Abstract. *This article presents the findings of a research conducted with small and medium accommodation managers in Brasov, Romania, with the purpose of investigating their environmental responsibility and attitudes towards environmental management. Based on a qualitative exploration of their perceptions and experiences, the general understanding of the sustainable tourism concept is examined; the practical application of different voluntary environmental instruments is analyzed as well as managers' interest in environmental policies. The research findings show that the studied accommodation units have low performance on water conservation, responsible waste management, environmental awareness, necessary knowledge about and interest in the environmental protection and environmental policy. The interviewed managers' environmental initiatives arise mostly from immediate economic gains that result from minimizing expenses by means of cost reduction measures. Based on the outcomes of the study, a series of recommendations are mentioned in order to promote the adoption of environmental management in small and medium accommodation units from the studied destination.*

Keywords: environmental management, environmental tools, small and medium accommodation, managers, cost reduction.

THE PERSPECTIVES FOR ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT IN SMALL AND MEDIUM ACCOMMODATION UNITS. THE CASE OF BRAŞOV, ROMANIA

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1. Introduction

The well-being and development of accommodation units in tourism destinations depends on a constant availability of natural resources. The deterioration of the natural environment in many destinations threatens both accommodation units and other tourism businesses. Preserving high environmental quality, as advocated by the green movement within the hotel industry, should therefore be one of the priority areas on the business agenda of tourism managers. Accommodation cannot be provided without implication for energy and water consumption, i.e. implications for adding to national resource use and greenhouse gas inventories, and a significant proportion of this resource consumption might not be necessary (Warnken, Bradley and Guilding, 2004). However, in order to achieve noticeable improvement, accommodation managers and operators must be willing to act in an environmentally responsible manner. They also need to have adequate knowledge of the environmental issues pertinent to their activities, and sufficient funds to implement state-of-the-art environmentally sound practices (Bohdanowicz, 2006). Internationally, the most common formal environmental instruments applied by the hotel industry are codes of conduct, best environmental practices, eco-labels, environmental management systems (EMSs) and environmental performance indicators (Ayuso, 2006).

The tourism industry comprises a large number of relatively heterogeneous small to medium-sized business entities. As such, tourism is a prime example of a largely fragmented, yet significant, service industry. Accommodation units, which are a major component of the industry, typify this fragmentation (Warnken, Bradley and Guilding, 2004). Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) have generally been portrayed as failures in relation to environmental sustainability due to their low take-up rates of sustainable business practices (Battisti and Perry, 2011). Given the large number of small to medium-sized businesses within the tourism sector, their combined environmental impact is potentially considerable. The increase in the power of environmental groups, the ease of cross border information flow, and the rising concern of the public with regards to global impact of environmental issues are motivating factors resulting in the establishment of environmental management systems (Todd, 2009).

In the context of a growing international concern about a sustainable management of the natural assets used by tourists, this article presents the findings of a qualitative research conducted with Braşov small and medium accommodation managers concerning their attitudes and opinions concerning sustainable tourism development and the adoption of different environmental tools. Based on a qualitative exploration of the perceptions and experiences of the interviewed managers, the general understanding of the concept of sustainable tourism is examined, as well as the practical application of different voluntary environmental instruments. The article begins with a review of the research conducted in this field, continues with a presentation of tourism development in the studied destination and afterwards describes the applied research method. The following section presents the findings of the conducted qualitative research and the final section outlines some conclusions of the study as well as some limitations of the research.

2. Literature review

The accommodation sector is among the most energy-intensive and water consuming sectors of the tourism industry. Because accommodation units are large users of consumer goods, waste generation is probably the most visible effect that the hotel industry has on the environment. As a response to this international problem of the tourism industry, a variety of environmental guidelines have been developed by different organizations, such as the International Hotel & Restaurant Association, United Nations Environment Program, and the International Hotel Environmental Initiative. In the case of independently operated facilities, environmental concern and the willingness to act are strongly dependent on the hotel manager's attitude and knowledge. In contrast, chain-affiliated hotels often incorporate environmental issues in their company policies, which usually are imposed on individual establishments (Bohdanowicz, 2005). Previous studies (Horobin and Long, 1996; Stabler and Goodall, 1997; Vernon et al., 2003) have shown that hoteliers have a fragmentary and occasionally contradictory understanding of the concepts of sustainable development and tourism and its environmental, social and economic dimensions.

As an emerging strategy, environmental management has increased its attraction for hotel managers because it encompasses the technical and organizational activities undertaken by an organization for the purpose of reducing these environmental impacts and minimizing their effects on the natural environment (Cramer, 1998). 'Environmental management' is defined as 'the equipment, methods and procedures used in the production, product design and product distribution mechanisms which save energy and natural resources, minimize the environmental problems generated by human activities and protect the natural environment' (Shrivastava, 1995).

For environmental or other reasons, some hotels have voluntarily adopted self regulatory initiatives such as an environmental management system (EMS) to improve their environmental performance (Chan, 2011). Environmental management systems have emerged as one of the most effective tools since the 1990s to achieve sustainable development. The adoption of environmental management systems by accommodation units has been an important subject both on the industry and academic agenda. Certain studies (Tzschentke, Kirk and Lynch, 2008) concentrated on the factors that influenced a number of hospitality operators to adopt an environmental profile outlining the need to formulate initiatives in accordance with the needs of the target market in terms of its sectoral and size characteristics, whilst acknowledging the diversity of environmental motivators. López-Gamero et al. (2011) analyzed the influence that some external and internal factors exert on the managerial perception about the natural environment as a competitive opportunity, and additionally, about the effect that this managerial perception has on the adoption of superior proactive environmental management schemes. The same authors investigated the impact that proactive environmental management has on environmental performance, and the effect that these environmental variables have on competitive advantage and financial performance through the resource based view. Carmona-Moreno et al. (2004)

concentrated on the influence of contextual factors (stakeholder influence, chain affiliation and size) on hotels' proactive environmental management and the relationship between the types of environmental management and the firms' environmental and economic performance.

Certain authors (Deng and Burnett, 2002) observed that certain small and medium-sized hotels (SMHs), have not adopted an EMS, although annual bills for electricity, gas and diesel fuel for a typical medium-sized hotel contribute significantly to its total operating cost. Sampaio et al. (2011) examined the reasons for different levels of environmental engagement among small firms in tourism. It seems that the size of a firm determines its organizational capability to apply appropriate environmental initiatives and its environmental performance (Elsayed, 2006). In small and medium-scale accommodation companies, the lack of capital resources or an internal arrangement structure are environmental management constraints (Mauforth and Munt, 1998, in Chan, 2011, p.7). Dewhurst and Thomas (2003) found that the environmental actions taken by smaller firms tend to be implemented ad hoc, rather than within a coherent environmental management strategy, and that these firms normally do not have a formal environmental policy in place. The environmental actions taken in such firms involve mainly simple, low-cost measures, and established priorities and practices do not involve owners in active and innovative environmental work (Hobson and Essex, 2001).

Chan (2011) identified barriers in the process of EMS adoption specific to SMHs: (a) lack of a sense of urgency, (b) ambiguity of EMS standards, (c) lack of qualified verifiers/consultants, (d) conflicting guidance, and (e) inconsistent support and suggested strategies to reduce these barriers to adopting an EMS.

Due to a sustained development of the hotel industry in the last decades, that has substantially affected the environment at the global level (Christensen and Beckmann, 1998), there is a growing need to formulate tourism models based on sustainability criteria, which can be perceived in the main forces of the business environment (Rodriguez and Cruz, 2007):

1) Customers, who are gradually altering their purchasing attitudes towards behaviors that are more sensitive towards the natural and social environment. This is generating image problems for those firms that do not respect the environment. Dalton et al. (2008) found that Australian tourists would prefer environmentally friendly accommodation and renewable energy supplies, while Becken (2005) showed that tourists were willing to pay reasonable amount of money for certain environmental measures to be taken in hotels. Tsagarakis et al. (2011) have shown that 86% of tourists visiting the island of Crete in Greece would prefer to stay in hotels equipped with Energy Saving Installations (ESI), and 87% in hotels with Renewable Energy Sources (RES), rather than staying in hotels of identical quality, which do not have either ESI or RES.
2) The political-legal context is also undergoing drastic transformations, directed fundamentally at limiting the environmental deterioration caused by business activity (regulatory standards for products and processes, etc.). In the context

of the EU integration Romania's environmental policies outline the necessity of a better understanding and compliance of national businesses concerning the environmental management systems and eco-labelling.

The overview provided above highlights the necessity of further research concentrated on small and medium-sized accommodation, as these types of hotels may experience more challenges and barriers to the adoption of an EMS, the implementation of which, together with different green practices, could potentially result in benefits such as operating cost savings.

Sustainable tourism development in Romania has been an important research topic for several authors (Albu, 2009; Gherasim et al., 2011; Ispas, 2009; Nedelea and Scutariu, 2009; Nistoreanu, 2007, Stănciulescu, 2004). However, to the best of the author's knowledge, there are few studies that investigate the opinions and attitudes of accommodations managers towards environmental management and environmentally friendly practices in the Romanian tourism literature. Roman, Stanciu and Condratov (2008) analyzed the opinions and practices regarding social responsibility of accommodation managers in the city of Suceava and outlined the role of the human factor in the sustainable tourism development process. Stanciu and Hapenciuc (2007) have found that half of the hoteliers in the same tourism destination do not consider nor apply any environment protection measure. Although recycling and water contamination with detergents or other toxic products have been ignored by the studied hoteliers, energy saving seems to be the most popular environmentally friendly initiative. Tomescu (2011) outlined the necessity for eco-labelling in the Romanian lodging services.

Considering the lack of hoteliers' interest in nature protection and the constant degradation of Romania's natural resources we consider it is of great importance to further investigate the opportunities for environmental management and the promotion of eco-friendly practices in accommodation units, as a key for successful sustainable tourism development process. By investigating Braşov accommodation managers' opinions regarding environmental management, the present paper sheds some light on tourism stakeholders' low interest in sustainability issues and outlines the necessity for further training and promotion of such practices in urban destinations.

3. An overview of tourism development in Braşov

The city of Braşov is situated in the central part of Romania, surrounded by important tourism nature assets: the Carpathian Mountains and the rolling hills of Southern Transylvania. Because it is one of Romania's best-preserved medieval sites this tourism destination offers many cultural tourism development opportunities. Its culture and heritage architecture, which come from the mixture of Romanian and Saxon traditions, provide a wealth of interpretive and sightseeing experiences.

The Destination Management Organization is the Association for the Promotion and Development of Tourism in Braşov County (APDT). The main purpose of APDT is to increase tourism flows in Braşov County by pursuing a sustainable tourism development approach while providing visitors with quality travel

experiences, fostering the development of tourism services, facilities and promoting Braşov County on both Romanian and international market. APDT activity is focused on the conservation of natural resources, aesthetics and cultural characteristics of Braşov County while providing local communities with economic and social benefits from tourism development.

Braşov's Statistics Institute (2011) reported a constant growth of tourist arrivals in Braşov city in the last years starting from 184.651 arrivals in 2003 to 295.521 arrivals in 2008. However, due to the international crisis the number of tourist arrivals in 2009 was 26 % lower than the previous year, counting 218.485 tourists. The year 2010 brought a slight recovery of tourist arrivals to 251.188, a value which is however 15% lower than the one registered in 2008. While Braşov has enjoyed relative success over the past 30 years because of its proximity to Bucharest, its markets remain primarily Romanian with foreign travellers providing only a quarter of visitor nights. The 2010 statistics showed that the majority of Braşov tourists are Romanians (74%) and only 26% are foreign visitors, mostly coming from Germany, Israel, Italy, France, Republic of Moldavia, USA, UK, Spain, Greece and Austria. The average length of stay of tourists in Braşov is between 2.13 and 2.19 days, a possible consequence of the perception of Braşov as a transit point or a destination for weekend getaways.

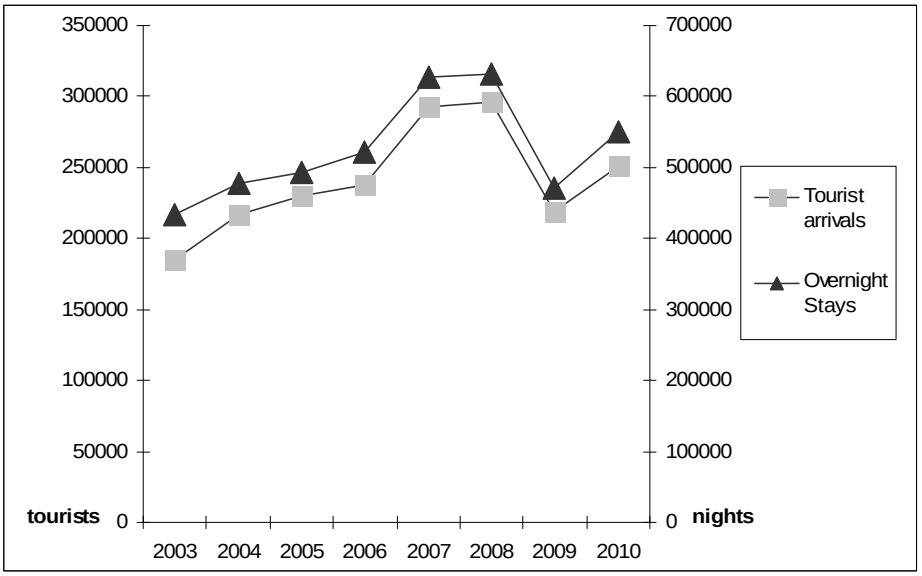


Figure 1. **The evolution of tourist arrivals and overnight stays in Braşov between 2003 and 2010 (Braşov County Statistics Institute, 2011)**

According to previous research (Candrea, Constantin and Ispas, 2011) Braşov visitors are interested in the impact of tourism development on the environment (61% of the selected sample in the cited study), in the environmental initiatives of local

tourism providers (51%) and 45% of the interviewed subjects would choose an eco-certified accommodation against a non-certified one.

At the beginning of 2011, a total of 110 accommodation units have been registered in Braşov (Braşov's Statistics Institute, 2011), with a total of 6421 places in 3098 rooms. Most of the accommodation units are urban guesthouses (54%), followed by hotels (34%) and other types of accommodation (villas, chalets, hostels and bungalows). These statistics point out the predominance of small and medium accommodation units in the city of Braşov; their small capacity is a function of the limited financial resources of their owners and, in some cases, the limited space in certain central areas available for the construction. The fact that Braşov's accommodation market is dominated by small and medium accommodation units was the reason for our sample selection among this type of accommodation units for an investigation of managers' opinions concerning the perspectives for environmental management in such tourism establishments.

4. Research methodology

The present study explores Braşov's small and medium accommodation managers' environmental responsibility in the context of their business and how they translate their understanding into practice. As the investigation of this issue needed to be conducted in an open way, where managers could explain their understanding in their own words, we have chosen a qualitative methodology based on face-to-face interviews. Interviews are considered by certain authors (Brătucu and Brătucu, 2006) as the most common and valuable qualitative research method. The advantage of qualitative methods is that use of open-ended questions gives participants the opportunity to respond in their own words, rather than forcing them to choose from fixed responses, as quantitative methods do. Open-ended questions have the ability to evoke responses that are (FHI, 2005): meaningful and culturally salient to the participant, unanticipated by the researcher and rich and explanatory in nature. Thus, semi-structured face-to-face interviews were chosen as the main data collection method. The study aimed to answer the following research questions:

- What is the respondents' general perception regarding the impact of tourism on the environment?
- What voluntary environmental practices are implemented by the selected managers?
- Are the respondents familiarized with accommodation eco-certification systems?
- Would the managers be interested in the eco-certification of the accommodation units they are managing?

An interview schedule listing topics for the interviews and data needs was prepared in case the informants failed to think of any ideas related to the topic at hand. These interviews explore how small-business owners understand environmental responsibility and how this links to the context of their business. An interview guide

was developed after an analysis of the existing research literature and managers were initially contacted by phone to seek their participation in the research. Interviews took place on the business premises and averaged around one hour.

A total of 10 managers of small and medium accommodations units from Brasov were interviewed using a semi-structured interview schedule that covered the following issues: general perceptions regarding the impact of tourism on the environment, the necessity for environmental initiatives in the accommodation unit they are managing, voluntary environmental practices implemented, their knowledge concerning eco-certification systems and their interest in the eco-certification of the managed accommodation units. The choice of research objectives and interview questions has been made following a review of the tourism literature, including several studies focused on the adoption of environmental management and other sustainability practices in the tourism industry (Vernon et al., 2003; Bohdanowicz, 2005; Battisti and Perry, 2011; Chan, 2011; Sampaio et al., 2011). The collected data was afterwards processed using content analysis and the discussions and conclusions are presented in the following sections.

5. Research findings

In order to cast some light on the perception of environmental issues within the accommodation sector in Braşov, a total of 30 invitations to participate to this research have been sent, but only a 10 of the approached managers have agreed. The low response rate can also reflect managers' lack of interest concerning environmental management.

The first analyzed accommodation unit is a hotel with 30 rooms, a restaurant and 29 employees. Mainly, the hotel's clients are Romanians, travelling especially for business purposes and training courses while the most frequent foreign tourists come from Poland, Austria, France and Italy. The manager has a high environmental interest and is limited by both practical and financial barriers in the adoption of further environmental tools.

The second interviewed manager is the owner of a 10-room guesthouse attracting equally Romanian and foreign tourists, mainly motivated by the competitive rates and the new facilities of the unit which started functioning in 2011. The manager is mostly motivated by cost reduction in the adoption of certain environmental tools and is open to further information concerning environmental management.

The third analyzed accommodation unit is an 8-room guesthouse positioned especially on the business market. The majority of its clients are foreign tourists coming from Germany, Italy, and Spain. The guesthouse is a family-run business and it has succeeded in accessing European funds in order to increase its capacity and implement photovoltaic panels. The manager is environmentally motivated but expects more support and motivation from the local and national authorities.

The fourth interviewed manager is also the owner of a 12-room family-run guesthouse. This respondent is the most sceptical to environmental management and is mostly interested in cost reduction measures.

The fifth analyzed accommodation unit is a family-run guesthouse with 5 rooms. More than half of its clients are foreign tourists coming from Italy, Spain, Germany, France, Russia, and USA while Romanian tourists are mainly coming from the Bucharest. The manager is interested in implementing more environmental tools but is mainly facing practical barriers as the rooms are in a rented building, declared a historical monument and they are not concentrated in the same space.

The sixth interviewed subject is managing a 30-room hotel. The hotel's clients are mainly business tourists, equally foreign (coming from Italy, Spain, and Germany) and Romanian especially coming from the capital city. It should be noted that this hotel is the only one of the studied accommodation units, which currently has solar panels. The manager of the hotel is interested in environmental management but expects more support from the public authorities.

The seventh studied accommodation unit is a family run guesthouse with five rooms, attracting mainly Romanian tourists. The manager is not very interested in environmental matters but is practicing cost reduction environmental measures.

The eighth respondent is the manager of a 14-room guesthouse, which has a restaurant and 12 employees. This manager is environmental responsible but faces some problems in applying environmental tools due to the lack of commitment of the employees.

The ninth analyzed accommodation unit is a hotel with 17 rooms attracting both foreign and Romanian tourists for both business and leisure. It has 17 employees and an environmental oriented manager, the only one of the interviewed subjects who implemented a responsible waste collection system.

The last interviewed manager is managing a family-run guesthouse with 6 rooms attracting mainly Romanian tourists. The manager is interested mainly in cost reduction environmental measures and is interested to find out additional information concerning certification schemes.

Eight out of ten participants in the survey expressed their interest concerning the negative impact of tourism activities on the natural environment. However, pressures to appear socially responsible may lead individuals to overstate their environmental commitment and behavior in the context of such surveys. Therefore, these results need to be interpreted cautiously.

All the respondents recognized that their facilities influence the natural surroundings, although the magnitude of the impacts is often underestimated. However, the level of their commitment to minimize the negative ecological effects of tourism activities has not reached a high level, as demonstrated by the few environmental tools they have implemented. Accommodation and tourism associations are believed to have an important role in promoting environmental awareness and advocating more sustainable practices among the operators of the hospitality industry. Five respondents mentioned that local and national authorities are

also expected to encourage the "greening" of tourism businesses by tax allowances or public assistance. The majority of managers raised the cost-related issue of becoming more environmentally responsible and feared that this approach might be very expensive, especially considering the fluctuations of tourism flows and decreasing revenues due to the economic recession. Although environmental accreditation could be a competitive advantage on the tourism market only six respondents are familiar with the European Eco-label for accommodation services while only two have heard about the eco-certification scheme for accommodation units created by the Association of Ecotourism in Romania. Despite the lack of information in this field eight managers have expressed their interest in a future eco-certification, especially if it could bring guidance, promotion or help from the local or national authorities.

As regards the implemented environmental tools, issues relating to energy-efficient lighting were the most commonly listed with 22 mentions (10 for efficient light-bulbs, 7 for light sensors for interior common spaces and 5 for light sensors in the exterior), which may be attributed to their economic benefits. This initiative is followed by waste water treatment (the use of biodegradable detergents or contracts with ecological laundries) with 5 mentions, building insulation (4 mentions), kitchen oil recycling (3 mentions) and glass bottle recycling (2 mentions). Five respondents reported local food purchasing although it is not necessarily perceived as a measure aimed at decreasing transport distances and consequently reducing pollution. Only one manager expressed the short-term commitment to implement solar panels with funding from the European Union. Responsible waste management was only mentioned by one of the respondents who also complained about the local waste collection firm that doesn't respect the waste segregation. Although the towel reuse programme is an already well-established practice in most European countries it was mentioned only by one of the respondents. This initiative saves not only water and electricity, but also reduces the use of detergents and prolongs the life of materials.

Respondents' environmental initiatives arise generally from immediate economic gains that result from minimizing expenses by means of cost reduction measures. However, in spite of this motivation these measures still bring about resource conservation and prevention. As the findings of this survey lead to the conclusion that environmental responsibility currently ranks low on the tourism managers' agenda, a series of conclusions and recommendations are discussed in the following section.

6. Conclusions and discussion

As the reviewed literature has shown, the hotel industry is becoming increasingly environmentally responsible. We thus recommend that the accommodation units in Brasov and elsewhere in Romania should pay close attention to the findings presented in this paper and other similar studies, and should begin working together to solve the identified problems.

Energy consumption in small and medium accommodation units can be a factor in their competitiveness while reducing costs and increasing sensitivity to environmental factors can create conditions favorable to the optimization of energy resources and the introduction of renewable energy solutions. The results of our study outline the preference of accommodation managers for energy saving measures and confirm previous research (Stanciu and Hapenciuc, 2007). We consider that further training and motivation should be promoted among small and medium size accommodation managers in order to give them the opportunity to improve their knowledge on energy saving measures and other environmental management instruments.

In addition to showing little concern on the implementation of environmental tools, most of the interviewed managers lack knowledge of the existence of environmental management systems and certification schemes. In order to achieve meaningful improvement, they must obtain adequate knowledge, develop more concern for environmental issues and they should be eager to allocate the necessary funds to develop and implement environmental programs. However, understanding, interpreting and applying environmental management systems standards to a company is not an easy task, and requires a certain level of technical knowledge and certain skills. Therefore, as Chan (2011) suggested, small and medium accommodation units' managers should consider working with other businesses facing similar problems. Forming a local group with a common goal can help in the exchange of information on environmental management.

The local destination management organization (APDT) can take a leading role in encouraging accommodation units to commit to an environmental management. By providing technical support and organizing more experience exchanges, training courses, within the industry, the association can help increase environmental knowledge and awareness among local accommodation managers. This is particularly important, as the interviewed subjects in this study indicated that external assistance and guidance is needed in the environmental approach. The association could create publications and best practice guides in order to explain environmental management concepts, and promote successful international and national cases. Both national and international eco-certification schemes and accreditations should be promoted to accommodation managers as well as the advantages of being more environmentally responsible. As more and more consumers are buying green products nowadays, another incentive for the adoption of environmental management in accommodation units in Braşov could be the ability of environmentally friendly companies to attract green travellers.

The implementation of environmental management systems is sometimes accompanied by operating costs that are often affordable only to large-scale companies and multinational enterprises. The financial inadequacy and incapability of the small-scale tourism enterprises to meet the stringent standards and criteria set by environmental protection schemes could discourage them from participating in environmental protection programs. Thus, governments and other decision-making institutions should become involved by providing legal and economic incentives for

the industry to adopt environmentally sound practices. The access to European funds through the sector operational program for environmental projects can also be a chance for small and medium accommodation units to overcome the financial barriers.

While this paper has provided some insights into environmental sustainability from the perspective of small and medium accommodation owners, it admittedly has a number of limitations. It is important to note that the collected data for this investigation was gathered from a survey with a 33% response rate. The low response rate indicates that not too many small and medium accommodation managers in Braşov are interested in environmental management, as their primary objective is to grow the business profits by increasing their market share and cutting costs. The findings should thus be treated as indicative and quantitative studies are recommended for a comprehensive image of the environmental responsibility of both Braşov and Romanian hotel sector. As only the accommodation sector of the tourism industry has been taken into consideration, the data collected should not be viewed as representing any other aspects of the tourism industry and future studied should consider investigating the perceptions of environmental management by travel agencies and tour operators' managers as well as tour guides. Despite these limitations, the study does provide some useful insights in connection with the environmental management in the tourist accommodation industry. In uncovering the dynamics of the decision-making process, it addressed an under-explored area of research, both in terms of the issues explored (small firm decision-making and going green) and the context (hospitality).

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