

SUSTAINABLE TOURISM AND CULTURAL LANDSCAPE OF OCNA MUREȘ. OPPORTUNITIES FOR CAPITALIZING ON LOCAL RESOURCES

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ABSTRACT. – **Sustainable Tourism and Cultural Landscape of Ocna Mureș. Opportunities for Using Local Resources.** Ocna Mureș is an urban settlement notable for its long-standing history and natural salt resources, which have distinguished it within the surrounding cultural landscape. These characteristics offer significant and specific potential for the development of sustainable tourism. This paper aims to analyse the main elements of the local cultural landscape and explore how these – either individually or as an integrated whole – can be leveraged for tourism development. The goal is to promote economic growth and social development within the local community in an environmentally responsible manner, while also preserving cultural heritage for future generations.

Keywords: *sustainable tourism, cultural landscape, sustainable development, Ocna Mureș, valorisation, resources.*

1. INTRODUCTION. SUSTAINABLE TOURISM – CULTURAL LANDSCAPE. GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS

In order to highlight the fundamental features of the aforementioned theme, it was deemed necessary to examine the concepts of *sustainable tourism, sustainable development* and *cultural landscape*.

According to the World Tourism Organisation (2025), sustainable tourism is defined as “*tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry,*

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the environment and host communities". This form of tourism "not only meets the needs of tourists and local populations in destination areas, but also contributes to safeguarding and enhancing future development opportunities. Resources are utilized to satisfy economic, social, and aesthetic needs, while simultaneously preserving cultural integrity, essential ecological processes, biological diversity, and life-supporting systems" (World Tourism Organisation, 2025; Funck, 2020).

The implementation of the form of tourism defined above requires careful planning and execution, aligned with its specific demands and impacts.

"The concept of sustainable development must be regarded as a continuous process of quality improvement, applicable equally to tourism in cities, resorts, rural and coastal areas, mountains, and protected zones, and relevant to all forms of tourism" (Minciu et al., 2010, p. 86).

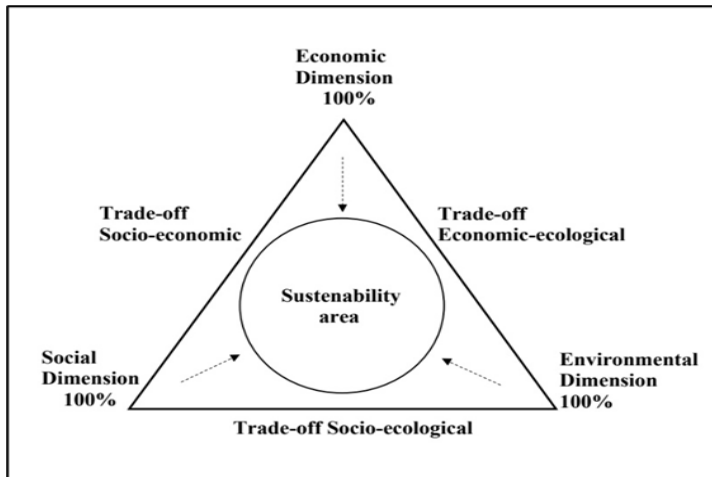


Fig. 1. The durability triangle.

Source: Dragulanescu Irina-Virginia and Dragulanescu Natalia, 2013, p. 49

Thus, sustainable tourism is intrinsically linked to the broader framework of sustainable development, which, according to the official website of the European Union for legislation (European Union, 2025) "was first defined in the **1987 Brundtland Report by the World Commission on Environment and Development**, entitled *Our Common Future*, as *development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs*". This implies that "achieving sustainable development depends on the capacity of governance to ensure economic growth – where appropriate – that is compatible with social equity and the conservation of ecosystems, through a balanced compromise between economic, social, and environmental dimensions (Dragulanescu and Dragulanescu, 2013, p. 48) (fig. 1).

This approach highlights the fact that tourism development in a region inevitably generates certain changes, and to ensure that sustainability objectives are achieved, these must be monitored and adapted.

Achieving sustainable tourism requires optimal strategic planning and careful management of tourism activities, based on a set of principles, which according to the World Tourism Organization (2025) *“relate to the environmental, economic and socio-cultural aspects of tourism development, and it is essential to strike the right balance between these three dimensions to ensure long-term sustainability. Thus, sustainable tourism should:*

- make optimal use of environmental resources which are an essential element in tourism development, maintaining fundamental ecological processes and contributing to the conservation of natural heritage and biodiversity.*
- Respect the socio-cultural authenticity of host communities, preserve the built and living cultural heritage, traditional values and contribute to intercultural understanding and tolerance.*
- ensure long-term viable economic operations, providing socio-economic benefits to all stakeholders, equitably distributed, including stable employment, income opportunities and social services for host communities, thus contributing to poverty reduction”.*

At the same time, by developing a sustainable tourism management and promotion policy, tourism can help preserve the natural and economic stability of the environment. Furthermore, it makes rational use of the resources of local cultural landscapes, ensuring that they remain available for future generations.

Moreover, *“to this end, it is and will be in harmony with the environment, the people and the culture of the place, in such a way that its development is for their benefit and not to their detriment”* (Mazilu, 2007, p. 64). A fundamental paradigm shift is recommended: contemporary tourism has a responsibility to implement sustainable principles to ensure a positive long-term impact.

If we analyse the cultural landscape-tourism nexus, it is *“a complex relationship, the links between them manifesting themselves in both directions. On the one hand they represent the basic resources of tourism, and on the other hand tourism activity has an influence on the ecological environment, modifying its component elements”* (Boghean and Boghean, 2006, p. 44), whether natural or cultural.

A detailed examination of the cultural landscape reveals that it results from *“the successive alteration over time of the material habitat of a sedentary human society, which responds with increasing power and variety to the dynamic challenges of nature, the needs and desires of the society itself, and the historical circumstances of various regions in different periods. The origins of the concept lie in the landscape as a territorial descriptor, and later as a pictorial view and representation of a scene. The scientific concept of the cultural landscape developed*

from debates in academic geography in the early 20th century, offering a framework for understanding the changes humanity has made to the physical environment of the earth's surface" (Conzen, 2001, p. 3086-3092).

Consequently, *"cultural landscapes are considered a construct for describing the relationship between humans and nature in relation to space" (Kühn and Danielzyk, 2006, p. 288).* Thus, pragmatically, sustainable tourism, which plays a vital role in preserving and valorising natural and cultural resources, logically leads to the recognition of the cultural landscape's importance as the outcome of the human-nature interaction. This is essential for the harmonious development of local communities. Considering the direct relationship between these two concepts (cultural landscape and tourism), *"it can be stated that the cultural landscape is, in fact, a fundamental resource for tourism development, and that tourism always occurs in a space containing certain natural and cultural attractions" (Mrda, 2015, quoted by Mrda, Bojanic and Scitaroci, 2016, p. 377),* which must be preserved for prolonged and efficient capitalization.

2. OCNA MUREȘ – GEOGRAPHICAL CONTEXT

A careful analysis of the topographic map highlights the location of the town of Ocna Mureș on a hilly and floodplain area, in the north-eastern part of Alba County, on the left bank of the middle course of the Mureș River.

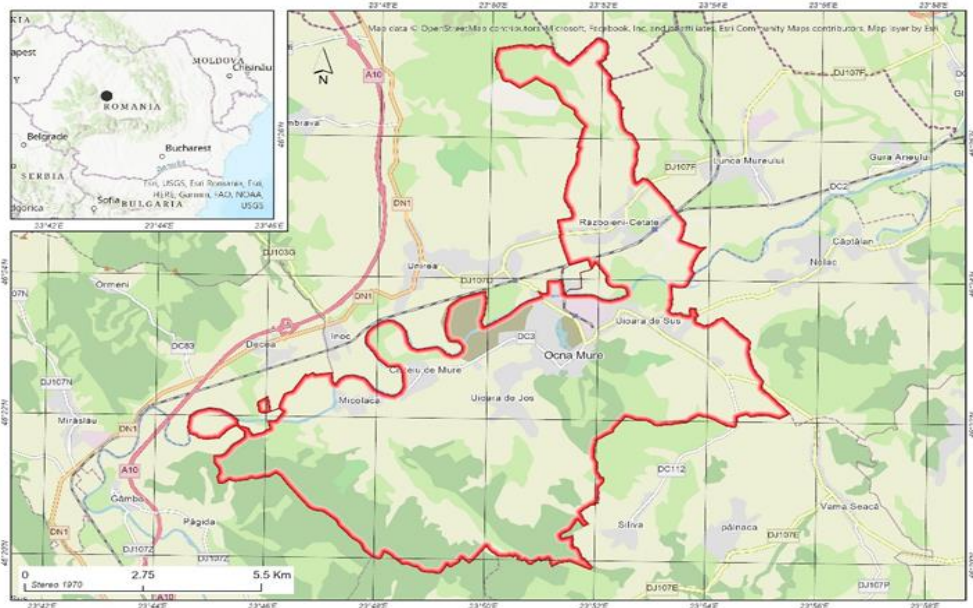


Fig. 2. Map of Ocna Mureș.
Source: the author

The western boundary of the city is defined by the Alba Iulia-Turda Corridor, the northern boundary by the Mureş Corridor, the southwestern boundary by Ciungi Hills (Nejoapa Hill), and the southern boundary by the summit of Banţa Hill.

Administratively, in addition to the urban area itself, the city includes the following villages: Uioara de Sus, Uioara de Jos, Cisteiu de Mureş, Micoşlaca, and Războieni-Cetate.

2.1. Short history

The considerable salt resources in the crust were the main factor in the early anthropisation of this area.

Ocna Mureş has been known as a settlement since the Dacian-Roman era, when it was called *Salinae* and was established as one of the largest salt mining settlements in Dacia. In medieval times, the settlement was first documented in 1280. After a period of reduced activity, it became the most significant salt mining settlement in Transylvania during the 18th and 19th centuries (Vlăsceanu and Ianoş, 1998, p. 386).

This area was *“by the end of the 19th century, the centre of the chemical industry with the creation of the Chlorosodic Products Enterprise, one of the first of its kind in Europe”* (Morariu, Bogdan, and Maier, 1980, p. 110).

Additionally, the utilization of natural resources, represented by concentrated saline waters, contributed to the diversification of the urban functions, with the development of its balneoclimatic component, which fostered the growth of Ocna Mureş resort. This evolved into an important treatment centre, relying on the therapeutic use of saline waters.

2.2. Natural setting

From a geological perspective, the Ocna Mureş area *“is located in a highly folded region with a sequence of anticlines and synclines. A fault approximately 20 km long, situated beneath the Mureş floodplain, running parallel to the river's course, specifically N 70°–80° E, has been highlighted through geological research”* (Bican-Brişan and Petrescu, 2006, p. 26). Thus, the visible morphology is characterized by a relative variety, expressed through the range of surface irregularities typical of the hills and plateaus extending nearby in the form of the Transylvanian Plain and the Târnave Plateau. This is complemented by the fluvial microforms, developed over time by Mureş River.

The latitudinal location of the Ocna Mureş urban area dictates the manifestation of a temperate continental transition climate, within which the permanent westerly winds give the western circulation a dominant presence.

“There are slight local nuances, characterized by moderately warm summers and less severe winters. The wide Mureș River Corridor favours the penetration of air from both directions, depending on the season and the air circulation type” (Vigh, 2013, p. 15).

Additionally, local foehn winds, *“specific to the Alba Iulia-Turda depression corridor, cause temperature increases, reduce precipitation to below 600 mm annually, and lead to early spring thawing throughout the Mureș Floodplain” (Capar Roxana Aybuke, 2017, p. 7).* As a consequence of the manifestation of the aforementioned local warm wind, *“there are situations, however, when, due to abundant precipitation, rapidly melting snow in the mountains, and the slight slope of the drainage, the Mureș River overflows, flooding the minor and major floodplain” (Mocean and Cenar, 1980, p. 21).*

The thermal regime of the area is characterized by *“an average annual temperature that oscillates around +9°C; the average temperature for July is around +20°C, and for January, it is -4°C”.* (Vigh, 2013, p. 16).

The hydrology is dominated by the Mureș River, with *“a low average flow slope (0.5–0.7 m/km), which causes it to meander and create small sandy beaches. The annual discharge at Ocna Mureș is 71 m³/s” (Dobra, 1996, p. 8),* with significant variations depending on the pluviometric regime and the snowmelt from the upper drainage basin. *“The absolute maximum discharge was recorded during the flood of 1970, when it reached 1580 m³/s, while the minimum discharge was 5 m³/s (January 1954)” (Arghiuș and Ozunu, 2005, p. 185).*

Regarding the existing lakes, *“the genesis of the Ocna Mureș lake complex is of anthropogenic nature, with the lakes here being the result of repeated collapses and sinkings of the ceilings of the old mining galleries, followed by the filling of the formed voids with water” (Toma, 2012, p. 11).*

From a pedological perspective, *“on the right bank of the Mureș River, as well as in the neighbouring Fărău area, ‘regosols’ are found, while the actual urban area of the city consists of brown soils and clay soils; in the Mureș Valley, alluvial soils are encountered, which have formed through repeated flooding” (Petcu, Călin, and Vich, 2009, p. 117).* The main resources *“include clay, bentonite, and salt” (Județele României Socialiste, 1972, p. 31).* After the flooding that led to the submersion of the salt mine and the inability to exploit the resource further, salt *“is now extracted in the form of brine through wells, with the salty water being transported via salt tubes to the processing site” (Mocean and Cenar, 1980, p. 25).*

The local biodiversity is strictly influenced by the relief and climate of the temperate zone. The presence of shrubs is notable: blackthorn (*Prunus spinosa*), hawthorn (*Crataegus monogyna*), wild rose (*Rosa canina*). There are also deciduous trees: carob (*Ceratonia siliqua*), oak (*Quercus robur*), walnut (*Juglans regia*), at higher altitudes and in combination with conifers, such as Scots pine

(*Pinus sylvestris*), and shrubs: blackthorn (*Prunus spinosa*), hawthorn (*Crataegus monogyna*), and wild rose (*Rosa canina*). Furthermore, the diverse fauna of the area offers favourable conditions for practicing forms of sports tourism, such as hunting and fishing. It also represents a natural setting that can add value to the natural landscape and the tourism function in general.

2.3. Local Resources – Elements of the cultural landscape relevant for tourism

The cultural landscape of Ocna Mureş, like any local cultural landscape, *“reflects the story of the people who have shaped it, not only in the past but also in the present. Therefore, both natural and cultural elements of that place must be considered as a whole”* (Sirisrisak and Akagawa, 2007). As a result, *“researching the cultural landscape in its entirety represents a way to better understand human settlements and economic activities, the spatial behaviour of these settlements and activities, and the changing landscape associated with them”* (Lowenthal 1990; Bičík 2004; Kupka 2010; all quoted by Jakub, Santruckova, and Komarek, 2021, p. 245). These definitions highlight the complex interaction of natural and cultural factors that have shaped the landscape over time.

In this context, as a defining element for tourism, the local salt resources play an important role, particularly the concentrated chlorosodic mineral water. This resource, with exceptional potential, preserves the heritage of salt mining and contributes to the revitalization of the area. Currently, it is used in the Ocna Mureş Treatment and Leisure Complex, which was reintegrated into the spa circuit in 2023, thus continuing its cultural and tourism history.



Fig. 3. Ocna Mureş salt spa.
Source: the author

Ocna Mureș also includes a valuable architectural and historical heritage, reflecting the cultural diversity of the area with buildings that highlight fragments of local history. Among the most representative are “*the ruins of the Romanesque Church* (1300), *the Roman Catholic church* dedicated to Saint Charles Borromeo (18th century), declared a historical monument in 2004; *the Banffy Castle – “Teleky”*, built in 1742 in the neo-Gothic style, with some modifications from 1850–1860, and in the village of Cisteiu de Mureș there is a *wooden church* dedicated to the Archangels Michael and Gabriel, built in 1750, with alterations in 1870, destroyed by the catastrophic floods of 1975 and later rebuilt on the same spot, on a concrete foundation, now declared a historical monument” (Ghinea, 2025).

Other attractive elements are related to the natural environment, which complement or provide a suitable framework for the cultural elements. In this sense, we mention the *Oak of Union*, planted at the end of the 20th century, and *Banța Forest*, an ideal setting for recreational activities due to its ecological diversity.

Also significant are the elements represented by *cultural and folkloric activities*, whose diversity and originality reflect a rich intangible heritage, in which millennia-old traditions related to customs, music, and dance are preserved and passed down from generation to generation. This folkloric dynamic offers the chance to understand the culture and way of life of the locals.

The above-mentioned elements involve various opportunities for tourism development through recreation, therapy and treatment, cultural and educational tourism, playing a decisive role not only in capitalizing on the cultural landscape of the area but also in preserving it. This contributes to the development of sustainable tourism through the responsible and environmentally friendly use of resources.

3. OPPORTUNITIES FOR CAPITALIZING ON LOCAL RESOURCES

The local cultural landscape, with all its specific elements related to natural salt resources (salt baths, salt lakes), cultural-historical resources (architectural and historical monuments, traditions, and customs materialized through various characteristic events), and natural landscapes supporting them, constitutes valuable tourism resources. Each of these enhances the practice of certain types of tourism, such as health and wellness tourism, recreational tourism, cultural tourism, and so on, especially when they are well-preserved and highlighted.

The opportunity to capitalize on these resources is subordinated to sustainable tourism development, in this context adhering strictly to the *Integrated Urban Development Strategy 2021-2030*, through which the local community aims to leverage the tourism potential of the cultural landscape. This represents

“an opportunity that the area must seize in its economic diversification and in overcoming the economic decline caused by the closure and restructuring of several mining operations and chemical industries” (Petcu, Călin and Vich, 2009, p. 121).

In close correlation with the points mentioned above, we highlight the secondary objective which focuses on developing the town of Ocna Mureș as *“a local interest health resort that sustainably and competitively capitalizes on the therapeutic and natural salt potential of the community”* (p. 148). In response to the need for local economic revitalization through the sustainable exploitation of its rich natural and cultural heritage, tourism activities can contribute to the strengthening of the local identity and of the socio-economic balance. The following are the main specific objectives (according to the source mentioned above, pp. 148, 149) necessary for its implementation:

- Operationalizing the Salt Baths complex – Treatment and Leisure Unit in the town of Ocna Mureș, based on economic efficiency, curative impact, and recreational attractiveness.

- Acquiring and capitalizing on the status of a balneoclimateric resort.
- Sustainable exploitation of the economic potential related to the historical, cultural, and natural tourism resources, both local and in the functional urban area.

- Development of accommodation infrastructure and provision of tourism and related services.

- Furthermore, it is proposed to integrate the anthropogenic salt lakes (formed as a result of the collapse of salt mine ceilings), according to the *Integrated Urban Development Strategy of Ocna Mureș 2014-2023*, p. 61, *“into the local landscape by developing them as leisure lakes, surrounded by pathways and piers, willows and linden trees, playgrounds, floral areas, sandy zones for games, cafes, and wooden terraces”*.

- An outdoor *Salt Museum*, a unique local project *“currently under development since 2020”* (Ghinea, 2025), aiming to capitalize on the long-standing tradition of salt exploitation by creating an open-air exhibition space.

- Collaboration between the local administration, the private sector, and specific non-governmental organizations that can contribute to supporting the development of sustainable tourism projects.

- Cooperation with other nearby settlements to develop a common strategy that includes potential existing tourist objectives.

- Implementation of community education programmes to involve and promote sustainable tourism.

The objectives presented constitute *opportunities for the valorisation, growth, and socio-economic development* of the town by enhancing the cultural landscape elements. Thus, sustainable tourism in the aforementioned area aims to develop a tourism sector designed to generate long-term economic benefits

without negatively impacting the existing cultural landscape. Currently, the local community is focused on protecting its resources and creating an environment that is favourable for both tourists and residents.

Therefore, the spa complex and the development of spa, cultural, and historical tourism play an important role, as they can generate multiplier effects at economic and social levels – by increasing employment rates, attracting investments, modernizing local infrastructure, and strengthening intercultural exchanges. Additionally, the income generated can support programmes dedicated to the protection of the cultural landscape.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The town of Ocna Mureș, with its long-standing history and natural salt resources, offers a unique potential for the development of sustainable tourism within a distinctive cultural landscape.

The implementation of initiatives outlined in the local strategic plans grants this urban settlement the opportunity to establish itself nationally as a top-tier tourist destination, leveraging its favorable assets by integrating its balneary tradition into a modern concept based on innovation and sustainability principles.

Tourism is inherently connected to the environment; therefore, protecting it is essential to maintaining the setting – and, by extension, the cultural landscape elements – necessary for tourism to thrive. In turn, tourism significantly contributes to economic development and enhances the quality of life for residents.

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