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ECOLOGICAL AGRICULTURE AS AN IMPORTANT FACTOR IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF SUSTAINABLE TOURISM IN CROATIA

Abstract: Climate change has been one of the key socio-political issues in recent years, and thus the main goal of “green” policies is to reduce man’s negative impact on the environment. Conventional agriculture, which is intensive and extensive and based on unsustainable work methods, primarily on chemical pesticides and the destruction of nature, is one of the biggest polluters and culprits for climate change. The solution to this big problem is organic farming, which is based on sustainable - or at least more sustainable - principles. As citizens increasingly recognize the harms of conventional agriculture, not only for the environment but also for their health, more and more tourists are supporting efforts to make agriculture more sustainable. Therefore, organic agriculture and its output in the form of healthy food has become a new trend in tourism and a competitive advantage for businesses that are in any way related to it. Croatia has great potential when it comes to organic agriculture, especially in terms of the synergy of ecology and tourism, given that tourism, in its current form, is also an activity that harms the environment. The paper discusses the current state of organic agriculture in Croatia and supply, demand, and competitiveness in the context of Croatian organic products in tourism. The scientific paper gives examples of good practice and analyses the perspectives of Croatian organic agriculture in European and global tourism. The role of organic agriculture in the creation and implementation of the system of sustainable development of Croatian tourism is becoming increasingly important.

Keywords: Ecology, Tourism, Sustainable Development, Organic Agriculture.

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, it has become clear that the last model of tourism developed in Croatia, which was natural mass tourism, has negative consequences, for the environment, but also cultural and historical heritage, and society in general. Due to the relatively bad economic situation in the country, i.e., the decline of other industries and activities, especially manufacturing ones, tourism has in a way imposed itself as a salvation. This leads to a large increase in the number of apartments, which brings (local) residents either additional income or it is even their primary activity. The growth in the number of apartments leads to major urban changes and creates additional pressure on the existing and mostly insufficient infrastructure, such as sewage. The expansion of rental facilities in some areas is so pronounced that the term “apartmentisation” (the term for “apartment building”) began to be used for it. According to the Department of Linguistics of the Faculty of Philosophy in Zagreb. (2015, November 12), Neologism Apartmentisation is a negative phenomenon that implies the “large and often illegal construction of apartments”. The term “concreting” is often associated with the term “apartmentisation”, and according to the Department of Linguistics of the Faculty of Philosophy in Zagreb (2015, December 10) Neologism Concreting implies “the construction of buildings, usually on the coast, which endangers the natural environment”. These two terms - apartmentisation and concreting - have recently been more often associated with the perception of Croatian tourism and in some ways perhaps best describe it. It is a spontaneous model of tourism development management, which calls into question the adequate management of tourism activities and environmental protection, waste management and industrial pollution, construction, etc. The pandemic of the disease COVID-19, which began in 2019 and significantly reduced tourism and economic trends in general, additionally pointed out the pressing problem of mass tourism and its ultimate unsustainability but also focused

on some of the potential solutions. One of them is ecotourism, which is based on ecological agriculture. Ecological agriculture is agriculture that is based on sustainable principles of cultivation and management that do not harm nature or humans, or these damages, or possible negative consequences, are minimal and reversible. Organic agriculture is thus the only adequate alternative to conventional agriculture, which is based on unsustainable and harmful practices such as, for example, the intensive use of pesticides. Conventional agriculture today is one of the activities that most pollute nature and the environment and is considered one of the biggest culprits for climate change, which is one of the key socio-political topics today. As a result, so-called "green policies" are being rapidly developed, the goal of which is to reduce the negative impact of humans on the environment as soon as possible, as far as possible under the given circumstances. Organic agriculture as part of the ecotourism offer would thus have multiple beneficial effects not only on the environment but also on the economy, i.e., it would help generate new ways of doing business that would be sustainable both ecologically, economically and in the general social sense.

2. THE IMPORTANCE OF SUSTAINABILITY IN TOURISM

Sustainability implies the management of a specific activity in a way that is balanced and does not endanger any of the components involved in the processes and activities necessary for the performance of that specific activity. According to Croatian encyclopaedia, online edition from Lexicographic Institute Miroslav Krleža. (2021) Sustainable Development (seen as balanced development, steady development) "is economic development that fully considers the impact of economic activity on the environment and is based on renewable sources of goods. The basic premise of sustainable development is: increasing well-being is measured by increasing the quality of life of the individual and the entire population and not by increasing the amount of produced or consumed material goods or energy. Inconsistency of interests and orientations of different groups and countries regarding the priorities of development goals is the cause of the unevenness of the development plans of individual countries, regions, or continents. Sustainable development, although incompletely defined and open to different, even partially conflicting interpretations, enters as a principle into the development strategies of all countries. The UN, through the Commission for Sustainable Development, assesses the progress achieved in geographical and thematic areas and makes recommendations." You can sometimes come across partially conflicting views on what sustainable development is or should be, but generally, this development (tourism, economy in general) is balanced and stable. Although sustainable development as a component of management guidelines is integrated into the development plans of practically all countries and business plans, visions, and missions, it often happens that practice is largely or even completely different from theory. At the same time, for tourism, sustainability is not only a noble practice that will contribute to the reasonable and balanced use of resources and the preservation of natural and cultural heritage. For tourism, sustainability is of crucial importance for the activity itself, therefore also from a strictly economic point of view. If countries like Croatia, which succumbed to mass tourism without a clear strategy for the development of the activity itself, and especially without a clear plan for the sustainable development of that activity, precisely because of spontaneous and unbalanced tourism, destroy natural and cultural and historical resources on which their tourist offer is based, will directly threaten their position on the global tourist market. In the long term, investing in sustainability is not only an investment in the preservation of nature and other resources but also an investment in the future of tourism itself. Without sustainability, tourism is exposed to a real threat to destroy itself. The real question is not what sustainability is, but how profitable it is. And it turned out that, in the short term, it is often not profitable, but quite the opposite. Tourism, like many other activities, has already sunk into unsustainability to such an extent that the implementation of sustainable development guidelines has become an expensive investment, but as time goes by without investing in sustainability, this sustainability in many of its segments becomes more expensive. In addition to the fact that investment in sustainable development is important for nature and other resources and is therefore important for the further development of tourism itself, of which nature is one of the main resources, sustainability has become or is rapidly becoming, one of the critical competitive advantages. This is an additional reason that should influence decision-makers in tourism - from governments to the management of business entities and organizations in tourism - to speed up and strengthen efforts in the direction of implementing the principles of the concept of sustainable development in their laws, strategies, plans and operations. In the year 2001 author Pravdić primarily criticizes the World Trade Organization, "which violates the principles of sustainable development in numerous ways, but also the very dangerous phenomenon of manipulation of terms and nominal principles of sustainability, based on which many developed and executed projects that are bad for the environment, even destructive, can be seen as sustainable". All these conclusions are from him (Pravdić, 2001): (A) Implementation of sustainability guidelines is slow and ineffective or non-existent. He concludes that the key reasons are that those who should be the bearers of change have neither the interest nor the political strength to implement the principles of sustainability and sustainable development. (B) The problem is that a generally accepted interpretation of these concepts has not been found, and thus real progress in its introduction into legislative practice has been prevented. (C) Ethically based attitudes towards environmental protection should be obligatorily included in economic development. (D) Unclear meaning and interpretations of these terms allow their usual abuse for special or collective goals. (E) A critical factor in the (un)successful implementation of the principles of sustainable development is the insufficient specification of the abilities and characteristics that must be possessed by persons in charge of creating sustainability strategies and their implementation. He especially emphasizes the need for education in the field of sustainability. After that, more and

more authors are dealing with the question of the feasibility of sustainable development, especially in tourism as a very specific and complex activity that directly and for the most part depends on natural beauty. Also, in the year 2019 author Grofelnik, asks these questions: “Is it possible to combine the development needs of modern tourism with the preservation of originality and high-value resources in the environment? From today's perspective and knowledge, is it possible to measurably determine the impact of man on the environment? Is it possible to create realistically based plans for ecologically sustainable development that will satisfy society's wishes for an increase in the standard of living, while at the same time maintaining the high-value characteristics offered environment? Is the sustainable development of tourism as a concept even achievable or is it a utopia?” (Grofelnik, 2019). The author states that it is difficult to give an unambiguous and accurate answer to these questions. This is a problem that persists in Croatia, which at the same time is strongly economically linked to tourism, and the preservation of the environment (as a basic local resource) is a comparative advantage compared to similar competitive areas. As stated by the same author, the analysis of strategic documents, spatial plans and similar documents shows that the elaboration of the approach to the sustainable development of tourism is “insufficiently concrete” (Grofelnik, 2019). The reason for this usually is not only the lack of professional and competent people in Croatian politics and in key positions in the government and government institutions, and the Croatian tourist community, when it comes to the creation of sustainability policies, but also the fact that the implementation of sustainability in the given conditions is a complex problem, often difficult to solve. Author Šimleša in the year 2003 points out the relationship between economy - ecology - society is the basic relationship that is at the core of the principle of sustainable development. “The fundamental question arises as to whether it is practically possible to achieve the material development of a society without endangering the sustainability of natural resources and people's health. This is especially pronounced in tourism, and especially in mass tourism, where it is practically impossible to harmonize the economy and ecology” (Šimleša, 2003). One of the potential solutions is in alternative forms of tourism, such as ecological tourism, i.e., ecotourism. It is about tourism that is responsible towards nature and that does not endanger natural resources. The International Society for Ecotourism describes this form of tourism as “responsible travel to natural areas where the environment is preserved and the well-being of the local population is improved” (Klarić & Gatti, 2006). It can be noted here that ecotourism is not only a form of tourism that preserves nature but at the same time strives not to disturb the way of life of the local community in the destination where it takes place. The dictionary of tourism defines ecotourism as “tourism in which the emphasis is placed on the stay of tourists in a natural and unpolluted environment, especially in areas with a certain degree of environmental protection (national parks)” (Opačić, 2006). According to this definition, the focus is on the tendency of tourists to prioritize a preserved environment, such as national parks, which therefore become more competitive in the tourist market. According to the volume, ecotourism is tourism that has minimal negative effects on the nature and socio-cultural resources of the destination. Ecotourism is a form of tourism that “supports the protection of natural areas by raising the awareness of residents and tourists about the need to protect the environment, creating jobs and achieving economic benefits for the local community and organizations that are responsible for the protection of natural areas” (Klarić & Gatti, 2006). An important part of ecotourism is the interaction between tourists and the local population, for mutual benefit, which is also strongly aimed at strengthening awareness of the need to preserve and protect the environment and cultural heritage. According to the definition of ecotourism given by the United Nations World Tourist Organization, these are all forms of natural tourism whose main characteristic is that tourists are motivated by respecting the nature and culture of the destinations they visit. Croatia has great potential for the development of ecotourism “which needs to be adequately valorised and protected by the concept of sustainable development” (Čurić, 2010). One of how Croatia can develop ecotourism is through ecological agriculture. This claim is supported by the fact that Croatia is traditionally an agricultural country, and particularly large investments, both financial and other resources, have been focused on ecological agriculture in recent times. Although the investment has not yielded even close to proportional results and considering that in this area there is a lack of expertise and competence of those who implement policies and make decisions, perhaps this is precisely why the solution is in the combination of agriculture and tourism, i.e., ecological agriculture and ecotourism.

3. ECOTOURISM

In December 2022, the Croatian Parliament presented a proposal for the Sustainable Tourism Development Strategy until 2030, adopted by the Ministry of Tourism of the Republic of Croatia, which was adopted in November 2022 at the session of the Government of the Republic of Croatia as “the most important strategic document of Croatian tourism” (NN 2/2023, 2023). The drafting of the National Plan for the Development of Sustainable Tourism from 2021 to 2027 was launched. It is noticeable that both documents put sustainability and sustainable development first, and the following is stated: “The strategy will prescribe a vision for the development of tourism, taking into account the principles of sustainable development, development needs and development potentials of tourism, as well as prescribing strategic goals, key performance indicators and target values of indicators” (NN 2/2023, 2023). It is stated that “as part of the development of the Strategy and the National Plan, the Ministry of Tourism and Sports plans, by the Law on Environmental Protection and the Law on Nature Protection, to carry out a strategic assessment of the impact on the environment and the main assessment of acceptability for the ecological network” (NN 2/2023, 2023). Despite these documents, tourism in Croatia is still relatively unsustainable. Many segments are increasingly unsustainable, and the

previously mentioned processes, such as apartment building and concrete construction on the coast, continue. The strategy for the development of sustainable tourism until 2030, as one of the critical environmental protection measures, states in the first place the encouragement of the use of ecological agricultural products in tourism. Furthermore, it states the encouragement of the agricultural identity of the recognized areas, and its inclusion in the tourist presentation/offer within the agricultural holdings themselves, whose primary activity is agriculture and the processing and sale of its agricultural products (NN 2/2023, 2023). When it comes to organic agriculture, despite the investments and incentives that are measured in billions of HRK since Croatia joined the European Union (EU), the value of Croatian agriculture in general, including ecological agriculture, is constantly decreasing. Specifically, HRK 33 billion (or 4.4 billion €) has been invested in agriculture since Croatia joined the EU, and according to data from 2021, production is lower than in 2012. Consultant Zvezdana Blažić said in an interview for “Agroklub” in 2021 that Croatian agriculture, upon joining the EU, “experienced the cumulative shock of strong open market competition, new agricultural policy rules and the loss of the traditional CEFTA market” (Petković, 2021). She also pointed out that “unsolved structural issues for years led to the loss of over HRK 5 billion (or 663,614,042.07 €) in the value of this product in the first three years” (Petković, 2021). Croatian agricultural products - neither organic nor conventionally produced - are not competitive on the European market, but often not even on the domestic market. As far as the European market is concerned, the Croatian organic product does not have to strive for that kind of competitiveness, but to begin with, focus on the domestic market and on tourists to whom the producer will offer the product at their doorstep. Despite all the indications that there is a huge potential here, it has only been minimally used so far. This is the result of a lack of vision and competence in the management of this sector, and not a lack of potential because it undoubtedly exists. The bad results in the sector of organic agriculture so far should not be an obstacle to continuing thinking and planning in the direction of functionally connecting organic agriculture and tourism to make both agriculture and tourism sustainable. We are talking about activities that in their current form in Croatia have enormous negative consequences for the climate, environment, flora and fauna, cultural heritage, and the person himself and his health and overall well-being. All recent research shows that the awareness of tourists, and the population in general, about the need for sustainability in tourism, is growing. According to research conducted by the European Commission in 27 countries of the EU, and the data which are presented with the Strategy for the Development of Sustainable Tourism until 2030, 82% of EU citizens stated that they are ready to change their habits and consequently make their touristic travelling to be more and more sustainable. Citizens to a large extent (55% of them) expressed their willingness to travel or vacation, to consume domestic products on vacation, to reduce the amount of waste they produce during vacation (48% of them), to travel outside the tourist season (42% of them) and to travel to less visited destinations (41% of them). A third of the surveyed citizens are ready to pay more for environmental protection or the well-being of the local community. A significant share of citizens (33% of them) is ready to prefer to use transport that has a less negative impact on the environment, and a large of respondents are ready to reduce water consumption during vacation and participate in some way in nature protection activities, such as planting trees, etc. (Croatian Government, 2022). These data imply that an increasing number of tourists are looking for destinations that implement the principles of sustainable tourism, i.e., that the demand for ecotourism will grow. Regional and global trends in ecotourism already show this. More than fifteen years ago, it was shown that in countries where ecotourism is developed, most ecotourists prefer destinations with preserved nature that also offer integrated ecological agriculture, and this especially applies to rural areas that still preserve authentic cultural heritage (Pelikan Matetić & Pelikan, 2008). As the combination of tourism and ecological agriculture became more and more common, the term "eco agrotourism" was created, and introduced by the Food and Agriculture Organization, which combines ecology, tourism, and agriculture. Eco agrotourism is a form of tourism that combines ecotourism and agrotourism, i.e., tourism that is based on ecological - responsible and sustainable - agriculture and tourist activities that take place on family farms that implement the principles of sustainability and ecological awareness in their operations and production method (Pelikan Matetić & Pelikan, 2008). Organic agriculture thus enriches the tourist offer, and - in turn - tourism helps or encourages the further development of organic agriculture. This is not only a mutual benefit, in which both agriculture and tourism profit, but also multiple benefits for numerous other stakeholders, primarily nature, and then the local community and society.

4. CROATIAN ECOLOGICAL AGRICULTURE AS PART OF THE CROATIAN TOURIST OFFER

Organic farming is a form of agriculture that strives not to harm nature, animals and the environment in general, as well as humans, to produce healthy food. The detailed definition says that ecological agriculture is “a system of agricultural management that strives for ethically acceptable, ecologically clean, socially just and economically profitable agricultural production” (Stepinac Fabijanić, 2012). Organic agriculture is thus considered an alternative to conventional agriculture, which is “the biggest polluter of the environment” and it “is both a source of pollution and its victim” (Srpak & Zeman, 2018). Although conventional agriculture still largely prevails, “ecological agriculture is rapidly spreading as a practice of healthier living, as a survival strategy for the rural (partly also urban) population and as a worldview” (Pudak & Bokan, 2011, p. 139). It is considered that organic agriculture in Croatia developed through three key phases (Srpak & Zeman, 2018). The first phase is until 1991 when it is considered that the development of this form of agriculture in Croatia was just beginning to be seen, and it was mostly about individuals. The second phase

is from 1991 to 2001 when the number of organic producers grows and the first healthy food stores are opened, and more and more associations are founded through which ecologically conscious individuals strive to educate citizens and promote ecologically produced food. In 2001, the Department for Ecological Agricultural Production was established in the Croatian Agricultural Advisory Service. This was the beginning of the third phase of the development of ecological agriculture, which is considered to have lasted until 2012. In this phase, the market is formed, and the legislative and institutional framework begins to be created, the first production standards are set, and ecological certificates are issued (Gugić et al., 2017). Although the period from 2012 to today should mark the further, fourth phase of the development of organic agriculture in Croatia, experts believe that this development is stagnating and that Croatia currently “joins the group of rare European countries where organic agriculture is still poorly and insufficiently developed” despite the enormous potential (Srpak & Zeman, 2018). Recently there has been more and more talk about connecting ecological agriculture with tourism. In Croatia, the law related to ecological agriculture, the full name of which is the Law on Ecological Production of Agricultural and Food Products, was passed in 2001. This law calls ecological agriculture “organic” or “biological”, and defines ecological production as “a special system of sustainable management in agriculture and forestry that includes the cultivation of plants and animals, the production of food, raw materials and natural fibres, and the processing of primary products, and includes all ecologically, economically and socially justified production-technological methods, operations and systems, making the most favourable use of soil fertility and available water, natural properties of plants, animals and landscapes, increasing the yield and resistance of plants with the help of natural forces and laws, with the prescribed use of fertilizers, means for the protection of plants and animals, by internationally adopted norms and principles” (NN 12/2001, 2001). In the year 2003 there was more talk about the connection between ecological agriculture and tourism, so the Ministry of Tourism of the Republic of Croatia included ecological agriculture in its Strategy for the Development of Croatian Tourism. It states that ecological agriculture has great potential in the function of tourism and that the goal is to connect agriculture, tourism, and ecology precisely through ecological agriculture (Ministry of Tourism of the Republic of Croatia, 2003). Official statistical data on the number of organic farmers and other indicators of the state of organic agriculture in Croatia have existed since 2002. That year, only two producers were registered in the Register of producers in organic agriculture. In 2020, 5,548 organic agricultural producers were registered in Croatia, and only 389 processors of organic products (Ramov & Slavuj, 2021). In the EU, where the demand for certified organic products is constantly increasing, there are currently 344,000 organic product manufacturers (Business diary, 2022). In Croatia, the area under organic cultivation is increasing (although production is still insufficient). In 2017, these areas were 13 times larger than in 2007. One of the most important indicators of the state of organic agriculture in Croatia is the share of areas under organic production in total agricultural production. This share amounted to 7.21% in 2020, and it records continuous growth (Ramov & Slavuj, 2021). Of this, the most agricultural land under organic production is in Osijek-Baranja County, followed by Lika-Senj and Virovitica-Podravina County, and the least in Krapina-Zagorje County (Ministry of Agriculture, 2021a). Cereals are mostly produced in organic agriculture (87%), primarily wheat and spelt, followed by fruit (6%), primarily organic grapes and olives, aromatic, medicinal and herbs (4%), and fresh vegetables (2%), and potatoes (1%). The quantities of vegetables and most species produced in organic agriculture are not sufficient for the domestic market - they cover about 50 to slightly less than 60% of the market's needs (Ministry of Agriculture, 2021b). This clearly shows that there is still a lot of room for growth, only when it comes to the domestic market, and especially when it comes to foreign markets. The question arises as to how competitive domestic organic products are in these markets, including domestic ones. As can be seen from the previously mentioned figures, the number of organic farmers is growing (in 2020 it is higher than in 2013), but there is no proportional increase in the share of organic agriculture in the GDP. It is a matter of stagnation, while tourism can play a key role in encouraging the growth of organic agriculture in Croatia. Croatia is a globally popular tourist destination. In 2019, it was ranked 27th in the ranking of the world's leading tourist countries and recorded constant growth in the tourism sector until the pandemic. The problem is that Croatia is dominated by mass tourism, which destroys nature and the environment in general. Croatia is dependent on tourism. The share of tourism in GDP is constantly growing, but this is more an indicator of negative economic trends in general (lack of production and shutdown of numerous industries), than the development of tourism. Data from the State Statistical Office of the Republic of Croatia from 2019 show that the share of the direct GDP of tourism in the total GDP was 11.8%. The share of direct and indirect tourism GDP is around 25%, according to data from the World Travel & Tourism Council. This also places Croatia at the very top of the list of countries with the highest share of tourism - direct and indirect - in the total national GDP. In Greece, this is 20.3%, in Portugal 17.1%, in Malta 15.8%, in Spain 14.1%, in Cyprus 13.8%, in Italy 13.1% and in Austria 11.8% (State Bureau of Statistics, 2021). Croatian tourism in 2019 (pre-pandemically, relevant) generated total revenue of 10,539 million euros. For comparison, 10 years earlier, in 2009, the revenue generated amounted to 7,115 million euros (Ministry of Tourism of the Republic of Croatia, 2020.) Tourism has been the dominant economic activity in Croatia for decades (Croatian Government, 2022). Despite this and its enormous potential, it is still mostly based on the offer popularly called “sun and sea”, without a clear development strategy and with intensive and unsustainable exploitation of natural and other resources to create an additional tourist offer (which is growing quantitatively, more than qualitatively). Croatian tourism majority takes place in Adriatic Croatia, and this situation has remained almost unchanged for decades. In 2009, 96% of all overnight stays took place in Adriatic Croatia, and in 2019, this change is only slightly lower and amounts to 94.5% (Croatian Government, 2022). Tourists in Croatia are mostly foreign. The share of domestic tourists is only about 10%. Most tourists to Croatia come from Germany, Slovenia, Austria, Italy, and Poland, according to data from 2019 (Croatian Government, 2022). When

it comes to the fundamental features of Croatian tourism, which is characterized by distinct seasonality, "the greatest compared to European Mediterranean countries, and which is directly correlated with the main product of "sun and sea", as well as the structure of accommodation capacities." (Croatian Government, 2022). According to the same source, the dominant form of accommodation facilities is "rooms, apartments and vacation homes" (share of 66%), followed by "campsites" (20.4%) and "hotels" (13%). However, although the number and share of rooms, apartments and vacation homes have grown, this type of accommodation has a low occupancy rate - 27.6% (which indicates the quantitative, but not necessarily qualitative growth), while hotels have the highest occupancy rate - 48.2% (Croatian Government, 2022). The largest number of accommodation facilities (92.5%) is, as expected, in Adriatic Croatia, which causes great pressure on the destination, i.e., its space, environment and infrastructure, which, as mentioned earlier, is mostly inadequate, i.e., insufficient and outdated. Croatia is a popular tourist destination and generates large revenues from it. Seasonality and concentration mostly along the coast have extremely negative consequences for nature and the overall environment. Changes are urgently needed to increase the sustainability of the Croatian tourism sector. One way is to diversify the offer, that is, the form of tourism. Ecotourism is still in its infancy, but this form of tourism would solve, to a significant extent, some of the critical problems that Croatian tourism is dealing with. The critical advantage of ecotourism is the reduction of the growth of mass tourism and the positive combination of tourism and agriculture, i.e., encourages the growth of ecological-sustainable - agriculture. For the ecotourism sector to start developing (faster), a clear development plan and investments are needed. In addition to the fact that there is no clear plan or strategy for the development of ecotourism (or ecological agriculture) in Croatia, in 2019 Croatia was also rated as an unfavourable investment environment. The document called "The Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Report" placed Croatia in 123rd place, out of a total of 140 places, according to the evaluation of the quality of the business environment. The biggest problems are a low-quality management system, restrictive and outdated legislative frameworks, slow and ineffective administration, and high taxes (Croatian Government, 2022). Now, in this regard, Croatia ranks slightly better according to the World Bank's ranking, so it is in 51st place out of a total of 190 places. The critical problems highlighted by the World Bank when it comes to investments in tourism are the slow processing of construction permits, the slow processing of the obtaining process, and inertia in starting a business. "In support of the above, research on the attitudes of key business stakeholders in the private sector of Croatia, where the problem of the slowness and complexity of the reaction of the investment preparation system, the legal framework and implementation on the ground, and the reduction of the profitability of high-added-value accommodation, has been identified" (Croatian Government, 2022). Ecotourism based on ecological agriculture is here in many of its segments in a more favourable position than some other forms of tourism, primarily because a significant part of the resources and infrastructure already exists. In Croatia, there are numerous rural households and other subjects of ecological agriculture, i.e., numerous examples of good practice, and a highly developed know-how system, i.e., human resources with already developed skills and practical knowledge applied for a long. Education and investment in the promotion are needed to strengthen competitiveness. Organic products can be sold directly on the farm, or indirectly, through markets, shops, fairs or online. The goal should be to shorten the path from the producer to the customer as much as possible, which means selling on the spot where the product was created. The same applies to services. This is the most common type of implementation of ecological agriculture in tourism, the arrival of tourists to the eco-destination itself and the consumption of ecological products and related services in the same place. The producer thus has a direct benefit, and the price of his product is more competitive (without the price of distribution, reseller's margin, and sometimes without the price of packaging, etc.), and the tourist has direct contact with the agricultural economy (nature and the people who produced the food he eats or other products and services they will consume). For this scenario to take place in the manner described, adequate marketing in ecotourism is needed, which "implies the importance of knowing the profile of ecotourists" (Čurić, 2010). Ecotourists are characterized by the fact that they are highly ecologically aware, usually highly educated, and they are motivated to travel by enjoying a healthy environment healthily. "Ecotourist or responsible tourist is a new type of traveller who wants to have new experiences by actively participating in the way of life of the places he visits" (Klarić & Gatti, 2006). To attract such tourists to a destination that offers an offer within the framework of organic agriculture, it is necessary to label such destinations, i.e., their products and services, as organic. In Croatia, there are eco-labels, i.e., certificates that prove the ecological way of doing business and production, i.e., the origin of the product or service. The following can be concluded: organic agriculture as part of the tourist offer in Croatia already exists, the potential is enormous, but it is still in its infancy, and a clear development plan and investment, primarily in marketing, are missing. The development of ecological agriculture in Croatia is one of the key things in reducing mass tourism in Croatia and preventing other negative impacts of the current model of tourism on nature and the environment.

5. EXAMPLE OF GOOD PRACTICE: ECO-FARM "ZRNO"

The eco-farm "Zrno" (in Eng.: "Grain"), the oldest organic farm in Croatia, which has been in existence since 1988, was chosen as an example of good practice or the synergy of ecological agriculture and tourism. It was started by Zlata Nanić (a pioneer of ecological food production in Croatia) under the name "Bio Zrno". This is still the name of the company that manages the estate, but since 2010 it has been owned by Biovega. Zrno employs more than 50 people. The estate is in the village of Habjanovac, about 55 kilometres from Zagreb. The area of the property is 20 hectares, and

it is surrounded by a forest. In addition to organic farming, Zrno is also engaged in processing and bakery production. More than 60 crops are grown on the estate, and Zrno offers about 52 bakery products and 18 processed products. The estate also has its restaurant, Bistro Zrno, which opened in 2013, and offers about 30 types of organic dishes. All products from the estate are ecologically certified, and in addition to being organic, they are also vegan, i.e., all products that can be purchased on the estate or in the bistro are free of animal products (Zrno estate website, 2023). Among crops, vegetables, field crops and herbs are grown on Zrno. Everything is grown using ecological and regenerative farming methods. As stated on the estate's website, "all Zrno eco-growing products share the same criteria: ecological cultivation, regenerative practices, crop rotation of diverse crops, soil covering, green fertilization and many other methods that guarantee the highest quality of agricultural culture, but also the restoration of the environment" (Zrno estate website, 2023). No mineral fertilizers or chemical pesticides and herbicides are used on the farm. There grow vegetables and herbs on bio-intensive no-dig beds "which represent the highest standard of regenerative ecological agriculture and soil conservation" (Zrno estate website, 2023). Field crops and vegetables for processing are grown in a five-year crop rotation, "with a continuous change of cover crops and green manure crops and avoiding heavy tillage such as ploughing" (Zrno estate website, 2023). Zrno has more than 35 types of salad, root, fruit and tuber and other vegetables (Zrno estate website, 2023). When it comes to field crops, sorghum, soybeans, and corn are mostly grown in Zrno. About 12 types of herbs are grown on Zrno, on about 900 m², basil, sage, lemon balm, mint, oregano, thyme, celery, dill, coriander, parsley, chives, and chilli peppers. "Our herb garden also has an experience effect - covered with rich compost and crisscrossed by paths of wood chips, its beds are the most fragrant point of the estate and the star of all tours and events" (Internet site of the Zrno estate, 2022), states the description on the Zrno estate's website. The estate is also engaged in processing, primarily in its Zrno Eco bakery, which was launched in 2011, and catering, in its Zrno Eko bistro. Zrno produces bread, pastries, desserts, and sandwiches in its bakery. There are about 14 types of bread on offer, the most famous of which are brown rice bread spelt and rye bread, tahini bread, sesame bread and Mediterranean ciabatta, and there is also gluten-free bread, which is said to be "the only ecological gluten-free sourdough bread in the market" (Internet site of the Zrno estate, 2023). Given that, in addition to vegetables, field crops and herbs, which make up most of the cultivation on the estate, Zrno also produces fruit, which is largely used in processing, i.e., to produce desserts, almost 30 types of them (cakes, pies, cakes, biscuits, etc.) which he sells in his bistro, but also through the organic grocery store Bio&Bio. The estate also produces the popular vegan foods tofu and seitan as part of its processing activities. From processed products, Zrno also offers sauces and spices and a pickled assortment. It is also interesting to note that the property has its water from an artesian well. Estate Zrno is a special tourist attraction which offers very innovative processed products. Time has shown that the estate attracts more and more visitors who - only 60 kilometres from Zagreb - could enjoy a peaceful environment and preserved nature, but also in an environment that offers additional value, which is sightseeing farms and enjoying healthy, and homemade foods. Zrno also began to offer educational content related to ecological agriculture, zero waste philosophy and other forms of a sustainable lifestyle. In 2012, the director of the estate received the Network for Development and Creativity award for the creative and innovative educational program Development of a Self-Sustaining Earth Station on the Zrno Ecological Estate (Biovega website, 2023). Thus, on the farm, additional space was arranged with accommodation capacity for a smaller number of visitors (later this capacity grew). Over time Zrno became profiled as a destination for groups, primarily those whose members share the same worldview that is nurtured on the estate: the desire for preserving nature, enjoying it and healthy food, but also learning about organic farming. A special Eco-educational centre was built, which consists of two halls and can host about 50 visitors, also who practice yoga, meditation and various anti-stress and other relaxation programs. Zrno has 6 rooms that can host 15 people, with additional space that can accommodate another 35 people in mountain conditions, and it offers services for holding various ceremonies, celebrations, etc., such as weddings, in which case it can host from 100 (in winter) to 200 people (in summer). Within the estate, there is also a natural swimming pool and a pond, a playground for children. Several types of tourism take place on the Zrno property, within the framework of ecotourism, primarily rural and health tourism, as well as business and educational tourism, and team-building gatherings. To expand business and education, Zrno started the association "Živa zemlja", and twice a year Open Days are held on the estate when visitors can participate in various activities and taste a food on the estate for free. While all the above-mentioned offers – healthy food, accommodation facilities and education – are located on the property itself, the catering facility Zrno Bio bistro is in the centre of Zagreb. It is "the first and only certified 100% eco restaurant in Croatia" (Zrno estate website, 2023) and as such has a huge competitive advantage. The joint action of ecological agriculture and tourism enabled the Zrno estate not only to stay and survive on the market but to take a leading market position and to make all its business processes sustainable. Thus, the complete sustainability of the business was achieved, i.e., from the perspective of tourism, the sustainable development of the tourism industry was achieved. The director of the estate, David Pejić, was declared the best ecological farmer in Europe in 2022. The director of Zrno received the prestigious EU Organic Awards of the European Commission (which places increasing emphasis on ecological agriculture and the strategy "from field to table") at the end of September 2022 in Brussels. 200 representatives from 26 countries were registered, with the director of Zrno being the only representative from Croatia (Business diary, 2022). That the combination of ecological agriculture and tourism is profitable in terms of increasing profits is shown by the income of the Zrno estate: they grew by an average of 10% for the last seven years, and in 2021 they amounted to HRK 9.1 million (or 1,207,777.56 €) (Starčević, 2022).

6. CONCLUSION

Based on the presentation of the case of the Zrno estate and the theoretical framework presented in the paper, it can be concluded that ecological agriculture could - and should - be one of the critical factors in the development of sustainable tourism in Croatia. The mass and elemental character of Croatian tourism is currently one of the most pressing problems, which shows that Croatia chronically lacks a clear vision of tourism development in general, especially in the sustainability segment. As for organic agriculture, despite the potential and large investments in the last decade, and the growth in the number of organic farmers and areas under organic farming, that sector is almost stagnating, which shows that there is no (satisfactory) vision of development there. The synergy of ecological agriculture and tourism can result in a significant improvement of the Croatian situation in both sectors, and contribute to the development of sustainable tourism, i.e., ecotourism, which is a growing trend in the world, both in terms of supply and demand. That can encourage the development of ecological agriculture and generally contribute to the product and the promotion of sustainability as a way of doing business that is less and less an option and more and more imperative.

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