

## Article

# Adventure Tourism: Insight from Experienced Visitors of Romanian National and Natural Parks

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**Abstract:** The rapid growth of adventure tourism is remarked all over the world, being considered as a modern form of tourism. This study attempted to investigate the preferences of experienced visitors of Romanian national and natural parks with the main focus on understanding what motives describe the three elements that define adventure tourism: physical activity, natural environment and cultural immersion, and what is the level of satisfaction regarding the quality of facilities and services. An online survey was filled in by 137 members of adventure tourism groups, being further grouped based on their experiences. Results indicate that experienced participants better appreciated the opportunity to be engaged in physical activity and to explore the natural environment. Cultural experience was perceived as similar by both groups. The level of satisfaction about facilities and services provided by the national and natural parks and adjacent rural communities was similar among groups, except for that about the existing information panels. Future development actions should address both groups to enhance their willingness to revisit the areas and increase the attractiveness of tourism in rural areas situated in the neighborhood of parks.

**Keywords:** adventure tourism; parks; rural communities; preferences



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## 1. Introduction

Adventure tourism is observed as having a rapid growth all over the world [1–3], being considered as a modern form of tourism. The opportunity of practicing adventure tourism in the Romanian national and natural parks is attractive due to the unique characteristics and the relatively broad range of activities that can be experienced, the benefits tourists gain from recreational trips being highly valued [4]. The parks are known for their wide diversity of fauna and flora with unique and endangered species, multiple recreational opportunities, as well as for their commercial uses, such as ecotourism, hunting tours, camping places, berries, etc. However, due to the characteristics of protected areas not all activities listed by the Adventure Travel Trade Association (ATTA) [5] can be experienced. Some are forbidden (e.g., hunting), others are not possible due to the characteristics of the area (e.g., cruises).

National and natural parks offer a wide variety of environmental and recreational benefits for tourists and adjacent communities [6–8], while job opportunities [9,10], local rural development [8], regional economic development and rational use of resources [11,12] enhance local economies through tourism development [10,13]. In Romania, many rural communities are adjacent to protected areas, in some areas their involvement in supporting sustainable tourism being more visible than in others [13]. Although the involvement of local communities in tourism activities is beneficial for rural development, it cannot be successful unless viewed in the context of sustainability. Both the sustainability of the environment and of tourism experiences are central to the management of sustainable tourism in national parks [14]. Therefore, it is paramount to also understand tourists' behavior, as the tourist is the main actor in sustainable development of tourism destinations.

The importance of research on understanding the behavior of tourists who practice adventure tourism activities in protected areas is recognized by scholars as mandatory to assure the sustainability of the areas [2]. Tourism services developed based on accurate and current data about tourist behavior are assets for sustainable tourism planning [15,16]. At the same time, virtual reality is gaining more and more attention as it offers the opportunity to experience the visual representation of areas before or at the desired destination. Scientists focused on understanding consumers' behavior and choices of tourism destinations presented in virtual reality-based 3D environments have pointed out that virtual reality can support future development of cultural tourism destinations [17–20]. Behavior can be explained by motives. Kajala [21] emphasizes that visitor profiles can be better explained based on their motives. The main motives for choosing adventure tourism are relaxing, exploring new places and learning about different cultures [22]. In a recent study, Samuelsen [23] explains that tourist motivation has changed over the years, risk being replaced by the opportunity for personal growth and unique life experiences. However, a certain degree of risk, proper planning, physical training and skills, and the need for specific equipment are the main challenges for any individual that chooses this type of tourism [24], which is often perceived as distinctive [1].

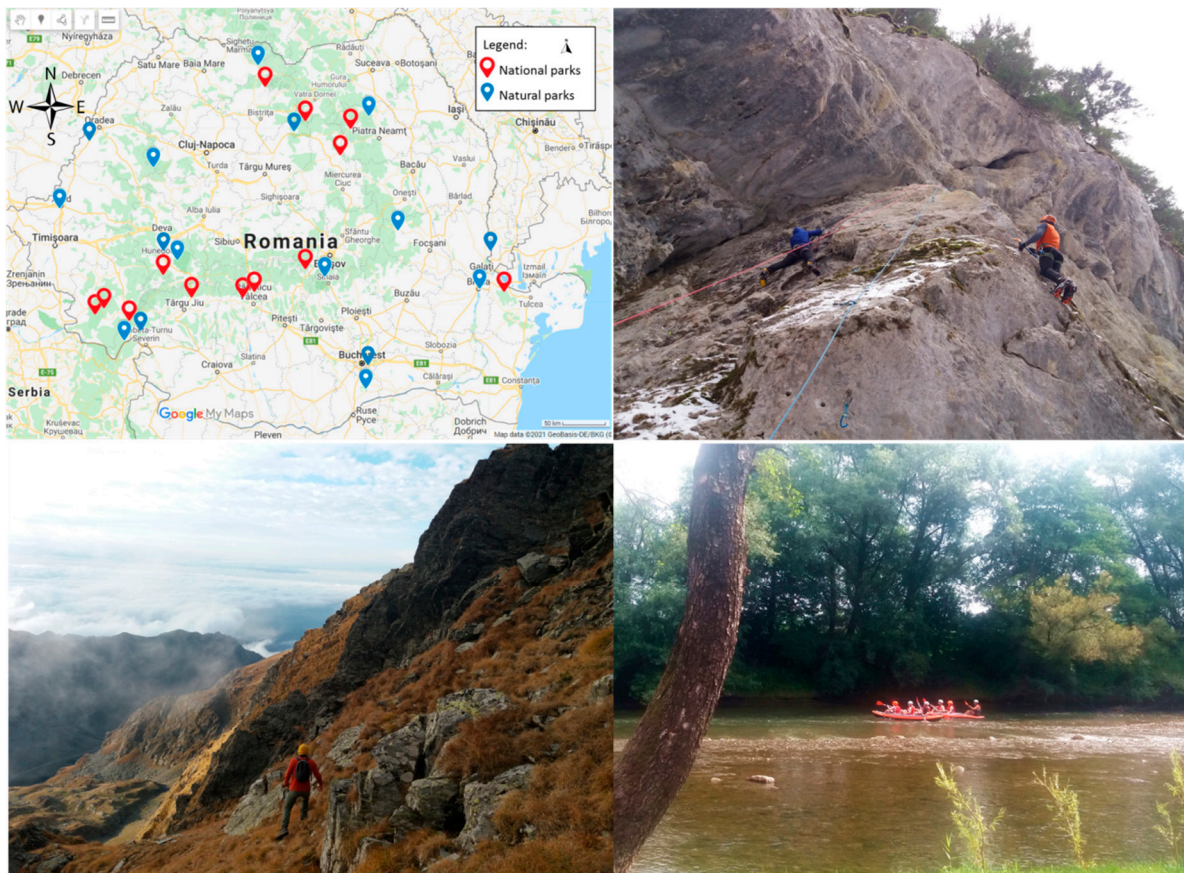
Moreover, motives may be linked to the experience level of tourists participating in outdoor adventure activities [1,25]. Seen as a unique form of tourism [26], according to WTO [22] it requires only two of the abovementioned elements to define an adventure tourism trip. However, Huddart [3] reflects on the rationale of judging whether a tourist is engaged in adventure tourism, based on the definition provided by the ATTA, emphasizing that the fullest experience can be attained only by incorporating all three elements that define adventure tourism: physical activity, natural environment and cultural immersion.

On the basis of the above, the present study attempts to investigate the preferences of experienced visitors of Romanian national and natural parks with its main focus on understanding what motives describe the three elements that define adventure tourism: physical activity, natural environment and cultural immersion, and what is the level of satisfaction regarding the quality of facilities and services.

## 2. Materials and Methods

The study area is represented by the national and natural parks of Romania. Parks are scattered around the country, offering a variety of adventure tourism activities, such as trekking, hiking, climbing, cave exploration, mountain biking, skiing, water sports and many more (Figure 1). The increasing potential for adventure tourism competitiveness is acknowledged by the ATTA, Romania being ranked in the top 10 in 2018 and 2020 in the developing countries ranking [27], with expectations based on natural and cultural resources [28]. Opportunities for recreation in national and natural parks increased as a result of the significant changes in the management of the protected areas. The area of designated national and natural parks has increased significantly since 2004, today reaching in total 1,087,446 hectares (13 national parks on 317,419 hectares, 16 natural parks on 770,027 hectares) [29].

Many local communities own land included in the parks or are situated at the borders of the parks [30,31]. Residents are directly involved in the tourism sector by providing services such as accommodation and food services. Thus, tourists can experience deep immersion in local cultural values by experiencing in situ old customs and rituals that are preserved in many rural communities located in the proximity of the parks [30,32]. Such rich cultural values were previously proved to be linked with the experience of visiting natural parks in Romania and in other Eastern EU Member States [33–35]. This was also acknowledged by the ATTA [27]; Romania's score being above the average for the cultural resources linked with adventure tourism.



**Figure 1.** Location of national and natural parks in Romania and examples of adventure tourism. Source: Map created using Google maps; photos taken by Delia Donici.

An online survey was distributed in spring 2019 among members of adventure tourism groups and associations. In total, 137 responses were gathered, out of which 59 were less experienced visitors and 78 more experienced visitors. More experienced visitors are herewith defined as visitors who made more than five trips, whereas less experienced visitors are visitors who made less than five trips. The experience level of respondents was determined based on the number of visits in the three years previous to data collection (2016–2018). A list of all national and natural parks was provided to help respondents recall the number of their previous experiences.

The survey consisted of questions regarding individual sociodemographic characteristics (gender, age group, education level, personal net monthly income), number of trips taken in the past three years, motives and attitudes towards adventure tourism measured with the use of items adapted after Torbidoni [36], and level of satisfaction regarding the quality of facilities and services provided by the national and natural parks and adjacent rural communities. The 13 items included in the survey related to the motives for visiting a national or natural park were evaluated using a 5-point Likert scale where 1 meant not at all important and 5 meant extremely important. In the analysis, we retained only the items that best described the three elements that define adventure tourism: physical activity, natural environment and cultural immersion [22]. The questions used to assess the cultural immersion values were based on these previously existing data where visiting a particular area meant having direct contact with the residents. Tourist can have deeper cultural experiences, such as getting to know new places and enjoying new experiences, together with their strong cultural links. Facilities and services referred to general infrastructure, accommodation, information centers, information panels, toilet facilities and cleanliness, all being selected based on previous studies [4], and were evaluated using a 5-point Likert scale where 1 meant not at all satisfied and 5 meant extremely satisfied. Descriptive statis-

tics were used to summarize the data and an independent t-test was used to determine differences between groups. A 5% level of significance was considered statistically significant. Due to the ordinal nature of the dependent variables, the ordered logit regression [37] was used to analyze the effects of experience level and sociodemographic data (gender, age, level of education, personal net monthly income) on the level of importance of motives. All analyses were conducted using STATA version 15.0 (StataCorp, College Station, TX, USA).

### 3. Results

Socioeconomic characteristics of the respondents are presented in Table 1. There was a slightly higher percentage of male respondents, with preponderance in the more experienced group (60.26%). Respondents' age ranged from 18 to 68 years old, more than 75% being younger than 39 years old. Mean age of the more experienced group ( $36.02 \pm 1.27$ ) was statistically significantly higher than the mean age of the less experienced group ( $30.10 \pm 1.08$ ) ( $p < 0.001$ ). In terms of level of education, the majority had at least a university degree (72.99%), their level of income varying depending on its source.

**Table 1.** Sociodemographic characteristics of respondents.

Variables	Total (N = 137)		Less Experienced (N = 59)		More Experienced (N = 78)	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Gender						
Female	58	42.34	27	45.76	31	39.74
Male	79	57.66	32	54.24	47	60.26
Age groups						
18–29 years	58	42.33	31	52.54	27	34.62
30–39 years	47	34.31	22	37.29	25	32.05
40–49 years	21	15.33	5	8.48	16	20.51
50–68 years	11	8.03	1	1.69	10	12.82
Education level						
High school	37	27.01	15	25.42	22	28.21
University degree	66	48.17	29	49.16	37	47.43
Masters/PhD degree	34	24.82	15	25.42	19	24.36
Personal net monthly income						
Less than 1250 RON	11	8.03	7	11.86	4	5.13
1250–2000 RON	17	12.41	10	16.95	7	8.97
2001–3000 RON	28	20.44	10	16.95	18	23.08
3001–4000 RON	22	16.05	11	18.64	11	14.10
Over 4000 RON	34	24.82	14	23.72	20	25.64
Confidential	25	18.25	7	11.86	18	23.08

Note: RON is Romanian leu; in spring 2019 the average exchange rate of 1 USD = 4.22 RON. Outliers were not found in the dataset using boxplot method.

To understand the motives for visiting a national or natural park several steps were performed. First, the items were clustered based on the three elements that define adventure tourism: physical activity, natural environment and cultural immersion [22]. For each of the three elements, we calculated the average score representing all respondents by averaging the individual average score over all observations (Figure 2). The overall score for the “fullest experience” was determined by incorporating all three elements, as defined by Huddart [3], as mean value of all individuals' average scores (Figure 2). It can be observed

that both groups sought the “fullest experience”, the average scores corresponding to the “very important” or “extremely important” ratings. However, the overall score was significantly higher for the more experienced group than for the less experienced group ( $4.21 \pm 0.54$  vs.  $3.92 \pm 0.75$ ) ( $p < 0.01$ ). Besides, the ranking of the three adventure tourism elements was found to be similar for both groups, with higher scores for the more experienced visitors.

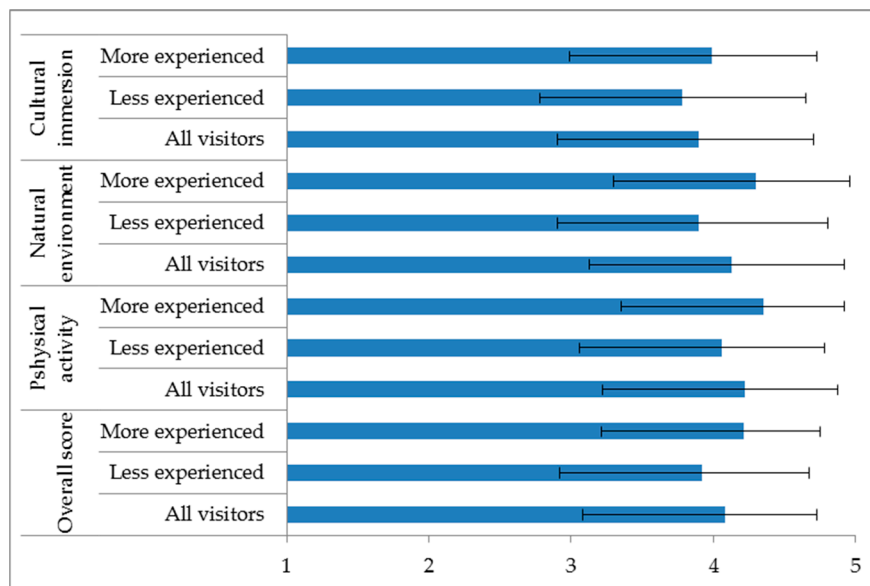


Figure 2. Average scores of motives.

Second, comparisons between user groups were performed to identify the motives that were perceived differently (Table 2). The importance of motives for visiting a national or natural park was perceived slightly differently among groups. As regards to the first element, the physical activity, it can be noted that the opportunity to practice adventure sports or/and some kind of outdoor physical or sporting activity was evaluated as very important, being significantly higher for more experienced visitors than for less experienced ones ( $p < 0.01$ ). Enhancing health or physical condition was perceived as very important by both groups ( $p > 0.05$ ), and most probably seen as an expected outcome. The evaluation of the items used to describe the natural environment element indicates a significantly higher score for more experienced visitors when they were asked about the importance of being close to nature ( $p < 0.01$ ) and enjoying the scenery ( $p < 0.05$ ). The cultural experience was perceived as very important and similarly by both user groups ( $p > 0.05$ ).

Third, a deeper investigation was carried out only on the motives that were perceived as different among the user groups. A separate ordered logistic model was used to identify the determinants (sociodemographic characteristics and experience level) of the level of importance of the motives related to the choice of practicing adventure tourism activities in national and natural parks (Tables 3 and 4). Results indicate an insignificant relationship between the sociodemographic characteristics of respondents, except for the model analyzing the level of importance of having the opportunity to practice adventure sports. In this latter case, age was a significant factor with negative effect, suggesting that the opportunity to practice adventure sports was less important as age increased (OR = 0.96,  $p < 0.05$ ). Experience level was as expected a positive determining factor in all cases. The odds of considering the opportunity to practice adventure sports as of high importance were 3.57 higher for a more experienced individual. The odds of an experienced individual's level of perception of the importance of having the opportunity to practice some kind of outdoor physical or sporting activity were higher by 2.45 as compared to a less experienced individual. The odds of higher expectation were for the more experienced group

(OR = 3.74 for the opportunity to get close to nature and OR = 2.47 for the opportunity to enjoy the scenery).

**Table 2.** Importance of motives for visiting a national or natural park.

Statements	Less Experienced (N = 59)		More Experienced (N = 78)		p-Value
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	
1. Physical activity					
To practice adventure sports	3.64	0.14	4.27	0.11	0.001 **
To practice some kind of outdoor physical or sporting activity	3.98	0.14	4.45	0.08	0.003 **
To enhance health or physical condition	4.08	0.13	4.19	0.09	0.488
2. Natural environment					
To get close to nature	4.27	0.10	4.72	0.07	0.000 **
To enjoy the scenery	4.41	0.10	4.69	0.06	0.013 *
To learn more about the natural environment	3.51	0.12	3.63	0.12	0.495
3. Cultural immersion					
To visit a particular area	3.32	0.14	3.47	0.12	0.410
To get to know new cultural places	4.00	0.12	4.18	0.09	0.232
To enjoy new cultural experiences	4.03	0.13	4.31	0.10	0.087

Note: 1—not at all important; 5—extremely important; \* significant at 5% level; \*\* significant at 1% level.

**Table 3.** Regression results for the motives related to the physical activity element.

Variable	Dependent Variable: “Importance of Having the Opportunity to Practice Adventure Sports”		Dependent Variable: “Importance of Having the Opportunity to Practice Some Kind of Outdoor Physical or Sporting Activity”	
	Coefficient (Std. Error)	Odds Ratio	Coefficient (Std. Error)	Odds Ratio
Gender (Male = 1)	0.3957 (0.3381)	1.4855	−0.0913 (0.3404)	0.9127
Age	−0.0374 (0.0178) *	0.9633	0.0056 (0.0172)	1.0056
Level of education	−0.1379 (0.2423)	0.8712	−0.0100 (0.2458)	0.9047
Income	0.1451 (0.1165)	1.1562	−0.0550 (0.1166)	0.9465
Experience	1.2744 (0.3527) **	3.5766	0.8966 (0.3533) *	2.4514
Cut point 1	−4.6035 (1.1237)		−4.8819 (1.3221)	
Cut point 2	−2.3974 (0.8887)		−3.2248 (0.9711)	
Cut point 3	−0.8705 (0.8516)		−1.1335 (0.8811)	
Cut point 4	0.0509 (0.8547)		0.0693 (0.8773)	
Log likelihood	−169.2603		−152.6894	
LR chi-square (4)	18.55		8.01	
Pseudo R-squared	0.0519		0.0256	

\* Significant at 5% level; \*\* significant at 1% level.

The “fullest experience” adventure tourism trip can be affected by the quality of facilities and services provided by the national and natural parks and adjacent rural communities. Respondents’ level of satisfaction was measured for the main factors that can influence the decision to revisit and/or recommend the experience to other individuals interested in adventure tourism that related to: ease of access to the parks, means of information about the area, toilet facilities and cleanliness (Table 5). In general, the satisfaction level was rather low, with mean values ranging from 1.85 (slightly satisfied) to 3.21 (moderately satisfied). The scores were similar among groups, except for those relating to the existing information panels, which were better appreciated by the more experienced

visitors ( $p < 0.05$ ), and for those relating to the location of accommodation, which was slightly better appreciated by the more experienced group ( $p = 0.07$ ).

Respondents were asked to express their agreement or disagreement with statements that defined adventure tourism in comparison with other types of tourism (Table 6). More experienced respondents considered adventure tourism as being more attractive and more interesting ( $p < 0.01$ ), being willing to explore new places and enjoy new experiences. The less experienced respondents seemed to be more aware that this type of tourism may be dangerous ( $p < 0.05$ ) and requires proper planning, skills, training and equipment. The neutral response associated with the statement regarding the costs of such trips was not surprising as respondents were heterogeneous in terms of their income levels.

**Table 4.** Regression results for the motives related to the natural environment element.

Variable	Dependent Variable: “Importance of Having the Opportunity to Get Close to Nature”		Dependent Variable: “Importance of Having the Opportunity to Enjoy the Scenery”	
	Coefficient (Std. Error)	Odds Ratio	Coefficient (Std. Error)	Odds Ratio
Gender (Male = 1)	0.1169 (0.3873)	1.1241	−0.0663 (0.3789)	0.9358
Age	0.0391 (0.0227)	1.0399	0.0045 (0.0194)	1.0045
Level of education	0.1486 (0.2771)	1.1602	0.2087 (0.2743)	1.2320
Income	−0.1839 (0.1347)	0.8320	−0.1759 (0.1316)	0.8387
Experience	1.3199 (0.3968) *	3.7433	0.9074 (0.3940) *	2.4780
Cut point 1	−3.3916 (1.3789)		−4.4646 (1.3789)	
Cut point 2	−0.2872 (0.9834)		−1.8595 (0.9915)	
Cut point 3	1.0544 (0.9828)		−0.1428 (0.9697)	
Log likelihood	−112.6843		−113.8592	
LR chi-square	18.80		6.83	
Pseudo R-squared	0.0770		0.0291	

\* Significant at 5% level.

**Table 5.** Satisfaction regarding the quality of facilities and services.

Type of visitors	Not at All Satisfied	Slightly Satisfied	Moderately Satisfied	Very Satisfied	Completely Satisfied	Mean	S.D.	p-Value
			General infrastructure					
Less experienced	8.47%	25.42%	50.85%	13.56%	1.69%	2.34	0.11	0.329
More experienced	2.56%	20.51%	55.13%	11.54%	10.26%	2.53	0.14	
			Location of accommodation					
Less experienced	35.59%	47.46%	0.00%	15.25%	1.69%	2.94	0.08	0.067
More experienced	44.87%	37.18%	10.26%	3.85%	3.85%	3.21	0.10	
			Tourist information centers					
Less experienced	18.64%	38.98%	38.98%	3.39%	0.00%	2.27	0.10	0.463
More experienced	17.95%	37.18%	37.18%	3.85%	3.85%	2.38	0.11	
			Existing information panels					
Less experienced	16.95%	40.68%	33.90%	8.47%	0.00%	2.74	0.11	0.041 *
More experienced	24.36%	28.21%	29.49%	6.41%	11.54%	3.06	0.10	
			Toilet facilities					
Less experienced	3.39%	11.86%	71.19%	13.56%	0.00%	1.85	0.10	0.993
More experienced	3.85%	10.26%	58.97%	15.38%	11.54%	1.85	0.11	
			Maintaining cleanliness					
Less experienced	23.73%	33.90%	38.98%	3.39%	0.00%	2.22	0.11	0.142
More experienced	39.74%	34.62%	17.95%	3.85%	3.85%	1.97	0.12	

\* Significant at 5% level.

**Table 6.** Perception of adventure tourism compared to other forms of tourism.

Type of Visitors	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Disagree nor Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean	S.D.	p-Value
More attractive than other forms of tourism								
Less experienced	1.69%	1.69%	11.86%	52.54%	32.20%	4.12	0.11	0.005 **
More experienced	0.00%	0.00%	8.97%	34.62%	56.41%	4.47	0.07	
More interesting than other forms of tourism								
Less experienced	0.00%	5.08%	13.56%	45.76%	35.59%	4.12	0.11	0.001 **
More experienced	0.00%	1.28%	5.13%	30.77%	62.82%	4.55	0.07	
More dangerous than other forms of tourism								
Less experienced	0.00%	5.08%	33.90%	37.29%	23.73%	3.79	0.11	0.023 *
More experienced	5.13%	12.82%	38.46%	24.36%	19.23%	3.39	0.12	
Financially more accessible than other forms of tourism								
Less experienced	0.00%	11.86%	42.37%	37.29%	8.47%	3.42	0.10	0.535
More experienced	6.41%	10.26%	43.59%	24.36%	15.38%	3.32	0.12	

\* Significant at 5% level; \*\* significant at 1% level.

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusions

The findings of this study are discussed in relation to existing literature related to adventure tourists which, as emphasized by Pomfret [1], is dispersed. Even so, comparisons with other studies that focused on understanding adventure tourists' motives are possible due to the characteristics of protected areas when it comes to adventure opportunities. Adventure tourist sites are often associated with remote locations with little or no mass tourism [38], being distinctive due to the main elements that characterize adventure activities such as uncertainty, danger, risk, challenge, novelty, excitement, exploration and contrasting emotions experienced by participants [1]. In protected areas, such as national and natural parks, tourists have a variety of opportunities to practice adventure activities [39], often classified as soft and hard activities [40].

Results reveal the motives of experienced visitors for adventure tourism activities in Romanian national and natural parks and their level of satisfaction regarding the quality of facilities and services provided by parks and adjacent rural communities. Clustering the motives by the three elements that define adventure tourism [22] (physical activity, natural environment, cultural immersion) allowed a better understanding of what individuals are seeking.

The analyses show that the motivation of the visitors of the Romanian national and natural parks were mainly related to the physical activities, and less related to cultural education and nature appreciation. This is contrary to the results of Giddy [41], who conducted a study revealing the adventure tourism motivations in South Africa and found that novelty represented the main reason for this type of tourism, followed by nature appreciation, while the physical activities (physical challenges) had a lower score.

Motives in performing adventure tourism activities were close related to their previous experience, as reported by Pomfret [1], who accentuates that experienced visitors are used to taking more risks and seek demanding experiences with challenges related to control, excitement, enjoyment and achievement. The more experienced visitors evaluated more highly the opportunity to practice adventure sports or/and some kind of outdoor physical or sporting activity. Better health was found also by Naidoo [42] as one of the main motives for participating in adventure tourism. The fact that tourists engaged in adventure tourism activities seek out interactions with nature in places with special environments was also reported by Giddy [41]. Moreover, Schneider [43] also emphasizes the importance of the cultural aspects as a main factor in people's choice of adventure tourism.

In terms of age and gender of tourism adventure practitioners, it can be observed that changes have occurred over time at the international level. Sung [44] found that men prefer in general hard adventure tourism, while women are more oriented to soft adventure tourism which is nature-based. More recent studies [45–47] revealed that there is a changing trend and women are more present in adventure tourism in general, and more open to experience hard adventure tourism. Adventure tourists are better represented



by the young generation, which tends to adopt a healthier lifestyle, are more educated and more open to get involved in educational adventure tourism [48,49]. In our study, the ordered logistic regression results reveal that the level of importance of having the opportunity to practice adventure sports is lower for older age groups. Differences in motivation by age were also found by other researchers [1,50].

The results of our study suggest that future actions to develop adventure tourism should address both user groups—more and less experienced visitors—by offering an equal chance of having more rewarding experiences that better respond to their expectations. Knowledge about the motives that may underpin individual behavior and may enhance the willingness to revisit represents essential information for assuring sustainable and responsible tourism in natural areas. This is in line with the trends envisioned by the World Tourism Organization [51], referring to the change in tourists' behavior towards being more experienced and having higher expectations regarding their trips.

Although this study employed only members of adventure tourism groups or associations, there may be some limitations in terms of the sample size. Another limitation could be the low participation of older respondents, which may reduce the possibility to generalize the results. Higher participation can be achieved in further studies focused on analyzing adventure tourists' behavior in individual parks. The relatively large number of national and natural parks in Romania and the variety of activities in which tourists can be engaged support this suggestion, as it would help identify what actions are needed for better sustainable tourism planning. Furthermore, the lack of detailed information regarding the cultural experiences of tourists while visiting the parks to practice adventure activities could also be considered a limitation. This can be investigated in future work by approaching participants on-site during their experiences.

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