tourist information centres, that provide any relevant information and that they can be found at the larger municipalities of all involved counties, however the concentration of tourist information centres is the lowest within the Hungarian counties. Another aspect of the amenities are visitor centres, which will be presented in the following.

Visitor centers

In comparison to tourist information centres, visitor centres are a facility or a combination of facilities that interprets a site of interest using a range of media, such as video displays and material exhibitions, and frequently includes amenities such as refreshment rooms and gift shops (Collins Dictionary, n.d.). In the “Amazon of Europe” region a total amount of 16 different visitor centres could be determined, which are furthermore, visible in the figure below.

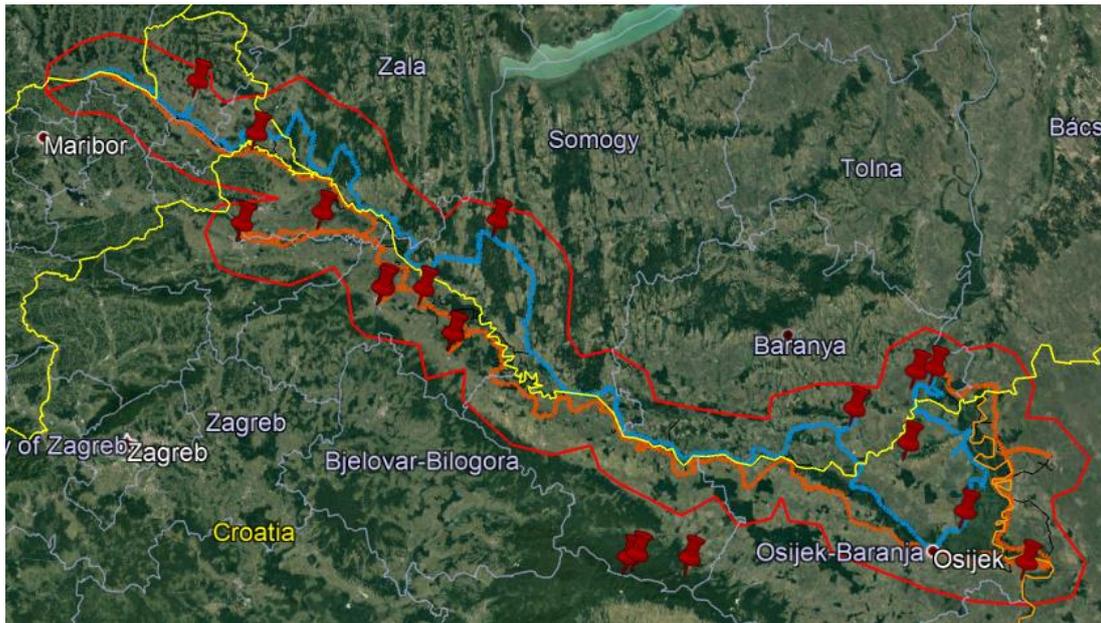


Figure 46: Own representation. Visitor centres of the "Amazon of Europe" region. Based upon the data forwarded by Iskriva and the respective tourism boards.

In the figure above the determined visitor centres of the "Amazon of Europe" region are illustrated. On the figure above, 19 different visitor centres are illustrated, however, due to the borders of the "Amazon of Europe" region three visitor centres within the Croatian Virovitica-Podravina County are not relevant. Furthermore, it is detectable that the Austrian Eastern Styria County does not include any visitor centres, and only a small volume of visitor centres is furthermore detectable in the respective Hungarian counties, except in the Baranya County, where more visitor centres could be determined. On the other hand, the largest accumulation of visitor centres is determinable in the respective Croatian counties.

To summarize, it is determinable, that a possibility to visit a visitor centre exists in the 'Amazon of Europe' region, however, it is not possible to claim, that an abundance of visitor centres is provided. However, of importance is that all the data presented was gathered and forwarded by the tourism boards of the respective counties. Therefore, a possibility exists, that not all visitor centres were detected and gathered in the same manner or under the same

circumstances and/or criteria. However, this possibility remains fairly minor. To continue the aspect of amenities, medical centres within the region will be elaborated.

Medical centers

Another vital element of amenities, especially in a touristic region with an emphasis on a physical activity are medical centres or hospitals. These are vital, due to the importance of accessible medical help in case a demand for it occurs unexpectedly. Therefore, to illustrate, how well the region is equipped for a case of medical emergency, the hospitals and medical centres of the region will be further elaborated.

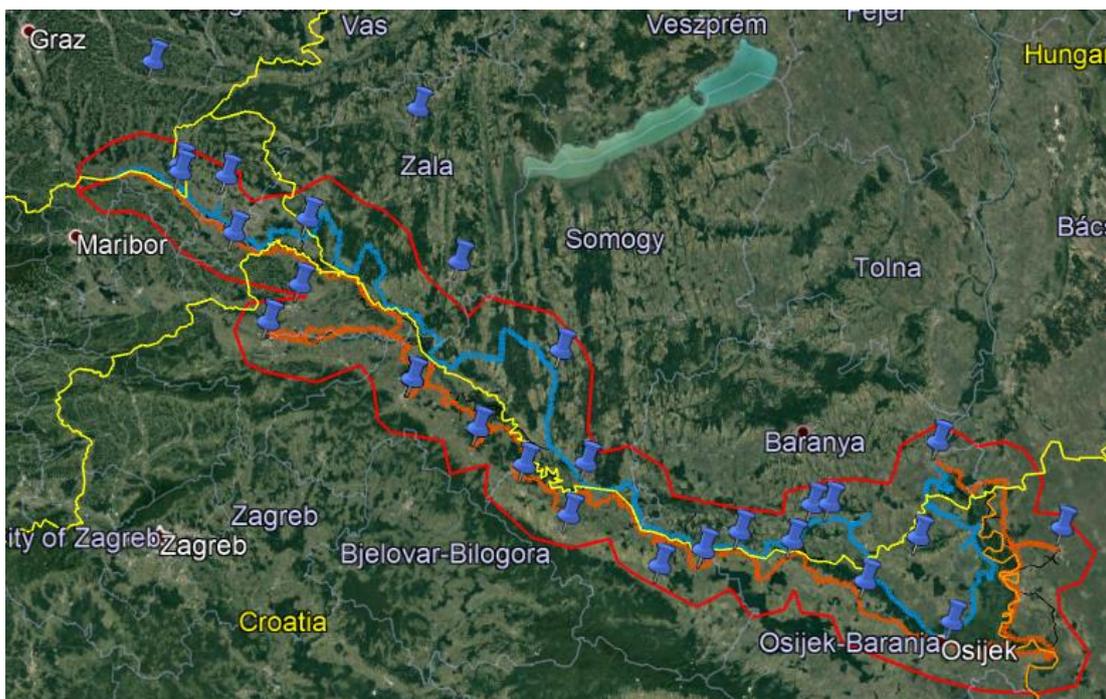


Figure 47: Own representation. Medical centres and hospitals of the "Amazon of Europe" region. Based upon the data forwarded by Iskriva and the respective tourism boards.

Above, a total of 29 medical centres and hospitals is visible. However, due to the limitation of the region by the ten-kilometre-wide belt, three medical centres do not correspond to the location framework and are therefore not relevant for

the case of the “Amazon of Europe” region. Therefore, 26 medical centres and/or hospitals are located in the region. It is visible in the figure above, that the medical centres seem to be dispersed very good along the South route of the bike trail, however, on the other hand, along the North route hospitals and medical centres seems to be not as commonly located. Nevertheless, it is possible to claim, that it is possible to attain medical help or visit a medical centre in case of an emergency whether along the North or South route of the bike trail. It is also clearly visible, that the medical centres and hospitals are located mostly in the near surroundings of larger municipalities, which speaks for easier navigation towards them as well as secure accessibility.

To summarize the aspects of amenities, it is possible to claim that the region alone is very well interwoven with as good road system. An honourable mention is, furthermore, that almost all of the respective counties have a highway connection, which speaks for the good accessibility of the region. Furthermore, the region provides a fairly large number of bridges, which provide the guests the possibility to take advantage of offers on both river bank, without regard on which route of the bike trail they are located. The region also records a considerable amount of tourist information centres, which provide guests with information about the region. On the other hand, there are not as many visitor centres recorded in the region as tourist information centres. Nevertheless, they are considered relevant in the aspect of a destination. One of the most important aspects of amenities, within a destination, are hospitals and medical centres. In this aspect, the region records a considerable amount of them, providing enhanced accessibility for medical help.

To continue the notion of accessibility, the respective factor will be further elaborated for the case of the “Amazon of Europe” region.

7.2.1.5. Accessibility

As has been elaborated, the region has a good road system, with connections to highways therefore, access by private car is very much possible, therefore, this option will not be further elaborated. However, on the other side, other options of access into the region exist. Those are divided into categories by air, by bus and by train. These will be further elaborated as well as their significance explained.

By air

All countries involved have an airport connection, however, only few of the airports are in the direct counties which are involved in the region. Most airports are located in larger cities of the respective countries and a shuttle service to the region alone is thus needed. Shuttle services are available upon request. Mostly they can be arranged, that they pick up the tourists at the airport and drive them to the prior set location point. Also, the pick-up and transport to the airport can be arranged. As the bike trail is the flagship product of the "Amazon of Europe" region, it implies that most guests visit the region in order to indulge in the physical activity of bike riding. Therefore, if the guests intend to travel with their personal bikes, it would be needed to clarify, if the shuttle service provides the option of bike transfer. In order to clarify this, it would be needed to contact the respective shuttle service, which does not resemble an issue as most of the shuttle services have an online presence.

By bus / train

On another aspect, the whole region is nationally and internationally good connected with bus lines, meaning there are buses which drive to and away from the "Amazon of Europe" region. Problematic can be the state of the schedule itself as some bus lines do not drive very often, especially on the weekends and/or remote areas of the region itself. Special focus needs to be set out on Hungary and Austria, as there it is prohibited to carry your bicycle

onto the bus. There might be a conflict of interest, as the region present a transboundary bike trail as their flagship product. On the other hand, the situation regarding trains is similar to the one of buses, just that bicycle transportation is possible. Furthermore, train travel is the preferred and recommended way of transport for tourists and visitors within the “Amazon of Europe” region (Stuhec, V., Assistant Project Manager, personal e-mail, 4th May 2021).

Border policies

As the region involves five different countries into the region it is also important to elaborate the border crossing conditions. Austria, Slovenia and Hungary are members of the Schengen area (Schengen Visa Info, n.d.). Therefore, crossing borders for EU-citizens should not be a problem. Nevertheless, an identification document (ID) should always be carried (European Commission, n.d.). For Croatia and Serbia, which are not members of the Schengen area, an identification document needs to be provided at the border crossing. No other documents should generally be required if the stay is less than three months (European Commission, n.d.). Important to note is that every country is autonomous, therefore, travel restrictions due to Covid-19 can be in place. How the current state of travel restrictions looks like, would be needed to be reviewed prior to arrival. Data on it should be available online or at the respective tourism boards of the participating countries.

To summarize, the “Amazon of Europe” region offers an abundance of accessibility options. Due to the good road system, accessibility through a personal vehicle is not an issue. Also, further, the region offers accessibility points through airports as well as train and bus connections. The only matter of issue could be possible travel restrictions and border policies due to the Covid-19 pandemic. However, these measures need to be checked upon, prior to arrival. All things considered, it is possible to say, that the region is very well

accessible through many different manners. It is, however, important to remember, that the data was gathered and provided by the respective tourism boards. Therefore, it is possible, that not all options of accessibility were described and elaborated in the same manner, nevertheless, the possibility for this occurrence remains low. In the following, the marketing and its characteristics of the “Amazon of Europe” region will be further elaborated.

7.2.1.6. Marketing

Marketing is the process through which an entity promotes the purchase or sale of a product or service as referenced by Twin (2020). According to Iskriva, the lead partner in the development of the “Amazing Amazon of Europe” destination, marketing is one of the vital tasks, which are to be taken with the utmost seriousness, to be able to achieve the desired effect (Stuhec, V., Assistant Project Manager, personal e-mail, June 9th, 2021).

The tasks and importance of marketing were furthermore divided into subcategories, for which inquiries were made towards the lead partner. These subcategories examine through which channels the marketing is being conducted, how often are measures being taken, which target group is being aimed at, how far does the range of marketing reach and how can marketing be utilized for further product development.

To start with the most relevant subcategory, the target group of the “Amazing Amazon of Europe” destination will be elaborated. It is important to define the target group at the beginning, on grounds which further measures can be taken and adapted upon the prior set target group. According to Vid Stuhec, the assistant project manager in the case of the “Amazing Amazon of Europe” destination at Iskriva, the main target group is defined as “Responsible Action Tourists” from the age of twelve (+12) upwards. Special focus is laid on population which pursue sustainable, active tourism from the DACH and

BENELUX market. Other target groups are also being defined as local population as well as involved stakeholders.

However, marketing measures are taken mostly to appeal to the main target group. These measures need to be placed somewhere adequately, to be able to reach the desired target group. Therefore, the inquiry about marketing channels was made. According to Iskriva, the main channels are through social media, with channels like Facebook and Instagram. Other channels, followed by social media, are (tourism) fairs like the ITB (International Tourism Borse) or the WTM (World Travel Market). However, due to the Covid-19 pandemic the marketing through fairs has been severely impeded as massive gatherings during the worldwide pandemic could not be organized. Nevertheless, it has been stated by Iskriva, that fairs will still be utilized for marketing purposes as soon as it will be possible again to attend them. Further channels for marketing are also regional and local live events to appeal to the local community as well as specially designed conferences to address other involved stakeholders (Stuhec, V., Assistant Project Manager, personal e-mail, June 9th, 2021).

According to the Strategic Marketing Plan (2020, pp. 15-16) the goals of the marketing segment of the "Amazon of Europe" as well as the "Amazon of Europe Bike Trail" are twofold. In the short term, it is focused on raising awareness about the brand as well as motivating customers to purchase the product. On the long term however, the marketing activities focus on brand image, establishing relationships, obtaining an online presence and carrying out creative marketing campaigns. However, regarding other subcategories, statements about the inquiries regarding the frequency as well as range of marketing measures could not be obtained. According to Iskriva, a detailed plan about the frequency of marketing measures is not yet in place. Furthermore, no comprehensive analysis of the range of these marketing measures has been done so far, therefore, it is not possible to determine its adequacy.

Lastly however, marketing does not need to be used solemnly for promotion and distribution of products and services. According to Iskriva, their marketing incorporates aspects of product development as well. It combines development of additional tourism products as well as stakeholder workshops and preservation of cultural heritage. Due to the specific approaches of these marketing measures, a general form of these could not be provided. Even though many specifics could not be obtained it is visible, that the marketing holds great value not only for sales and promotion, but also for development and conservation purposes.

It is therefore possible to conclude, that marketing is a vital component of the general destination development and that it holds great value specifically in the case of the “Amazing Amazon of Europe” destination. As Iskriva is the lead partner of this development, several inquiries were made about the marketing, its form, channels, range, frequency and most important target group. Even though data about the range and frequency could not be obtained, it was possible to determine the aspects of target groups, marketing channels and the attempts of marketing utilization for product development. In the following, other products and services, along the “Amazon of Europe Bike Trail” will be presented and elaborated.

7.2.1.7. Products/Services

The “Amazon of Europe Bike Trail” presents the flagship product of the region. However, due to the fact, that the bike trail is vital for the determination of the borders of the “Amazon of Europe” region, it was already elaborated as the first point of the internal factors, as all further ongoing analysis depends on the limitation provided by the ten-kilometre-wide belt from the bike trail, that sets the borders of the respective region. Further on, the bike shops and rentals within the region as well as wellness & spa’s, adventure parks and hiking trails will be presented and elaborated. Not included within this analysis will be different service providers like tour providers and workshops or organized and

guided tours as it would move beyond the scope of this case. In order to provide sufficient data to conduct a thorough analysis it would be obligatory to move past the possibilities included within this analysis.

Bike shops and rentals

As the respective bike trail has already been identified as the flagship product it also represents the most important tourism product this region has to offer up to date. In correspondence to the bike trail, it is possible to determine, that bike shops and rentals are almost of corresponding importance. This is due to the fact, that on one hand, if one is to travel with their personal bicycle, that possible repairs or spare parts would be needed and on the other hand, that if one were to rent out a bicycle there would also be the possibility to do so. In the figure below the respective bike shops and rentals within the region "Amazon of Europe" are visible.



Figure 48: Own representation. Bike shops and rentals within the "Amazon of Europe" region. Based upon the data forwarded by Iskriva and the respective tourism boards.

In the figure above the bike shops and rentals within the region "Amazon of Europe" are visible. A total of 44 bike shops and rentals could be determined within the scope of the region. It is clearly determinable that the dispersion of bike shops and rentals within the region is fairly even, with stronger saturations at the larger municipalities that lay in the region. Only a few areas within the

region are seemingly less covered with the scope of available bike shops. These are the Baranya County as well as the Osijek-Baranja County. Another area that accounts for only 3 available bike shops is the West Bačka District. Otherwise, the region “Amazon of Europe” provides seemingly enough options for bike repairs and spare part purchase as well as options for bike rental.

However, all the data presented was gathered and forwarded by the tourism boards of the respective counties. Therefore, a possibility exists, that not all bike shops and rentals were detected and gathered in the same manner or under the same circumstances and/or criteria. However, this possibility remains fairly minor. To summarize, however, it is possible to say that the region provides a considerable amount of bike shops and rentals, and that they can be mostly found at the larger municipalities of all involved counties. In the following, wellness and spas within the region will be presented and elaborated.

Wellness & Spas

According to Bacon (1998, p. 21) spa and wellness centres are an integral part of tourism within Europe. People generally visit spas and wellness centres to exercise and receive particular treatments in order to enhance their health (Collins Dictionary, n.d.). As the destination “Amazon of Europe” also incorporates aspects of health improvement, the spas and wellness centres represent a valuable addition to the region. In the figure below all wellness centres and spas within the region are visualized.

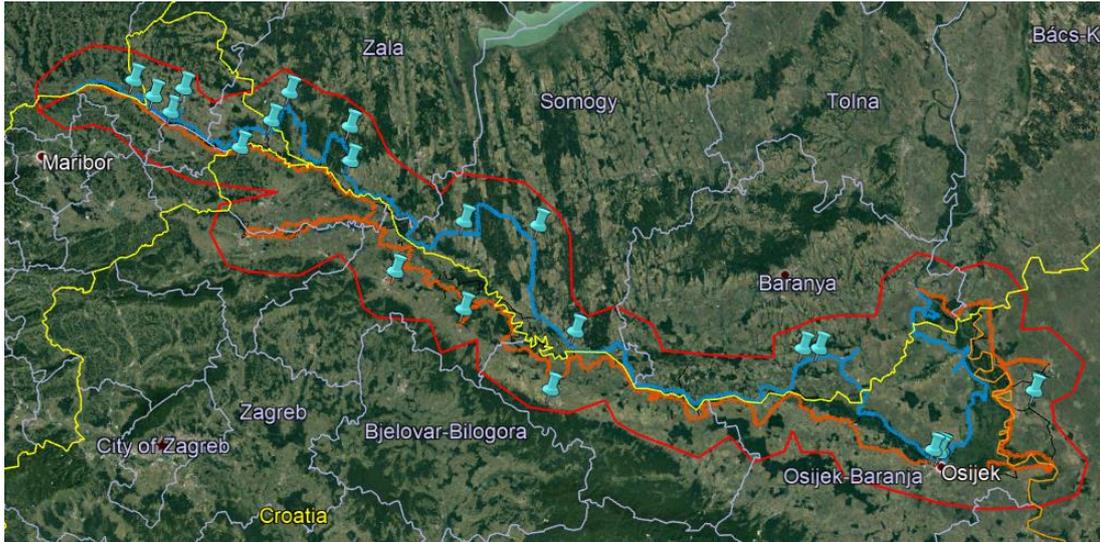


Figure 49: Own representation. Wellness centres and spas within the "Amazon of Europe" region. Based upon the data forwarded by Iskriva and the respective tourism boards.

In the figure above all 21 wellness centres and spas in the region "Amazon of Europe" are visible. Through the visualisation it is clearly visible that the region does not offer an abundance of wellness centres and spas within the borders of the "Amazon of Europe" region. A clear distinction is visible, that wellness centres and spas are mostly, by large majority, located within the larger municipalities within the region. There are many areas, which do not have any wellness centres or spas, mostly however in Croatia.

Nevertheless, it is not possible to say that there is no option to attend any wellness centres or spas, yet it is clearly visible that there is possible development need into this direction. It is however important to note that the data was collected on a NUTS 3 level by the respective tourism boards. It is therefore possible that not all wellness centres and spas could be determined or have been determined under the same criteria. However, the possibility lays low for this occurrence. It is, nevertheless, possible to conclude that the region offers options to attend wellness centres and spas, however it is important to note that the total number remains fairly low. In the following, adventure parks motoric parks and hiking trails of the region "Amazon of Europe" will be presented.

Hiking Trails

Within the borders of the “Amazing Amazon of Europe” destination, several other tourism products can be found, along with the “Amazon of Europe Bike Trail”. In this subcategory the adventure and motoric parks as well as hiking trails within the region will be described and elaborated. As has been clear up until now, the “Amazon of Europe” offers a vastness of possibilities to get to know and learn about nature conservation as well as local culture and heritage. One way to learn about the region is going on hiking trails within the region. The “Amazing Amazon of Europe” offers 27 different hiking trails. These are visible in the figure below.



Figure 50: Own representation. Hiking Trails within the "Amazon of Europe" region. Based upon the data forwarded by Iskriva and the respective tourism boards.

It is visible in the figure above that the region offers a considerable amount of different hiking trails. Most of them are located along the rives Mura, Drava and Danube, which additionally affirms the importance of the rivers for the region. The hiking trails seem to be fairly even distributed. Important to mention is that the figure above shows other hiking trails too, which however are located outside of the ten kilometre belt along the bike trail, which makes them irrelevant for the case of the “Amazon of Europe” region. This occurrence is

due to the fact, that the data was gathered on a NUTS 3 level by the respective tourism boards. Therefore, a possibility exists, that not all hiking trails were detected and gathered in the same manner or under the same circumstances and/or criteria. However, this possibility remains fairly minor. To summarize, however, it is possible to say that the region provides a considerable amount of hiking trails, and that they can be mostly found along the rivers Mura, Drava and Danube. In the following, adventure and motoric parks within the region will be presented and elaborated.

Adventure and Motoric parks

Adventure and motoric parks are, compared to hiking trails, less intended for learning purposes. However, they are mostly designed for recreational purposes, and they usually entail climbing exercises, courses with obstacles rock climbing or bouldering or other specifically targeted activities according to Collins Dictionary (n.d.). In the figure below, the adventure and motoric parks within the “Amazon of Europe” are visible.

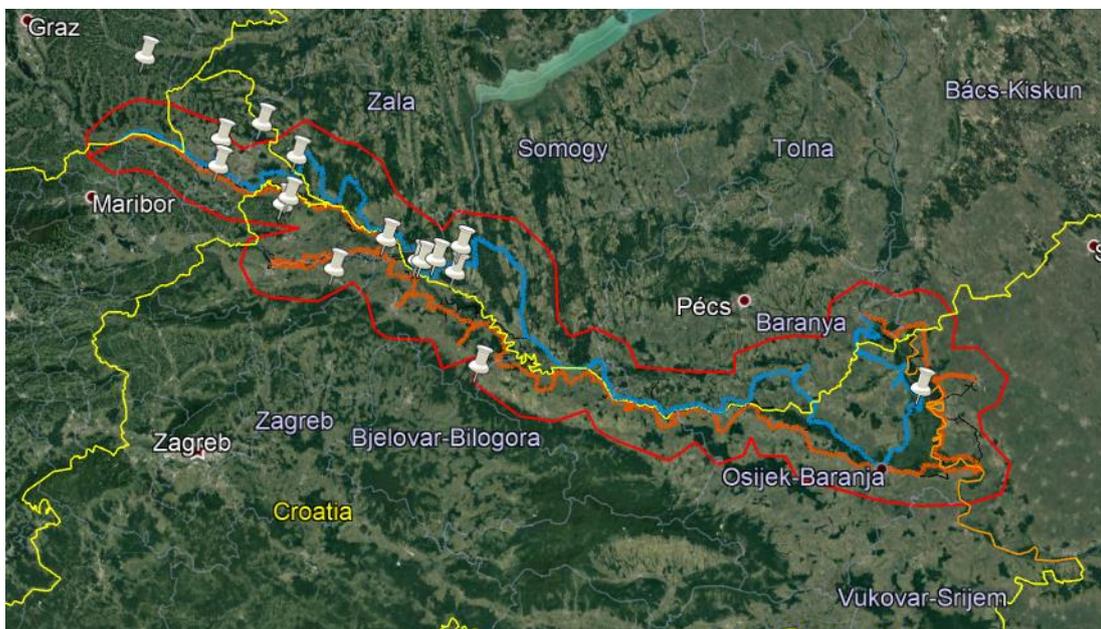


Figure 51: Own representation. Adventure and Motoric Parks within the "Amazon of Europe" region. Based upon the data forwarded by Iskriva and the respective tourism boards.

Through an analysis and gathering of data on a NUTS 3 level 16 adventure and motoric parks could be determined. It is clearly visible, that the region “Amazon of Europe” does not provide an abundance of adventure and motoric parks within its borders. Those that can be found are furthermore located in the western half of the region, making it therefore very clear, that the dispersion within the region is not even. It is however important to mention that the data was gathered on a NUTS 3 level by the respective tourism boards. It is therefore possible, that the data was not gathered in the same manner or under the same circumstances and with the same criteria, nevertheless, the possibility remains low. It is therefore possible to conclude, that the region “Amazon of Europe” offers possibilities to visit adventure and motoric parks, however, the dispersion is uneven, therefore the possibilities may seem limited throughout the whole region.

Therefore, it is possible to conclude, that the “Amazon of Europe” region provides a considerable amount of tourism products, whereas the “Amazon of Europe Bike Trail” represents the most prominent product. Following, several bike shops and rentals could be determined as well as wellness centres and spas could be identified. The least evenly distributed, but still present products are adventure and motoric parks, where one may indulge in different activities. Furthermore, many hiking trails could be identified within the borders of the respective region. In the following, the network aspect of the “Amazon of Europe” region will be presented and elaborated.

7.2.1.8. Networks

Networks are a vital part in the case of the “Amazon of Europe” region as well as the development of the “Amazing Amazon of Europe” destination, not only for the management but also for information sharing and provision of help and support. It is vitally important to understand how the region and later destination operate. As has been displayed in the chapter 4.1 – What is a Destination?; a destination requires a form of management or a DMO

(Destination Management Organization), which will usually take form of local councils, tourism boards or development organizations. However, in regard to the destination “Amazing Amazon of Europe” the establishment of a DMO is not possible, as all participating countries and the respective NUTS can act autonomously, i.e., decide for themselves..

As mentioned, a DMO is in charge of the management of the destination, however, that is due to the previous mentioned reason not possible, therefore, a DDO or Destination Development Organization, with Iskriva, a Slovenian company, as lead partner in this European project, was established. The respective counties are not obligated to participate in this organisation, however, to assure an even development and unified standards the respective counties are very much encouraged to participate in order for them to mutually share knowledge and learn from each other. Up to date, however, it is not possible to determine, which or how many of the of the counties are willing to participate, however, according to the lead partner Iskriva (Stuhec, V., Assistant Project Manager, personal e-mail, May 25th, 2021), all of the counties have been repeatedly invited to. According to Iskriva, a furthermore integral part of the regions network is the local population as well as all included stakeholders. Even though the importance of the stakeholders has been made significantly clear, information about who the specific stakeholders are could not be obtained. Therefore, it is not possible to determine which stakeholders are involved in the development of the “Amazing Amazon of Europe” destination. It may hence pose a difficulty to elaborate how the network within the region operates as well as how resilient and capable this network is. It is, nevertheless, important to mention that this network is still at its early stages as well as the development of the destination itself finds itself at the initial phase, which means that possible changes on the operational level might still be introduced.

Networks are a vital part of touristic destinations as well as of their development. The most utilized way to coordinate this is through a so called DMO or Destination Management Organization. However, in the case of the "Amazon of Europe" an establishment of a DMO is not possible. Therefore, a DDO or Destination Development Organization was established, where the participation of the respective countries is not obligatory, due to their autonomy, however it is strongly recommended in order to proceed with the development with a combined effort and pace. Additionally, information regarding stakeholders could not be obtained. This hinders the understanding possibilities of the respective network. Nevertheless, it is important to mention that the network and the destination development itself are at an early stage, where many changes may still occur as well as better understanding of the network might be obtained. In the following chapter, the external factors regarding the case of the "Amazing Amazon od Europe" destination will be presented, elaborated and if possible, visually supported.

7.2.2. External Factors

As has been previously mentioned, the external factors are characteristics or conditions in various forms, over which the respective entity has no control (Sarsby, 2012, p. 10). In the following, the external factors for the case of the "Amazon of Europe" region, which were determined, will be presented as well as further elaborated.

According to the beforehand set criteria as well as the previously described characteristics, these below stated factors were determined as external factors in regard to the "Amazon of Europe" region.

- EU policy
 - legislation
 - Borders & travel restrictions
- Biosphere Reserve framework
 - Nature conservation

- Sustainable development
- Logistic support
- Employment rate
- Social stability
- Economic growth & GDP
- Health risks
- Tourism trends

7.2.2.1. EU policy

To briefly describe the legislation characteristics as well as further border policies and travel restrictions, it is important to understand the organization of the participating countries. As the development of the “Amazing Amazon of Europe” destination presents a European project, it is strongly implied that the participating countries belong to the European Union. The European Union is a geopolitical as well as economic union, uniting 27 countries (European Union, 2021). According to the European Union (2021) it was established in 1993 under the Maastricht treaty and since then it stands for a single internal market incorporating a standardized set of laws. The first steps towards this union were however already made in 1952 under the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) (EUR-Lex, n.d.). The EU policies ensure free movement of goods and people as well as maintain and enact common policies regarding trade, regional development and other (European Commission, n.d.). Nonetheless, the European framework applies to four of the five participating countries, leaving one country, Serbia, without a membership. However, in spite of that, all participating countries remain autonomous with their own legislation and law system. Nevertheless, the respective four countries also integrate the common set of laws established by the European Union.

For the case of the “Amazon of Europe” region, this analysis and description of the European Union, its legislation and its characteristics stands as adequate and sufficient in regard to this case. A more elaborate and in-depth research and analysis will therefore not be needed. Furthermore, it would

move beyond the possible and necessary scope, needed for this particular case of the “Amazon of Europe” region.

Another aspect important to remember is the existence of the Schengen area, which was established in 1995 (European Commission, 2008). The Schengen area is an area within the European Union that completely abolishes the need for border controls, i.e. passports. The area operates within a single jurisdiction, incorporating a shared visa policy enabling unstrained international travel for all Schengen member countries (European Commission, 2008). Meaning that everyone residing in a Schengen member country may travel without any major restrictions into another member country. This fact is important to note as of the respective five countries involved in the “Amazon of Europe” region, only three (Austria, Hungary and Slovenia) are Schengen member states. This may present a limitation to the region as two of the participating countries are not members of the respective Schengen area and may therefore limit and/or restrict international travel. Therefore, it is needed to conduct a prior check-up on current border crossing measures.

In spite of the membership in the European Union or the Schengen area, it is of vital importance to take the worldwide Covid-19 pandemic into account. As mentioned before, the pandemic critically impacted the tourism sector on a worldwide spectrum. It furthermore led to many travel restrictions both on a national and international level (European Commission, n.d.). Nevertheless, travel might still be possible, however, potential restrictions and/or measures might be in place (Re-open Europe, n.d.). Therefore, a prior check-up would be important.

To summarize, four out of five respective countries of the “Amazon of Europe” region are members of the European Union. To continue however, only three of the respective countries involved, are also members of the Schengen area, leaving Croatia without a Schengen membership and Serbia without any memberships. This is of importance, due to the fact, that even though the

countries are autonomous, they share a certain set of rules and laws. And including these rules and laws are travel restrictions, which need to be considered in the case of a transboundary bike trail and destination. Along with these restrictions, the potential restrictions, due to the worldwide Covid-19 pandemic needs to be considered.

It has been clarified, what the frameworks of the European Union and Schengen area represent as well as further elaborated how these frameworks may or may not impact the possible travel restrictions. This is of importance as the region aspires to become a transboundary destination, where traveling and border crossing is of vital importance. However, on the other hand, the region already represents a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve. Therefore, the framework and characteristics of the UNESCO Biosphere Reserve will be elaborated in the following chapter.

7.2.2.2. Biosphere Reserve

The “Amazon of Europe” is a designated UNESCO Biosphere Reserve. As described in the chapter 5 – Biosphere Reserve, a Biosphere Reserve is a region or an area that follows the framework of the Man and the Biosphere (MAB) Programme designed by UNESCO. The MAB Programme incorporates three basic pillars that the designated region has to follow. These are, as elaborated by the UNESCO (n.d.) nature conservation, sustainable development and logistical support within the region.

The MAB Program alone was introduced in 1971 and has ever since designated 714 regions as Biosphere Reserves worldwide (UNESCO, n.d.), where nature conservation and sustainable development have been emphasized. However, even though the MAB Program has designated 714 regions as Biosphere Reserves, they nonetheless fall under the jurisdiction of the respective countries they lay in. This is important to note, as even though UNESCO prescribes the framework, which the Biosphere Reserves should follow, the uphold of this framework remains a task of the country itself. This is

similar to such an important aspect as the respective Biosphere Reserve "Amazon of Europe", which consists of five participating countries that all act autonomously, even though they share a common Biosphere Reserve.

Another requirement to successfully implement conservation and/or development is funding. Funding is and has always been a huge element in conservation or development ventures, big or small. Capacity and funding for park management have steadily declined, and the willingness to collaborate among key players has fluctuated over time, sometimes being absent, as in the case of the East Carpathians Biosphere Reserve (ECBR) (Taggart-Hodge & Schoon, 2016). The case of the ECBR has been chosen due to the resemblance to the "Amazon of Europe" Biosphere Reserve. Funding and interest in collaborations have emerged as one of the most serious threats to the Biosphere Reserve network, which can therefore be seen as a potential danger to both current and potential future Biosphere Reserves.

Other issues include the Biosphere Reserve's ability to accomplish its goals, which include nature protection and flora and fauna conservation. The most serious threats to the ECBR were identified as deforestation, hunting, flooding, temperature extremes, changes in species behaviour, and the lack of cultural ties (Taggart-Hodge & Schoon, 2016). Due to the similarities of the ECBR to the "Amazon of Europe" Biosphere Reserve, it may be implied that these threats may also affect the "Amazon of Europe" Biosphere Reserve in the future. However, further in-depth analysis would be required for these particular threats.

Many of the obstacles that the ECBR is facing are shared by other Transboundary Biosphere Reserves (TBRs) around the world. In certain nations, social and economic issues take precedence over environmental protection, which is expressed in funding allocations. Budgets that are too small or non-existent prevent the implementation of best conservation

practices, the maintenance of basic operations and personnel, and/or the adoption of emerging technologies (ECBC, 2004).

This pattern is visible in the ECBR, particularly in terms of organizational funding and management capability, and it appears to be prevalent in other protected areas around the world (Singh, 1999; Bruner et al., 2004; Emerton et al., 2006). In none of the countries affected, the Biosphere Reserve designation seems to have resulted in expanded funding or policy support. This is cause for concern, if Biosphere Reserves, under the UNESCO MAB Programme framework, should lead to both nature conservation and regional sustainability. It is also worth noting that balancing these aspects is not solemnly dependent on the Biosphere Reserve or its management but is largely influenced by the legislation of the country it finds itself, due to the fact that the country itself is responsible for the Biosphere Reserve and the regarding implementations of nature conservation and sustainable development, and not UNESCO alone for instance.

In general, balancing development needs without jeopardizing ecosystem health remains the most pressing problem of our time. However, when it comes to habitat conservation, the ECBR's low to medium observed levels of residential and commercial developments, energy production and mining, transportation and utility corridors are encouraging. Positive evidence of changing states of primeval beech forests as a result of human management (Vrška et al., 2009; WWF, 2016a), as well as evidence of climate change in the ECBR (Dittmar et al., 2003), shows that these habitats are fundamentally linked to anthropogenic activities and should be viewed as such, rather than being regarded as pristine or untouched. Other TBRs (Transboundary Biosphere Reserves), such as the Bialowieza National Park, the Biosphere Reserve between Belarus and Poland (Agrawal, 2000), and protected areas in general, such as the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park, have found similar growth risks (Evans et al., 2014). As a result, establishing a balance between

growth and biodiversity restoration appears to be a critical element in Transboundary Biosphere Reserves. The concern persists as to how much development can be driven without upsetting the equilibrium.

When diverse political interests, national and foreign policy, ecological and economic background, and cultural values are all taken into consideration, managing a TBR as one cohesive entity is an enormous challenge. This was shown in the case of the ECBR, where transboundary collaboration had to transcend deep-seated conflict as a result of historical developments to find a way to reach a cohesive cooperative result, despite the use of two separate political management and support structures. The lack of cultural bonds is alarming, particularly given the MAB program's goals of strengthening local economies, populations, cultural heritage, and natural habitat conservation. (German MAB National Committee 2005; Broggiato et al., 2007a, b). To put this into perspective, the Amazon of Europe Biosphere Reserve links and actively involves five nations, as opposed to the ECBR, which involves just two.

As a result, it is reasonable to conclude that the probability of trouble increases, particularly when given the disparities in legal and support structures. It could also be difficult to effectively handle this Biosphere Reserve since one of the countries is not a member of the European Union (Serbia), which impacts the handling of legislation. Furthermore, the spoken languages of the nations, as well as previous tensions between them, may present a difficulty, and can play a role in decision-making or task execution.

Also, of significant importance seems to be the size of the Biosphere Reserve. In the first TBR in Africa (the 'W' Region Biosphere Reserve, which includes the countries Benin, Burkina Faso and Niger), covers 3,504,648 ha, and the intercontinental Biosphere Reserve of the Mediterranean, which covers

894,134 ha, it is visible that size is most definitely a major factor (UNESCO, 2016) when it comes to managing it. All of these reasons may account for the fact that there are only 20 TBRs in the world today: twelve in Europe, three in Africa, three in Latin America, and two intercontinental (UNESCO, 2019).

Due to the vastness and scale of the “Amazon of Europe” Biosphere Reserve as well as the extensive involvement of several countries, certain problems can be identified. However, with the determination and implementation of right choices and the particular skills of strong and capable management, those outcomes that have been seen in other Biosphere Reserves do not have to be repeated.

In order to create a basis for the management to be able to make the right decisions it is crucial to learn from what has already been done in the past. Therefore, the lessons of the East Carpathian Biosphere Reserve have been studied and analysed to provide a framework of factors that need to be taken into account, to reach the aspired results.

The analysis of the ECBR's achievements and problems identifies some key factors that must be considered before putting a TBR in place (Niewiadomski, 2011):

1. To direct initiatives, a shared vision and framework, as well as common goals, must be established,
2. It is essential to provide a leadership framework,
3. All possible joint measures must be outlined, decided upon, and included in a schedule and/or action plan,
4. Affected parties should be consulted and included in decision-making,
5. To offset overhead expenses and ensuring that the TBR's mission is fulfilled, a solid budget must be in place.

These findings are consistent with lessons learnt from other TBRs too, such as the Delta of the Senegal River TBR in Africa, which is now struggling to achieve environmental management and social-ecological stability (Vasilijević et al., 2015), or the Vosges du Nord/Pfälzerwald TBR of France and Germany, which has seen tremendous progress but is still vulnerable in terms of development (Stein, 2008).

Even though the Biosphere Reserve model is appealing on paper, the practical reality is likely to be difficult, given the history of conventional failures of the Integrated Conservation and Development Projects (ICDPs; Wells & McShane, 2004; Blom, Sunderland & Murdiyarsa, 2010) which, as Biosphere Reserves, aim and aspire conservation goals and social development. Furthermore, since each Biosphere Reserve is subject to the jurisdiction and laws of the country in which it is located, the Biosphere Reserve classification does not guarantee that the definition will be implemented effectively (Walker & Solecki, 1999). This is particularly true in developing countries, where socio-economic development and poverty alleviation take precedence over environmental protection. As a result, a Biosphere Reserve can end up being nothing more than a bureaucratic label, with little resemblance to the model imagined by UNESCO and MAB Programme. This means that the criteria of the classification can be ignored by the Government, as can the management priorities of the individual protected areas, found within the Biosphere Reserve. As a consequence, the Biosphere Reserve often takes on a more theoretical character (Nolte, 2008), with a significant gap between the Biosphere Reserve definition and practical truth.

As has been concluded, Biosphere Reserves are areas bound to nature conservation and sustainable development by UNESCO's MAB Programme. However, as the jurisdiction lies within the country in which the Biosphere Reserve lies, reality may not resemble the theoretic framework imagined. To

continue, on the other hand, the employment rate will be described, as well as its impacts elaborated.

7.2.2.3. Employment rate

Despite the fact that not one statistic can reflect all of the complexity in the labour market's health, the employment and unemployment rate are regarded one of the most significant economic indicators to date.

The employment rate, as defined by the OECD (n.d.), is the employment-to-population ratio, or the number of working-age persons in the population. The employment-to-population ratio is a valuable, all-encompassing indicator. It simply displays the number of individuals now employed as a percentage of the entire working-age population, defined as civilian, non-institutionalized people aged 15 and above (International Labour Organization, n.d.). Although this indicator does not fluctuate much from month to month, even modest variations can enable identifying which parts of the population are losing or gaining the most jobs. This ratio can be used in conjunction with the unemployment rate to analyse the state of the labour market according to the International Labour Organization (ILO) (n.d.). These statistics allow to determine how many working-age persons are currently working, how many are unemployed, thus giving a picture of the market health at a set point in time.

As emphasized, the employment rate is one of the most influential economic tools. Nonetheless, despite the importance of it, the employment rate of the respective counties within the "Amazon of Europe" region could not be determined. Determinable is, on the one hand, the employment rate of the respective counties for the year 2016, as a thorough analysis of the regions was conducted in that year. The employment rate that year measured 55,05 percent (Interreg Danube Transnational Programme, 2019, p. 20). According

to the Millenium Development Goals Indicators (2021) the employment rate typically falls between 50 and 75 percent. Any value under 50 percent implies a very low amount of population engaged in market-related endeavours, meaning a very concerned state for the general economy (Millenium Development Goals Indicators, 2021). As presented, the employment rate of the "Amazon of Europe" region holds just above the lower standard, however it is important to emphasize, that this value presents the state for the year 2016 and might therefore not grant actuality. It is nevertheless an indicator that provides some insight into which direction the region alone is leaning. On the other hand, the employment rate on the national level of the included counties can be determined. Meaning that the general employment rate for the participating countries could be analysed, however, as the result of the analysis on national level would not be representative of the "Amazon of Europe" region alone and as the employment rate of 2016 does not guarantee actuality of the current state, these cannot be used due to their irrelevance.

A thorough analysis would be needed to determine the actual employment rate of the "Amazon of Europe" region or on the NUTS 3 level, which would provide a coherent picture of the current economic and social state of the region. However, the employment rate does not contribute to this picture alone. In the following, a description and illustration of the general social stability, for the case of the "Amazon of Europe" will be given and explained.

7.2.2.4. Social stability

In public, social stability is a mediocre-studied concept that nevertheless provides a helpful framework for analysing socio-economic disadvantages across various dimensions. Only in developmental and clinical psychology, the importance of stable living conditions has been explored so far, according to German & Latkin (2011, p. 20). Lack of psychological stability due to divorce, unemployment, or home instability has been seen as a stressful life event that can have an impact on personal growth and well-being from a psychological

standpoint. (Pearlin, Menaghan, Lieberman & Mullan, 1981, p. 338; Compas, 1987, p. 276).

The concept of social stability was initially created in public health to explain the wide range of social functioning found among male alcohol treatment patients (Straus & Bacon, 1951, p. 231). Early ideas of social integration, control, and roles in society were used to imply that social stability is a sign of life structure and proper social involvement. The domains of social stability were chosen because they offer significance to one's existence and show one's capacity to operate in and engage with one's surroundings (Straus & Bacon, 1951, p. 231). This concept provides a framework of pre-set criteria upon which the social stability can be measured. Simply elaborated, it shows the ability of a person to operate within the societally established social positions one is to fulfil, according to Gerard & Saenger (1966). However, it is important to note that even though these positions instil additional obligations and expectations, they simultaneously limit mobility while also providing prestige and support.

When considered in conjunction with the original definition of social stability as a reflection of social integration and social role fulfilment, social stability can be defined as a state of life structure and consistency that protects against further dangers while also assisting in the maintenance of one's connection to societal expectations.

As social stability includes the general means of existence, the prior mentioned employment rate may be enclosed for better understanding purposes. Thus, although it has been argued that the 55.05 per cent figure presented cannot be taken into account due to its exclusive topicality, it can be used to show in which direction the employment rate is leaning. However, the employment rate does not resemble the only factor that defines the social stability. It would,

however, move beyond the scope of the means of the “Amazon of Europe” case to identify and elaborate the additional collection of the respective factors that determine the social stability. Nevertheless, with an immense amount of caution, it is possible to make an assumption, that the social stability of the “Amazon of Europe” region population also tends to lean toward the lower standards of social stability.

It is possible to say that according to the preliminary results of the analysis of employment rate and general social stability, the region “Amazon of Europe” does not stand on the strongest ground. However, many other factors can be found, which can portray the state of the region. In this notion, the economic growth as well as GDP will be presented and elaborated, in order to portray the economic profile of the region “Amazon of Europe”.

7.2.2.5. Economic growth & GDP

Economic growth is defined as a rise in the production of economic products and services from one-time period to the next (de la Croix, 2015, p. 38) and it can be expressed in nominal or real (inflation-adjusted) terms. Although other measures are sometimes employed, the general collective economic growth is traditionally assessed in terms of Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

In its simplest form, economic growth refers to a rise in an economy’s total output. Aggregate production improvements are frequently, but not always, associated with higher average marginal productivity (de la Croix, 2015, p. 38). As a result, salaries rise, encouraging consumers to open their wallets and spend more, resulting in a greater material quality of life or standard of living. Growth is frequently modelled in economics as a function of physical and human capital, labour force, and technological advancements (Castro, 2005, p. 195). Simply said, increasing the number and/or quality of working-age people, the tools they have at their disposal, and the methods they have for

combining labour, capital, and raw materials will result in greater economic production.

This greater economic production and the ability to make and spend more money will hence increase the general GDP. The total monetary or market worth of all completed products and services produced within a country's boundaries in a certain time period is referred to as the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (OECD, n.d.). It serves as a complete assessment of a country's economic health due to its wide measure of the entire domestic production. All private and public spending, government outlays, acquisitions and development ventures, additions to private inventories, paid-in building expenses, and the foreign balance of trade are all factored into the calculation of a nation's GDP (Kubiszewski, 2019, p. 327). Simply said, everything that was produced in a country, or acquired by the final user in a time frame of usually one year, is considered as a part of the Gross Domestic Product.

As the "Amazon of Europe" region consists of eleven different NUTS 3 regions from five different countries it would be needed to analyse the economic growth and the respective GDP on a NUTS 3 level. This measure would represent the foremost approximation of the state of the "Amazon of Europe" region. This is due to the fact that the respective boundaries of the region do not coincide with the borders of the NUTS regions, but it merely entails parts of the respective counties. This would allow an estimation as reliable as possible. However, due to the complexity of the GDP calculation, as it is mentioned above, and the boundaries of the scope within the case of the "Amazon of Europe" region, the GDP from the years 2017 and onwards could not be determined. Similar to the employment rate, which has been analysed above, the most actual GDP value for the "Amazon of Europe" region could be determined for the year 2016, within the socio-economic analysis of the "Amazon of Europe", which measured 10.420 €/inhabitant (Interreg Danube Transnational Programme, 2019, p. 20). Further, possible to acquire is the GDP on a national level of the

included countries, however, due to the fact of actuality and representability it is not possible to utilize these figures in the current case analysis of the “Amazon of Europe” region.

Important to note, is that the above mentioned figure of the average GDP is the average value of the GDP of the respective counties. This implies, that some NUTS regions may reach GDP values higher than these as well as vice versa. According to the socio-economic analysis the region “Amazon of Europe” registered an increase in GDP from 2012 to 2016. Nevertheless, a remarkable distinction was presented, as the difference between the respective NUTS and their GDP is remarkably uneven. The highest GDP was detected in the Austrian Eastern Styria with almost the triple of the average value (28.700 €/inhabitant) of the GDP and the lowest in the Croatian Virovitica-Podravina County with little over the half (6.200 €/inhabitant) of the average GDP value (Interreg Danube Transnational Programme, 2019, p. 23). Another remarkable distinction has been discovered in the socio-economic analysis between the average GDP of the “Amazon of Europe” NUTS 3 regions for the year 2016 and the average national GDP of the included countries. The average GDP of the included countries on a national level was 17.660 €/inhabitant in the year 2016, which represents almost double of the average of the “Amazon of Europe” NUTS 3 GDP (Interreg Danube Transnational Programme, 2019, p. 23). According to the data, the “Amazon of Europe” has therefore a lower level of economic development than compared to the average GDP on a national level.

Therefore, even though the data from the years 2017 and onwards could not be gathered, it could be possible to conclude, that the respective counties of the “Amazon of Europe” region have a lower economic development as compared to the national level of the included countries. It is important to emphasize that this conclusion needs to be considered with great caution as the data does not represent the actuality of the current state. A furthermore factor, which may have impacted the economic growth as well as the GDP of

the region is the worldwide Covid-19 pandemic, which severely impacted the tourism sector. Nevertheless, the values presented above may function as a guide, which shows where the standpoint was as well where the development might have gone.

As mentioned, the worldwide Covid-19 pandemic has influenced many spectres of the “Amazon of Europe” region. In the following however, further additional health risks or factors of importance and impact will be presented and elaborated, which may have influence in the region.

7.2.2.6. Health risks

Humans have been aware of the numerous links between health and the environment at least since Hippocrates’ essay “Air, Water, and Places,” published around 400 B.C. Out of this reason are health risks included within the case of the “Amazon of Europe”. The most important advancements in public health during the 20th century were improved water, food, and milk cleanliness, less physical crowding, increased nutrition quality, and central heating with cleaner fuels (United Nations, 2005). These benefits of a modern country are taken for granted, but they might worsen if the government’s public health infrastructure is not adequately supported, turning them into potential health hazards.

According to the OECD (2019) health risks entail non-medical health determinants. Any feature, characteristic, or exposure that raises the probability of getting a disease or suffering an injury is referred to as a risk factor. Tobacco and alcohol use, as well as being overweight or obese, are some examples of more serious risk factors according to the OECD (2019). For health decision-making and planning, a description of diseases and injuries, as well as the risk factors that cause them, is essential (WHO, 2009, p. 1), however, data on the health of populations and the threats they confront is often inconsistent and unreliable. Nonetheless, the majority of scientific and

medical resources are spent on medical therapy and cure (WHO, 2009). Yet understanding the health hazards, on the other hand, is critical to avoiding sickness and injury in general. As a result, most risk factors are linked to many diseases, and addressing them can help to reduce numerous causes of disease. Evidence-based decisions regarding the most effective treatments to enhance global health may be made by measuring the impact of risk factors on illnesses. It is important to identify and address the causes of disease and injury, in order to prevent them, which is emphasized by the World Health Organization (2009, p. 1). Each risk has its own set of causes, and many of them are the result of a long sequences of events including socio-economic variables, environmental and community circumstances, as well as individual behaviour.

As a country advances, the diseases that impact its citizens change from contagious diseases like diarrhoea and pneumonia to non-communicable diseases like cardiovascular diseases and cancer (Omran, 2005, p. 749).

The following factors contribute to this shift:

- improvements in medical treatment, resulting in fewer children dying from easily treatable illnesses like diarrhoea,
- the population's aging, because non-communicable illnesses afflict elderly people at the highest rates,
- public health initiatives that minimize the occurrence of infectious illnesses, such as immunizations and the provision of clean water and sanitation.

This tendency may be seen in a variety of nations, whereas richer countries are being more advanced in the shift. Similarly, the hazards that impact a population change with time, from infectious disease risks to those that raise non-communicable disease risks. Low-income population is particularly vulnerable to poverty-related hazards such as malnutrition, unsafe sex,

unclean water, inadequate sanitation and hygiene, as well as indoor smoke from solid fuels, which are known as "traditional risks" (WHO, 2009). Physical inactivity, overweight and obesity, and other diet-related variables, as well as cigarette and alcohol-related hazards, are becoming more prevalent as life expectancies rise and the primary causes of mortality and disability shift to the chronic and non-communicable hazards (Prüss-Ustün et al., 2019, 265). As a result, many low- and middle-income nations are now facing an increasing burden from contemporary health hazards, while also waging a losing struggle against traditional health risks. At various stages of socio-economic growth, the impact of these modern hazards varies (WHO, 2005, p. 28). For example, while high-income nations have made significant progress in decreasing this risk through public-health measures, urban air pollution is a higher risk factor in middle-income countries than in high-income ones. Increased exposure to these emerging hazards is however not unavoidable; it may be mitigated through public health measures. For example, low- and middle-income nations can benefit from high-income countries' successes in increasing physical activity by implementing robust frameworks and public health initiatives.

As for the case of the "Amazon of Europe", it has already been determined that a considerable amount of the region's population is of older age as well as it keeps getting older, due to the advances in general hygiene and medical assistance. As a matter of fact, it has also been concluded, that due to the advances in medicine, general life style as well as quality of life could be improved. However, ageing and age-related diseases cannot be annihilated according to Brown (2015, p. 1). This connects the previous mentioned notion by the WHO, that stated, that in recent years there has been an increase in non-communicable diseases. The most prevalent diseases are disability, dementia, cardiovascular disease and cancer, as elaborated by Barron 2017 (p. 4). A further instance of importance is described by Clark et al. (2020, p. 1003) in a recent study, that found that elderly people have an increased possibility of getting infected with the Covid-19 virus as well as developing a severe course of the disease.

As, however, the definition and analysis of health risks entails a vast spectrum of environmental, socio-economic as well as behavioural factors, a more adequate and precise elaboration of the health risks within the "Amazon of Europe" region cannot be provided. Mainly, due to the fact that a sufficient research and analysis would go beyond the scope of this particular case of the "Amazon of Europe" region. It is, however, inevitably possible to conclude that due to the ever older growing population of the region, the non-communicable diseases will proceed to be one of the most coherent hazards within the region.

To conclude, in this chapter, it was discussed what population health entails in terms of not just knowing the hazards of various exposures to individuals, but also the significance of included ideas related to risk distribution in communities. Furthermore, a notion for understanding how social, environmental, and biological factors influence population health could be presented. Many of the determinants of health are part of the larger economic and social environment, and so are outside the direct control of health-care managers in both the public and commercial sectors. To implement any initiatives, public policy in the agricultural, commerce, education, and treasury sectors of government, among others, will need to be aligned to promote health. This includes giving funding for population-based research that will help in better understanding of the social origins of disease and disability in general as well as for the "Amazon of Europe" region alone.

Another aspect, what can also be connected to a larger economic as well as social environment are trends. And in the light of analysis of external factors for a future touristic destination, touristic trends will be described and elaborated in the following chapter.

7.2.2.7. Touristic trends

According to the European Tourism Manifesto (n.d.), tourism is a significant economic and social growth factor. The industry promotes economic growth in Europe by producing revenue, employment, and investment, as well as exporting to markets throughout the world. It contributes to the preservation of Europe's cultural and natural heritage, generates income to finance tourist and resident amenities and infrastructure, and fosters an understanding of a common European identity and citizenship marked by variety. On another instance, trends are a "general direction in which a situation is developing" according to the Oxford Dictionary (n.d.). In a business setting it may therefore mean a pattern of steady change in a process, product, or situation. This implies the importance of tourism trends and the understanding of it. With this understanding, it is possible to avoid any potential pitfalls and to fully utilize its strengths and opportunities to maximize social and economic development. Therefore, in the following, general directions of development in the area of tourism will be presented, elaborated and discussed.

Through an extensive research, several tourism trends could be identified. Emerging as one of the most coherent trends, is the development of digitalization within the tourism sector, according to the OECD (2020, p. 5). Through digitalization, improved booking possibilities can be provided, as well as better communication and data management can be achieved. Another aspect withal, is the contactless travel that can be achieved, which has several safety and health benefits. Another ongoing trend in the travel sector is the aspect of sustainability. Forbes (2019) predicted it already in 2019, that tourists seek out sustainable options as well as other ways of travel (like cycling and/or sailing). This has been further approved by a survey from Booking.com in 2020 where it was concluded that 53 per cent of people pursue sustainability and travel with an eco-conscious mind-set. Additionally, re-affirming the prediction of Forbes, has been data of the European Parliament (2020) as well as the European Cyclist Federation (2020), which state that there has been a

massive increase in bicycle sales as well as registered mobility regarding bicycles within the European Union, along with the increased interest of health improvement by the general population. Important to mention is the impact of the worldwide Covid-19 pandemic, which negatively influenced the tourism sector on a global level. However, through this influence several adaptations can be detected. One of them is the aspect of health safety and promotion, where contactless payments and similar have been introduced. Another adaptation is the prior mentioned increase in cycling mobility, which does not only have a beneficial impact on health but has also solved the issues of limited public transport possibilities during the worldwide Covid-19 pandemic (European Cyclist Federation, 2020). It is furthermore important to mention, that the Covid-19 pandemic influenced outbound international travel and that travel restrictions may influence the overall travel trends in the future. Finally, several sources (Amadeus, n.d.; Booking.com, 2020; Euronews, 2020) mention the rise of the work and travel trend. However, it could not be approved due to missing data that claims that this trend is or could be a realistic trend, which could be seen in the future. Moreover, the previous mentioned Covid-19 pandemic and its accompanying travel restrictions could pose as another obstacle of this notion becoming an actual tourism trend.

It can be therefore concluded that tourism trends pose a vital (external) factor within the case of the "Amazon of Europe" region. Several possible trends could be identified through an extensive research, which could be relevant for the respective region. The main trends that pose as relevant are digitalization (OECD, 2020, p. 5), sustainability and eco-consciousness (Forbes, 2019; Booking.com, 2020) as well as the increase in cycling mobility (European Parliament, 2020; European Cyclist Federation, 2020). There have been some mentions of the possible work and travel trend, however convincing data is missing to approve its actual occurrence. Withal, the influence of the Covid-19 pandemic cannot be ignored, especially in regard of travel restrictions in the aspect of a transboundary destination.

In the following, both the described and elaborated internal as well as external factors of the “Amazon of Europe” region will be presented within the SWOT Analysis and further illustrated within the SWOT Matrix, as described prior.

7.2.3. Execution of SWOT Analysis

In the following, the presented internal and external factors will be sorted within the according quadrants of the SWOT matrix, following the principle of the prior set criteria. The data has been summarized and divided into strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. The results are as followed:

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -first worldwide transboundary bike trail, which includes five countries -Bike Trail as bookable product -abundance of natural richness, beauty and untouched nature -even distribution of accommodation -even distribution of restaurants -large variety of cuisine offer -plentiful offer of natural attractions -added value through the events offered -good road system within the region with good highway connections -good connection of the North and South route through bridges 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -language barriers (between the management, stakeholders, locals and guests) -not identified exact border of the “Amazon of Europe” region up until to date -no hotel with 5* in the region -uneven distribution of cultural attractions -low number of ecological events -few tourism information centres in the Hungarian counties -few visitor centres in the region -lacking and unregularly bus lines -no exact plan for marketing measures in place

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -tourism information centres in all larger municipalities -good accessibility to medical centres -accessibility through airports and shuttle services -good train network with possible bike transport -defined target group which addresses a considerable amount of people -product development through marketing -abundance of bike shops & rentals -considerable amount of hiking trails -established DDO as a flexible substitute for a DMO 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -not possible to determine how far the marketing measures reach -only a mediocre amount of wellness & spa offers -small number of adventure & motoric parks as well as uneven dispersion of them -unclear structure of network regarding stakeholders
<p>Opportunities</p>	<p>Threats</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -majority of involved countries involved in the European Union implying support from the EU -involvement of a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve -early stages of development implies potential for right choices to be made adequately and fast -developing health initiatives for better health risks understanding -ongoing digitalization in tourism -increasing information technology 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Serbia without any membership in the EU or Schengen area may impede travel possibilities -jurisdiction of Biosphere Reserves lays in each country divided because there is no unified framework -missing funding and support -according to late data, the employment rate is at lower standards and could become critically low -lower social stability of population within the region

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -sustainable, eco-conscious travel possibilities (biking) as emerging trend -increased bicycle sales and mobility on bikes -rising the low employment rate through aspired tourism development -increasing social stability -international attention due to uniqueness -great potential for tourism development -promotion from the EU for tourism development and health improvement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -border and peripheral regions less developed than national average -remarkable differences in GDP between involved NUTS regions -low GDP of the region compared to the national averages -health risks due to older growing population -Covid-19 restrictions impede travel -challenges of working with five countries: different legislation and administrative barriers
---	---

In the table above, the identified strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of the “Amazon of Europe“ region, in its aspiration of touristic development, can be seen. On the first instance, it seems that many different points regarding the internal and external factors could be gathered and identified. However, as the SWOT Analysis only lists these points regarding the regions strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats, a more comprehensive tool is needed in order to contextualize these points. Therefore, in the following, another management tool will be presented and elaborated. The tool by the name of TOWS Matrix was introduced by Heinz Weihrich, a professor of management at the University of San Francisco, in 1982. How this tool works, what it incorporates and what the results of this tool are, will be presented and elaborated in the following.

7.3. TOWS Matrix

7.3.1. Theoretical Background of TOWS Matrix

The TOWS Matrix has been developed in 1982 by Professor Heinz Wehrich from the University of San Francisco. It is an advancement based upon the SWOT Analysis. The TOWS Matrix or also called "Situational Analysis" is the next step in order of creating strategies. It provides means to strategic development in logically combining external Threats (T) and Opportunities (O) with internal Strengths (S) and Weaknesses (W). Although the variables are not new, Wehrich was the first one to pair them in a systematic manner.

This creates a four field matrix with the combinations Strengths-Threats (ST), Strengths-Opportunities (SO), Weaknesses-Threats (WT) and Weaknesses-Opportunities (WO) (Kulshrestha, D.S., & Puri, P., 2017).

Through these combinations, tactics, strategies and actions can be derived from.

Wehrich (1982, p. 54) stated, that within the framework of the TOWS Matrix the factors included are not new but are re-used from the SWOT Analysis. What Wehrich did introduce, was the systematic identification of their relationships and utilizing those as a basis for strategy formulation. He emphasizes, the importance, that many economic entities utilize their strengths to exploit opportunities, but many fail to incorporate the aspect of overcoming weaknesses to do so (Wehrich, 1982, p. 54). The TOWS Matrix, in which its letters stand for the same meaning as of the SWOT Analysis, has the ability to emphasize different aspects, giving it therefore a wider scope than compared to other management tools like the Business Portfolio Matrix of the Boston Consulting Group or the General Electric's Business Screening according to its creator H. Wehrich (1982, p. 59).

Wehrich argues in his article, that the steps of utilizing the TOWS Matrix may vary as he provides a suggestive process (Wehrich, 1982, p. 60). Therefore, the first step, after the identification of internal and external factors for the

SWOT Analysis, the analysis for the TOWS Matrix will begin with the listing of external factors. Specifically, the threats (T), which may be of urgent importance. These could be further categorized as political, social and economic as well as demographic factors, technology. Even though the listed points will incorporate these categories, they will not be named with a specific label or order. The same procedure will be applied for the listing of the points of the external opportunities (O). The second step will incorporate the listing of the internal factors of strengths (S) and weaknesses (W), which regard organization and management, marketing and other.

The next step entails formulation of strategies, actions or tactics. It is important to remember, that these regard the future as well as the present state of the entity. Wehrich mentions, that in the steps of strategy formulation, the matrix indicates four distinct conceptual alternatives. However, he mentions, that in reality some strategies may overlap or may be engaged in a strategy concurrently (Wehrich, 1982, p. 61). Withal, important to remember is, that even though the main focus of this tool is to formulate strategies, it can also be utilized for devising tactics to apply these strategies. As has been said, the matrix alone indicated for four alternative strategies, which present the relationships between the factors. The first one being the WT strategies, followed by WO, ST and SO strategies. The WT (Weakness - Threat) strategy, also referred to as the mini - mini alternative, is a strategy that tries to diminish both threats and weaknesses. Followed by the WO (Weaknesses - Opportunities) or also the mini - maxi strategy attempts to diminish the weaknesses by also nurturing and increasing the possibilities. Followed by this is the ST (Strengths - Threats) strategy or also called the maxi - mini option. This strategy incorporates the entity's internal strengths to overcome external threats. Wehrich (1982, p. 61) emphasizes that this notion of utilizing the strengths is to be used with great caution and moderation. And lastly the SO (Strengths - Opportunities) or maxi - maxi option, where an entity attempts to maximize both its strengths as well as opportunities. These strategies (SO) are of all four the most aspired after, as it lays in any entities interest to boost both.

It remains important to emphasize, that the respective internal and external factors are dynamic variables within this tool. Therefore, Wehrich suggests preparing several TOWS Matrixes for different points in time. However, due to the limited possible scope of this case of the “Amazon of Europe“ region, the fast changing industry of tourism and the intent of this thesis of solemnly giving proposals for strategic tourism development, only one matrix will be fashioned. It will be regarding the initial phase of one to two years of tourism development.

The next step in the process of strategy formulation is the determination of relationships between the entities strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. For this task a simple table, as visible in the figure below, is utilized. In it a found relationship is marked with a “+“ and a void relationship with “0“. As visible below, an example for a relationship between internal strengths and external opportunities is visible.

		Strength									
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Opportunity	1	+	0	+	0	0	+	+	0	0	0
	2	+	0	0	+	0	0	0	+	0	0
	3	0	0	0	+	0	0	0	0	0	+
	4	+	+	+	0	+	+	0	+	+	+
	5	+	0	+	0	0	0	+	0	0	0
	6	+	0	0	0	+	0	0	0	+	+
	7	+	+	0	+	+	0	+	+	+	+
	8	0	0	0	0	0	+	0	0	+	0
	9	+	0	0	+	0	0	0	+	0	0
	10	+	+	0	0	+	0	0	0	0	0

Figure 52: Interaction matrix. Wehrich, H. (1982). *The TOWS matrix—A tool for situational analysis*. *Long Range Planning*, 15(2), 54–66. doi:10.1016/0024-6301(82)90120-0

Similar tables can be applied for the WT, WO and ST strategies. In this procedure however, utmost caution is needed as different relationships may carry different value in their probability and potential. Therefore, each relationship should be evaluated separately and carefully. For the case of the “Amazon of Europe“, this procedure has been made for all four alternatives and the results will be presented in the following.

7.3.2. Execution of TOWS Matrix (Results)

As has been mentioned above, similar tables as seen in figure 50, have been utilized for the identification of relationships between the respective factors and for further tactics, action od strategy formulation. In the following, these results will be presented for the WT, WO, ST and SO alternatives. For better referencing, they will be listed and elaborated in this particular order.

Weaknesses – Threats (mini – mini) alternative: Several factors of the external environment, like the divided jurisdiction of the Biosphere Reserve management, lack of funding and support, lower development of peripheral regions, its lower GDP, employment rate and social stability as well as different legislation regarding the involved countries and the currents Covid-19 travel and safety measures pose a serious threat to the development of the “Amazing Amazon of Europe” destination. However, when these are taken into consideration with the identified weaknesses, an alternative would be to re-evaluate the meaningfulness of this endeavour or to turn to a survival strategy, where steps would be taken that would guarantee the mere survival of the destination. However, another possibility would be to attempt to overcome the identified weaknesses and convert them into strengths. Meaning, by possibly overcoming language barriers, defining the exact border, organize more ecological events, structure and identify the role of stakeholders and set a clear and defined marketing plan, to change the direction towards a SO (Strengths – Opportunities) position. This way, both the weaknesses and threats could be

minimized, and further better products and organization could be established, which would add additional value to the development.

Weaknesses – Opportunities (mini – maxi) alternative: In this approach, the weaknesses are attempted to be minimized as well as the opportunities maximized. One approach is similar to the WT alternative, where the weaknesses are attempted to be overcome and turned into strengths, thus creating a SO position. On the other hand, however, it is possible to utilize and take advantage of the identified opportunities, to diminish the impact of the weaknesses. This would be possible by establishing a stronger combined effort for sustainability and nature conservation, thus expanding possible ecological events and defining the marketing measure upon that notion as well. Another option is to fully utilize the digitalization within the tourism sector and expanding the information technology through a mobile application or database. This would enable connecting the tourism information centres into a coherent unit, through which also innovative marketing could be driven and measured. Furthermore, information about public transport could be reviewed and language barriers tackled in the form of a possible translation aid or helpful phrase assistance (through the possible mobile application). In addition, this development has allowed health initiatives to be established without the necessary focus on modern technology to help the ageing population. Also, important to emphasize would be taking advantage of the niche of sustainable and eco-conscious travel, onto which special interest is laid in recent trend analysis results.

Strengths – Threats (maxi – mini) alternative: The scope of this strategy is based upon the entities' strengths to overcome the environmental threats. Meaning, that it utilizes and maximizes the former to overcome and diminish the latter. In the case of the "Amazing Amazon of Europe" destination, this could be achieved through additional product development which could rise the employment rate and social stability within the region. Furthermore, the DDO could utilize other strengths like the first five countries transboundary bike

trail as a bookable product, the regions great offer of natural attractions as well as its pristine nature and cuisine and the good road system as well as available bridges to develop the region, thus attaining financial support, rising the regions GDP and elevate the overall development of peripheral areas. Furthermore, the incorporation of the DDO could aid in not only the language barrier, different legislation and administrative barriers, but would also attend to matters of the Biosphere Reserve management as up until no unified framework for incorporation of the UNESCO regulations is in place. Due to the easy accessibility of medical centres, medical expertise is within close reach, meaning possible medical risks could be identified faster as well as treated more promptly. Besides, any safety regulations due to Covid-19 could be better enforced. Overall, the identified strengths should be attempted to be utilized as well as possible in order to achieve their full potential and impact.

Strengths – Opportunities (maxi – maxi) alternative: Strategies based on strengths and opportunities are the most sought after as they fully utilize their strengths as well as take advantage of the external possibilities given. For this particular case it is evident that the bookable product of the transboundary bike trail as well as the pristine natural beauty represent the major strengths identified. Through this, travel trends could be sought after, resulting in the expansion into international markets and promoting to the specific target group. Furthermore, an innovative and unique brand could be established, which should however be promoted adequately through allocated funding, which might pose as a difficulty to date. Through the implementation of right choices and the disposal of strengths identified, a rise in the general GDP, employment rate and social stability could be anticipated. This could not only be achieved by the involvement of the European Union, but also the common aspiration of the involved countries and their DDO. Altogether, the region seems to hold some admirable strengths. Additionally, the environment carries some promising opportunities, which ought to be exploited within the development of the transboundary destination.

Above, the four different alternatives of the TOWS Matrix by H. Wehrich have been described and elaborated for the case of the "Amazing Amazon of Europe" destination and its touristic development. These four alternatives consist of the relationships between the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats, which were identified in regard to the SWOT Analysis for the respective case. However, within the limited scope of this general analysis, which has been mentioned before, these results of the TOWS Matrix represent mere proposals. These results do not pose as actual recommendations but are rather an interpretation of the possibilities and options as well as a simple guide showing into which directions the development could be steered. In the following, the chapters will involve the discussion and conclusion, as these results culminate here for the case of the respective "Amazing Amazon of Europe" destination.

8. Discussion

Within this thesis, the basis for future strategic decisions for tourism development for the case of the "Amazon of Europe" region was determined. Through an extensive literature research as well as data analysis, aspects of destinations, Biosphere Reserves and strategic decisions have been discussed. In addition, data regarding the region, demography, tourism, marketing, management and others were analyzed in order to answer the set research question.

Firstly, the region of the "Amazon of Europe" was researched and analyzed. Through this analysis the regions location could be determined as well as the framework of the NUTS regions elaborated. Furthermore, a glimpse of the regions geology and climate was provided, and its demography analyzed. It was possible to determine, that the demography in the region is very versatile, due to the involvement of five countries. Data of the demography of the region show two trends. One being the steady decline in the general population,

mostly due to the emigration, and the other the steady increase of older people, due to the better and more attainable medical care. It could also be determined, that within the region several larger municipalities can be found as well as a well interwoven road and highway system. Furthermore, it was determined, that the region alone remains fairly flat, with few elevations. Another aspect of importance is the fact that the region is very nature bound, where many forest areas could be determined, which implies the importance and significance of nature within the region, as well as implies a remarkable advantage for the tourism development within the region. Furthermore, an abundance of arable land on which agricultural activities are conducted could be identified, which implied the additional importance of nature in the region as well as the significance of agriculture for the population. Agriculture was very much influenced by the communist regime, which impacts can still be determined up to date.

These findings provide a sufficient illustration of the “Amazon of Europe” region, into which the following aspects of tourism development can be incorporated. The region alone was found to be well accessible through the road and highways system. It has been emphasized, that this bears a magnitude of importance for the aspired tourism development, not only a local and national level, but rather on an international scale. It is once again important to note, that the data, regarding the region, was gathered on a NUTS 3 level.

In the beginning however, it remains discussable, of what importance the geographical characteristics of the chosen area actually are. It might be arguable, that the determination of the aspired destination was conducted slightly un-coordinated. Following existing infrastructure along the riversides of three border rivers and anticipating its natural richness to account for touristic prosperity seems like a disorganized endeavor without a framework to be unrealistic and impractical. Furthermore, it is debatable whether the geological

and climatic characteristics described in chapters 3.1 and 3.2 really carry the expected magnitude. It goes without saying, that influence of it exist on the aspired development, however it would be unreasonable to expect of it to account for the solemn reason of touristic development and prosperity.

Another aspect to criticize are the changes and trends of population, which can be identified within the region. The most evident reasons of these were identifies as emigration of younger aged people, however, it might be possible that these reasons do not portray the actual state. It might be arguable, that the younger people are leaving due to the lack of educational possibilities or potentials of career development within the borders of the region. Several other reasons might account for the state of which the region finds itself, which are not be ignored, however, those could currently not be portrayed and identified.

Lastly, as the landscape and characteristics of the involved countries were elaborated in the chapter 3.5, the endeavor of the involvement of the five countries arose questionable. It would be up for further discussion if the involvement contributes positively to the development of the destination and its touristic image or does it rather complicate the procedure of the development. Certain literature later discusses the complexity of tourism development (chapter 4.2, p. 66) as well as the importance of a detailed understating of the situation or entity (chapter 6.2, p. 87). Therefore, it might be arguable, that the involvement of five countries as well as their different characteristics not only in their legislation and administrative procedures, but also in their different historic development and current state, additionally contributes to the complexity of the endeavor and rises the questionability of it. However, it could still be possible to declare, that the involvement of five countries in a common shared development contribute positively to the general image of the endeavor, however, if so and to which extent would still be needed to be identified.

Continuing, based upon literature research, a touristic destination, which the "Amazon of Europe" region aspires to become, is a physical location, which receives touristic flows, promotes a touristic image and is managed by a DMO. However, it has been argued, that a region or place cannot just become a destination, therefore, touristic development is required. It was elaborated, that tourism development should be utilized for strategy creation, that would increase tourism flows for the region. However, no unified framework for this development could be found. Nevertheless, it has been argued, that even though no unified framework for tourism development could be determined, some strategic tools can be utilized, that can help in strategy creation and encourage tourism for a destination. The one named within this thesis is the SWOT Analysis, which will be further presented in the following. This analysis provided the needed information, that in order for any region to become a touristic destination, it requires a systematic and tailored approach for tourism development to succeed. According to the literature research, the data strongly suggests and emphasizes the complexity of tourism and its development. Furthermore, many sources stated the positive impacts tourism can have on a region, therefore, recommending its development. Most positive impacts stated, are the economic aspects, where increasing employment and social standards, as well as improving health care access and the expansion of infrastructure, which does not only benefit the tourists but also the local population, is highlighted. However, it remains debatable whether tourism is the most favorable development that a region committed to nature conservation can pursue. This argument is stated due to the possible negative impacts tourism may contribute to the region. In question here is mostly the carrying capacity of an area as well as the impact of tourism on the land and water, where it is conducted. Not only does tourism effect the expansion of infrastructure, but furthermore the possible negative impacts it may bear. But also, as has been emphasized, tourism should be constructed to increase the flows of tourists into an area, which may not only produce overcrowding and have an additional negative impact on the local population but can also

elevate crime rates and in times of a global pandemic, increase the risk of disease transmission. It is even more important to emphasize, that even though tourism highlights its positive impacts on the employment rate, it is often the case that employment within the tourism sector is of seasonal nature and is often poorly paid, therefore its positive impacts should be re-evaluated.

Additionally, as the main emphasis of the region is on the transboundary bike trail, the risk of traffic accidents and accidents in general may increase, causing additional liability not only for the local population but furthermore the region as well as the brand itself. Therefore, it is important to weight the magnitude of positive as well as negative impacts prior to any development or decision making process in order to be fully aware of the effects and influences of tourism. It might be possible that the outcome of this comparison will be to target another strategy or tactic, away from possible overcrowding and nature neglect due to tourism. However, as this thesis aims to generate a basis for future strategic decisions for the tourism development for the "Amazon of Europe" region, this discussion remains open for another occasion.

The aspiration for the destination development for the region began when the region became an official UNESCO Biosphere Reserve. To be able to better understand what a Biosphere Reserve is and what its framework entails, a detailed description of it was provided. It has been therefore determined that a Biosphere Reserve is a designated protected area under the UNESCO MAB Program. In general, it pursues three different tasks of nature conservation, sustainable development and the logistic support within the region. It acts as a testing ground for interdisciplinary research for clearer understanding between the relationship of social and ecological systems.

The designation of the region for being a Biosphere Reserve provides a framework, which is important to keep in mind, when creating strategies for

tourism development, as this designation might not only provide a unique basis but also interferes with some limitations which needs to be accounted for. According to the presented data, Biosphere Reserves provide the possibility for long-term growth in connection to environmental sustainability, therefore, not only providing the framework for accountable conservation, but rather a foundation where educational purposes are an integral part as well as where the coexisting of humans and nature can be put in the foreground. Data furthermore suggests the possible positive impacts of the Biosphere Reserve on the trend of migration, creating a sustainable and desired living place, which would not be effected by migration as strongly.

However, even though UNESCO's MAB Programme determines the framework for the designation of a region for becoming a Biosphere Reserve, the jurisdiction for the implementation of this framework lies within each country itself. This is furthermore of utmost importance in the case of the "Amazon of Europe" region, where the Biosphere Reserve is divided by five individual and autonomic countries. It is therefore of critical importance to assure that the respective countries implement the conditions and framework of the Biosphere Reserve on a common level to prevent any major disunity.

Furthermore, common in Biosphere Reserves is, as suggested by the literature, the difficult practical reality many Biosphere Reserves face. It is not uncommon, that these areas hold different management priorities, which cause a distinction between the definition provided by the UNESCO and the often realistic practical truth of the Biosphere Reserve. According to Nolte (2008) these areas therefore often take on a more theoretical character suggesting a rather bureaucratic label than an actual emphasis on the conservation endeavor. Therefore, the question arises to which degree the five different countries are actually able to implement the required framework as well as to which degree these countries aspire to follow these guidelines in the first place. It would be of further discussion to which magnitude the designation

of the destination as a Biosphere Reserve has actually positively impacted the region alone, due to its many limitations the region has or should follow in order to be designated as one. Another point of critic important to note is the fact, that in the event of not following the required guidelines for a Biosphere Reserve no consequences are being held against as well no re-evaluation period could be determined in which it is investigated and researched if and to what degree the respective guidelines were upheld and maintained. Therefore, it would be possible for the management of the respective Biosphere Reserve to completely ignore the guidelines and framework of UNESCO and focus on other operations or fields of interest, making the designation as a Biosphere Reserve null and void, however not expecting any consequences in return. Meaning, that it is completely up to the managements interest of the area to uphold and maintain the required framework for it to be fully and sustainably implemented.

Lastly, the strategic decisions were elaborated within the scope of the literature research. The importance of strategic decisions has been elaborated as well as the process of making them presented. It has been explained in detail, that strategic decisions bear a lot of importance and impact and that it is important to bear in mind, that they cannot be made in an instance, as the possibility remains that not all facts could be obtained, or other instances are not clarified. Therefore, a simplified strategic decision making process has been presented, to firstly, undermine the importance of these decisions and secondly, to make the aspect of decision making better understandable and applicable. Nevertheless, it is strongly suggested by the data that strategic decisions cannot be made ad-hoc as well as they require an enormous amount of sound judgement and imagination. However, to be able to assess the future sufficiently and correctly, it is important to know as much about a problem or situation as possible, yet this circumstance is not always given. Therefore, not only are strategic decisions extremely time consuming, but they also incorporate an abundance of variables, which might change over time creating a delicate situation in handling them.

As has been emphasized by the literature, strategic decisions bear a lot of influence therefore it is important that decision-makers avoid any possible pitfalls. The most common identified are uncertainty, due to a lack of information, self-fulfilling prophecies, which are heavily influenced by decisions as well as fragmentation. It has been emphasized, that the decision making process deals with a high degree of complexity, therefore it is firstly time-consuming, secondly very riskful and lastly requires an immense amount of skill. These characteristics make it visible, that only high-skilled decision-makers with the right knowledge should engage in the process of making them. It is therefore questionable, if the management of the region possess this kind of skill to occupy itself in this endeavor. One could argue that although the development of the region is in its infancy, mistakes can be made and the responsible decision-makers could learn from them, but it would be favorable to avoid them altogether. It might, therefore, also be arguable to outsource someone with the expertise and knowledge, yet it would remain questionable if this would still have the appropriate impact as further time as well as investment would be needed. It is still important to emphasize the importance of strategic decisions, especially in the case of a transboundary destination, yet it still remains out for discussion how this process is best to be approached.

Through an extensive research, the region "Amazon of Europe" could be presented and elaborated in detail, giving a good understanding of where it lays and what are its natural as well as demographic characteristics. Furthermore, through literature research, a detailed framework for the aspired tourism development for the "Amazon of Europe" region could be presented. It has been made clear what a touristic destination is and how it operates, what it means for the region to be a Biosphere Reserve and how its framework can assist or hinder any development. Furthermore, the importance of strategic decisions has been explained and the process of making strategic decisions clarified. With this, it was possible to move towards the empirical data analysis,

through which further insights of the region could be obtained and utilized for the answering of the set research question.

Within the empirical methodology, two strategic planning tools have been presented and illustrated as well as utilized for the case of the "Amazon of Europe" region. The first one presented is the well-renewed SWOT Analysis. The SWOT Analysis is a simple, yet effective strategic tool which allows within its framework to identify the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of an entity or similar in question. It uses a 2x2 matrix displaying internal and external as well as helpful and harmful factors, which can be identified. This tool therefore provides the means to identify the before mentioned strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats in a simple, yet effective matter. In the empirical methodology, the internal as well as external factors have been identified for the case of the "Amazon of Europe" region according to prior set criteria. After the identification, they have been further explained and elaborated. This has been done out of two reasons. Firstly, to provide an understating of why the identified factor is of importance for the region as well as give an instance of whether the factor has a helpful or rather harmful nature. And secondly, it has been done to be able to utilize the second strategic planning toll which has been used within the scope of this thesis.

The second strategic planning tool within the empirical methodology has been the TOWS Matrix, created by Heinz Wehrich in 1982. Wehrich did not intend to invent another strategic planning tool, however, he utilized the findings of the SWOT Analysis and decided to show the relationships between the respective factors. With this tool therefore, it is possible to display four different alternatives or strategies which minimize one factor and maximize the other or simply try to maximize both or vice versa. This way, four different strategies could be presented in the combination of weaknesses-threats, weaknesses-opportunities, strengths-threats and strengths-opportunities.

Through these tools, it was possible to identify the regions internal strengths and weaknesses as well as external opportunities and threats. Further, after the identification, their relationships between them could be portrayed and along that, four different courses of strategies presented, which could be further pursued. The SWOT Analysis and TOWS Matrix are widely used strategic tools, due to their simplicity and applicability. However, the importance of context-sensitivity cannot be overstated, and it can require additional consideration in strategic planning. SWOT analyses (and related strategic planning tool) should not be detached cerebral/academic exercises, but rather an observational exercise driven by context-sensitive testing, according to management literature. Yet, rather than presenting strategy-formation as a systemic, highly objective, conscious, top-down operation, strategic planning has been shown to be insensitive to both action and context. After a strategy has been established, it is simply a matter of putting it into effect. Often is that the strategy formulation stage (e.g., the evaluation of strengths, limitations, opportunities, and threats) is portrayed as thinking without action, and strategy making as a process of conception rather than learning. However according to literature, both of these elements are required in the strategic planning process.

Focusing on whether or not policymakers, functionaries, or academics can effectively model a SWOT analysis and TOWS Matrix, which will serve as the foundation for their actual development strategies, seems to overlook the fact that all elements of such an analysis must be situational. The problem described, can also be expressed in terms of planning or strategy development and strategy execution. The focus of a regional SWOT Analysis is on the area in question, rather than the organization conducting the SWOT Analysis, as it was meant in the management sphere. As a result, there is a chance that the strengths and limitations of the organization implementing the plan in a specific geographic context will be ignored. As a result, one might argue that, as

complicated as it may be, an organizational overview of the implementing organization should be included in any SWOT analysis.

As furthermore suggested by the data, the importance of context in strategy design is often overlooked in favor of the strategy execution. This means that while strategies should be developed objectively, the degree to which they are implemented objectively depends on the individual or organization carrying out the strategy. It is easy to overlook the fact that the strategy development stage (which includes a SWOT analysis as well as TOWS Matrix) is not always carried out by the same individual or people as the implementation stage. Furthermore, it is believed that (business) leaders and executives regard strategies as personal or subjective, while researchers approach strategy execution with objectivity. The art of putting a plan into action (i.e., choosing how and by what means the strategy should be implemented) is where these two opposites of subjectivity and objectivity collide. Therefore, to adequately implement a strategy it is important that the opposites complete this task collectively in order for it to apply the strategy in a sufficient and context related manner. While it is possible to argue that there are no inherent benefits to using the SWOT tool in strategic planning, there appear to be inadequate reasons to do so. However, rather than recommending that the SWOT instrument be replaced, it appears reasonable to advocate for a more strategic and calculated use of it.

It is possible to say that the data strongly suggests the importance of strategic decisions within the scope of tourism development. As has been mentioned, that tourism development is often sought after as a life-line, expecting to have savoring capabilities. However, it is important to note that tourism does not always aid in its intended way. Therefore, strong, precise and confident strategic decisions seem vital in the process of tourism development. Furthermore, the impact of the UNESCO Biosphere Reserve designation with its intended tasks of nature conservation, sustainable development as well as

logistical support will be shown. However, it is important to remember, that the countries itself need to be responsible for the implementation of these respective tasks and that up until to date no consequences can be expected when failing to do so. It is nevertheless of utmost importance to emphasize the influence and seriousness of nature conservation as the core task of the Biosphere Reserve as well as the educational aspect of sustainable development and logistics within.

Furthermore, strongly suggested within the data and analysis is the gravity of the bookable product of the "Amazon of Europe Bike Trail" which represents the first five countries transboundary bike trail in the world. Not only does this pose an opportunity for an innovative and unique brand, but it is also supported by the recent data where the bike sales and general bike mobility increased substantially. It is, however, important to remember, that with tourism development possible negative impacts may come along, which need to be handled accordingly. However, withal, the strongest notion within this thesis, which poses as a basis for future strategic decisions for the tourism development of the "Amazing Amazon of Europe" destination, is the importance to act context related when formulating and implementing a strategy, as well as of being aware that possible pitfalls, due to uncertainty or lack of information and data, can occur.

9. Conclusion

In this chapter a short summary of the work is given again, the research question answered, further questions formulated, the limitations pointed out and, last but not least, further recommendations for action are given.

9.1. Summary

The present work dealt with potential proposals for the future touristic development of the transboundary "Amazing Amazon of Europe" destination. Within, the theoretical background of touristic destinations, its development, Biosphere Reserves and strategic decisions was analyzed. Furthermore, the relevant data for touristic development gathered and applied through the utilization of the SWOT Analysis and TOWS Matrix to derive proposals as a basis for future strategic decisions in regard to tourism development.

In the theory, descriptions and terms of the firstly the respective region in question and later the framework of tourism destinations, its development as well as Biosphere Reserves and strategic decisions have been elaborated. First, the scope of the region itself and its geological, climatic and demographic characteristics were elaborated, followed by the identification and description of the countries involved. It could be determined that the region portrays a versatile image an all above mentioned components. It was therefore further elaborated how this region could incorporate the aspect of a touristic destination. Through research it was found out that touristic destinations follow a specific framework, especially in regard to management, infrastructure and resources. However, when inspecting the development of such destinations. it was concluded, that even though certain steps are common and can be universally utilized, no detailed framework for the development of destinations could be determined. This concludes in the necessity of a tailored approach, when engaging such an endeavor. In the light of the Biosphere Reserve, which the respective region is labeled as, it could be determined hat its framework as well as responsibilities are. Especially highlighted is the aspect of nature

conservation, which however, incorporates the features of development in a sustainable manner as well as the element of logistic support within the respective Biosphere Reserve. Furthermore, as this work portrays the basis for future strategic decisions, the concept and background of these has been researched and described. Their role in the business world has been emphasized for many years in the past, yet in recent years the utility has been detected in many other fields, concluding, that they can be utilized in the tourism development sector as well. Strategic decisions were presented to be of significant importance in the success of an entity. They do not only, however, present great value to the entity, but furthermore enormous responsibility to the decision-makers. It is not only vital, that the decision-makers are skilled in this area, it is also of utmost importance to gather as much information as possible prior to the decision. The temporal component is also important as strategic decisions cannot be made in one instance. The quality of a decision lays within the process of conducting one, therefore, a decision making process could be clarified as well as possible pitfalls elaborated. It is possible to conclude, that a strategic decision necessitates a high level of imagination and sound judgement as well as the skill of navigating through variables, in order to develop a course of action, to achieve a set goal.

Within the aspect of the empirical methodology, the strategic planning tools SWOT Analysis and TOWS Matrix have been described and elaborated. According to prior set criteria, the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of the region could be identified with the scope of the SWOT Analysis. Furthermore, the relationships between these respective factors could be determined by the utilization of the TOWS Matrix, which has been created by H. Weirich in 1982. With this tool, the relationships between the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats could be identified and along that, four different courses of action or possible strategies presented, which the management of the region, in charge of the development, could pursue. To conclude, several factors of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats could be identified using the SWOT Analysis as well as they could be

incorporated in the four different strategies using the TOWS Matrix. However, it is important to emphasize the context-sensitivity related to strategy design and formulation, as it is commonly overlooked.

9.2. Answering of the Research Question

Within the scope of this thesis, the sub-question as well as the respective main research question could be answered. These answers will be presented in the following. As the main research question is answered upon the basis of the sub-questions, the sub-questions will be answered first.

Sub – question 1:

Which present or future tourism trends occurring in central Europe would be relevant for the destination “Amazing Amazon of Europe”?

Thesis 1:

Due to the Covid-19 Pandemic, cycling tourism and nature tourism are seen as a great opportunity, as is the opportunity for nature lovers who want to travel sustainably, due to the development of sustainability in travel possibilities.

Answer 1:

As has been proposed by the hypothesis, one continuous trend is and will be traveling with the idea of sustainability. Since the beginning of the worldwide Covid-19 epidemic, environmental awareness has grown even more popular (Chapter 7.2.2). According to Booking.com, 53% of consumers want to travel in a more sustainable or environmentally responsible manner. More doubts develop about how the limitations will be managed and when individuals will be able to travel freely once more in regard to restrictions caused by the pandemic. Cycling was the one solution that Europeans provided most frequently when presented with mobility issues, according to the European Parliament and the Covid-19 and urban mobility research (Chapter 7.2.2). Furthermore, the European Cyclist Federation feels that the global epidemic is

a practical opportunity to change people's behaviour, not just in terms of cycling, but also in terms of reducing air pollution and choosing healthier modes of transportation.

Sub – question 2:

What are the key components, that need to be considered by the destination “Amazing Amazon of Europe” in relation to the overall touristic development regarding the Biosphere Reserve framework conditions?

Thesis 2:

The key components of the destination “Amazing Amazon of Europe” in relation to the overall touristic development regarding the Biosphere Reserve framework conditions are the cooperation between human activity and the ecosystem, ecotourism, the aspect of learning and the need for local people to be aware of the Biosphere Reserve as well as them being the majority stakeholders in the aspect of tourism.

Answer 2:

The response to this question appears to validate UNESCO's strategy to Biosphere Reserve protection, which encourages sustainable usage. People strive to maintain what they value and appreciate what helps them satisfy their needs, which is the fundamental rationale of this approach (Chapter 5). By supporting ecotourism that benefits local inhabitants and companies, good attitudes and behaviours toward sustainability and preservation are promoted among individuals (local citizens and businesses) whose support is critical in the protection of Biosphere Reserves.

To summarize, if Biosphere Reserves are valued assets to local and national population, efforts will be made to manage them in ways that preserve their traits and value (Chapter 7.2.2). Simply, as one does not murder the goose that lays the golden eggs. However, what starts off as carefully regulated use, can quickly escalate into misuse and abuse, causing irreversible harm to delicate ecosystems.

The study's conclusion, on the other hand, is that policies of sustainable usage – in this example, ecotourism – adopted with caution and care appear to be capable of offering an economically and environmentally feasible solution to the protection of Biosphere Reserves (Chapter 7.2.2). In this manner, the hypothesis presented can be validated, as the importance of not only the local population, but also the cooperation human to human and human to nature can be emphasized. Tourism development therefore only seems appropriate, when the right capacity of conservation and care can be provided.

Sub – question 3:

What are the outcomes of the SWOT analysis and TOWS matrix in regard to the region Amazon of Europe destination development?

Thesis 3:

This will be answered through the Master Thesis.

Answer 3:

The strategical planning tools of SWOT Analysis and TOWS Matrix have been utilized within the scope of this thesis to firstly, identify the internal and external factors of helpful or harmful nature, which are known as strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. And secondly, to identify their

relationship between each other in order to utilize these relationships for further strategic design and formulation.

Several factors of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats could be identified for the region "Amazon of Europe" therefore, the most evident of them will be further presented here. The most evident and crucial strengths for the "Amazon of Europe" region in regard to tourism development are the first transboundary bike trail through five countries provided as a bookable product, the vastness of offers regarding the natural offers and cuisine as well as the well interwoven road system with highways connections (chapter 7.2.3). Furthermore, the flexible DDO for the involvement of five countries as well as the product development through marketing has been identified as additional strengths for the region.

Continuing, the identified weaknesses (Chapter 7.2.3) for the region "Amazon of Europe" are the persisting language barriers, due to the involvement of five countries as well as the absence of an exact plan for marketing measures and the unclear structure of stakeholders. Additional weakness of the region might be the undefined border of the region alone as well as the absence of visitor centres and ecological events.

To resume, the external opportunities, that were identified for the region (chapter 7.2.3) in regard to tourism development are the involvement of the EU as well as the designation of the region as a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve. Additional opportunity remains the ongoing trends of digitalization, information technology as well as the trend of bicycle mobility, which can be fully implemented into the framework of the aspired destination.

To finish the elaboration of the factors of the SWOT Analysis, the threats (Chapter 7.2.3), which were identified will be presented. The main identified threat is the divided jurisdiction of the Biosphere Reserve as well as the lack of general funding and support for nature conservation. Furthermore, has it been identified, that this peripheral is lack in development, which is generally seen in the employment rate as well as the general social stability and GDP of the region. However, one of the most pressing threats in regard to tourism development for the region are the travel restrictions and other measures due to the global Covid-19 pandemic. Other threats are also the different legislation within the five involved countries as well as the fact that not all countries involved share a membership with the European Union or Schengen area.

These factors could be identified within the scope of the SWOT Analysis (Chapter 7.2.3), however, in the further process, the TOWS Matrix has incorporated the same factors and has furthermore identified their relationship (Chapter 7.3.2). Through the measure of combining the factor in alternative involving weaknesses-threats, weaknesses-opportunities, strengths-threats and strengths-opportunities, strategies, actions or tactics could be determined which either maximize a factor to diminish a another, maximize both or minimize both. The result of this procedure were four different alternative strategies (Chapter 7.3.2), that could be pursued in terms of strategic tourism development for the case of the "Amazing Amazon of Europe" destination and therefore act as proposals for the future development.

Main research question:

Which proposals can be interpreted from the analysis of the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats of the region "Amazon of Europe" in terms of strategic decisions for future tourism development?

Main thesis:

This question will be answered through the thesis.

Main answer:

In general, several factors of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats could be identified through the SWOT analysis (Chapter 7.2). With the help of the TOWS matrix, it was possible to determine their relationship to each other and in the process develop four alternatives for strategies that can serve as suggestions for future strategic decisions on tourism development in the respective region (Chapter 7.3).

As mentioned, four different alternatives could be determined through the TOWS Matrix, combining the respective factors into the combinations strengths-opportunities, strengths-weaknesses, weaknesses-opportunities and weaknesses-threats (Chapter 7.3.2). The alternative strengths-opportunities focuses on the strengths and opportunities identified, trying to maximize both in the set strategy. The strategy that has been proposed was to utilize the bookable product of the bike trail in order to take advantage of the ongoing trend of bicycle mobility. Along that, a unique and innovative brand could be established, which could adequately reach the target group, thus promoting tourism into the region and therefore not only raising the regions DGP, but also increasing employment possibilities as well as the social stability. This way both the regions internal strengths and external opportunities could be utilized to its maximum.

Continuing with the strengths-weaknesses alternative (Chapter 7.3.2), this strategy aims to utilize its strengths to attempt to minimize the external threats. The proposed strategy for this alternative is to utilize its strengths like the bike trail as a bookable product, vast offer of natural attraction and different cuisine as well as additional product development against the threats like the lack of financial support and low GDP and overall development of the region or

overcoming language and administrative barriers as well as aiding the management of the Biosphere Reserve. Thus, incorporating the regions strengths in a manner to attempt to diminish the threats. Furthermore, possible restrictions or health initiatives, due to Covid-19, could be additionally enforced, due to the availability of medical centres in the region.

As the former two alternatives incorporate the strengths of the region, will the presented latter two incorporate the weaknesses of the region in combination to the region opportunities as well as threats. The alternative weaknesses-opportunities (Chapter 7.3.2), attempts to minimize the regions weaknesses and contemporaneous taking advantage of the opportunities to the maximum. On one hand, this alternative provides the option to attempt and turn the weaknesses into strengths, therefore creating a strengths-opportunities situation, which has already been elaborated. However, in order to accomplish this a magnitude of skill is required. On the other hand, however, it is possible to take advantage of the opportunities and attempt to diminish the weaknesses. This could be done through utilization of digitalization and the expenditure of information technology, through which the combined effort for nature conservation and sustainability as well as quantified ecological events could be marketed taking advantage of the recent niche market of sustainable and eco-conscious travel. This way not only would the target group be addressed, but also promotion of health initiatives could be conducted as well as language barriers overcome. This way the respective alternative maximizes its opportunities whilst attempting to diminish its weaknesses, which were identified.

The last alternative, the weaknesses-threats (Chapter 7.3.2), however, is out of the four the most renounced. When combining the identified threats and weaknesses, especially for the case of the “Amazing Amazon of Europe” destination, it poses the question of meaningfulness in the endeavour of tourism development. However, it is on another instance, possible to attempt

to turn the weaknesses of the region, similar as in the weaknesses-opportunities alternative, into strengths, therefore moving towards a strengths-opportunities situation. It is, however, important to emphasize the amount of skill and resources needed to endure this conversion.

Through the identification of the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats of the respective "Amazon of Europe" region, these four alternative proposals for future strategic decisions regarding the tourism development could be identified and elaborated.

9.3. Practical Recommendation

On the basis of the theoretical and empirical results, some key points can be used as recommendations for action, especially for the case of Biosphere Reserve as well as general strategic decisions.

Establish a set of pre-requisites for Strategic Decision-Makers

The results of this work could furthermore be utilized to establish a set of pre-requisites for strategic decision-makers. As has been evident, in the results of the thesis, strategic decisions do not only carry great value and are extremely context sensitive, but it also requires a special skill set as well as sufficient amount of data and time to make them.

As has been emphasized in the strategic decision chapter, it is of vital importance to engage in the process of making decisions in a structured and methodologic fashion. Therefore, not only the requirement of the environment has to be met, which includes the sufficient amount of data and time, but furthermore the requirements of skill in this endeavor as well as adequate amount of imagination and sound judgment need to be present.

It would be of strong recommendation, for the respective management and decision-makers of the region "Amazon of Europe", to establish a set of pre-requisites that the individual decision-makers have to meet in order to be verified to continue the process of making strategic decisions. This is due to the fact, that as has been mentioned, the strategic decisions carry an enormous amount of value for an entity and the decision-makers may be held accountable for the formulation and implementation of strategic decisions. Furthermore, it would increase the possibility of formulating a more advanced and superior decision, increasing its chances of appropriate implementation and reaching the aspired outcome.

Exact plan for Marketing Measures

The analysis and results of the work clearly presented the lack of planned marketing measures in regard to the "Amazon of Europe" region. It has, on the other hand, been presented that the five country transboundary bike trail "Amazon of Europe Bike Trail" as a bookable product present one of the strongest strengths that could be identified. Additionally, the opportunity of the present and ongoing trend of increased bicycle mobility has been made evident.

It would therefore be of strong recommendation for the management of the "Amazing Amazon of Europe" destination, to firstly create a detailed and elaborated marketing plan for marketing measures regarding social media, as well other venture of marketing, and secondly, to attempt to incorporate the strength of the transboundary bike trail and the opportunity of the bicycle trend into the marketing measures alone. Through these measures, not only could the aspired target group be better addressed, but furthermore, the range could be optimized, and more people could be approached. Marketing measures should, however, not only be based upon the existence of the bike trail, but

furthermore attempt to incorporate other strengths into them for the optimal function and impact of marketing.

Inaugurate a community

Another recommendation for the future development of the destination “Amazing Amazon of Europe” would not only be additional product development or enhance marketing, but furthermore, the establishment of a community – a group of people with shared interests around the “Amazon of Europe Bike Trail”. Through this measure, people could be brought together, that share a common lifestyle of have preferences and shared interests as well as the marketing of products and services could be further optimized.

Therefore, to optimize the onset of the bookable product of the bike trail a community option should be provided, in order for like-minded people to exchange their experiences and ideas as well as give inquiries and search for answers. This endeavor could be done through the marketing segment on social media or a possible other platform, which enables the exchange for like-minded people. The presence of an active community could not only positively influence the economic aspect of the region, but the general well-being of the region alone. It would be, however, important to elaborate if the demand for a community is present, as the establishment of one can consume magnitudes of time and other resources.

9.4. Critic on Methodology

As has been declared in the limitations of the thesis, the main barrier of this work was identified as the desk research which was conducted. The main limitation was identified as the lack of literature regarding the region itself as well as the literature regarding the SWOT Analysis and TOWS Matrix. Even further limitations were identified when research was conducted in the

combination to tourism. Similar limitations were identified in regard to literature for strategic decisions. Even though an abundance of management literature could be obtained, there was a consistent and noticeable lack of literature that regarded the tourism sector. The limitation therefore causes the question of plausibility of the stated results and proposals. Even though it is clearly stated that the literature research poses a limitation to the thesis, a variety of keywords and search terms has been used to compensate the visible lack of specific literature. Through this action, an array of literature could be gathered which lead to the presented findings. Even though specific literature on the region itself or management literature in regard to tourism and Biosphere Reserves could not be found, it was possible to research what was supposed to be researched. And this due to the application of an array of search terms which generated an abundance of results, which could be implemented. Therefore, it is possible to state, that this measure compensated the limitation and enhanced the plausibility of the results.

Another limitation has been discovered in regard to the data provided by the tourism boards. As mentioned above, the data was collected at a NUTS 3 level, which means that the data itself does not have the required representativeness. Furthermore, as mentioned in the limitations of the thesis, lack of information, which was provided by the tourism boards, was determined. Mainly regarding the data on tourism, GDP, social stability and employment. A furthermore comprisable factor was the uncertainty, that the data, gathered by the tourism boards on the NUTS 3 level, has been gathered in the same manner as well under the same circumstances. It is due to this reason that the results, especially regarding tourism, GDP, social stability and employment rate, are not representative for the "Amazon of Europe" region. To specifically describe and elaborate the state of the region, an in-depth analysis of it would be needed. This way only data from the respective "Amazon of Europe" region within its borders would be gathered and analyzed for the purpose of a precise description of it. It remains however, plausible that some of these figures show the actual state of the region, due to the fact, that

the region alone lays within the borders of data collection. However, they cannot be generalized in a wider sense than the respective borders of data collection. Nevertheless does the research present a reference point for further research regarding the “Amazon of Europe” region.

Interviews as well as empirical data collection, which were not conducted, could be a further improvement of the methodology. The reason for this, as mentioned above, is that the data was collected by the tourism boards and later shared for this work. As there are five countries active in the region, an international trip would be necessary to obtain the required data. However, due to the actions of the global Covid 19 pandemic, there were travel restrictions that hindered this endeavor. Therefore, even though data could not be collected from the first hand which could possibly deliver more accurate data regarding the research area it was possible to analyze an immense collection of data through the chosen methodology. Through this data set, which was provided by the respective tourism boards, it was possible to not only give a provisional picture of the state of the region, but furthermore provide additional reference points for future research regarding the “Amazon of Europe” region.

Another challenge in the methodology for developing regional strategy has been the subjectivity of the SWOT Analysis. The SWOT Analysis is in fact, by definition, a subjective process. This fact is reinforced by the involvement of the internal analysis, where the strengths and weaknesses indicated in the analysis should be based on the organization's characteristics, making it self-reflective by nature. This has additionally challenged the process of creating and elaborating not only the SWOT Analysis but later also the TOWS Matrix. This challenge was possible to avoided by the means of an external party (The author) to conduct the SWOT Analysis and TOWS Matrix, through which the subjectivity could be avoided to some degree. However, it is still possible that the challenge of subjectivity could not be completely avoided. Therefore, it is possible that the subjectivity of the analysis is still present. Nevertheless, it was

possible to successfully conduct both the SWOT Analysis and TOWS Matrix, which allowed the further development and design of strategy proposals.

However, to finalize, it is possible to say that the data and results of this work can be validated as well as generalized to some degree. Although the SWOT analysis and the TOWS matrix have been used in relation to the destination "Amazing Amazon of Europe" and its development, the theoretical background as well as the emphasis on the results of the strategic choices, the Biosphere Reserve and tourism development can be generalized and widely applied. It is therefore possible to state, that even though the limitations hindered the process of the research, it was still possible to conduct the research to a full extent and reach the set goals of the design and formulation of future strategy proposals.

It still needs to be addressed that the provided data set has not been gathered by the respective tourism boards explicably for the means of this research. However, the data set has been utilized within the scope of the thesis, solemnly, due to the existence of it and the possibility, that it was provided by the respective tourism boards. It is, therefore, important to note that the provided data set did not fit the means of the thesis perfectly, however, those parts, which could be used, were utilized and the rest was left to be untouched. Nevertheless, even though the data set was not collected explicably for the means of this research and did not fit the frame perfectly, it was still handled with the utmost respect and decency. It was, therefore, still possible to be utilized to an extent to meet the goals of the research and to be able to provide adequate results.

9.5. Further research questions

Within the framework of this work, the questions about strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats could be answered and it was worked out how the concepts of a Biosphere Reserve can be integrated into the tourism development of a destination and what significance strategic decisions have. Nevertheless, further questions arose during the research that could not be answered within the framework of this work and would require additional attention and research to clarify.

One of the questions is: "To which extent, has the designation of the "Amazon of Europe" region as a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve, helped the conservation of nature as well as aided the sustainable development within the region?"

It has been made clear that the region has been declared as a Biosphere Reserve, as well as what the framework of it should represent, however, through the chosen methodology it was not possible to assess the extent to which the designation has helped the region in the tasks of nature conservation, sustainable development as well as the logistic support within.

Another question that arose is: "How does tourism impact a Biosphere Reserve, especially in the context of nature conservation and sustainable development?"

This question occurred whilst researching the variables that need to be considered for tourism development i.e. building of infrastructure, or generally what happens when tourism is promoted, and overcrowding becomes present. It was researched, how a Biosphere Reserve can be integrated into the framework of tourism development, however it would be important to further research what impacts does tourism have on the Biosphere Reserve.

The last pressing question that has been present has been the question: “How to determine the pre-requisites needed to be able to make adequate strategic decisions in regard to tourism development?”

It has been widely researched, that strategic decisions are of immense importance and that the process of making them requires not only data and time but furthermore a strong skill-set. It has also been made clear, that it is further recommended for the management of the “Amazon of Europe” region to determine a required skill-set of pre-requisites a decision-maker has to have to be able to make strategic decisions. However, it would be required to further research the procedure or method of determining the required skill-set in order to choose a capable decision-maker.

Through an extensive research, it was possible to not only provide a theoretical background to the region “Amazon of Europe”, destinations and destination management as well as Biosphere Reserves and strategic decisions, but furthermore, through the methodology of the SWOT Analysis and TOWS Matrix provide practical recommendations as well possible proposals for future strategic decisions in regard of tourism development for the “Amazing Amazon of Europe” destination.

The main outcome of the research is the basis for future strategic decisions, which has been provided through the SWOT Analysis as well as proposals for future strategies in regard to touristic development of the “Amazing Amazon of Europe” destination. This thesis furthermore provides an in-depth insight of the respective region, as well elaborated and describes the importance of destination management, the framework of UNESCO’s Biosphere Reserves as well as the importance of strategic decisions. It furthermore elaborates a

strategic decision making process, which may be utilized in an array of possibilities and businesses.

In final words, this thesis has reached its set goal of 1) giving a theoretical background on touristic destinations and their development, strategic decisions and Biosphere Reserves, 2) gathering relevant data as a basis for strategic decisions in the process of developing a touristic destination in the region "Amazon of Europe" and 3) using the provided data in the SWOT Analysis and TOWS Matrix to establish a basis for future strategic decisions as well as propose possible directions of touristic development for the "Amazing Amazon of Europe" destination. It is therefore possible to say that this oeuvre is finished.

10. Literature List

- Achieving in Tourism. (n.d.). Attractions. Retrieved from <https://www.achievingintourism.cymru/home/main-menu/do-well-in-developing-uk-tourist-destinations/ac-1-1/resources/natural-attractions/>
- Agrawal, A. (2000). Adaptive management in transboundary protected areas: the Bialowieza National Park and Biosphere Reserve as a case study. *Environmental Conservation* 27(4),326-333. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0376892900000370>
- Ahrens, C & Henson, R. (2015). *Meteorology Today* (11 ed.). Cengage Learning. pp. 491–492.
- Altiok, P. (2011). Applicable vision, mission and the effects of strategic management on crisis resolve. *Procedia - Social and Behavioural Sciences*. 24, 61-71. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2011.09.057>
- Amadeus. (n.d.). Travel trends 2021. Retrieved from <https://amadeus.com/documents/en/pdfs/amadeus-trends-2021.pdf>
- Amazon of Europe Bike Trail. (2020). Output 3.4 AoE Bike Trail Strategic marketing plan . Retrieved from http://www.interreg-danube.eu/uploads/media/approved_project_output/0001/41/ac7895f81aaeb011fd27edcca0d9f1ff193bd1e1.pdf
- Amazon of Europe Bike Trail. (n.d.). About. Retrieved from <https://aoebiketrial.com/about/>
- Amazon of Europe Bike Trail. (n.d.). Discover Amazon of Europe by cycling along Mura, Drava and Danube. Retrieved from https://aoebiketrial.com/?fbclid=IwAR3psFYZ9J0vQtnRjKQ71I_IhBrpaCxn3ni_8EGWfTRmXq_CGaAU-LkeR4g

- Amazon of Europe. (n.d.) The ``Amazon of Europe`` Bike Trail. Download document: Implementation concept EN. Retrieved from <http://www.amazon-of-europe.com/en/bike-trail/>
- Amazon of Europe. (n.d.). A Transboundary Biosphere Reserve for the benefit of nature and people. Retrieved from <http://www.amazon-of-europe.com/en/biosphere-reserve/>
- Amazon of Europe. (n.d.). Background. Retrieved from <http://www.amazon-of-europe.com/en/menu62/>
- Amazon of Europe. (n.d.a). Output 3.1 Socio-economic analysis of tourism potentials. Retrieved from http://www.interreg-danube.eu/uploads/media/approved_project_output/0001/41/6bcd6cc21f53f643d2a805fa37f9380014b8e12f.pdf
- Amazon of Europe. (n.d.b). Output 5.1. Amazon of Europe Bike Trail Route Plan - Southern route. Retrieved from http://www.interreg-danube.eu/uploads/media/approved_project_output/0001/41/3f15ff5c367e4d449924ca354fe829e4a8422875.pdf
- Amazon of Europe. (n.d.c). Output 5.1. Amazon of Europe Bike Trail Route Plan - Northern route. Retrieved from http://www.interreg-danube.eu/uploads/media/approved_project_output/0001/41/6d7b37119e6e1adb4d916fb9de1582d466a8e6a1.pdf
- Andler, N. (2015). Tools für Projektmanagement, Workshops und Consulting: Kompendium der wichtigsten Techniken und Methoden (6., überarbeitete und erweiterte Auflage. ed.).
- Ateljevic, J. (2009). Tourism entrepreneurship and regional development. In J. Ateljevic & S.J. Page (Eds.), *Tourism and Entrepreneurship: International Perspectives* (pp. 149-171). Oxford, UK: Butterworth-Heinemann
- Bacon, W. (1998). Economic Systems and Their Impact on Tourist Resort Development: The Case of the Spa in Europe. *Tourism Economics*, 4(1), 21–32. doi:10.1177/135481669800400102

- Batisse, M. (1982). The Biosphere Reserve: A Tool for Environmental Conservation and Management. *Environmental Conservation*, 9(02), 101. doi:10.1017/s0376892900019937
- Batisse, M. (1982). The Biosphere Reserve: A Tool for Environmental Conservation and Management. *Environmental Conservation*, 9(02), 101. doi:10.1017/s0376892900019937
- Beirmann, D. (2003). Restoring tourism destinations in crisis: a strategic marketing approach. Cambridge, MA: CABI Pub
- Better Health Channel. (n.d.). Cycling – Health Benefits. Retrieved from <https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/healthyliving/cycling-health-benefits>
- Bhushan, N. & Rai, K. (2007). Strategic decision making: Applying the Analytic Hierarchy Process. Kent: Springer.
- Blair, E., Blair, J., & Czaja, R. (2014). *Designing Surveys: A guide to decisions and procedures*. (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications Inc.
- Blom, B., Sunderland, T. & Murdiyarto, D. (2010). Getting REDD to work locally: lessons learned from integrated conservation & development projects. *Environmental Science & Policy*, 13, 164 – 172
- Boniface, B., Cooper, R. & Cooper, C. (2001). *Worldwide destinations: The geography of travel and tourism* (3rd ed.). Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann.
- Booking.com. (2020). Smarter, kinder, safer: BOOKING.COM REVEALS ITS PREDICTIONS FOR THE FUTURE OF TRAVEL. Retrieved from <https://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:hEDjsCvKLiCJ:https://globalnews.booking.com/download/944450/booking.comglobalresearchreport.pdf+&cd=3&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=si&client=firefox-b-d>

- Bosak K. (2016) Tourism, Development, and Sustainability. In: McCool S., Bosak K. (eds.) Reframing Sustainable Tourism. Environmental Challenges and Solutions, 2. Springer, Dordrecht. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-017-7209-9_3
- Breakey, N. M. (2005). TOURISM DESTINATION DEVELOPMENT – BEYOND BUTLER (Doctoral dissertation). The University of Queensland, Brisbane.
- Britannica. (n.d.). Köppen Climate Classification. Retrieved from <https://www.britannica.com/science/Koppen-climate-classification>
- BRM. (n.d.). SWOT Analysis. Retrieved from <https://research-methodology.net/theory/strategy/swot-analysis/>
- Broggiato, A., Filipova, T. B., Cetara, L., Church, J., Luciani, G., Monnier, C. and Sandei, P. (2007a). Handbook on the Carpathian Convention. The Regional Environmental Center for Central and Eastern Europe and the European Academy Bolzano. Szentendre: Hungary.
- Broggiato, A., Filipova, T. B., Luciani, G., Markus-Johansson, M., Monnier, C., Romanescu, D. and Stec, S. (2007b). A heightened perspective regional assessment of the policy, legislative and institutional frameworks implementing the Carpathian Convention. The Regional Environmental Center for Central and Eastern Europe and the European Academy Bolzano. Szentendre: Hungary.
- Brouder, P. (2013) TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN PERIPHERAL AREAS - Processes of Local Innovation and Change in Northern Sweden (Doctoral dissertation). Mid Sweden University, Östersund.
- Bruner, A. G., Gullison, R. E. and Balmford, A. (2004). Financial costs and shortfalls of managing and expanding protected-area systems in developing countries. *BioScience*, 54(12), 1119-1126. doi:

[http://dx.doi.org/10.1641/0006-3568\(2004\)054\[1119:fcasom\]2.0.co;2](http://dx.doi.org/10.1641/0006-3568(2004)054[1119:fcasom]2.0.co;2)

Burja, C. & Burja, V. (2010). Analysis model for inventory management, *Annals of the University of Petroșani*, 10(1), 2010, 43-50

Butler, R. W. (1980). THE CONCEPT OF A TOURIST AREA CYCLE OF EVOLUTION: IMPLICATIONS FOR MANAGEMENT OF RESOURCES. *The Canadian Geographer/Le Géographe Canadien*, 24(1), 5–12. doi:10.1111/j.1541-0064.1980.tb00970.x

Cambridge Dictionary. (n.d.). Amenity. Retrieved from. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/amenity?q=amenities>

Cambridge Dictionary. (n.d.). Attraction. Retrieved from. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/attraction>

Cambridge Dictionary. (n.d.). Event. Retrieved from. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/event>

Cambridge Dictionary. (n.d.). Factor. Retrieved from <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/factor>

Cambridge Dictionary. (n.d.). Festival. Retrieved from. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/festival>

Cambridge Dictionary. (n.d.). Infrastructure. Retrieved from. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/infrastructure>

Castro, R. (2005). Economic development and growth in the world economy. *Review of Economic Dynamics*, 8(1), 195–230. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.red.2004.10.006>

CBI. (2018). Cycling Tourism in Europe. Retrieved from <https://www.cbi.eu/market-information/tourism/cycling-tourism/europe>

- Charantimath, P., & Ravanavar, G. (2012). Strategic Formulation Using Tows Matrix – A Case Study. *International Journal of Research and Development*, 1(1), 87-90.
- Clark, A., Jit, M., Warren-Gash, C., Guthrie, B., Wang, H. H. X., Mercer, S. W., Sanderson, C., McKee, M., Troeger, C., Ong, K. L., Checchi, F., Perel, P., Joseph, S., Gibbs, H. P., Banerjee, A., Eggo, R. M., Nightingale, E. S., O'Reilly, K., Jombart, T., . . . Jarvis, C. I. (2020). Global, regional, and national estimates of the population at increased risk of severe COVID-19 due to underlying health conditions in 2020: a modelling study. *The Lancet Global Health*, 8(8), 1003–1017. [https://doi.org/10.1016/s2214-109x\(20\)30264-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/s2214-109x(20)30264-3)
- Clark, C. S., & Krentz, S. E. (2006). Avoiding the pitfalls of strategic planning. *Healthcare Financial Management*, 60(11), 62-72.
- Clark, C. S., & Krentz, S. E. (2006). Avoiding the pitfalls of strategic planning. *Healthcare Financial Management*, 60(11), 62-72.
- Climate Change & Infectious Diseases. (n.d.). World Maps of Köppen-Geiger climate classification. Retrieved from <http://koeppen-geiger.vu-wien.ac.at/>
- Coetzer, K. L., Witkowski, E. T. F., & Erasmus, B. F. N. (2013). Reviewing Biosphere Reserves globally: effective conservation action or bureaucratic label? *Biological Reviews*, 89(1), 82–104. doi:10.1111/brv.12044
- Collins Dictionary. (n.d.). Adventure Park. Retrieved from <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/adventure-park>
- Collins Dictionary. (n.d.). Tourist Information Centre. Retrieved from. <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/tourist-information-centre>

- Collins Dictionary. (n.d.). Visitor Centre. Retrieved from <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/visitor-centre>
- Compas, B. E. (1987). Stress and life events during childhood and adolescence. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 7(3), 275–302. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0272-7358\(87\)90037-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/0272-7358(87)90037-7)
- ControllingWiki. (n.d.). SWOT-Analyse. Retrieved from <https://www.controlling-wiki.com/de/index.php/SWOT-Analyse>
- Corporate Education Group. (2020). Five-Step Model to Making Strategic Decisions. Retrieved from <https://blog.corpedgroup.com/blog/five-steps-to-making-strategic-decisions>
- Council of Europe. (n.d.). EU macro-regional strategies. Retrieved from <https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/cultural-routes-and-regional-development/eu-macro-regions>
- Coung, C. V., Dart, P. & Hockings, M. (2017). Biosphere reserves: Attributes for success. *Journal of Environmental Management*, 188, 9-17. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvman.2016.11.069>
- CyclingUK. (2020). Economic Benefits of cycle tourism. Retrieved from https://www.cyclinguk.org/sites/default/files/document/2020/07/benefits_of_cycle_tourism_factsheet_final10738.pdf
- Dandage, R., Mantha, S., & Rane, S. (2019). Strategy development using TOWS matrix for international project risk management based on prioritization of risk categories. *International Journal of Managing Projects in Business*, 12(6), doi: 10.1108/IJMPB-07-2018-0128
- de la Croix, D. (2015). Economic Growth. *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, 38–44. <https://doi.org/10.1016/b978-0-08-097086-8.71057-9>
- Dittmar, C., Zech, W. and Elling, W. (2003). Growth variations of common beech (*Fagus sylvatica* L.) under different climatic and environmental conditions in Europe—a dendroecological study.

Forest Ecology and Management, 173(1), 63-78. doi:
[http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0378-1127\(01\)00816-7](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0378-1127(01)00816-7)

Dwyer, L. (2006). International handbook on the economics of tourism.
In L. Dwyer. & P. Forsyth (Eds.). Cheltenham: Edward Elgar
Publishing

Earle, S. (2019). Groundwater and Aquifers. Retrieved from
<https://opentextbc.ca/geology/chapter/14-1-groundwater-and-aquifers/>

Eastern Carpathians Biodiversity Conservation (ECBC). (2004).
Challenges and opportunities for biodiversity conservation in the
East Carpathians. Foundation brochure. ECBC: Ustrzyki Górne,
Poland.

ECF. (2020). ECF RECOMMENDATIONS FOR HEALTHIER AND
SAFER STREETS AFTER THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC.
Retrieved from
https://ecf.com/sites/ecf.com/files/civicrm/persist/con.tribute/images/Recommendations_for_post_COVID_cities.pdf

ECF. (n.d.). Cycling beyond the crisis. Retrieved from
<https://datastudio.google.com/embed/u/0/reporting/1ae589b4-e01c-4c27-8336-f683ea516256/page/wkQTB>

EGDI. (n.d.). Hydrogeological Map of Europe. Retrieved from
<http://www.europe-geology.eu/groundwater/groundwater-map/hydrogeological-map-of-europe/>

Emerton, L., Bishop, J. and Thomas, L. (2006). Sustainable financing of
protected areas: a global review of challenges and options.
International Union for conservation of Nature and Natural
Resources (IUCN). Gland: Switzerland.

Engl, C. (2017). Destination Branding: Von der Geografie zur Bedeutung.
München: Konstanz.

- England, K., & Azzopardi-Muscat, N. (2017). Demographic trends and public health in Europe. *European Journal of Public Health*, 27(suppl_4), 9–13. <https://doi.org/10.1093/eurpub/ckx159>
- EUR-Lex. (n.d.). Treaty establishing the European Coal and Steel Community, ECSC Treaty. Retrieved from <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=LEGISSUM:xy0022>
- Eurobike. (2019). Cycling trends to expect in 2020. Retrieved from <https://www.eurobike.at/en/blog/cycling-trends-2020>
- Euronews. (2020). Travel Trend Report October 2020. Retrieved from <https://static.euronews.com/website/pdf/euronews-trend-report-travel-after-Oct-2020.pdf>
- European Commission. (n.d.). "The EU Single Market: Fewer barriers, more opportunities". Europa web portal. Retrieved from https://web.archive.org/web/20071001122551/http://ec.europa.eu/internal_market/index_en.htm
- European Commission. (n.d.). Corona Virus Response. Retrieved from https://ec.europa.eu/info/live-work-travel-eu/coronavirus-response/travel-during-coronavirus-pandemic_en
- European Commission. (n.d.). Demographic trends. Retrieved from <https://ec.europa.eu/futurium/en/system/files/ged/eprs-briefing-633160-demographic-trends-eu-regions-final.pdf>
- European Commission. (n.d.). EU Strategy for the Danube Region. Retrieved from https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/policy/cooperation/macro-regional-strategies/danube/#1
- European Commission. (n.d.). Macro-Regional Strategies. Retrieved from https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sl/policy/cooperation/macro-regional-strategies/

- European Commission. (n.d.). Schengen Borders and Visa. Retrieved from https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/schengen-borders-and-visa_en
- European Commission. (n.d.). The EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR). Retrieved from <http://www.interreg-danube.eu/uploads/media/default/0001/09/69b2e1bf710919943a4a8e1c507cf47c01b7326c.pdf>
- European Commission. (n.d.). The Pannonian Region. Retrieved from https://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/natura2000/biogeog_regions/pannonian/index_en.htm
- European Commission. (n.d.). The Pannonian Region. Retrieved from https://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/natura2000/biogeog_regions/pannonian/index_en.htm
- European Commission. (n.d.). The Schengen Area. Retrieved from http://biblio.ucv.ro/bib_web/bib_pdf/EU_books/0056.pdf
- European Commission. (n.d.). Tourism Nights spent as tourist accommodation establishments. Retrieved from https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Tourism_statistics_-_nights_spent_at_tourist_accommodation_establishments
- European Commission. (n.d.). WHAT IS AN EU MACRO-REGIONAL STRATEGY? Retrieved from https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/cooperate/macro_region_strategy/pdf/mrs_factsheet_en.pdf
- European Parliament. (2020). COVID-19 and urban mobility: impacts and perspectives. Retrieved from [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2020/652213/IPOL_IDA\(2020\)652213_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2020/652213/IPOL_IDA(2020)652213_EN.pdf)
- European Tourism Manifesto. (n.d.). Tourism Manifesto. Retrieved from <https://tourismmanifesto.eu/>

- European Union. (2019). Demographic trends in EU regions. Retrieved from https://ec.europa.eu/futurium/en/system/files/ged/eprs-briefing-633160-demographic-trends-eu-regions-final.pdf?fbclid=IwAR1f3DwhFmQ6zh8OOU91jByCI3U5y2_6ZBIAdwddbDEU4-ZC868xsZleAA
- European Union. (2020). European Economic Forecast: Autumn 2020. Retrieved from https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/economy-finance/ip136_en_2.pdf?fbclid=IwAR2bLzPa4HdriL_yFD7551Zi8J0FAMIZFmIvy45GWkecbPw_TXdxaaw_FHY
- European Union. (2021). EU in Brief. Retrieved from https://europa.eu/european-union/about-eu/eu-in-brief_en
- European Union. (n.d.). Travel documents for EU nationals. Retrieved from https://europa.eu/youreurope/citizens/travel/entry-exit/eu-citizen/index_en.htm
- Evans, L. S., Ban, N. C., Schoon, M. and Nenadovic, M. (2014). Keeping the 'Great' in the Great Barrier Reef: large-scale governance of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park. *International Journal of the Commons*, 8(2), 396-427. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.18352/ijc.405>
- FAO. (2000). Chapter 29. Central Europe. Retrieved from <http://www.fao.org/3/y1997e/y1997e0y.htm#TopOfPage>
- FAO. (2000). Chapter 30. Southern Europe. Retrieved from <http://www.fao.org/3/y1997e/y1997e0z.htm#TopOfPage>
- Fennell, D. (2002). *Ecotourism Programme planning*. Wallingford: CABI.
- Fink, A. (2003). *How to Sample in Surveys*. (2nd ed). Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications Inc.
- Forbes. (2019). The Four Biggest Travel Trends For 2020. Retrieved from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/alexandratalty/2020/12/31/the-four-biggest-travel-trends-for-2020/?sh=18d766141ced>

- Foris, D., Florescu, A., Foris, T. & Barabas, S. (2020). Improving the Management of Tourist Destinations: A New Approach to Strategic Management at the DMO Level by Integrating Lean Techniques. Sustainability. 12. doi: 10.3390/su122310201
- Franck, N. & Stary, J. (2006). Die Technik wissenschaftlichen Arbeitens: Eine praktische Anleitung. (17th ed.). Stuttgart: UTB.
- Freyer, W. (2011). Tourismus-Marketing: Marktorientiertes Management im Mikro- und Makrobereich der Tourismuswirtschaft (7., überarb. und erg. Aufl.. ed., Lehr- und Handbücher zu Tourismus, Verkehr und Freizeit). München: Oldenbourg.
- Friedl, H. A. (2017). The SAGE International Encyclopedia of Travel and Tourism: SWOT Analysis. In Lowry, L. L. (Ed.), The SAGE International Encyclopedia of Travel and Tourism. (1204-1206). Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Fullerton, C. (2013). Arts, culture, and rural community economic development: A southern Saskatchewan case study. In K. Vodden, R. Gibson, & G. Baldacchino (Eds.), Place Peripheral: The Challenge and Promise of Place-based Development in Rural and Remote Regions (in press). St. John's, NL: ISER Books.
- Gallarza, M.G. and Gil Saura, I. (2020), "Consumer value in tourism: a perspective article", Tourism Review, Vol. 75 No. 1, pp. 41-44. <https://doi.org/10.1108/TR-06-2019-0227>
- GDRC. (n.d.). Tourism Destination Management. Retrieved from <https://www.gdrc.org/uem/eco-tour/destination-mgmt.html>
- Gerard, D. L., & Saenger, G. (1966). Out-Patient Treatment of Alcoholism. University of Toronto Press. Published. <https://doi.org/10.3138/9781487595760>
- German Man and the Biosphere (MAB) National Committee, editor. (2005). Full of life: UNESCO biosphere reserves – model regions for sustainable development. Springer-Verlag: Berlin, Germany.

- German, D., & Latkin, C. A. (2011). Social Stability and Health: Exploring Multidimensional Social Disadvantage. *Journal of Urban Health*, 89(1), 19–35. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11524-011-9625-y>
- Gluck, F. W., Kaufman, S. P. & Walleck A. S. (1980). Strategic Management for Competitive Advantage. Retrieved from <https://hbr.org/1980/07/strategic-management-for-competitive-advantage>
- Gluck, F. W., Kaufman, S. P. & Walleck A. S. (1980). Strategic Management for Competitive Advantage. Retrieved from <https://hbr.org/1980/07/strategic-management-for-competitive-advantage>
- Goffi, G. & Cucculelli, M. (2014). Components of Destination Competitiveness. The case of Small Tourism Destination in Italy. *International Journal of Tourism Policy*. 5. 296-326. doi: 10.1504/IJTP.2014.068035
- Goranczewski, B. & Puciato, D. (2010). SWOT Analysis in the formulation of tourism development strategies for destinations. *Tourism*, 20, 45-53. doi: 10.2478/v10106-010-0008-7
- Goranczewski, B., & Puciato, D. (2010). SWOT Analysis in the Formulation of Tourism Development Strategies for Destinations. *Tourism*, 20(2), 45-53. doi:10.2478/v10106-010-0008-7
- Grant, R., Butler, B., Hung, H. & Orr, S. (2011). *Contemporary Strategy Analysis: an Australian perspective*, John Wiley & Sons Australia
- Gürel, E. (2017). SWOT Analysis: A theoretical review. *Journal of International Social Research*, 10(5), 994-1006. doi: 10.17719/jjsr.2017.1832
- GÜREL, E. (2017). SWOT ANALYSIS: A THEORETICAL REVIEW. *Journal of International Social Research*, 10(51), 994–1006. <https://doi.org/10.17719/jjsr.2017.1832>

<https://www.cii.co.uk/media/6158020/a-useful-guide-to-swot-analysis.pdf>

- Hall, C.M. (2005). *Tourism: Rethinking the Social Science of Mobility*. Harlow, UK: Pearson Education.
- Hall, C.M. (2007). North-South perspectives on tourism, regional development, and peripheral areas. In D.K. Müller & B. Jansson (Eds.), *Tourism in Peripheries: Perspectives from the Far North and South* (pp. 19-37). Wallingford, UK: CABI.
- Hall, C.M., & Boyd, S. (Eds.) (2005). *Nature-based Tourism in Peripheral Areas: Development or Disaster?*. Clevedon, UK: Channel View.
- Hansson, S. O., & Helgesson, G. (2003). What is stability? *Synthese*, 136(2), 219–235. <https://doi.org/10.1023/a:1024733424521>
- Hartmann, R. (2018). *Marketing in Tourismus und Freizeit* (2. überarbeitete Auflage. ed., UTB 3973 Tourismus, Betriebswirtschaftslehre). München: UKV.
- Haugland, S.A., Ness, H., Grønseth, B. & Aarstad, J., (2011). Development of Tourism Destinations, An Integrated Multilevel Perspective. In: *Annals of Tourism Research*. 38(1), pp.268 –290.
- Hoppstadius, F. (2018). *Sustainable development and tourism in a biosphere reserve: A case study of Lake Vänern Archipelago Biosphere Reserve, Sweden* (Doctoral dissertation). Karlstad University, Karlstad.
- Ianos, I., Stoica, I., Talanga, C., & Vaidianu, N. (2012). *Politics of Tourism Development In Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve*. Sofia: Surveying Geology & Mining Ecology Management (SGEM). Retrieved from <https://search.proquest.com/conference-papers-proceedings/politics-tourism-development-danube-delta/docview/1444052833/se-2?accountid=192066>
- IGI Global. (n.d.). What is Tourist Destination. Retrieved from <https://www.igi-global.com/dictionary/tourist-destination/39274>

- ILO. (n.d.). Employment-to-population ratio. Retrieved from https://www.ilo.org/ilostat-files/Documents/description_EPR_EN.pdf
- ILO. (n.d.). Glossary of Statistical Terms. Retrieved from <https://www.ilo.org/ilostat-files/Documents/Statistical%20Glossary.pdf>
- Interreg Danube Transnational Programme. (2019). Amazon of Europe Bike Trail. Retrieved from <http://www.interreg-danube.eu/approved-projects/amazon-of-europe-bike-trail>
- Interreg Danube Transnational Programme. (2019). Socio-economic analysis. Retrieved from http://www.interreg-danube.eu/uploads/media/approved_project_output/0001/41/6bcd6cc21f53f643d2a805fa37f9380014b8e12f.pdf
- Kabeyi, M. J. B. (2019). Organizational strategic planning, implementation and evaluation with analysis of challenges and benefits for profit and nonprofit organizations. *International Journal of Applied Research and Studies*, 5(6), 27-32. doi: 10.22271/allresearch.2019.v5.i6a.5870
- Karmasin, N. & Ribing, R. (2017). *Die Gestaltung wissenschaftlicher Arbeiten: Ein Leitfaden für Seminararbeiten, Bachelor-, Master- und Magisterarbeiten, Diplomarbeiten und Dissertationen*. (5th ed.). Stuttgart: UTB.
- Karppi, I., Kokkonen, M. & Lähteenmäki-Smith, K. (2001). SWOT-analysis as a basis for regional strategies. Nordregio Working Paper, Stockholm.
- Keep.eu. (2014). Amazon of Europe Bike Trail. Retrieved from <https://keep.eu/projects/19533/Amazon-of-Europe-Bike-Trail-EN/>
- Kögel-Knaber, I. & Amelung, W. (2014). 12.7 - Dynamics, Chemistry, and Preservation of Organic Matter in Soils. In Holland, H. & Turekian,

- K. (Ed.). *Treatise on Geochemistry* (2nd ed.). (157-215). Elsevier. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-08-095975-7.01012-3>.
- Kolb, B. (2006). *Tourism marketing for cities and towns: Using branding and events to attract tourists*. Amsterdam: Butterworth-Heinemann.
- Kosti, S., & Kundu, J. (2020). *SWOT Analysis of Literature. Creating a Framework for Dissertation Preparation*. doi: 10.4018/978-1-5225-9707-0.ch004
- Kottek, M., Grieser, J., Beck, C., Rudolf, B. & Rubel, F. (2006). World Map of Köppen-Geiger Climate Classification updated. *Meteorol. Z.*, 15, 259 -263.
- Kubiszewski, I. (2019). The Genuine Progress Indicator: A Measure of Net Economic Welfare. *Encyclopedia of Ecology*, 4, 327–335. <https://doi.org/10.1016/b978-0-12-409548-9.10609-8>
- Kulshrestha, D.S., & Puri, P. (2017). Tows Analysis for Strategic Choice of Business Opportunity and Sustainable Growth of Small Businesses. *Pacific Business Review International*, 10(5), 144-152.
- Löffler, G. (2007). The impact of tourism on the local supply structure of goods and services in peripheral areas. In D.K. Müller & B. Jansson (Eds.), *Tourism in Peripheries: Perspectives from the Far North and South* (pp. 69-84). Wallingford, UK: CABI.
- Lu, W. (2010). Improved SWOT Approach for Conducting Strategic Planning in the Construction Industry. *Journal of Construction Engineering and Management*. 136(12), 1317-1328. doi: 10.1061/(Asce)Co.1943-7862.0000240
- Lundmark, L. (2006). Mobility, migration and seasonal tourism employment: Evidence from Swedish mountain municipalities. *Scandinavian Journal of Hospitality and Tourism*, 6(3), 197-213.

- Magretta, J. (2012). Understanding Michael Porter: the essential guide to competition and strategy, Harvard Business School Library, Boston,
- Manhas, P. S., Manrai, L. A. & Manrai, A. K. (2016). Role of tourist destination development in building its brand image: A conceptual model. *Journal of Economics, Finance and Administrative Science*, 21(40), 25-29. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jefas.2016.01.001>
- March, J.G. & Simon, H.S. (1958). *Organizations*, John Wiley & Sons, New York
- Mazilu, M. (2010). Key Elements of a Model for Sustainable Tourism. *International Journal of Energy and Environment*, 4(2), 45-54. Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/228466592_Key_Elements_of_a_Model_for_Sustainable_Tourism
- McDonald, M., Bauer, H., & Hammerschmidt, M. (2008). *Marketingpläne: Eine Einführung für die praktische Anwendung* (6. Aufl. ed.). Heidelberg: Spektrum
- McMaster, I. & van der Zwet, A. (2016) Macro-regions and the European Union: The Role of Cohesion Policy. In: Gänzle S., Kern K. (eds) *A 'Macro-regional' Europe in the Making*. Palgrave Studies in European Union Politics. Palgrave Macmillan, London. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-137-50972-7_3
- Meriam Webster. (n.d.). Strategos. Retrieved from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/strategos>
- Millenium Development Goals Indicators. (2021). Employment-to-population ratio. Retrieved from <http://mdgs.un.org/unsd/mi/wiki/1-5-Employment-to-population-ratio.ashx>

- Mintzberg, H., Lampel, J., Quinn, J.B & Ghoshal, S. (2003). The strategy process: concepts, contexts, cases, Person Education Limited, Harlow
- Mondino, E. & Beery, T. (2019). Ecotourism as a learning tool for sustainable development. The case of Monviso Transboundary Biosphere Reserve, Italy. *Journal of Ecotourism*, 18(2), 107-121, doi: 10.1080/14724049.2018.1462371
- MSG. (n.d.). Strategic Decisions - Definition and Characteristics. Retrieved from <https://www.managementstudyguide.com/strategic-decisions.htm>
- Müller, D. K. (2006). Amenity migration and tourism development in the Tärna Mountains, Sweden. In L.A.G. Moss (Ed.) *The Amenity Migrants: Seeking and Sustaining Mountains and their Cultures* (pp. 245-258). Wallingford, UK: CABI.
- Müller, D.K. (2011). Conclusion: Polar tourism for regional development? In A.A. Grenier & D.K. Müller (Eds.), *Polar Tourism: A Tool for Regional Development* (pp. 251-255). Québec, Canada: Presses de l'Université du Québec.
- Nguyen, N. & Bosch, O. (2012). A Systems Thinking Approach to identify Leverage Points for Sustainability: A Case Study in the Cat Ba Biosphere Reserve, Vietnam. *System Research and Behavioural Science*. 30(2), 104-115. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1002/sres.2145>
- Niewiadomski, Z. (2011). The East Carpathians—the world's first trilateral UNESCO biosphere reserve. In M. Vasiljević and T. Pezold (Eds.). *Crossing borders for nature: European examples of transboundary conservation*. International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN). Gland: Switzerland.
- Nolte, B. (2008). Sustainable tourism development in cross-border biosphere reserves of Central and Eastern Europe. In *Cross-Border Governance and Sustainable Spatial Development: Mind*

- the Gaps! (eds. M. Leibenath, E. Korcelli-Oolejniczak and R. Knippschild), pp. 140 – 160. Springer-Verlag: Berlin-Heidelberg
- Nolte, B. (2013). Sustainable Tourism in Biosphere Reserves of East Central European Countries – Case Studies from Slovakia, Hungary and the Czech Republic. Retrieved from <http://www.metla.fi/julkaisut/workingpapers/2004/mwp002.htm>
- Nutt, P.C. & Wilson D.C. (2010). Handbook of decision making, John Wiley & Sons, Chichester
- Nyhus, P. & Adams, M. (1995). Biosphere Reserves of the world. Retrieved from <http://npshistory.com/publications/mab/br-world-principles-practice.pdf>
- OECD Data. (n.d.). GDP and spending - Gross domestic product (GDP). Retrieved June 18, 2021, from <https://data.oecd.org/gdp/gross-domestic-product-gdp.htm>
- OECD. (2012). Policy Approaches to Skills Development in Tourism. OECD Tourism Trends and Policies 2012, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/tour-2012-5-en>
- OECD. (2019b). Health at a Glance 2019 OECD Indicators. Van Haren Publishing.
- OECD. (2020). Employment Rate. Retrieved from <https://data.oecd.org/emp/employment-rate.htm>
- OECD. (n.d.) Employment Rate. Retrieved from <https://data.oecd.org/emp/employment-rate.htm>
- OECD. (n.d.) Employment Rate. Retrieved from <https://data.oecd.org/emp/employment-rate.htm>
- OECD. (n.d.). OECD Tourism Trends and Policies 2020. Retrieved from <https://www.oecd.org/cfe/tourism/2020-Tourism-Brochure.pdf>

- Öffentliches Gesundheitsportal Österreich. (2021). Retrieved from <https://www.gesundheit.gv.at/leben/bewegung/sportarten/ganzjaehrige-sportarten/radfahren>
- OMRAN, A. R. (2005). The Epidemiologic Transition: A Theory of the Epidemiology of Population Change. *Milbank Quarterly*, 83(4), 731–757. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0009.2005.00398.x>
- OMRAN, A. R. (2005). The Epidemiologic Transition: A Theory of the Epidemiology of Population Change. *Milbank Quarterly*, 83(4), 731–757. doi:10.1111/j.1468-0009.2005.00398.x
- Oxford dictionary. (n.d.). Trend. Retrieved from https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/trend_1?q=trend
- Parnell, J. A. (2014). *Strategic Management: Theory and Practice*. SAGE, Thousand Oaks.
- Parnell, J. A. (2014). *Strategic Management: Theory and Practice*. SAGE, Thousand Oaks.
- Paul, H., & Wollny, V. (2011). *Instrumente des strategischen Managements: Grundlagen und Anwendung*. München: Oldenbourg.
- Pearlin, L. I., Menaghan, E. G., Lieberman, M. A., & Mullan, J. T. (1981). The Stress Process. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 22(4), 337–356. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2136676>
- Pechlaner, H., Weiermair, K. & Lässer, C. (2002). *Tourismuspolitik und Destinationsmanagement: Neue Herausforderungen und Konzepte*. Bern: Haupt.
- Peterlin, J., Pearse, N. & Dimovski, V. (2015). STRATEGIC DECISION MAKING FOR ORGANIZATIONAL SUSTAINABILITY: THE IMPLICATIONS OF SERVANT LEADERSHIP AND SUSTAINABLE LEADERSHIP APPROACHES. *Economic and Business Review*. 17(3), 273-290.

- Ponto, J. (2015). Understandings and Evaluating Survey Research. *Journal of the advanced practitioner in oncology*, 6(2), 168-171.
- Pool-Stanvliet, R., Stoll-Kleemann, S. & Giliomee, J. (2018). Criteria for selection and evaluation of biosphere reserves in support of the UNESCO MAB programme in South Africa. *Land Use Policy*. 76. 654-663.
<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0264837717312619>
- Proctor, T. (2000). Strategic marketing management for health management: cross impact matrix and TOWS. *Journal of Management in Medicine*, 14(1), 47-56. doi: 10.1108/02689230010340552
- Prüss-Ustün, A., van Deventer, E., Mudu, P., Campbell-Lendrum, D., Vickers, C., Ivanov, I., Forastiere, F., Gumy, S., Dora, C., Adair-Rohani, H., & Neira, M. (2019). Environmental risks and non-communicable diseases. *BMJ*, l265.
<https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.l265>
- Ramao, J. & Neuts, B. (2017). Territorial capital, smart tourism specialization and sustainable regional development: Experiences from Europe. *Habitat International*, 68, 64-74. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.habitatint.2017.04.006>
- Re-open Europe. (n.d.). Re-Open Europe. Retrieved from <https://reopen.europa.eu/en/>
- Responsible Travel. (n.d.). Top 10 travel trends 2021. Retrieved from <https://www.responsibletravel.com/copy/travel-trends>
- REVITAL. (2020). AMAZON OF EUROPE BIKE TRAIL. NATURE ORIENTED VISITOR GUIDANCE AND MAPPING. Retrieved from http://www.interreg-danube.eu/uploads/media/approved_project_output/0001/41/c75ae33f601f30461a2cfd588410538863fab5af.pdf

- Sabau, L.I. (2012). INFORMATION AND STRATEGIC DECISIONS IN ECONOMIC ENTITIES MANAGEMENT. *Annals of the University of Petroșani, Economics*, 12(4), 227-234.
- Samac, K., Prenner, M., & Schwetz, H. (2011). *Die Bachelorarbeit an Universität und Fachhochschule* (2nd ed.). UTB.
- Schengen Visa Info. (n.d.). List of Schengen Countries. Retrieved from <https://www.schengenvisainfo.com/schengen-visa-countries-list/>
- Schmallegger, D., Harwood, S., Cervený, L., & Müller, D. (2011). Tourist populations and local capital. In D. Carson, R.O. Rasmussen, P. Ensign, L. Huskey, & A. Taylor (Eds.), *Demography at the Edge* (pp. 271-288). Burlington, VT: Ashgate.
- Singh, J. (1999). Study on the development of transboundary natural resource management areas in southern Africa. Global review: lessons learned. Biodiversity Support Program: Washington, D.C., USA.
- Sociology Discussion. (n.d.). Classification of Villages: 4 Categories. Retrieved from <https://www.sociologydiscussion.com/village/classification/classification-of-villages-4-categories/2615>
- Sociology Discussion. (n.d.). Classification of Villages: 4 Categories. Retrieved from <https://www.sociologydiscussion.com/village/classification/classification-of-villages-4-categories/2615>
- Sotiriadis, M. Tourism Destination Marketing: *Academic Knowledge Encyclopedia* 2021, 1, 42–56. <https://doi.org/10.3390/encyclopedia1010007>
- Stacey, R. (1993). Strategy as order emerging from chaos. *Long Range Planning*, 26(1), 10-17.
- Stacey, R. (1993). Strategy as order emerging from chaos. *Long Range Planning*, 26(1), 10-17.

- Statista. (2020). COVID-19 Pandemic Fuels Bicycle Boom. Retrieved from <https://www.statista.com/chart/21794/year-over-year-change-in-bicycle-sales-in-the-us/>
- Statista. (2020). How Covid-19 Boosted Cycling Investment in Europe. Retrieved from <https://www.statista.com/chart/23095/additional-funding-allocated-for-cycling-during-the-pandemic/>
- Stein, R. (2008). The Pfalzerwald? Vosges du Nord transboundary biosphere reserve. *International Journal of Environment and Sustainable Development* 7(2), 156-169. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1504/IJESD.2008.018361>
- Steinecke, A. & Herntrei, M. (2017). *Destinationsmanagement* (2., überarbeitete Auflage. ed., Utb 3972 Tourismus). München: Konstanz.
- Stickel-Wolf, C., & Wolf, J. (2013). *Wissenschaftliches Arbeiten und Lerntechniken: Erfolgreich studieren - gewusst wie!* (German Edition) (7., akt. u. überarb. Aufl. 2013 ed.). Springer Gabler.
- Straus, R., & Bacon, S. D. (1951). Alcoholism and Social Stability. A Study of Occupational Integration in 2,023 Male Clinic Patients. *Quarterly Journal of Studies on Alcohol*, 12(2), 231–260. <https://doi.org/10.15288/qjsa.1951.12.231>
- Taggart-Hodge, T. D., and Schoon, M. (2016). The challenges and opportunities of transboundary cooperation through the lens of the East Carpathians Biosphere Reserve. *Ecology and Society* 21(4), 29. doi: <https://doi.org/10.5751/ES-08669-210429>
- The Nations Health. (2016). Cycling: Rolling your way into better life. Retrieved from <https://www.thenationshealth.org/content/46/8/28>
- Tourism 4-0. (2020). Amazing AoE – Responsible Green Destination Amazon of Europe. Retrieved from <https://tourism4-0.org/amazing-aoe-responsible-green-destination-amazon-of-europe/>

- Tourwriter. (n.d.). The future of bike tourism in 2021. Retrieved from <https://www.tourwriter.com/travel-software-blog/future-bike-tourism-2021/>
- Trading Economics. (n.d.). Croatia - Population Density (people Per Sq. Km). Retrieved from <https://tradingeconomics.com/croatia/population-density-people-per-sq-km-wb-data.html>
- TripAdvisor. (n.d.). 2021 The year of the travel rebound? Retrieved from https://www.tripadvisor.com/InfoCenter-a_ctr.2021TravelTrends#article
- Twin, A. (2020). Marketing. Retrieved from <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/m/marketing.asp>
- UNESCO. (2016a). Ecological sciences for sustainable development: World Network of Biosphere Reserves (WNBR). UNESCO: Paris, France. Retrieved from <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/natural-sciences/environment/ecological-sciences/biosphere-reserves/world-network-wnbr/>
- UNESCO. (2019). Transboundary Biosphere Reserves. Retrieved from <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/natural-sciences/environment/ecological-sciences/biosphere-reserves/transboundary-biosphere-reserves/>
- UNESCO. (n.d.). Biosphere Reserves. Retrieved from <https://en.unesco.org/biosphere>
- UNESCO. (n.d.). Zoning Schemes. Retrieved from <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/natural-sciences/environment/ecological-sciences/biosphere-reserves/main-characteristics/zoning-schemes/>
- UNESDOC. (2002). Ecotourism and sustainable development in biosphere reserves: experiences and prospects; workshop summary report, Quebec City, Canada, May 24-25, 2002.

Retrieved from
<https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000127757>

United Nations Development Programme (2005). UN Human Development Report 2005. Retrieved from
<http://hdr.undp.org/en/content/human-development-report-2005>

United Nations Development Programme (2005). UN Human Development Report 2005. Retrieved from
<http://hdr.undp.org/en/content/human-development-report-2005>

UNWTO (2012). International Tourism Hits One Billion. Press Release No. 12076.

Vasiljević, M., Zunckel, K., McKinney, M., Erg, B., Schoon, M. and Rosen Michel, T. (2015). Transboundary conservation: a systematic and integrated approach. Best Practice Protected Area Guidelines Series No. 23. International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN). Gland, Switzerland.

Vrška, T., Adam, D., Hort, L., Kolář, T. and Janík, D. (2009). European beech (*Fagus sylvatica* L.) and silver fir (*Abies alba* Mill.) rotation in the Carpathians—a developmental cycle or a linear trend induced by man? *Forest Ecology and Management*, 258(4), 347-356. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.foreco.2009.03.007>

Walker, R.T. & Solecki, W. D. (1999). Managing land use and land-cover change: the New Jersey Pinelands Biosphere Reserve. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 89, 220 – 237

Waterton. (n.d.). Three Functions and Three Zones. Retrieved from
<https://www.watertonbiosphere.com/biosphere-reserves/three-functions-three-zones/>

Wehrich, H. (1982). The TOWS Matrix - A Tool for Situational Analysis. *Long Range Planing*. 15(2), 54-66. doi: [https://doi.org/10.1016/0024-6301\(82\)90120-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/0024-6301(82)90120-0)

- Wehrich, H. (1982). The TOWS matrix – A tool for situational analysis. *Long range planning*, 15(2), 54-66. doi: 10.1016/0024-6301(82)90120-0
- Wells, M. P. & McShane, T. O. (2004). Integrating protected area management with local needs and aspirations. *Ambio*, 33, 513 – 519
- WHO. (2005). Socioeconomic inequalities in health and health care access in central and eastern Europe and the CIS: a review of the recent literature. Retrieved from https://www.euro.who.int/data/assets/pdf_file/0006/125457/e94412.pdf
- WHO. (2009). Global Health Risks. Mortality and burden of disease attributable to selected major risks. Retrieved from https://www.who.int/healthinfo/global_burden_disease/GlobalHealthRisks_report_full.pdf
- Wiesner, K. (2006). *Strategisches Tourismusmarketing: Erfolgreiche Planung und Umsetzung von Reiseangeboten*. Berlin: Erich Schmidt.
- Wiesner, K. (2007). *Wellnessmanagement: Angebote, Anforderungen, Erfolgsfaktoren*. Berlin: ESV.
- Willekens, F. (2015). *Demographic Transitions in Europe and the World*. Retrieved from <https://library.oapen.org/handle/20.500.12657/46472>
- Winchenbach, A., Hanna, P. & Miller, P. (2019) Rethinking decent work: the value of dignity in tourism employment, *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 27(7), 1026-1043, doi: 10.1080/09669582.2019.1566346
- World Tourism Organization & European Travel Commission. (2017). *Handbook on key performance indicators for tourism marketing evaluation*. Madrid: WTO.

- World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF). (2016a). The Carpathians. WWF: Gland, Switzerland. Retrieved from http://wwf.panda.org/what_we_do/where_we_work/black_sea_basin/danube_carpathian/our_solutions/wilderness_protected_areas/carpathians/
- World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF). (2016b). The green heart of Europe: the Danube-Carpathian region. WWF: Gland, Switzerland. Retrieved from http://wwf.panda.org/what_we_do/where_we_work/black_sea_basin/danube_carpathian/blue_river_green_mtn/
- Worldometers. (n.d.). Countries in Europe by Population (2021). Retrieved from <https://www.worldometers.info/population/countries-in-europe-by-population/>
- WWF. (2011). Mura-Drava-Danube UNESCO Trans-Boundary Biosphere Reserve. Retrieved from https://wwfint.awsassets.panda.org/downloads/danube_drava_mura_factsheet.pdf
- WWF. (2015). Green Infrastructure of Europe: The Mura-Drava-Danube-`Europe`s Amazon`. Retrieved from https://d2ouvy59p0dg6k.cloudfront.net/downloads/wwf_factsheet_green_infrastructure_mura_drava_danube.pdf
- WWF. (n.d.). Why are rivers so important and what are we doing to protect them. Retrieved from <https://www.wwf.org.uk/updates/why-are-rivers-so-important-and-what-are-we-doing-protect-them>
- Xu, J., Lü, Y., Chen, L. & Liu, Y. (2009). Contribution of tourism development to protected area management: local stakeholder perspectives. *International Journal of Sustainable Development & World Ecology*. 16(1), 30-36. doi: 10.1080/13504500902757189

Yue, D., You, F. (2016). Biomass Supply Chains for Bioenergy and Biorefining. Retrieved from <https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/engineering/strategic-decision>

Žemła, M. (2016). Tourism destination: The networking approach. Moravian Geographical Reports, 24(4), 2–14. <https://doi.org/10.1515/mgr-2016-0018> Sotiriadis, M. Tourism Destination Marketing: AcademicKnowledge.Encyclopedia2021,1,42–56. <https://doi.org/10.3390/encyclopedia1010007>