

Exploring where and why rural tourism occurs: The case of Croatia and the Ravni Kotari region

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Abstract

The paper examines factors influencing the development and spatial distribution of rural tourism in Croatia according to the EU classifications of municipalities as urban, rural and proper rural areas. The tourist traffic figures for selected years were computed and the association of socio-economic variables and tourism development index (dependent variable) within these three areas were considered. Semi-structured interviews with stakeholders in Ravni Kotari, a rural region in Littoral Croatia, supplemented the quantitative analysis. The findings indicate that proximity to the coast and overall economic development emerge as the primary factors associated with rural tourism development. The interviews reveal a trend in rural tourism development, specifically in the form of luxury holiday homes, while highlighting the lack of other tourist facilities.

Keywords: Croatia; Ravni Kotari; rural tourism; rural areas

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1. Introduction

In the widest sense, rural tourism covers various tourism activities and forms in rural areas, that is, outside urban areas (Demonja & Ružić, 2010). It includes elements of culture tourism, gastro-tourism, agritourism, health tourism and adventure tourism (Jelinčić, 2007; Momsen, 2016; Vukonić & Čavlek, 2001). Rural tourism is considered a multidimensional concept which includes first-hand experiences of agricultural activities, outdoor activities and traditional ways of life (Kaptan Ayhan et al., 2020). It is also a social construct which is being continually (re)defined and is changing under the influence of various stakeholders, highlighting differences between localities, cultures and practices (Dashper, 2014).

The rise of rural tourism can be attributed to the rapid urbanisation, driven by the increasing desire of urban residents to seek leisure activities away from cities and towns (Kaaristo, 2014). In competition with urban areas, rural areas at the global level are shrinking, reducing their development, but increasing their potential value, since they frequently have elements of significant cultural and natural heritage. Simultaneously, the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 spurred more interest in rural areas, which tourists usually consider to be safe destinations (Kriaučiūnas et al., 2023).

Rural tourism in Croatia is a relatively recent phenomenon, dating back to the mid-1990s, though it has developed more significantly this century, so it would be true to say that it lags behind rural tourism in Western Europe (Lane

& Kastenholz, 2015; Petrić, 2006). A moderate level of research has been undertaken regarding rural tourism in Croatia. In most published works, the emphasis has been on a single larger or smaller territorial unit or region, and the range, subtypes and development potential of rural tourism. In methodological terms, such research relies on analysing data concerning numbers of tourist visits and overnight stays, gleaned from questionnaires or interviews with members of small family farms engaged in tourism, local tourist boards and others (Baković, 2020; Bušljeta Tonković, 2019; Košak & Lugomer, 2015; Marušić, 2017; Naglav et al., 2019; Ralica & Blaće, 2021; Ružić, 2012; Svržnjak et al., 2017). Only a small number of papers have considered Croatia as a whole (Lukić, 2013; Demonja, 2014) or the effect of tourism on the economies of rural areas (Bartoluci et al., 2018). There is a noticeable research gap regarding rural tourism on a national level, particularly in terms of its distribution and presence across different regions. This paper aims to examine the factors associated with rural tourism throughout Croatia and analyse its spatial characteristics. Additionally, we conduct a focused case study on rural tourism in the Ravni Kotari region, located in central Littoral Croatia. This newly established tourism area, situated near the coastline, provided an opportunity to study rural tourism and its features firsthand, during its early development phase. Although this dual-level approach, examining rural tourism on both national and local scales simultaneously, is uncommon in scientific research, we believe it offers deeper insights into the phenomenon compared to focusing on a single level.

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To guide our research, we formulated three main questions:

1. What are the quantitative and spatial features of rural tourism in Croatia, and how are they associated with specific socio-economic variables?
2. What are the quantitative and spatial features of rural tourism in the Ravni Kotari region?
3. What are stakeholders' opinions on rural tourism in Ravni Kotari, and what factors drive its development?

2. Theoretical background

Rural tourism usually occurs in areas characterised by lower population density, abundant natural landscapes, and traditional cultural settings. These destinations are often isolated, located on the peripheries of urban centres, in mountains, or agricultural zones where tourists can experience different environments and lifestyles (Lane, 1994; Roberts & Hall, 2001). Rural tourism is considered an important factor in the evolution of rural areas (Bramwell, 1994; Crouch, 1994; Lane, 1994; Lukić, 2002), since it helps preserve the local heritage and strengthens traditional and ecologically acceptable activities (Cánoves et al., 2004). Thus, it can be considered to be General Interest Tourism (Pulido-Fernandez et al., 2019). It also provides a counter-balance to mass tourism (Sharpley, 2002), not only in terms of tourist numbers but also in regard to what is available to them, including tourism products. On the other hand, Cerić (2016) emphasised that the significance of tourism in fostering the development of rural areas is sometimes exaggerated. It may be a factor in the revitalisation of such areas, but it must go hand-in-hand with other factors. The flip side of rural tourism is excessive construction of tourist accommodation, which reduces arable land and alters the original environment. In addition, the desire to live in a peaceful place or adopt an alternative lifestyle leads to gentrification and the commodification of rural areas (Randelli & Martellozzo, 2019).

The significance of tourism development in rural areas is acknowledged by the EU, particularly in its Common Agricultural Policy. Its second pillar is designed to support non-traditional activities like rural tourism, agritourism, and environmental services (Galluzzo, 2021). For example, since its accession to the EU in 2007, Romania has faced the challenge of emigration, particularly from rural areas. However, thanks to Common Agricultural Policy's incentives, agritourism farms have improved their range, effectively mitigating the adverse effects of emigration (Galluzzo, 2021). Italy has similarly leveraged Common Agricultural Policy's support, predominantly benefiting small and medium-sized farms engaged in tourism in underdeveloped rural areas (Giaccio et al., 2018). In Poland, agritourism farms are also the recipients of EU funds, with location playing a pivotal role in their success. These farms are predominantly situated in areas rich in natural values and close to large cities (Sadowski & Wojcieszak, 2019). In contrast, Lithuania's rural tourism development has been mostly influenced by economic factors, including the average wage, GDP per capita, and regional investment levels (Barkauskas et al., 2015).

The EU integration process played a major role in the advancement of rural tourism in Croatia, which, though slow, resulted in Croatia becoming a full member in 2013. Although Croatia benefitted from the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance Rural Development Programme 2007–2013, since 2013 resources have increased many times over through various programmes and projects, for example the Links Between Actions for the Development of the Rural Economy programme (Croatian Network for Rural Development, 2020). This programme has contributed to strengthening economic links among stakeholders and encouraged the establishment of local action groups which are often successful in co-financing rural development and

tourism through EU funds (Marinković, 2014). Local action groups provide support to small family farms which are the main bearers of agricultural production in Croatia, rather than large companies or farms. There were about 128,000 of them by the end of 2022 (Paying Agency for Agriculture, Fisheries and Rural Development, 2023), occupying 80% of arable land under use (Ministry of Agriculture, 2023). Small family farms which in addition to growing crops and breeding animals offer catering and accommodation, are a subtype of rural tourism known as tourist rural family farms (Ćurić, 2010). We do not have exact data on the number of rural family farms engaged in tourism, but their estimated numbers likely range from a few hundred to a few thousand (Lukić, 2013; Bartoluci et al., 2016). This highlights the lack of a reliable database and the rather underdeveloped state of agritourism.

Scientific research has often tried to enumerate and group the key elements which define rural tourism. The World Tourism Organisation says that it covers a wide variety of activities conducted in non-urban areas with the following features: sparse populations, landscapes dominated by forests, the use of land for agricultural purposes, and traditional social connections and ways of life (UNWTO, 2019). Up to now, the most comprehensive research on definitions and elements of rural tourism, based on 125 papers written in English, claims that there is no unified account of the concept, but concludes that it can be defined according to four terms of reference: the space (rural area), activities in line with sustainable development, the specific psycho-social experiences of guests, and the particular role of the local community (Rosalina et al., 2021, p. 137). We based our research on the spatial element and equated the concept of rural tourism with tourist activities (traffic) occurring in rural areas. This approach has been accepted in research thus far (Cantallos et al., 2015; Guzman Parra et al., 2015; Nieto et al., 2011; Oppermann, 1996; Qui et al., 2019).

The topic of factors influencing the development of rural tourism has been addressed in prior research, though often on a general level. In a meta-analysis of 221 scholarly papers, Suherlan and Cheer (2024) categorised influencing factors into four major types: economic, socio-cultural, environmental, and political. Additionally, their study noted institutional, technological, and managerial factors. Al Matris (2023), Drăguleasa et al. (2024), Kumar et al. (2022), Mohammadi et al. (2022), and Wijijayanti et al. (2023) identified overlapping factors, such as income levels in rural areas, natural attractions, environmental consciousness, local participation in tourism, and investment in infrastructure, including water, electricity, and communication facilities. While these factors highlight the potential for rural tourism to drive socio-economic development, challenges such as inadequate infrastructure and community engagement persist, necessitating comprehensive planning and stakeholder collaboration for successful implementation (Wijijayanti et al., 2023). Suherlan and Cheer (2024) also argue that these factors are often generalised and lack specificity, highlighting the need for nuanced, globally diverse research perspectives.

Addressing this gap, our paper analyses the association of tourism in rural areas with specific social variables offering a more detailed look into how distinct factors shape the development of rural tourism.

3. Materials and methods

The research used several methods. First, the Croatian rural areas were defined based on Degree of urbanisation (DEGURBA) data, the European categorisation of rural and urban areas at the level of local administrative units (LAU) of EU member states created in 2010. Within the territorial organisation of Croatia, local administrative units are municipalities and towns/cities. Degree

of urbanisation classifies them in three categories according to population density and spatial distribution: densely populated (cities), moderately densely populated (towns and suburbs) and sparsely populated (rural areas) (Eurostat, 2019). In other words, the first two categories taken together form urban areas, while the third is rural and allows direct comparison of these dichotomous units. This is what we did in our research with regard to tourism indicators. The application is practical since it is possible to compare all rural and urban areas of EU member states. Degree of urbanisation classification is variable and changes each year with regard to demographic change, so in our research the 2018 version was used, as the most recently verified classification at the time of compiling this paper. Given the rather minor demographic changes in Croatia in the meantime in comparison to other EU members, we assume that using later classifications would have had only a minor effect on the results gained during this research.

The next step was to gather data on tourist traffic (arrivals, overnight stays, beds), according to Degree of urbanisation typology, for all 556 municipalities in Croatia, for 2000, 2010, 2019, 2020, 2021 and 2022. We selected 2000 because this was the year in which tourist traffic started to recover after the pause caused by the Croatian War of Independence. In 2010, ten years later, tourist traffic intensified. Regarding arrivals 2019 was the most successful tourist season in Croatia so far, while in 2020, 2021 and 2022, the COVID-19 pandemic led to a decline followed by recovery in tourist traffic. Thus, we were able to calculate precisely tourist traffic in rural regions of Croatia for several years, in contrast to previous generalisations or calculations based on other classifications. We also collected various data from other institutions to use as independent variables, in order to try to establish to what extent they associate with tourism development in Croatian municipalities and rural areas (Tab. 1). The choice of variables was based on previous research on rural tourism in Croatia (Lukić, 2013) and their availability at the national level.

All data for municipalities were inputted into a spreadsheet, serving as the foundation of statistical analysis in JASP 0.16 software (JASP team, 2021) and visualisation in terms of a map in GIS software (ESRI, 2012). Employing the non-parametric Spearman's correlation coefficient (due to the absence of normal distribution in both dependent and independent variables, checked by Shapiro-Wilk tests), we examined the association of socio-economic development and tourism. This is, therefore, a dependent variable in this case expressed by the tourism development index, a composite indicator derived from ten variables (Tab. 1) (Opačić et al., 2022). The index was selected

as a dependent variable, since it does not take into account only one indicator (for example, the number of visitors or number of beds) but several, and by using a logarithmic scale balances out large discrepancies in values of tourist traffic between Croatian municipalities. Given the index values, the researchers placed municipalities and cities in five classes: Class I (index value > 30), Class II (20.00–29.99), Class III (10.00–19.99), Class IV (0.01–9.99) and Class V (0, or areas with no recorded tourist traffic (Opačić et al., 2022). We took into account the values for 2019 as this was the last pre-pandemic year, while values for some variables for 2018 and 2021 were also available.

Tourism development in municipalities with no access to the coast was considered separately from those with sea access. This is because tourism development in coastal municipalities in Croatia is dominated by beach tourism during the summer months and shows different trends (as does the economy in general) in relation to rural municipalities with no sea access. We classified the Croatian rural areas into coastal rural areas and proper rural areas, using Eurostat (the EU office of statistics) methodology and data, according to which coastal areas are not only municipalities that border the sea but also those with at least 50% of their land area within a distance of 10 km from the coastline (Eurostat, 2019). It is evident that EU statistical classification also regards rural areas with sea access differently from those without it.

The second part of the research relates to the rural region of Ravni Kotari, a part of central Littoral Croatia. Along with an analysis of tourist traffic, field research and in-depth, semi-structured interviews were carried out during July and September 2022. In-depth interviews are most often used when research relates to topics which do not come up often, and for which questionnaires are therefore unsuitable (Veal, 2018). The aim of such interviews was to establish the experiences and opinions of local stakeholders regarding rural tourism development in Ravni Kotari and the interviewees were free to express their personal standpoints on other aspect of tourism as well. There is no minimum number of respondents in qualitative research (Fosey et al., 2002) and, given the aims of the research, the limited number of interviews conducted was considered acceptable. Nine respondents with different profiles were selected according to the “snowball” method, at the recommendation of tourist boards experts (Tab. 2). Each respondent was interviewed separately for between an hour and ninety minutes in a location of their choice. The participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity, so it was possible to record the interviews which were then transcribed.

Dependent variable	Description	Sources	Year
Tourism development index	Composite variable computed from ten variables (total number of beds, number of beds in hotels and similar establishments, number of tourist arrivals, number of overnight stays, and number of employees in tourism and hospitality, total number of beds per 100 residents, number of beds in hotels and similar establishments per 100 residents, number of tourist arrivals per capita, number of overnight stays per capita and proportion of employees in tourism and hospitality in terms of total employment (Opačić et al., 2022).	Institute for Tourism (2023)	2019
Independent variables			
Population density	Number of inhabitants per surface area of city/municipality (km ²)	Calculated by authors based on: Croatian Bureau of Statistics (2022a)	2021
Small family farm density	Number of small family farms per surface area of city/municipality (km ²)	Calculated by authors based on: Paying Agency for Agriculture, Fisheries and Rural Development (2023)	2019
Proximity to the coast	Proximity from a municipality to the coast – median distance (km)	Calculated by authors in GIS software (ESRI, 2012)	–
Proximity to a highway	Proximity from a municipality to a highway – median distance (km)	Calculated by authors in GIS software (ESRI, 2012)	–
Development index	Composite indicator utilised to calculate adjusted mean of standardised socio-economic indicators to gauge the development level of municipalities in Croatia during a defined timeframe	Ministry of Regional Development and European Funds (2018)	2018
Unemployment rate	Proportion of unemployed persons in a municipality within a year (%)	Ministry of Regional Development and European Funds (2018)	2018

Tab. 1: Variable definitions for Croatia
Source: Authors' conceptualisation

Participant	Occupation/position
Participant 1 (P1)	Tourist board employee
Participant 2 (P2)	Owner of a rental house
Participant 3 (P3)	Owner of a rental house
Participant 4 (P4)	Owner of a small family farm
Participant 5 (P5)	Tourist board employee
Participant 6 (P6)	Municipality administration employee
Participant 7 (P7)	Owner of a rental house
Participant 8 (P8)	Local action group employee
Participant 9 (P9)	Owner of a rental house

Tab. 2: Profile of participants interviewed

Source: Interviews conducted by the authors (2022)

A map of rental properties was made for the area of Ravni Kotari and data acquired from the tourist board and addresses were geocoded in My Maps (Google, 2023). These were then transferred to a GIS programme in which a median distance analysis was done in order to calculate the correlation between the number of rental properties in a particular settlement and the variables related to it (Tab. 3). Thus, at the level of the Ravni Kotari settlements, a quantitative analysis of rural tourism development was also carried out, but this time the dependent variable was the number of accommodation units, since the tourism development index was not available at the level of individual settlements. The analysis was not carried out at the municipal level since there are only seven municipalities in Ravni Kotari and this was considered too small a sample.

3.1 Study area – Croatia and the Ravni Kotari region

In the first part of the research, we examined the entire territory of the Republic of Croatia (Fig. 1), which is administratively divided into 556 municipalities and covers an area of 56,592 square kilometres. Given its geographic position at the contact of large European regions such as the Mediterranean, Pannonian Plain and Dinaric Alps, its complex historical development, and despite its small size, Croatia has a diverse natural heritage and a large number of cultural-historical monuments (Kapusta & Wiluš, 2017). This makes it an attractive tourist destination, though primarily for beach tourism which dominates in a decidedly seasonal pattern. In fact, over 65% of overnight stays occur in June, July and August each year (Rašić, 2019). The highest numbers were achieved in 2019 (19.6 million arrivals) and 2023 (92.4 million overnight stays) (Croatian Bureau of Statistics, 2024). In 2019, tourism accounted for 19% of overall GDP (Ministry of Tourism, 2021), the highest proportion of all EU member countries (Statista, 2022). In 2020 this proportion fell to 8.9%, while in 2021 it was 15.7%, and recovered to pre-pandemic levels in 2022 (Ministry of Tourism, 2021; 2023).

The second part of research focused on Ravni Kotari, a physiognomic region located in central Littoral Croatia (Fig. 1). Physiognomic regions do not usually have precisely determined spatial extent (Blaće, 2014) but for the purposes of this research, we took the borders of the municipalities in the central part, which also correspond to the borders of the local Ravni Kotari Tourist

Dependent variable	Description	Sources	Year
Number of rental properties		Ravni Kotari Tourist Board	2023
Independent variables			
Population density	Number of inhabitants per km ²	Calculated by authors based on: Croatian Bureau of Statistics (2022a)	2021
Small family farm density	Number of small family farms per km ²	Calculated by authors based on: Paying Agency for Agriculture, Fisheries and Rural Development (2023)	2019
Proximity to the coast	Proximity from a settlement to the coast – median distance (km)	Calculated by authors in GIS software (ESRI, 2012)	–
Proximity to a highway	Proximity from a settlement to a highway – median distance (km)	Calculated by authors in GIS software (ESRI, 2012)	–
Proximity to Zadar	Proximity from a settlement to Zadar (administrative centre, largest city and largest tourist destination in the county) (km)	Calculated by authors in GIS software (ESRI, 2012)	–

Tab. 3: Variable definitions for the Ravni Kotari region. Source: Authors' conceptualisation



Fig. 1: Study area – Croatia and Ravni Kotari region

Source: Authors' elaboration based on: Croatian Geodetic Administration (2016), European Environment Agency (2018)

Board. Thus, the research area comprises seven municipalities: Benkovac, Galovac, Lišane Ostrovičke, Polača, Stankovci, Škabrnja and Zemunik Donji (Ravni Kotari Tourist Board, 2022). It includes 61 settlements with a total surface area of 546 square kilometres, and has 18,571 inhabitants according to the 2021 population census (Croatian Bureau of Statistics, 2022a). It is a rural area with unfavourable demographic characteristics and limited economic development. In the last decade, some positive economic development trends have been noted due to tourism, and these gave us the incentive to conduct this research. Since Ravni Kotari is close to the developed tourist area on the coast, tourists have begun to visit the region to taste the local food and wine (Đurkin Badurina et al., 2023) and escape from the crowds on the coast during the summer months. The “transfer” of tourists from coastal destinations to new leisure locations in the wider rural area in the hinterland also contributes to the more sustainable development of coastal tourist resorts (Williams & Lew, 2015).

4. Results

4.1 Quantitative analyses of rural tourism in Croatia

According to the classification carried out (Fig. 2) and the calculations made (Tab. 4), over 80% of the Republic of Croatia's territory falls under rural areas, though only a third of the

population lives in them. The rural areas with no sea access (proper rural areas), which we have noted separately, cover about two-thirds of Croatia's territory and are home to about a quarter of the total population.

The values of the tourism development index clearly show for 2019 (Fig. 3) differences between the municipalities and cities on the coast and islands (most developed) compared to those in the hinterland of Littoral Croatia, and even more so compared to Pannonian Croatia. The exceptions are larger cities and municipalities hosting one of the most famous natural features in Croatia – Plitvice Lakes National Park, a UNESCO World Heritage site. Tourism development in the rural areas is slight and, in some municipalities, non-existent. However, this indicator relates primarily to the volume of tourist activity rather than the level of tourism infrastructure development or associated issues (for example, environmental), so it would be unfair to assume automatically that high values are positive and low values are negative.

During the past twenty years, tourist traffic increased up to 2019, then fell in 2020 and began to rise again in 2021 and 2022 (Fig. 4). Throughout the entire observation period, the proportion of arrivals and overnight stays in the rural areas was in the range of 45% to 55%. The most marked difference was in 2020, when the rural areas overtook the urban areas in terms of numbers of

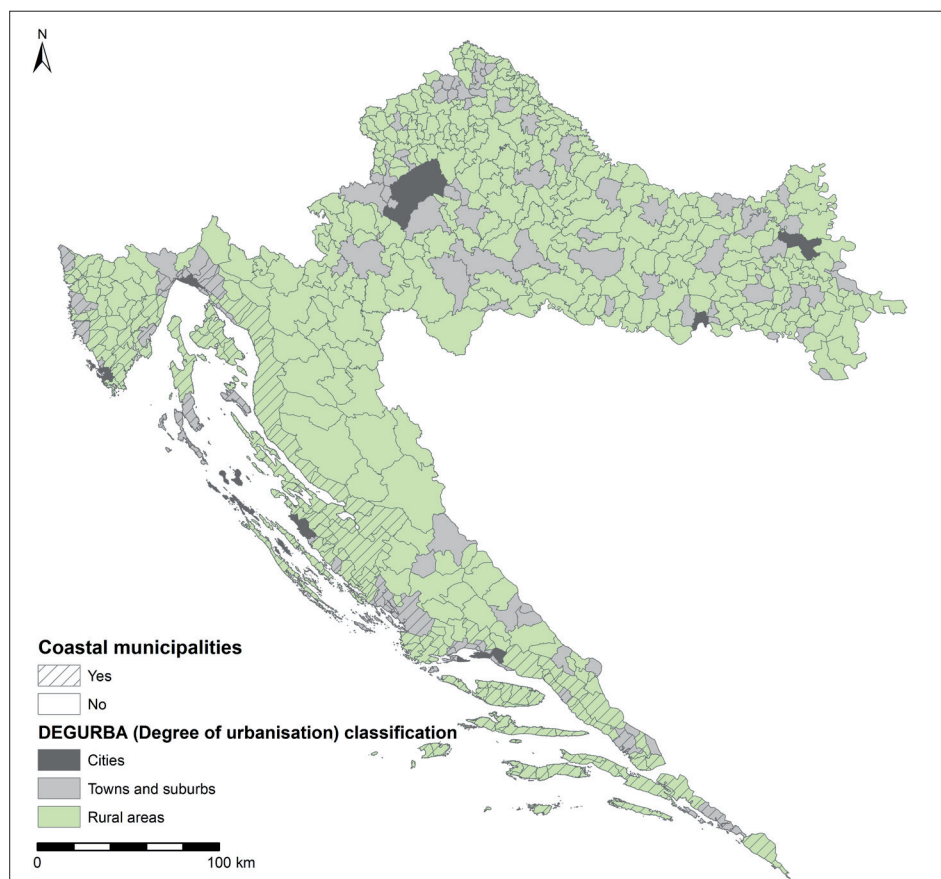


Fig. 2: Regionalisation of Croatian municipalities in urban (cities/towns/suburbs) and rural areas and coastal and non-coastal areas
Source: Authors' elaboration based on: Croatian Geodetic Administration (2016), Eurostat (2020)

Area	No. of municipalities	Surface area (sq km)	%	Population 2021	%
Croatia	556	56,592.2	100.0	3,871,883	100.0
A) Urban areas	106	10,864.3	19.2	2,565,905	66.3
B) Rural areas	450	45,727.9	80.8	1,305,928	33.7
B1) Coastal rural areas	114	9,753.3	17.2	306,332	7.9
B2) Proper rural areas	336	35,974.6	63.6	999,596	25.8

Tab. 4: Classification of Croatian municipalities in urban and rural areas

Source: Authors' calculations based on: Croatian Bureau of Statistics (2022a), Croatian Geodetic Administration (2016), Eurostat (2020)

arrivals, overnight stays and beds. It seems that the rural areas, with sparser populations and isolated accommodation, were seen as safer during the pandemic (Šulc & Fuerst-Bjeliš, 2021). When circumstances became safer, in 2021 the urban areas regained the upper hand in terms of arrivals and this trend continued in 2022. However, the number of overnight stays remained slightly on the side of the rural areas. This is because tourists visiting cities tend to do so for short periods and stay longer in rural areas (4.3 nights as opposed to 5.9 nights in 2022).

Changes in tourism trends in Croatia are most obvious in the proper rural areas, which have seen more or less steady growth in all three categories between 2000 and 2020. Although this means moderately small values in absolute and relative terms, the growth trend is obvious and starting values have doubled. It is clear that proper rural areas, which were hitherto insufficiently recognised and valorised in terms of tourism, have begun to change, diversifying their range and increasing accommodation capacities – and that this has been prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

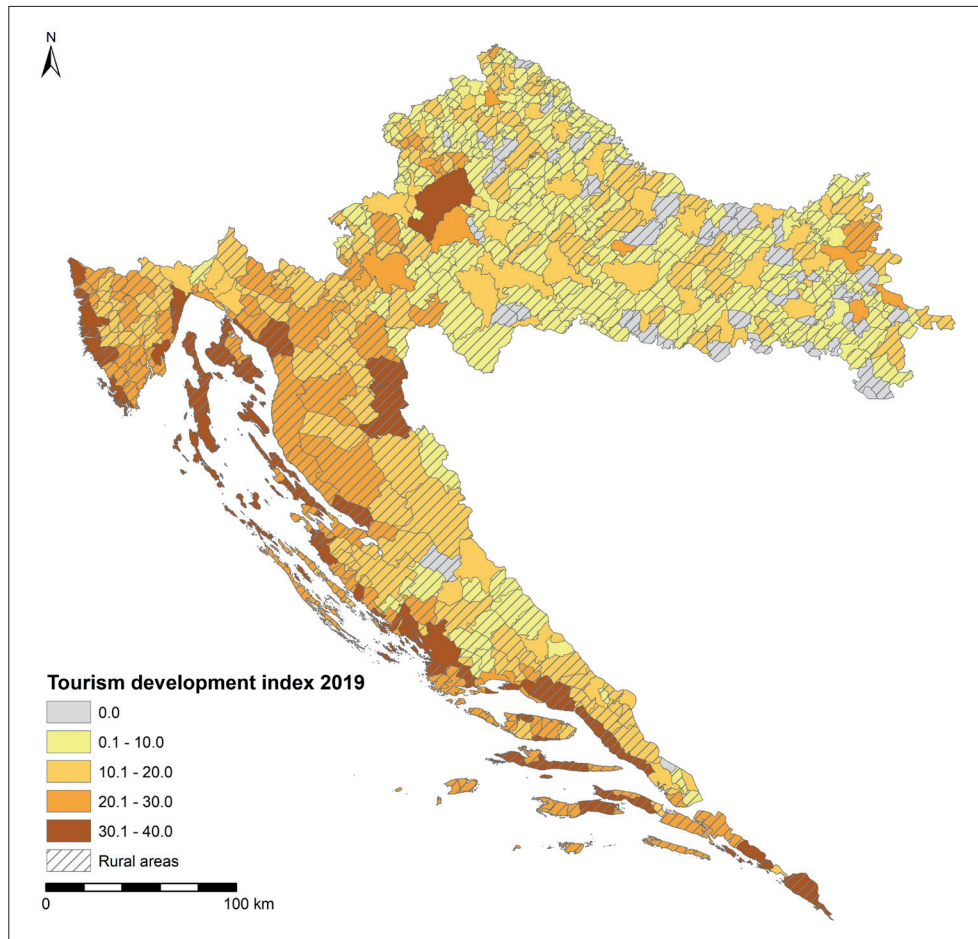


Fig. 3: Values of the tourism development index in Croatian municipalities in 2019

Source: Authors' elaboration based on: Croatian Geodetic Administration (2016), Eurostat (2020), Institute for Tourism (2023)

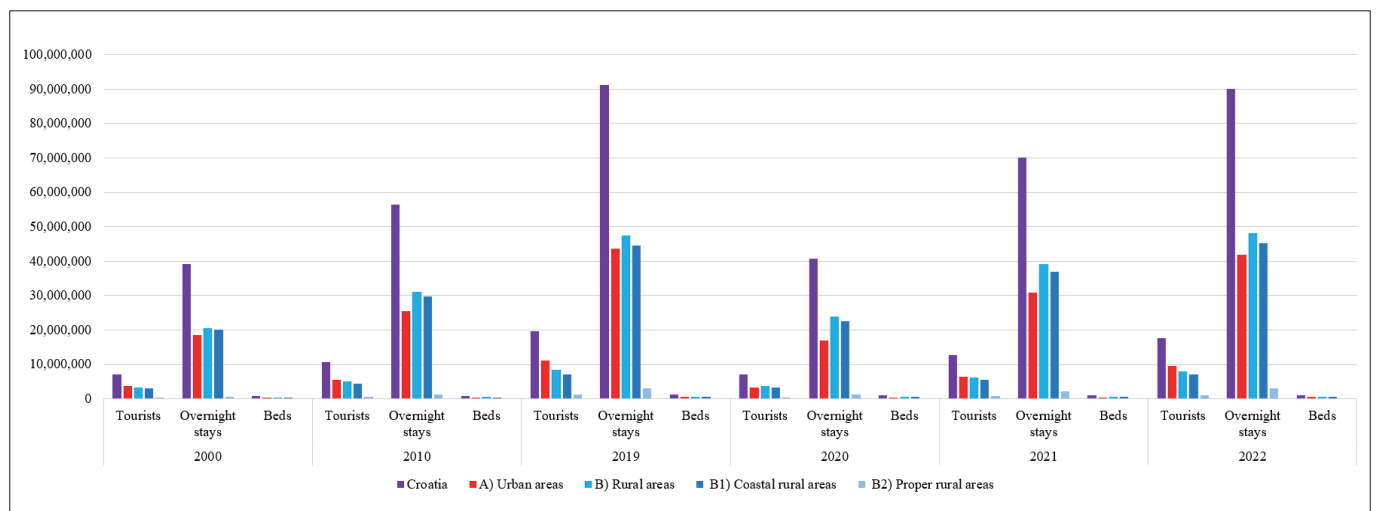


Fig. 4: Number of tourists, overnight stays and beds in Croatia, urban and rural areas in 2000, 2010, 2019–2022

Source: Calculated by authors based on: Croatian Bureau of Statistics (2001; 2011; 2020; 2021; 2022b; 2023), Croatian Geodetic Administration (2016), Eurostat (2020)

The outcomes of the correlation analysis between independent variables and the tourism development index for 2019 are given in Table 5. The largest (negative) values of the Spearman coefficient correlation for all three areas were between distance from the coast and tourism development index. This means that as distance from the coast increases, the tourism development of a municipality decreases. The coefficient value is medium for proper rural areas and high for Croatia as a whole and all rural areas. It is evident that the coast plays an important role in the volume of arrivals and overnight stays not only in the coastal municipalities but also in the hinterland. In addition (along with the larger cities and towns in Pannonian Croatia), since the mid-20th century the littoralisation process has concentrated a significant part of economic activity along coastline which also affects tourist trends.

The second variable with which the correlation was medium to high was the development index. It was noted that the effect on tourism development was more favourable in municipalities with better economic and demographic profiles. However, given the lower correlation values, this also applies to a lesser extent to municipalities in proper rural areas. There is a low to medium but negative correlation with the unemployment rate, meaning the variables covary in different directions. The correlation values for the other analysed variables were found to be low. It is noteworthy that, despite being low, a statistically significant negative correlation exists between the density of small family farms and the level of tourism development. Negative values indicate that in some municipalities, agricultural production and tourism development have opposite association. This is probably due to the fact that in economically depressed areas, with an undeveloped service sector (and thus tourism), the population focuses on agricultural activities.

4.2 Rural tourism in Ravni Kotari region

Tourism in Ravni Kotari began to develop in the last fifteen years, while a considerable increase in the volume of arrivals and overnight stays has been evident since 2013 (Fig. 5). This trend

continued up to 2020, when it was interrupted by the coronavirus pandemic. The next year, tourist traffic recovered a little and in 2022, the highest number of visitors (14,987) and overnights stays (120,884) was recorded (Ravni Kotari Tourist Board, 2023). The average stay is 8 nights, exceeding the national average of 5.5 to 6 nights. The evolution of spatial dispersion is evident in the fact that in 2017, 17 of the 61 settlements had some tourist traffic, while by 2019, the number had risen to 45 and in 2022, reached 53.

Tourists use newly-built or renovated houses and holiday villas. By mid-2023, their number was 339 (Fig. 6), offering a total of 2,065 beds. In rural areas in Croatia, swimming pools are an added attraction, and during the past decade, the Ministry of Tourism has provided grants for building them. In Ravni Kotari, 72% of tourist accommodation includes a swimming pool.

The results of the correlation analysis for Ravni Kotari (Tab. 6) indicate that all independent variables display a significant statistical association with accommodation units, particularly population density and proximity to Zadar, the regional and county centre. Unlike the national level, the density of small family farms covaries the same way as the number of accommodation units. However, we conclude that this value is tied to population numbers, because larger settlements tend to have more small family farms. Settlements which are further from Zadar and the coast are less developed in economic and demographic terms, while as distance from the coast and highways increases, the number of rental properties decreases and the correlation values between these variables are lower. Thus, the larger settlements which are closer to the coast and Zadar experience more intense tourism development, while those which are smaller and more isolated have little or no tourist traffic.

4.3 Interview results

One indicator of the role of tourism in Ravni Kotari is the Ravni Kotari Tourist Board (established in 2019), which has the aim of collating and creating recognisable destinations for the tourist

	Population density	Small family farms density	Proximity to the coast	Proximity to a highway	Development index	Unemployment rate
Croatia, n = 556 municipalities						
Tourism development index 2019	0.18*	-0.15*	-0.70*	-0.08	0.70*	-0.45*
Rural areas, n = 450 municipalities						
Tourism development index 2019	0.05	-0.11*	-0.74*	-0.07	0.67*	-0.47*
Proper rural areas, n = 336 municipalities						
Tourism development index 2019	-0.07	-0.24*	-0.49*	-0.25*	0.38*	-0.27*

Tab. 5: Correlation matrix between selected variables for three analysed areas (Note: * $p < 0.05$)

Source: Calculated by authors based on: Croatian Bureau of Statistics (2022a), Croatian Geodetic Administration (2016), Eurostat (2020), Institute for Tourism (2023), Ministry of Regional Development and EU Funds (2018), Paying Agency for Agriculture, Fisheries and Rural Development (2023)

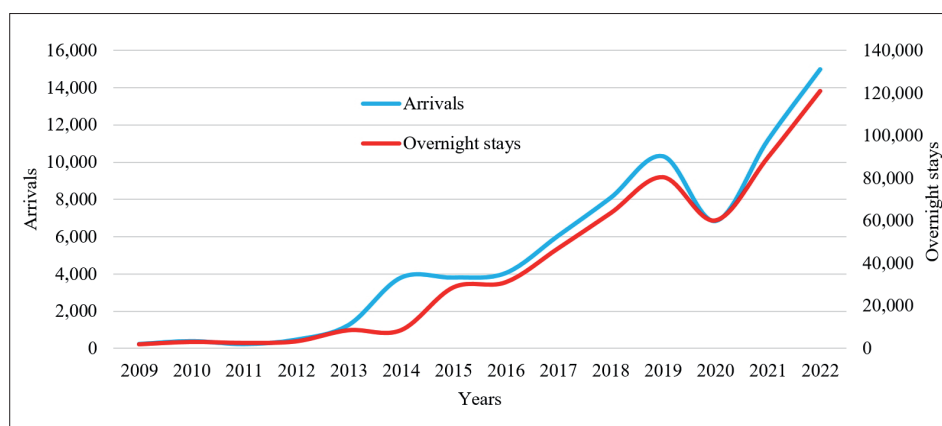


Fig. 5: Tourist arrivals and overnight stays in Ravni Kotari 2009–2022

Source: Authors' calculations based on Croatian Bureau of Statistics (2010; 2011; 2012; 2013; 2014; 2015; 2016), Ravni Kotari Tourist Board (2023)

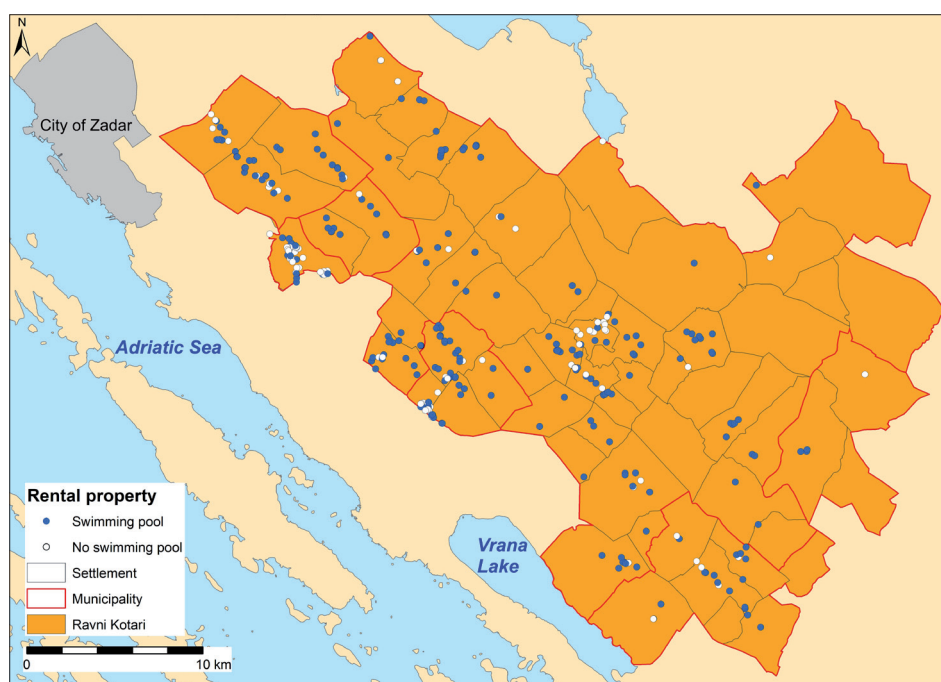


Fig. 6: Location of rental properties (with and without swimming pools) in Ravni Kotari

Source: Authors' elaboration based on: Croatian Geodetic Administration, (2016), Google (2023), Ravni Kotari Tourist Board (2023)

	Population density	Small family farms density	Proximity to Zadar	Proximity to the coast	Proximity to the highway
Number of rental properties	0.65*	0.54*	- 0.63*	- 0.44*	- 0.35*

Tab. 6: Spearman correlation coefficient between number of rental properties and selected variables in Ravni Kotari region (Notes: N = 61 settlements, Sig. * $p < 0.05$)

Source: Authors' calculations based on: Croatian Bureau of Statistics, (2022a), Croatian Geodetic Administration (2016), Paying Agency for Agriculture, Fisheries and Rural Development (2023), Ravni Kotari Tourist Board (2023)

market. Networking is important for small communities, enabling them to become important players in the tourism development of the wider regions, particularly if local residents trust the process and are attached to the areas where they live and work, reflecting their self-concept (Kemp et al., 2012). In Croatia, particularism is largely present in the functioning of tourist regions, which are highly segmented in marketing and business terms. In institutional terms, tourist boards tend to operate on the principle of one board per municipality on the coast, though they also belong to the wider network of the Croatian National Tourist Board. This has begun to change recently and the Ravni Kotari Tourist Board is an example of the new approach.

... You know us, our mentality. We don't like to come together around something. It took six months to form our tourist board, to get the regulations right. Having lived here for 12 years, I have come to realise how people think, they are aware of all the potential, but they aren't willing to get on and realise it. (P1)

Although the Croatian National Tourist Board supports new organisations in principle, local stakeholders think they do not receive sufficient support from the county tourist board.

The biggest problem in this area is the lack of understanding on the part of the county tourist board. Even today, they don't understand what Ravni Kotari is ... yet everyone talks about the hinterland, irrigation, ecological production, developing the rural area. (P1)

In fact, the tourism promotion in Zadar County is still largely based on summer, beach tourism in the coastal and island settlements (Zadar Region Tourist Board, 2023). It is important

and useful to encourage networking because of the availability of European funds for improving business.

We have the Cultural-Historical Route project (€400,000), the first organised trail with viewing points, resting places and charging points for mobile phones. We are promoting small winemakers. We want to attract visitors this way. (P1)

Previous research has also shown the positive expectations of local stakeholders in tourism regarding the advancement of rural hinterland areas following the accession of Croatia to the EU (Erstić et al., 2011; Kantar & Svržnjak, 2017). Renters also think that the new tourist board has played a crucial role in tourism development by encouraging them.

Our role is to help with branding and marketing. The biggest investments go into building houses, but the heart of rural tourism is life and work in the countryside, agriculture and authentic cuisine. (P5)

The tourist board provides more than just support. But the tourist boards in Zadar and county all rely on us, while they should be coming up with the ideas, that's their job. (P4)

The support of local action groups (established through EU programmes for strengthening economic links among stakeholders) is also important as they provide financial support for the development of non-agricultural activities, such as tourism, in rural areas with the aim of revitalisation (Marinković, 2014). The resources available are used to renovate or build holiday accommodation and food and wine tasting places, support traditional arts and crafts, improve marketing, etc. Therefore, cooperation between those involved in tourism and local action groups is important.

Our cooperation with local action groups is excellent, they help our small family farms which are interested in investing. It would be great if we could cooperate with everyone else as we do with them. (P1)

One local action group employee explains their role.

Since there are only about 15 small family farms which also provide accommodation, the link between agriculture and tourism is still weak. The group launched a series of specific campaigns aimed at encouraging economic development. We are building a plant for jam-making, for small farmers who may not have the facilities but have 100 kg of figs, and we make the logo and brand. We set up a website during corona and we support the creation of food and wine tasting places and excursion centres. (P8)

However, the connection between agricultural products and renters is still not strong enough.

There were some guests from Germany, older people, who went into the orchard to pick figs, but not many people like them come here. Nobody offers that here. (P3)

Agriculture is still disorganised. So, foreigners come and they can't buy local produce, there are no stalls, and yet everyone has local produce at home. (P6)

Local residents are engaged in renovating old family houses and building new holiday homes. They have adopted different methods and among the first were villagers who exploited the local stone.

I started in 2004. Apart from one man in the village, nobody had tourist accommodation. In this area, there are many traditional stone quarries. You can take people there and show them how we work with stone. I thought we might hold concerts there, but somebody has to take the initiative, to do the pushing. (P9)

This is my ancestral home. I decided to revitalise it, to stop it from decaying. We rent to tourists, and out of season my children and grandchildren come here for a rest. (P7)

The evolution of rural tourism in this area is characterised by different processes going hand-in hand.

Viniculture, holiday accommodation, cultural-artistic societies and summer events happen in parallel. (P1)

Renters are satisfied with the level of occupancy.

The number of visitors and overnight stays is increasing. This area does not depend on the sea and sun, although most tourists come in the summer months. (P3)

... I rent in June, July, August and September. I don't want more than that. There would probably be tourists around Easter, too. (P2)

The tourist traffic is higher for small family farms which cooperate with tourist agencies. The season is almost all the year round, because we have Christmas and New Year parties, a lull in February, and the season begins before Easter. April and May are better than July and August, because there are organised excursions, bus tours for older people who aren't bothered about the sea. (P4)

Therefore, according to stakeholders, the primary motivations for engaging in tourism and the main factors driving rural tourism development in Ravni Kotari include financial benefits, support from local tourism board and local action group and property ownership. The region's potential for agritourism is also perceived as important but currently remains underdeveloped.

5. Discussion

In this research, we employed qualitative and quantitative methodology, setting our study apart from others studying rural tourism in Croatia. Unlike previous research, our study aimed

to pinpoint the socio-economic variables influencing national-level rural tourism development and offered a spatial perspective on the phenomenon by mapping the distribution of rental accommodations in one rural area. Although our paper sheds new light on understanding rural tourism in Croatia, it does not identify a singular major reason for its occurrence. Instead, our findings suggest that the evolution of rural tourism results from a combination of economic and social factors and distance from the coastline.

The choice of the tourism development index as an indicator for evaluating the progress of rural tourism in Croatia is not optimal. This is because the index covers not only rural areas but also cities, and therefore lacks an inherently rural focus. Nevertheless, considering that the index provides a broad overview of tourism development in Croatia, its selection seems justified. To further validate our choice, we conducted correlation analyses with the number of overnight stays and tourist arrivals as dependent variables. The resulting coefficient values were comparable, if not slightly lower, reinforcing the appropriateness of our dependent variable selection. Quantification and statistical analysis of rural tourism presents challenges that are not exclusive to Croatia but are also present in other European countries (Batista e Silva et al., 2018; Lane & Kastenholz, 2015).

Rural tourism, as a geographically dispersed phenomenon, has been examined by various researchers, although typically at wider territorial levels rather than municipalities. For instance, Batista e Silva et al. (2021) performed a regionalisation of EU member states, categorising their territories into urban, mixed urban, coastal, rural, mountain, and areas of untouched nature. The primary spatial unit in their research was the NUTS level 3 region, a standard territorial unit within the EU statistical system (Eurostat, 2019). While this analysis enables cross-comparisons across all 27 member states, a limitation arises from the generalised nature of tourist traffic concerning NUTS regions in 2018. In smaller member states, where there are fewer regions which cover relatively large areas, the data tend to be less nuanced. In the case of Croatia, only about 1% of tourist overnight stays occurred in rural areas, while over 95% were on the coast. This discrepancy contrasts with our findings, where approximately 52% of overnight stays were recorded in rural areas – due to differences in methodological approaches.

An additional factor influencing rural tourism is the attitude of the local community. Some residents in rural areas often aspire to contribute to their own economic well-being and that of the community, leading them to engage in rural tourism. Insights from the local population were gathered through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, involving respondents who are also stakeholders in tourism development. Our findings indicate that the presence of active stakeholders can motivate local individuals to actively participate in planning, development and the management of rural tourism activities, and this has been confirmed by research conducted in Turkey by Ertuna and Kirbas (2012). This is particularly true regarding the role played by the Ravni Kotari Tourist Board. However, other research on tourism in the Ravni Kotari region highlights certain challenges. While there is considerable potential for the development of gastronomic tourism, it remains underutilised due to a lack of horizontal cooperation among private-sector stakeholders (Đurkin Badurina et al., 2023). Additionally, Krce Miočić (2023) found that residents have limited awareness of the cultural heritage in their area and the possibilities for incorporating it into the tourism offering.

In an examination of coastal tourism and rural tourism in Catalonia (Hernández et al., 2016), the conclusion was drawn that the two forms coexist independently, implying that rural tourism is not associated with proximity to the coast. In contrast, our findings suggest the opposite, revealing a statistically significant correlation

between the tourist development index and proximity to the coast. The older, more advanced tradition of rural tourism in Spain and Catalonia (compared to Croatia) may account for this difference. The scenario unfolding in Ravni Kotari bears some resemblance to the evolution of rural tourism in Extremadura (Nieto Masot & Ríos Rodríguez, 2021), a landlocked, rural region in Spain that has experienced a recent surge in tourist numbers and overnight stays. However, within Extremadura, tourism development varies considerably, due to the region's size. The northern parts exhibit more prominent development than the southern ones, and this has been attributed to their attractive natural features and proximity to Madrid. In contrast, Ravni Kotari, being spatially smaller and more homogeneous, has several national and nature parks located on its outskirts, in neighbouring regions.

6. Conclusions

In 2022, rural tourism in Croatia accounted for 45.6% of tourist arrivals and 53.5% of overnight stays. However, the majority of this activity was concentrated in municipalities with access to the sea. To address this, we have identified proper rural areas that, while currently contributing only a small percentage of arrivals and stays, have demonstrated consistent growth in recent years.

When applying the four criteria for defining rural tourism (Rosalina et al., 2021), Croatia predominantly aligns with the rural area criterion. The distinctive experiences for tourists and the emphasised role of local communities are less prevalent, primarily observed in a limited number of municipalities, often within agritourism farms.

Rural tourism is a complex phenomenon shaped by various factors. In this study, the proximity to the coastline and the overall economic condition of the observed municipalities demonstrated the strongest association with rural tourism. Notably, the integration of rural tourism and agriculture is currently lacking, as revealed by interviews conducted in Ravni Kotari. Respondents from this region also view tourism as a relatively new phenomenon, impacting property renters, local tourist community satisfaction, and positive influence of the local tourist board.

This research has certain limitations, particularly in its use of the tourism development index as an indicator of rural tourism development on a national scale (as noted in the discussion). A lack of systematic data on various aspects of rural tourism presents an ongoing challenge for accurately assessing its development levels and (sub)types.

Despite these limitations, this research advances the understanding of rural tourism in Croatia, addressing a gap in the literature where most existing studies are either overly general or limited to single regions. Our method of quantifying rural tourism, which involves delineating rural areas based on the DEGUBRA classification, holds applicability in other EU countries. The outcomes of our research, while primarily focused on Croatia and especially Ravni Kotari, could provide insights for various stakeholders and policymakers involved in devising tourism strategies and plans for rural areas. We highlighted the low integration of agriculture and tourism in rural areas and emphasised the need for improvement. The research also advocates for systematic data collection, to serve as a foundation for considering and developing more sustainable rural tourism.

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Data availability statement

The corresponding author can provide the data upon request.

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