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The Groups of Caroling Lads from Făgăraș Land (Romania) as Niche Tourism Resource

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Abstract: Contemporary tourism favors niche offers and heritage tourism is successful niche tourism. The cultural mapping of Făgăraș Land (Romania), accomplished during a project conducted by Transilvania University of Brașov, highlights the groups of caroling lads as a main local resource of intangible cultural heritage. The field research indicates that during winter, celebrations of the life of rural communities are organized around the group of lads. Currently, the group only performs a ritual role, but in the past the group had community work attributes, which could be resumed. Additionally, a sustainable heritage tourism can be developed around the groups of lads from Făgăraș Land. That is a form of niche tourism based on the aforementioned concept of *foster Christmas relatives*. The concept was outlined during the field research carried out as part of the project and refers to host families providing tourists access to the performance of group of lads within the community during the winter celebrations. Resuming the old attributes of the group of lads along with niche tourism could contribute to the sustainable development of rural communities and building local cultural identity. Additionally, they would also consolidate the status held by group members within the community.

Keywords: intangible heritage; group of lads; winter celebrations; niche tourism

1. Introduction

Tourism has been one of the industries taking an interest in sustainability for a long time [1]. Sustainable tourism requires integrated resource management and, inherently, the preservation of cultural integrity [2]. A sustainable approach to tourism involves searching for alternatives to large-scale tourism [3]. The viable, post-fordist alternative is niche tourism [4–6] focused on personalized and differentiated products. Niche products are very much liked by small numbers of people [7]; the groups of niche tourists are very homogeneous [2]. By meeting differentiated requirements, tourism becomes more sustainable and oriented towards the protection of culturally and naturally sensitive areas [8]. Niche or special interest tourism is more sustainable and ethical than mass tourism given the smaller size, higher education and experience of tourist groups [9].

Rural tourism can easily evolve into sustainable tourism. Rural tourism has become one of the priority options for tourists concerned with the sustainability of their destinations [10], while the niche products valued by rural tourism contribute to the development of sustainable tourism [11]. This applies to cultural heritage tourism, as well [12].

The interest in sustainable and responsible practices in tourism has brought local communities into the limelight. Their involvement is a prerequisite for the success of projects in tourism [13,14]. Initiatives in tourism should start locally and be in agreement with community preferences and opportunities [9]. Rural tourism [3,14], niche tourism [4] and, within it, heritage niche tourism need to be all the more developed around these communities if they are to be sustainable. Local people

as primary repositories and users of the content of cultural heritage [12] can support the touristic valorization of their customs and traditions as part of cultural heritage tourism [4,15].

Tourism can develop low income communities [1]. Many of these communities are in rural areas. Contemporary socio-economic transformations have changed the structure and functions of villages, whereas the expansion of urban areas threatens rural societies and their traditional customs [16]. Rural areas are depopulated and their specific economic sectors, starting with agriculture, are declining [14]. In this context, tourism as a complementary alternative to traditional rural occupations [10] is considered a strategic means for the economic revitalization of such areas [9,14]. The European Union has long supported rural tourism for this purpose [3], and the majority of European countries have also provided aid for tourism, ethnographic tourism included [15].

Between March 2018 and February 2019, Transylvania University of Brasov ran a research project called *Mapping the intangible cultural heritage of Făgăraș Land* (CarPaTO).

Făgăraș Land is the name of a depression in the south of Transylvania. It lies between the Olt River and Făgăraș Mountains. Făgăraș Land also refers to a distinct ethnographic area in Transylvania, in the center of Romania, south from Brașov and Sibiu counties. The project focused only on 16 ATUs in the administration of Brașov County.

The research outlined the preservation of social practices as rituals and their acknowledgment as elements of cultural identity by local people in the area under study. Those can be employed in community development and in sustainable touristic initiatives. The present paper shows the group of caroling lads and their performance during winter celebrations as main cultural heritage resources. The paper highlights some simple means by which these resources can be capitalized.

Approaching the topic of local identity, which is of anthropologic interest, and the topic of intangible forms of culture, which is of historical interest, the paper features characteristics of a work on heritage tourism: it is interdisciplinary and includes a humanist component [8].

The increasing number of tourists arriving in the accommodation units from Romania and from Brașov County, as well as their average length of stay in the 1995-2019 interval [17] are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Evolution of the Number of Tourists Arriving in Accommodation Units and the Average Length of Stay in Romania between 1995 and 2019. Data Source: Tempo Online [17].

		1995		2015		2019	
Arrivals of Tourists in Accommodation Units		Number of Tourists	Average Length of Stay (Nights)	Number of Tourists	Average Length of Stay (Nights)	Number of Tourists	Average Length of Stay (Nights)
All tourists	România	7,070,385	3.41	9,921,874	2.37	13,374,943	2.25
	Brașov	446,717	2.84	997,601	2.06	1,421,901	1.97
Romanian tourists	România	6,304,570	3.45	7,681,896	2.48	10,691,195	2.32
	Brașov	383,106	2.66	839,344	2.05	1,230,736	1.96
Foreign tourists	România	765,815	3.11	2,239,978	2.00	2,683,748	1.97
	Brașov	63,611	3.90	158,257	2.13	191,165	2.03

The data show a decrease in time of the average length of stay. In the case of Brașov County this length is shorter than at Romania's level for the total of tourists and for Romanian tourists, but is longer for foreign tourists, along the entire period.

According to a National Institute of Research Development in Tourism (INCDT) study, between 2007 and 2016 the annual increase rate of the number of tourists in ATUs who benefited from completed tourism investments was 22.1%, the highest in the field of cultural tourism. In the Central Region of Romania, where Făgăraș Land is located, 51% of the investments in touristic infrastructure were made in cultural tourism [18]. In Brașov County, the number of museums grew from 17 in 2005 to 35 in 2018. During the same time period, the number of tourists increased from 656,471 to 2,530,341 [17].

1.1. Cultural Heritage, a Successful Tourism Niche

Lotter, Geldenhuys and Potgieter [6] identify three macro markets for niche tourism (cultural tourism, events and natural areas tourism) and seven secondary markets (adventure tourism, eco-tourism, festival tourism, heritage tourism, nature tourism, religious tourism and sports tourism). Francis-Lindsay [4] distinguishes the following niche markets: health and wellness tourism, sports tourism, religious tourism, rural tourism, events tourism, ecological tourism and cultural tourism. Rural tourism is defined as “all tourism related activities that take place outside of urban areas and involve the natural and cultural patrimony of rural territories” [14] (p. 2). It shares the common dimension of heritage tourism with cultural tourism. Heritage tourism takes shape as a micro-niche of cultural tourism [6], it “relies on living and built elements of culture and folkways of today, for they too are inheritances from the past; other immaterial heritage elements, such as music, dance, language, religion, folkways and cuisine, artistic traditions, and festivals; and material vestiges of the built and cultural environment, including monuments, historic public buildings and homes, farms, castles and cathedrals, museums, and archaeological ruins and relics” [19] (pp. 3–4). All of the above considered, we are to use the terms of rural tourism and heritage tourism all throughout this paper. Ethnographic tourism, which entails the existence of traditional settlements, well-defined ethnic groups, and traditional cultural practices [15], is part of heritage tourism.

On the dynamic and competitive tourism market, niche tourism is gaining ground [7,8] as a viable alternative to mass tourism [4,5]. Heritage tourism is considered the most successful form of niche tourism by the actors on the market [4]. Postmodernism seems to be favoring the rapidly evolving [8] heritage tourism [9]. The rate of cultural tourism growth (heritage tourism included) worldwide is three times higher than the rate of tourism growth in general [20]. Rural tourism is also expanding [10], and Romania is no exception in this case [15].

Cultural tourism has enhanced the rural environment as a tourist attraction, transforming the relationship between cultural (tangible and intangible) heritage and the identity of the locals into a tourist product on offer [16]. Cultural heritage is a valuable touristic resource for rural areas [21]. Rural tourism, forced to modernize itself, provides experiences related to cultural heritage and its specific products [14]. Its heritage component, namely the capitalization of traditional processes and practices [9], is increasingly more substantial. Over time, in rural environments, culture has acquired the attribute of traditionality [15]. Culturally, rural communities are more conservative and slower in transformation than urban ones. European traditional cultures still employ common themes and patterns. In this context, rural tourism that is anchored into ethnographic heritage is an opportunity, European traditions and folklore can support such niche tourism [15]. Communities in Făgăraș Land have changed significantly in recent decades. They now have modern infrastructures in agriculture and local industries, in housing and public institutions [22]. Communities also import some urban lifestyles and even foreign habits through migration abroad and return migration [23]. However, communities value their cultural resources as strong markers of their collective identity. Winter customs, folk costumes and traditional dances are considered the most important elements of pride within the community.

1.2. Heritage Concerns and Touristic Interests

Niche tourists have special interests related to authenticity [12,21], namely existential authenticity [24]. They search for authentic personal experiences [6,9]. Cultural heritage is a sensitive resource, as well as a source of such valuable tourism experiences. Nonetheless, the goals and motivations of heritage management and tourism are different. The relationship between these two domains must be cautiously developed if everybody is to reap their benefits. Tourism requirements sometimes oppose heritage preservation interests [21]. In postmodern times, cultural tourism, as a commercial activity involving entertainment and controlled experiences, encourages the commercialization of community customs—the latter become attractions for the tourist who is a consumer [9]. Everything is prepared to be sold, traditions are revived to be turned into entertainment [25]. In this context, tourism can pose threats to the

authenticity of cultural products and local lifestyle and can generate acculturation, negatively influencing both locals and tourism potential [9]. Sometimes, even tourism initiatives that are deemed sustainable lead to unwanted aggressive developments [1]. Maintaining equilibrium among divergent interests is a challenge [9,12]. Sustainable management is required to tackle that challenge and to also maintain the balance between preservation and development [16], between the intrinsic value of cultural heritage and its touristic potential [4].

1.3. Făgăraș Land: Historical, Demographic and Touristic Landmarks

The Făgăraș voivodship is one of the oldest Romanian state systems. It was attested in 1222 as *terra Blachorum*. The first ruling dynasty in the old Romanian Country (Wallachia), which is located in the south, beyond the Carpathian Mountains, originates from this territory. According to tradition, the voivode of Făgăraș, Radu Negru, crossed the mountains with some of his subjects and established a new Romanian state after successive defeats from the Hungarian army. At the end of the XIII century, Făgăraș Land was under the control of the Hungarian Kingdom, its administrative status changing several times throughout history. It used to be a feud of the rulers of the Romanian Country, royal possession, district, free territory (after the defeat of Hungary at Mohacs), property of the Habsburg monarchy, and property of Universitas Saxonum. It joined the Romanian state after 1918 [26].

These successive changes in its administrative and political status favored the emergence and consolidation of local identity in Făgăraș Land [27]. The consecutive invasions of Tatars [28], the punishment raids organized by Vlad Țepeș (The Impaler), ruler of Wallachia [29], the campaign aimed at imposing Catholicism ordered by the empress Maria Theresa, and the post-war persecution of Făgăraș dwellers who were considered friends and supporters of the anti-Communist movement organized in the mountains are historical trials that additionally consolidated the cultural identity of the people from Făgăraș Land. They thus increased the potential of the area to develop as a community. A well-defined cultural identity catalyzes community collaboration [3].

During the inter-war period (1929 and 1938), Făgăraș Land was the focus of the field research campaigns conducted by Dimitrie Gusti, head of the Sociological School of Bucharest. A lot of papers have been written over time as a result of those research interests: Stahl (1972) [30], Herseni (1941, 1977) [31,32], Bărbat (1980) [33], Ionică (1996) [34], Roșculeț (2002, 2006) [35,36], Șandru (2009) [37], Șandru and Scârnci (2014) [38].

The main economic activities of the inhabitants of Făgăraș Land have been, for centuries, agriculture and livestock farming. The cultivation of plants was done on the lands around the villages, privately owned during the pre- and post-communist periods, as well as in the gardens near the homesteads. Făgăraș Land has also an important shepherding tradition [31], practiced since Antiquity. Among the crafts specific to this ethnographic area, the most important were pottery, painting on glass, weaving and sheepskin coat making. During the communist period, Făgăraș Land registered significant changes in both rural and urban economic life. In the rural area, private property was replaced by the collective one, in the form of Agricultural Production Cooperatives (CAP). In the urban area, state industrial centres were developed, especially in the chemical and machinery industry, which attracted a workforce from neighbouring ATUs. In this context, there was an important process of migration from rural to urban areas and, implicitly, of urban development, in parallel with the phenomenon of daily commuting from home to urban-based workplaces [33]. The typical model of the rural family in the 1960s–1980s of the last century featured women working in the household and in the CAP, and men laboring in industry and, after finishing the work program in the factory, in agriculture or livestock farming. They assumed the dual status of peasant and industrial worker [37].

The inhabitants of Făgăraș Land have a strong sense of attachment to the region, for reasons related to the ethnographic, social, landscape, economic and historical resources of the area [39]. At the same time, Făgăraș Land is characterized by a rich experience in lucrative migration abroad when the local socio-economic conditions were difficult: migration to America in the first part of the

last century and migration to the countries of Western Europe (still in progress) after the fall of the communist regime [38].

The population of Romania in 2019 amounted to 22,204,507 people—by 857,941 less than in 1995, largely due to migration. The urban/rural ratio at country level increased from 1.22 in 1995 to 1.29 in 2019 [17]. According to the 2002 census, the ATUs in Făgăraş Land totaled 39,723 in population [40]. According to the 2011 census, the number of people had decreased to 37,113 [41]. A number of 5258 people left from Făgăraş Land (changed their address) between 2002 and 2018 [17]. In 2018, the number of employees in Făgăraş Land was 3914 [17]. The main alternative occupation is agriculture. The sixteen ATUs in Făgăraş Land, which include 68 villages, totaled 13,143 households in 2011 [42].

Nowadays, there are 49 boarding houses providing services in agro tourism. Twenty-three of these are located in Sâmbăta Climatic Resort [17] which was built in the neighborhood of Brâncoveanu Monastery—the most important monastic complex in the area and close to the main access points to the touristic routes in the Făgăraş Mountains. The boarding houses' classification ranges from one to four daisies, with most of them being rated as three daisies [43]. The agroturistic boarding houses (ATBH in the tables) from Romania record a 20% occupancy rate in 2019 [17]. The occupancy rates of accommodation units from ATUs in Făgăraş Land in 2010, 2015 and 2019 are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Occupancy Rates of Accommodation Units from Braşov County and ATUs in Făgăraş Land in 2010, 2015 and 2019. Processing of Tempo Online [17] data.

Accommodation Units		Average Length of Stay (Nights)			Occupancy Rate (%)		
		2010	2015	2019	2010	2015	2019
Braşov	All units	2.11	2.06	1.97	20.19	21.66	28.72
	ATBHs	2.42	2.19	2.09	11.87	12.15	19.58
ATUs din Făgăraş Land	All units	1.87	2.18	1.99	10.98	8.60	15.77
	ATBHs	1.81	2.22	2.02	7.70	11.46	19.48

Since 2015, the occupancy rate of agroturistic boarding houses from Făgăraş Land is higher than that of all accommodation units. During the entire analysed interval, the occupancy rate in Făgăraş Land was lower than at the level of the entire Braşov County.

Throughout the year, the month with the lowest occupancy rate is March. The peak months are July and August. Table 3 presents the occupancy rates of accommodation units from ATUs in Făgăraş Land for these months, as well as for December, for 2010, 2015, and 2019.

Table 3. Monthly Occupancy Rates of Accommodation Units from ATUs in Făgăraş Land in 2010, 2015 and 2019. Processing of Tempo Online [17] data.

Monthly Occupancy Rate (%)	2010		2015		2019	
	All Units	ATBHs	All Units	ATBHs	All Units	ATBHs
March	3.03	0.76	3.61	4.24	7.47	9.55
July	17.70	9.65	12.62	17.39	24.85	28.93
August	34.28	26.32	16.56	23.56	30.26	36.97
December	13.77	8.54	8.36	11.16	18.14	22.63

According to these data, in December the occupancy rate is considerably lower than in August. However, a decrease in the differences in the two months' occupancy rate can be observed. The difference between August and December is lower in percentage in 2019 than in 2010.

The neighboring mountain range and the charm of rural life are the main attractions for the tourists coming to Făgăraş Land. They look for clean air, spectacular views, touristic routes in the mountains, peace, nature, and local cuisine. Most tourists come from urban areas and mostly from outside Transylvania. The tourists come with their families or as groups of friends. Occasionally, the boarding

houses host groups of students, and organize business meetings or team-building activities. There are a lot of Orthodox monasteries in Făgăraș Land. The boarding houses nearby those host pilgrims and are part of religious tourism networks.

1.4. The Groups of Lads in Făgăraș Land

The group of lads is a temporary male association of unmarried young men. The groups are established on St. Nicholas' day (6 December) when the young men elect their leaders. However, their main activities unfold between the eve of Christmas and St. John's Day (7 January, according to the Eastern Orthodox calendar). As we have already indicated, the groups sing carols to their fellow villagers. Caroling is perceived as a ritual and is believed to bring health and prosperity to its target audience. It is customary for singers to ask for their hosts' permission to sing and they are seldom refused. It is also unusual for anyone to refuse welcoming the singers, or for them to avoid singing in any household. It is their duty to knock on every door. Additionally, it is their job to organize the parties of the youth in the village during winter feasts and to perform certain archaic ceremonies and rituals related to the end or beginning of an annual cycle.

From Christmas Eve until St. John's Day, group members eat and stay together at the host—a family in the village who offers their house for this purpose. The lads work for the host: they cut wood, remove snow, and clean the stables during the working days all throughout this time period. The group has a flag which the lads carry when dancing by taking turns and this is guarded with great care.

In many of the villages of Făgăraș Land, the group of lads is accompanied by *turca* (archaic term, meaning in Romanian the female of the bull), a zoomorphic mask worn by one of the lads, that can do whatever it wants; it dances and scares the girls, women, and children [44,45]. The mask has a wooden head featuring horns with ribbon and tassel ornaments, and with a lower clattering mobile jaw. The head is stuck on a wooden cane. The body is made of manually woven blankets arranged in a cloak manner to hide the lad's body. During the dance ritual, the lad rhythmically thumps the cane on the ground and moves the lower jaw of the mask.

2. Materials and Methods

The Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage ratified in 2003 at the UNESCO General Conference defines intangible cultural heritage (ICH) as “the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills—as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith—that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage” [46] (p. 5). The Convention delineates five main domains of ICH: “(a) oral traditions and expressions, including language as a vehicle of the intangible cultural heritage; (b) performing arts; (c) social practices, rituals and festive events; (d) knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe; (e) traditional craftsmanship” [46] (p. 5). In 2012, United Nations World Tourism Organization (WTO) explicitly added music to the performing arts domain and identified a distinct ICH domain, namely gastronomy and culinary practices [47] (p. 4).

Mapping the intangible cultural heritage is part of cultural mapping defined as “a systematic tool to involve communities in the identification and recording of local cultural assets, with the implication that this knowledge will then be used to inform collective strategies, planning processes, or other initiatives” [48] (p. 2). *Asset mapping* or *cultural mapping* [49] represents a way to identify and catalog the cultural values of a community with the purpose of preserving and promoting them, and thus contributing to the development of viable communities [50]. The mapping highlights the local cultural differences, considered resources for strengthening community identity [51].

The project CarPaTO used UNESCO [46] and WTO [47] domains taxonomy in mapping the ICH resources. During its first stage, six interviews with local specialists in cultural heritage (employees of county cultural institutions or of specialized NGOs) were conducted. Additionally, the references to the ICH of Făgăraș Land in the specialized literature were identified and analyzed, starting with the works of the School of Bucharest and finishing with the last issues of the Bulletin published

by the Museum of Ethnography of Braşov. The information was used in the conduct of interviews during the second stage of the project, when we conducted 16 interviews. The interviewees were mayors, vice-mayors and other employees of the ATUs in Făgăraş Land. They resulted in a provisional inventory of heritage resources. Additionally, local contacts employed for the conduct of the field research were thus identified. These project deliverables were achieved during the third stage of the research, which unfolded between September 2018 and February 2019.

During the field research, events and local cultural practices were directly observed. Twenty-eight interviews of well-informed informants (informal local leaders, local intellectuals taking an interest in ICH for a long time) were conducted, audio and video recordings were made, social documents were collected (photographs, diplomas, monographic texts, popular poetry and books of carols).

There were a total of 44 respondents in stages II and III of the research, 20 men and 24 women, with ages between 40 and 89. The interview respondents who did not work for the town hall were all retired, except for two. In some cases, there were people working with the town hall who were recommended as well-informed informants.

All interviews were semi-structured. We chose this type of interview because it is flexible and allows the researcher to obtain rich and high-quality information [52]. In a semi-structured interview, the discussion with the interviewee is based on a predetermined scheme (in our case, the grid of categories from the definition of intangible cultural heritage), but the order of questions is not rigid, and the interviewer can ask new questions to clarify answers or to develop a certain interesting topic. This type of interview is used when the conversation is focused on a common experience to all research participants [53]. In our case, the common experience was the expertise of the participants regarding local cultural heritage. The interview guide followed the ICH domains listed by UNESCO and WTO, which we presented above. The last question in the interview guide was formulated as follows: *How could all these cultural assets be capitalized on?* The interviews were thematically analyzed. Thematic analysis is a flexible method that is independent from any pre-determined theoretical framework and can be applied to less investigated research fields [54]. Because of all these features we considered it an adequate method for the CarPaTO project.

All materials gathered during the research resulted in mapping charts for each ATU. These include the information collected from local interviewees for each of the ICH domain (stages II and III of the research), the information gathered from the interviews of the specialists in the ICH domains, references to local ICH resources in the specialized literature and the results of direct observation.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. The Group of Lads, the Most Important ICH Resource in Făgăraş Land

The interviews were designed based on the UNESCO domain framework. The information obtained is unequally distributed by the six ICH domains. The least amount of information is in the domain of *knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe*. We believe that the reticence was not due to the absence of information, but to the sensitiveness of interlocutors regarding the theme. As peasants living at the foot of the mountain where a strong anti-communist movement was conducted in the 1950s, they were more reserved about talking with some town inhabitants about their souls than about their customs. Most often, locals avoided direct answers to the questions concerning their beliefs and their magical practices. Comments like *It's what people would believe long ago, but I do not believe it—Ucea* (the place where the interview was conducted), or *It proved a farce—Comăna* were frequent. We believe that their reluctance is related to the numerous years under Communism when the Romanian population was subjected to Marxism indoctrination campaigns and spirituality was belittled. Thus, locals learned that it was safer not to talk about their beliefs. They took joy and pride in telling about the activities of community members, yet made no remarks as to what their beliefs are. Concerning this, we consider their sensitiveness and the protective care towards their own beliefs as ICH resources by themselves.

The domain that is the richest in available information is by far the domain of *social practices, rituals and festive events*. Almost with no exception, the first topic discussed by the locals during interviews was that referring to the *group of lads*. That was followed, in descending order in terms of locals' interest, by the references to the *Herods* (a group of carol singing boys who perform a play on the theme of Herod's killing of babies), and to the *Star* (a carol sung by children carrying a decorated wooden star to herald Christmas). The *Ploughman* (an agricultural spring custom, meant to ensure rich harvest; it focuses on a ritualistic throwing into the river of the most industrious of the villagers, namely the one who ploughs first) was also mentioned in the ATUs lying in the east of Făgăraș Land. Information on the group of lads' performance as an ICH resource that can be used at community level and in a sustainable manner will be detailed in the next paragraphs.

Traditionally, every village in Făgăraș Land has its own group of lads. Their main role is to sing carols to the villagers during winter celebrations. The groups are formed annually, with the election of the leader (*On St. Nicholas' Day "the leader is tossed in the air" ... they really toss him up to the ceiling—Beclean*). The field research highlights that some of the small villages have not had any groups of lads in recent years or these were not organized yearly (*Currently, the group of lads is no longer formed every year, there must be willing lads and a budget to pay the fiddlers who accompany the group, there must be resources for spending on food, wood and payment of the host where the members of the group live—Recea*). According to locals, the main reasons for this are the lack of lads (as a result of rural area depopulation in Romania) and the high prices the group needs to pay to music players who accompany it all throughout winter celebrations (*Musical performances are very expensive (at least 4000 euros), more money is required for music where the villages are larger—Hârșeni; The music is very expensive, about 4000 euros—Lisa; Music is very expensive, although the mayor offered to support the group of lads financially—Sâmbăta*).

The age of group members is much lower than in the "old days", by almost a generation, for two reasons. Firstly, young men are no longer drafted (the group leader used to be elected from among those who had already completed their conscription time). Secondly, out of an already small pool of candidates consisting of college students and high school students from the village, the most willing/the easiest to convince to join the group are the latter.

The script followed by the group is unitary. This is the common framework that allows to differentiate among the slightly different practices of the different groups from the villages of Făgăraș Land. These practices concern the group members' duty to live at a host's (*Of course they sleep at their host—that is why they joined the group, after all!—Comăna and There are only six, but they sleep at a host—Beclean, but A while ago they would stay at their host until after the St. John's Day; nowadays they only spend the day with the host and at night each of them sleeps at home—Părău*) and perform various activities for the host (members of this family are called *mother and father of lads* during this time period), their relationships with girls, the day/days when they go caroling and the places where they do that (*They begin caroling on Christmas Eve by singing to their host first—Părău; They begin caroling on Christmas Eve and they first sing to the priest—Mândra*). The group members' traditional costumes are slightly different from one village to another. The differences lie in the details of the masculine popular costume specific to the whole area. It is from these slight differences in the outfit that locals can tell to what village a lad belongs. The images below show groups of lads from various villages from Făgăraș Land.

Pojorta (Figure 1), Sâmbăta de Sus (Figure 2) and Voievodeni (Figure 3) are villages in the center-west part of Făgăraș Land, Șercăița (Figure 4) is in the east. Pojorta and Șercăița are under the mountain, Sâmbăta de Sus and Voievodeni are more to the plain, located on two neighboring valleys. The photos from Pojorta (Figure 1) show how the trousers' design has changed from the interwar period to the 1970s. We assume that this change, namely the adoption of an urban cut, is due to the Communist process of industrialization, which transformed the young peasants from Făgăraș into city workers.

Other differences are found in the details: ornamentations of the hat (Figures 2b and 3b), the chest and the chestplate (Figure 2), the cuffs (Figure 2b) and the hem (Figure 4) of the shirt, or the

trousers (Figure 3b). The existence of these differences signals a well-configured cultural identity in Făgăraș Land.

The group of lads is the core of community activities during winter celebrations. The importance assigned by locals to the group, the temporary prestige attached not only to group leaders, but also to their relatives and to the relatives of their lovers signals the potential that the group of lads has in terms of community development.



Figure 1. Group of Lads from Pojorta: (a) in 1924; (b) in 1973, with the Girls and the *Father of Lads* (in the Center); Ciungara Collection.



Figure 2. Group of Lads from Sâmbăta de Sus: (a) in the 1970s; (b) in the 2000s; CarPaTO Collection.



Figure 3. Group of Lads from Voievodeni: (a) in 1977, with the *Mother and Father of Lads* (in the Center); (b) in 2014; Ciungara Collection.



Figure 4. Group of Lads from Șercăița in 2018, with the Priest in the Church, CarPaTO Collection.

We believe that if this ICH resource is correctly capitalized on, it can also be an important resource for sustainable tourism.

3.2. The Group of Lads and its Community Relevance

Traian Herseni, one of the prominent members of the School of Sociology of Bucharest considers that *turca* is a representation of the pre-Christian mother goddess, whose young son is among the lads [32]. There are other practices of the group that also have archaic [55], pre-Christian origins (for example, the burning of a log in the center of the village to signify the end of the year). Mircea Eliade [56] signals the pagan-Christian syncretism manifested in the formation and functioning of the groups of lads. The church showed reluctance to the *turca* type of caroling for a long time. Herseni highlights the complex relationship between the group and the priest of the village in the second half of the XX century. The latter had the privilege to be the first to be sung to, outranking the mayor, the notary or the educator. There was a special carol dedicated to him—the priest’s carol. He was a person who commanded respect and fear. However, the lads did not dance with the *turca* in his yard, nor were they allowed to bring it into the church. Additionally, its carrier was forbidden from receiving the Holy Communion.

The group of lads does not go caroling with *turca* just everywhere and, besides, field research unveils a change in the relationship between the priest and the group. The groups are blessed by the priests before they start caroling in their villages (*The priest blesses Turca and the mayor assesses it at Mayor’s Hall—Comăna*) and they are invited to carol on St. John’s Day in the cathedral of Făgăraș city, the symbolic center of the area. The status of the lads as heralds of Christ’ Birth outweighs the one of companions of a pagan archaic deity. The priest’s blessing consolidates the group’s prestige in the community.

During celebrations, the group of lads and the community evaluate one another. By entering the villagers’ houses, the lads see things, evaluate, make judgments, and tell people what they saw. However, they are also seen, assessed and evaluated. During their stay at a host’s, the lads must respect the latter (*The host guides them and they listen to the host . . . they hang fir trees at the host’s gate—Ucea; The host of the group was a wealthy family that once supervised the lads, a family that honored the village and received recognition for this accommodation (it was well seen by the community, appreciated by the villagers), and the parents “left their children in good hands”—Recea*), as well as the rules of the group (*If they are late for the group’s activities they are fined and they must pay in wine—Beclean*). Caroling facilitates mutual assessment among lads and unmarried girls. A lad is assessed as adequate for marriage if he is healthy, both physically and mentally, well-built, handsome, good-looking, powerful and smart [32], but also brave and resourceful (*The lad who finds the cross thrown by the priest in the water gets married that year . . . until 10 years ago they would jump into the water naked to retrieve the cross . . . —Ucea; On St. John’s Day, when the church service is over, there is a fight over the cross: the lads from the group jump into the water and compete in order to recover the cross—Șinca*). His stamina and his singing, dancing and whistling skills are

indicators of his vitality (*In Ucea de Sus there is a very long carol; it has 12 stanzas . . . they sing it last—Ucea*). The girls are assessed by their dowry (*The girls wear different outfits for every day of Christmas—Mândra*) and behavior—namely how they react to alcohol and the quality of their kolacky. That is when future marriage arrangements begin to take shape (*During the dance performed on the St. John's Day the girls are introduced . . . then they shout "He who has an unmarried girl/ Shall put her out for sale" . . . it's when pairs are formed—Părău; Every lad in the group has a girlfriend who accompanies him when he goes caroling to the church—Mândra; The lads in the group throw their boots over the fence to the girls they hold dear; the girls must polish the boots and return them without mistaking the owner—Beclean*). Concerning this, one of the group of lads' duties is to invite nubile girls to dance (*The group leader asks one of the lads to take girl to the dance and to the host—Părău*). During the Big Dance held on the second day of Christmas, young girls make their debut (*. . . a very emotional moment for the girls, but especially for their mothers—Recea*) under the supervision of group's leaders. In their turn, *the girls make the lads' flag . . . which must be guarded—Beclean*.

The group disbands on St. John's Day when they ritually *untie* their flags. However, its members maintain their prestige and the responsibilities of organizing community events all throughout the year. In some villages, the person impersonating the main character in the *Ploughman* is the same as the group of lads' leader. Herseni [32] mentions the right of the group to sanction villagers' moral transgressions through satire, as well as its responsibility to maintain the order in the village. Additionally, it also has a duty to do community work (mainly for the benefit of the elderly) all throughout the year. According to field observations, these rights, responsibilities and duties of the group outside the Christmas celebrations time period are no longer performed.

In fact, Chelcea and Chelcea [57] and Şandru [37] point out this function of community support performed by the group of lads, which no longer exist nowadays. Long ago, the group of lads offered unconditional help to the sick or elderly: they cut wood, cleaned stables, brought water from the fountain, etc. During another sociological research dated 2006 and conducted in the village of Drăguş in Făgăraş Land, the group members said that they had not even heard of that ancient attribution. At the time of the research, they focused on carrying out two types of activities: respecting traditional religious rituals and having fun [37]. The community role of the group of lads has narrowed.

However, that is one role that could expand. We believe that the group's old community duties are a resource that can be appealed to and reactivated. Lekakis, Shakya and Kostakis [58] propose the concept of commons-based governance which refers to bringing together traditional community-oriented practices and mainstream heritage management patterns. Such an approach would involve government agencies, local municipalities and communities working together in a sustainable way to preserve cultural resources, produce economic viability and increase social cohesion. A community participation and collaboration with stakeholders is fundamental for reactivating the old custom of groups of lads for tourism purposes and, at the same time, for covering contemporary needs in local communities. During our field research, some representatives of local administrations or NGOs seemed interested and open to such an approach, arguing that the only way leading to positive results is intra- and inter-community partnership for the better management of local resources (*We are now working on setting up an association of town halls in Făgăraş Land to deal with promoting tourism destinations and attracting tourists—Viştea; Things go well when there is communication and collaboration between institutions, for example between the town hall and the school, between the town hall and the citizens, who come and participate voluntarily in cultural actions—Drăguş*).

The group of lads collaborates with the town hall on a permanent basis to organize various community events. As a result, the lads could work on a volunteer basis for town hall's projects, as well as for providing services to the elderly. The constructive involvement of the group of lads as a collective entity into the projects of local authorities—at the request of the mayor—would increase their prestige. Inherently, the status of the group leader would be higher in the community, and hence it would become attractive again for young men who are older than high school students. All that considered, it is worth reminding that the group's most elementary task would yield concrete results

for the community. Groups of lads still exist and this would be beneficial both for them and for communities (*The lads used to do community service, they helped cut wood at school, because at that time there was no gas . . . through the group of lads they were preparing for social life—Recea*) if they assumed their traditional role more or entirely.

3.3. The Group of Lads and its Performance as A Niche Tourism Resource

The groups' involvement in the planning and social projects of mayor halls is only part of their community potential. We believe that heritage tourism can be organized around the group of lads, and that would be efficient from a community perspective. Successful cultural tourism tells a story, mobilizes resources, provides participative and relevant experiences, focuses on quality and authenticity, as Swensen points out [21]. A touristic initiative built on the winter performance of groups could exhibit all of these attributes. Field research highlights that there is a community spirit characterizing winter celebrations in Făgăraș Land which prevails over family spirit. As happens all throughout Christian areas, children and grandchildren come back home for Christmas. The community re-integrates them swiftly, assigns them tasks and aligns their schedule to that of the group of lads. Additionally, field research shows the well-shaped cultural identity of the locals which, besides the local differences related to the unitary traditional outfit, is signaled by the subtle differences in the dances, carols, melodic lines, scenarios, culinary recipes, etc., pertaining to neighboring villages. Furthermore, research findings show the pride that locals take in their community. *That is how we do things here . . . You must come to us to see for yourselves . . . It is only here that we do things like that . . .* are leitmotifs in the interviews with these. They are aware of the value of the traditions they preserve and are willing/available to share them. It frequently happens that high school and college students come home accompanied by their colleagues. The members of the community are glad to explain the course of events and to integrate them. They symbolically adopt these guests during their visit. The same happens to the guests of the adults in the community. Whether relatives or friends of the locals, they are accepted as guests of the whole village. They are welcome and their delighted astonishment renders more color to the celebrations. However, somebody in the community must vouch for the foreigners if they are to be welcomed. They are accepted as participants/spectators to the events if they are brought (and vouched for) by somebody from the inside.

During our field research, we experienced the difference between going into the communities in Făgăraș Land as a stranger and entering these communities upon the recommendation of the mayor, an informal leader or another researcher who had already had contact with the locals. However, once the people were clear about us, they overwhelmed us with invitations for live experiences of the activities conducted in their villages during winter celebrations (*It makes no sense to tell you about that now . . . If you don't see it, you can't understand it—Comăna; Then let me write the carols for you . . . but writing them is one thing, while singing them is completely different—Ucea; Let me give you traditional outfits to put on . . . girls, too—Părâu*). The locals' reluctance towards strangers might echo the tempestuous history of the area, already mentioned above. On the other hand, Neagu Djuvara [59], an important Romanian historian, remarks the swiftness and passion showed by the Romanians for the past two centuries towards assimilating European values. The identity/alterity grammar [60] outlined by the field research might actually reflect a merger between the lessons learned from history and locals' adaptability.

We believe that this subtle play between the desire to reveal their traditions—which they deem valuable—and the reluctance to show them just to anyone (strangers about whom they know nothing) can become the basis for the development of sustainable niche tourism in Făgăraș Land. It regards a rural cultural heritage niche, which is located in the area of common interest for both cultural and rural tourism. As outlined in the introduction of this paper, there are 49 rural boarding houses of various capacity in Făgăraș Land. During the winter holidays, there are spectacular gastronomic offers based on local products. Their offers for winter celebrations include festive meals, parties around a fire camp and sometimes brief traditional dancing and music shows. Additionally, in Făgăraș Land there are

several ethnographic village museums. Nonetheless, heritage tourism focused on the caroling groups of lads would be a novelty.

The concept we deem adequate for such a form of touristic development is that of *foster Christmas relatives*. This would involve locals hosting tourists during winter celebrations. The latter would be involved in all the activities conducted by the hosting family as part of the community. It is about locals behaving towards tourists the same way that they do with their relatives and friends. The hosts introduce their guests to the community, vouch for them and guide them throughout activities that are focused on enabling the interaction of the guests with the group of lads. The household and yard would be decorated to welcome the carolers and ritual gifts would be prepared for these. The children carrying *The Star* and then the *Herods*, who walk around the village before the lads, would first sing to the tourists and their hosts. What is more, the group of lads would afterwards sing carols to the tourists and their hosts in accordance with the ritual (carols are sung at the gate, in front of the window and then in the house). After that, the tourists would accompany their hosts to their relatives and follow the group (*The whole village follows the group . . . —Ucea*) until the ceremony that closes the caroling (the lads' ritual to dance in the center of the village and/or to wash in the river, *When caroling is over they gather on the bridge . . . the lads wash themselves in the river and the girls must bring them towels—Părău*) ends. On the second and third day of Christmas, the tourists would participate in the dance organized by the group of lads (*The dance is organized on the second day of Christmas and on the third day, too . . . and on the St. John's Day—Comăna*) when the young people of the community flaunt their traditional costumes and demonstrate their skills in performing area specific traditional dances. Then, they would observe the group while performing activities loaded with ritual and ludic significance between celebration days (*On the fourth day of Christmas masked lads called "Bârdâhoaze" visit the girls with "The gentleman and the lady". They must be gratified with drinks and money—Părău; On December 28 Bârdâhoaze walk around the village . . . they sing carols to girls and smear grime on their face—Comăna*) and on other winter holidays spanning from Christmas until after St. John's Day (*On New Year's day the lads go caroling to the "gentlemen" (the mayor, the teacher, the doctor etc.) . . . and these must gratify them with doughnuts and plum brandy—Părău; On St. John's Day the lads sing serenades . . . and they sing to those named after St. John's Day—Șercaia; They pretend that the log they burn is the past year . . . they set it on fire in the middle of the village—Ucea*). They would be invited to the meal the group throws to honor their parents (*With the money received the lads pay for music and other expenses and organize a meal for their parents—Recea*).

The young tourists, boys and girls, could be assimilated to the locals. They would be girls to be sung to and boys who would carol, and hence, according to McKercher's taxonomy [61], serendipitous cultural tourists. Ethnographic tourism is attractive to the youth when they can experience new things [15]. For that, the hosts should train them about what is morally acceptable or not. Last but not least, the young men should participate in the group's meetings that are held before Christmas eve, when the members learn and rehearse the carols. The traditional outfit could be assured by the hosts. There are enough traditional costume parts in most dowry chests in Făgăraș Land for this purpose, as the field research highlights.

In the villages where the performance of the group of lads also includes the *Ploughman*, the touristic offer could be enlarged. Usually, the *Ploughman* is performed on the second day of Easter, when the groups of lads also organize the dance in the village.

The whole community participates in these events. They would not be organized for the sake of the tourists. The latter would only participate with the help of the hosts who adopt them. In postmodernism, touristic behavior is culturally differentiated and can be learned, according to Dujmović [9]. The concept of *foster Christmas relatives* implies exactly this kind of tourist behavior.

We believe that *foster Christmas relatives* as a tourism niche would be attractive to the tourists who take an interest in the cultural traditions and practices in the area. These have expectations related to the authenticity of living in the countryside. Romania's forced industrialization displaced a considerable part of the people who are now in their 1960s and 1970s from rural areas. For the members of these generations who are now urban dwellers, as well as for the Romanians in Diaspora,

spending their winter celebrations in the manner already presented (i.e., the niche tourism option) would be, literally - for those who left Făgăraș Land, or by analogy- for those who left from other parts of Transylvania/Romania, close to coming back home. They and their descendants are the main target for this niche offer in tourism. Additionally, the cultured people living in the Romanian cities and whose authenticity expectations are related to experiencing the real spirit of celebrations are part of this target audience. For these people, contemporary consumerism associated to Christmas is a loss. The niche offer could also be attractive to foreign tourists who have similar authenticity expectations. In accordance with a study conducted in a POSDRU project in 2012, foreign tourists coming to Romania mostly like traditional customs, locals' culture and hospitality [62]. The niche offer also targets the German ethnics who left Transylvania, and their descendants. In some of the ATUs in Făgăraș Land, there are villages where the Saxon community has been representative until 1990. Thus, at the local level, the tourism offer focused on the concept of *foster Christmas relatives* could acquire genealogical features.

The offer made to young tourists, both boys and girls, to participate in the activities conducted by the group of lads which are the core of community life during celebrations could be attractive to families who have teenage or young children. It hence can be an opportunity to clarify generational roles and inter-generational relationships within families.

Tourists who accept the *foster Christmas relatives* offer are knowledgeable about local culture and/or enjoy experiencing the authentic spirit of celebrations. They are also happy to communicate with their hosts and community members. They are willing to learn about the significance of traditional practices and already have clear projections about those. They have reasonable expectations concerning the quality of accommodation and meals, and these are subordinated to the expectations related to the quality of the experience offered. They can afford a pretty long stay with their hosts during the main events organized by the group of lads (starting with Christmas Eve and until after New Year, ideally after St. John's Day). Their profile only partially overlaps with that of the current tourists visiting Făgăraș Land in terms of their interest for living in nature and possibly for religious tourism. The touristic niche we propose could target the latter type of tourists, too, but they are not the priority. Our proposal aims at diversifying the local touristic offer and counts on diversifying the typology of the tourists visiting Făgăraș Land.

The brand manual *Romania. Explore the Carpathian Garden* (2011) promotes three *key differentiators* of the Romanian tourism brand: unspoiled nature, unique culture heritage and authentic rural lifestyle. According to this manual, the profile of international tourists visiting Romania is presented through the concept of *discerning travellers*: they seek the uniqueness of a place, reject "massive and artificial tourist destinations" [63] (p.7), are independent, curious and often well educated, are open-minded and cosmopolitan, and "their dream is to explore wild nature and immerse themselves in authentic local culture" [63] (p. 7); most of them are city dwellers who seek true experiences and emotions; their interest in cultural life and lifestyles is above average. Two main types of travellers are emphasized in the brand manual: the first one, the Younger Discerning—travellers of age between 25 and 35 who love to travel independently and present themselves interested in discovering and broadening their horizons; the second one, the Empty Nesters—people who "finally" could travel without children and enjoy good health, plenty of time and "often high spending potential" [63] (p. 7).

The profile of international tourist described in the brand manual fits very well with the niche tourism we are promoting. Moreover, the concept of *foster Christmas relatives* seems to be a good illustration of the Romanian brand personality: green and rural, authentic, pure and innocent, kind and warm-hearted [63].

3.4. "Foster Christmas Relatives": Challenges and Opportunities

As already highlighted, the group of lads from Făgăraș Land touristic niche pertains to rural cultural heritage tourism. All types of tourism that overlap within its scope can support local development. The community potential of each of these forms of tourism has already been highlighted.

Heritage tourism is an employment source [21], cultural tourism drives community development [12]. Rural tourism is a source of prosperity [5] and economic revitalization [11,14]. It stimulates small business [3], generates income for local enterprises and administration [14], reduces poverty [11] and stabilizes the mobility of rural population by reducing their exodus to cities [15]. Tourism focused on the groups of lads can generate all kinds of benefits for local communities. It does not require great financial resources [7], nor spectacular investments or sophisticated infrastructure [9]. Busuioc et al. [15] believe that such a form of heritage tourism is a viable solution whose value has yet to be capitalized for Romanian tourism, and the village could become the brand in this case.

Overestimating the local economic benefits of niche tourism is prone to risks since it is associated with excessive dependency upon a source of income that cannot be controlled [14]. In fact, in many cases the economic impact of rural tourism is not well developed [3]. However, it is doubled by a non-economic impact: tourism boosts community pride [1], consolidating local [3,12], national [15] and cultural [21] identity.

The regeneration of local interest for heritage resources is not risk free either. The field research we conducted unveils the tendency to organize events as shows and thus place them outside their normal traditional context. We believe that the adequate management of local interest in cultural heritage asks for the involvement of community seniors as event councilors. The specialists from the institutions responsible for the preservation and safeguarding of heritage resources should also be required to contribute. Goal divergence between heritage preservation and tourism can be reduced if communities become aware of the importance of the former. Heritage and tourism sustainability are interdependent because of the authenticity of the product on offer. Heritage tourism programs focused on aspects that communities consider authentic must be encouraged [4]. Thus, niche touristic interests and community interests potentiate one another. At a simpler level, that could, for example, mean overcoming financial difficulties related to employing good musicians to accompany the group (*Attracting tourists it would be ideal to cover the high costs of music—Drăguș*). Communities could financially support talented young men from the ATU, be they Romanians or Roma, to take classes with a school specialized in folk music with funds obtained from tourism. In exchange for sponsorship, these young men could sign a contract to provide music for the events organized by the group of lads for a determined number of years.

The overall management of all these multifarious interests and relationships is needed. There is need for a sustainable approach to social innovations in participative involvement, as well as for an adaptation of touristic offers to local resources [3]. Social entrepreneurship, efficient for emerging sensitive tourist destinations, as well as for niche tourism [12], is adequate for such an approach. Tourism social entrepreneurship (TSE) is a social innovation catalyzing host communities [1]. Social entrepreneurs are “change agents” orchestrating community sustainable development [64]. TSE efficiently mobilizes local resources [65], drives the local economy, creates sustainable living means, educates actors in local tourism [1], and supplies innovative solutions generating opportunities and benefits for host communities [12]. Communities are the main beneficiary of TSE. The latter is designed to maximize benefits, minimize the costs of tourism for host communities, protect them from risks accompanying the large-scale development of tourism [1], and its globalization [12]. TSE consolidates and employs local social networks to support regional economic interactions [3]. It thus favors a holistic approach to tourism [1,12,14]. We believe that social entrepreneurship is the appropriate solution for tourism focused on the groups of lads from Făgăraș Land.

Local Action Group (LAG), “a not for profit consortium of public and private partners whose aim is to promote local development” [14] (p. 6), revives social capital and is an efficient interface among all parties interested in tourism projects [14]. In Făgăraș Land, there are two LAGs with rural specificity operating in Brașov County, namely Microregiunea Valea Sâmbetei (Romanian for Sambata Valley Micro-region) and Răsăritul Țării Făgărașului (Romanian for The East of Făgăraș Land), and another one located in Sibiu County and known by the name of Țara Oltului (Romanian for Olt Land). We believe that it would be efficient to expand their area of responsibility into increasing the value of groups of lads as a sustainable touristic resource.

In order to be sustainable, niche tourism focused on the performance of groups of lads from Făgăraș Land during winter celebrations must meet a number of requirements. The first is related to the number of tourists a community can manage. Keeping the number of tourists under control is normal in niche tourism [6]. In the case of the groups of lads, this control should avoid transforming the group's performance from a community practice into a show. Consequently, the number of foreigners who can spend the holidays in the village as foster relatives depends on the capacity of the local people to assume responsibilities and to vouch for them.

Controlling the number of tourists is the means to ensure guest access to adequate hosting and meal services. Most of the locals could establish seasonal family businesses. We believe that group members' families and their relatives are the most willing to adopt tourists. They are the most involved in the group's performance and share the lads' prestige. That would total around 10–12 families from one village. Based on the current layout of the households that was observed during the field research, we can argue that a family could easily host around four tourists. Thus, we believe that the presence of the *foster Christmas relatives* could be smoothly managed by the community. Host families could be registered as individual enterprises, family businesses or as part of associations of owners that would be established for this purpose. The responsibilities of the host families could range between merely acting as guides for their guests during community events and fully accommodating the tourists whom they adopt. The choice depends on the availability of every host, as well as on the solution identified at a local level in terms of the collaboration/partnership agreements with the nearby boarding houses providing agro-tourism services. As Bârsan shows, creating tourist packages through the collaboration between local boarding houses and different partners from local communities is "an effective way to generate additional income and to encourage tourists and travelers to stay longer in a certain region" [66] (p. 32).

Most households already have a nicely decorated room that families maintain for special occasions, which is called the *front house, or good house* (*Almost all homes have rooms called "good" that families rarely use. These rooms could be used to accommodate tourists—Viștea*). What is more, Romanian women cook much more than is necessary for celebrations. Food abundance is a goal and also the manner by which household abundance for the year to follow is ritually secured. Guests who would help the family eat all excess products would be welcomed with relief and joy. Additionally, the group of lads receives gifts (offerings) consisting of symbolic food, kolacky and meat loaf from the villagers to whom they carol (*When they carol before Christmas, the lads receive traditional bread and smoked pork from each house—Drăguș; In the village, in addition to money, they receive traditional bread in form of rolls and meat—Sâmbăta*). These are eaten during the group's parties. However, more often than not, the food received is overabundant and hence could be shared with the tourists. However, in order to avoid bureaucratic hassle related to authorizations (quite a regular state of affairs in Romania) there is also the possibility for the locals to collaborate with existing and already authorized boarding houses and catering companies. Tourists could be thus supplied with food, and could even sleep at the boarding houses, their status of foster relatives involving only their participation in community events along with their foster family. This could be a win-win solution in the villages where there are boarding houses. Lease contracts could be signed between host families and boarding houses in order to provide accommodation for tourists. The boarding houses could thus include the concept of *foster Christmas relatives* in their touristic offer for winter time celebrations. During the field research we conducted, we could not identify any boarding houses capitalizing on the events organized by the groups of lads.

The presence of tourists is a challenge that community members can face together. By tradition (*The custom of honoring others was when a man stepped on your doorstep, you honored (served) him with traditional brandy, and by that you honored yourself; everyone drank a little, as everyone thought, it was a joy that he stepped into your house (that he visited you) and this was a reward—Recea*), the tourists should be welcomed with homemade bread, pies (as we noticed during our field research, the housewives in Făgăraș Land are skilled at baking a wide range of pies) and *țuică* (Romanian for *plum brandy*, distilled in the household). It takes time and effort to prepare for that. Sometimes, tourists need to be

taken to the station or must be provided transportation for their sightseeing visits in the area. Such trips are more attractive if they are made by sledges or by carts carried by horses. The sightseeing is more interesting if a knowledgeable and skilled local acts as a guide. Sometimes, tourists are so willing to hear local stories that it is only the most renowned story tellers in the community who can meet their requirements. Some tourists view learning local traditional dances as useful (*There are people both here and in Crihalma who would teach them, if only they wanted to learn. —Comăna*). During their stay at winter celebrations, tourists would enjoy learning some things about traditional crafts in local craftsmen's workshops (during our field research, we identified such initiatives being already conducted in the field of traditional sheepskin coat making or the adornment of traditional blouses). These activities are opportunities which can be managed through social entrepreneurship. Thus, different community members would be involved in conducting them, interacting with tourists and further strengthening their *foster Christmas relatives'* status. These activities are a source of income and, as a result of the entire community's contribution, generate social cohesion.

4. Conclusions

As outlined by this article, the groups of caroling lads from Făgăraș Land are an ICH resource presenting potential for community and tourism development. Restoring the group's traditional role transforms the lads into important actors in community work. Concerning the touristic potential, Keyser [67] identifies three features of sustainable tourism: Quality Sustainability (tourists' qualitative experiences and an increase in hosts' quality of life), Continuity Sustainable Tourism (stability of community resources) and Balance Sustainability (balancing the needs of tourism operators, environment and local communities). The group of lads touristic niche can develop these characteristics:

Tourists are invited to participate in community life throughout celebrations. They are offered the experience of connecting with the group of lads. The presence of the tourists is a source of income and an opportunity to increase the hosts' self-esteem. The concept of *foster Christmas relatives* contributes to the development of a relationship between tourists and their hosts. This encourages the former to come back to the community and strengthens the role of direct recommendations as a marketing strategy. In addition, a strategy to promote this type of tourism could be based on the stories and narratives told by tourists and locals on social media, which would mean very low or almost zero costs for the community. The *post-trip storytelling* heavily refers to posting impressions, photos or videos on social networks; when tourists share their experience with family and friends, they feel happy, valued by others or even motivated to return to the places they visited [68].

The group of lads is the reason why tourists join the community. The presence of tourists secures the group's financial resources for organizing events, and thus consolidates its identity. Both tourists and the group enhance and stabilize one another as resource providers for the community.

In terms of balancing needs, tourism operators could diversify their target audience by including this niche offer in their touristic packages. Furthermore, that, along with the group of lads and their activities, could be one more opportunity to capitalize on the history of Făgăraș Land (in this respect, the medieval fortress from Făgăraș hosts an impressive history museum), local ethnography, cuisine, religious pilgrimage routes and mountain landscape. At the same time, the services associated with the *foster Christmas relatives* niche could be provided by the community with TSE support and thus become a local source of income. In small and/or poor village communities, social entrepreneurship could be a solution to manage the entire niche touristic offer.

The concept of *foster Christmas relatives* can thus combine forms of community participation specific to social entrepreneurship and social volunteering with forms of economic activity specific to tourism, for the benefit of all parties involved.

Nonetheless, all of the above is achievable provided that decision-making in the field remains decentralized. That would actually mean keeping in touch with local people's needs, expectations and desires. Local decision-making would also mean for the Făgăraș Land communities to adopt a common strategy with the consultation of social entrepreneurs. Such a strategy, supported by the

unitary history of the area, would consolidate the touristic potential of the niche. As already pointed out, rural tourism does not require sophisticated infrastructures. However, the success of touristic initiatives depends on the quality of infrastructure [3,5,11,15]. Its increase should also encourage the collaboration of ATUs from Făgăraș Land.

Preservation/consolidation of cultural identity is important for sustainable tourism. Cultural resources are frequently considered sustainable development guarantees [49]. They are not useful only because they are economically exploitable: cultural resources catalyze the interaction of community members and enhance their sense of belonging [50], the preservation and capitalization of heritage culturally enrich its owners [69]. We believe that the main function of ICH is to support community cultural identity. It is only thus that ICH resources become touristic resources and can be exploited. Any decision related to sustainable tourism, and any locally made decision, should respect this hierarchy.

Niche tourism focused on groups of lads fits the identity argument for two reasons. The first has already been presented by most of this paper: the groups of lads belong to the community and their performance is part of the latter's tradition. Sustainable tourism can highlight that and, what is more, can maintain it. The second is related to the age of the main actors. Francis-Lindsay [4] suggests that the information on heritage should be included in the educational process in order to mold the youth as repositories of cultural heritage. By joining a group of lads, young people already become ICH repositories. They are the means by which tradition, as part of community cultural identity, is passed on from one generation to another.

This type of tourism could also entail an educational function. It can contribute to the dissemination and promotion of forms of voluntary participation which work in the communities of Făgăraș Land, facilitating their "export" through tourists, as good practices in the field of social volunteering and culture-led development [70].

As already indicated in the paper, touristic developments based on the use of ICH resources are not risk-free. Nonetheless, we believe that the groups of lads are a niche resource for which the risk can be assumed, and, most importantly, is worth assuming.

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