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Changes in the Touristic Attractiveness of Wild Forests Due to Forestry Activities? The Case of Romania's Făgăraş Mountains

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Abstract: Wilderness areas are declining worldwide. A major reason is large-scale forestry activities like logging. At the same time, wilderness offers unique opportunities for recreation in natural and remote environments, enabling communities to gather economic income based on wilderness tourism. An outstanding element of wilderness areas is primary forests. Wilderness is often understood as untouched nature, unchanged by human intervention. For visitors, wilderness resembles a counter-world, enabling them to escape from everyday life. The present study investigates whether forestry activities have an effect on the attractiveness of primary forests for wilderness tourism. This question is answered based on a case study in the Făgăraş Mountains (Southern Carpathians, Romania). The findings show that primary forests are a unique selling point in tourism. Forestry activities are associated with direct (loss of biodiversity) and indirect (change of target group) effects. Forestry activities not only cause changes in forests as a tourism attractor, but also change the attractor's contexts, by rendering access difficult or by destroying hiking trails. This paper makes theoretical and practical contributions. From a theoretical point of view, it reflects the concept of wilderness tourism and highlights the importance of contexts (i.e., access paths) for the attractiveness of wild forests. From a practical point of view, it highlights the importance of distinguishing various target groups and different degrees of naturalness to maintain a nuanced portfolio of recreational opportunities in wild forests, for example by referring to established management tools like the recreation opportunity spectrum.

Keywords: primary forests; recreation; forestry; attraction; Carpathian mountains

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1. Introduction

Forests are important nature tourism destinations [1,2]. The demand for recreation in forests is high [3,4]. Market studies show that the generation of value from nature tourism will grow by over ten percent in the European market during the next ten years [5]. Communities with high-quality natural endowments may profit from this development. This is the case with wilderness tourism especially. Wilderness tourism is a specific type of nature tourism that takes place in wild forests. Wild forests are largely unmodified, have retained their natural character, and are rich in biodiversity and endemic species [6]. Participants in wilderness tourism are looking for solitude and remoteness [7]. Research on touristic attractiveness, however, shows that besides the wild forests, it is their embedding in complementary contexts, like suitable spatial or infrastructural environments, that create a memorable tourist experience [8]. With a high occurrence of wild forests, Romania

could benefit from wilderness tourism. However, forestry activities often take place in remote natural landscapes with intact wild forests that could be suitable for wilderness tourism. It is unclear how these activities interfere with the requirements and expectations of wilderness tourism and thus impact on communities' abilities to realize economic gains from wilderness tourism.

Nature tourism is in growing demand. Allied Market Research [5] forecasts that the global adventure tourism market, of which wilderness tourism is a part, will increase by 19.5% per year from USD 324.9 billion in 2022 to USD 2 trillion by 2032. European countries contribute a high share to this. It is predicted that from 2019 to 2026, the European market will grow by 11.9%. Forest-based nature tourism could thus be a valuable product for forest owners who depend on logging and wood harvesting [9]. Czeszczewik et al. [10] show that visitors to the Białowieża Forest generated about USD 2.2 million in 2016, while timber harvesting generated losses during that time. Based on the travel cost method, Lupp et al. [11] calculated a recreation value of EUR 2913.57 per hectare in a forest close to Munich, while revenue from timber accounted for around EUR 560 per hectare.

Wilderness tourism is a special type of nature tourism [12]. This type of tourism takes place on wild lands. Wilderness is largely conceived of as untouched nature—that is, land that has hardly been altered by human activity [6]. The distinct features of wilderness are remoteness and primitiveness [13]. Visitors to wild lands search for solitude, inspiration and connectedness to nature. However, an aesthetic appreciation of nature, being free of constraints of every-day life or the mastery of challenging situations are common motives for visiting wild lands [14]. However, the term wilderness is much contested, and subject to cultural and time-related interpretation [15].

When it comes to touristic attractiveness, research has long recognized that it is a region's endowment with natural resources and intact ecosystems that affects visitors' travel decisions [16]. Against this background, inventories of natural features that appeal to tourists have been developed [17,18]. Of prominent importance in these inventories are wilderness areas. Wilderness areas are top attractors due to their rarity, especially in heavily industrialized regions, such as parts of the European Union. Wilderness areas, thus, exhibit a large touristic appeal and provide a unique selling proposition (USP) [19,20]. However, the potential of wilderness areas for tourism is fragile. Tourism experiences are co-created between nature and man [21]: not only is intact nature necessary, but so is the visitors' illusion of being in a counter-world to everyday life [19]. The entire setting, including access points and hiking pathways, is important. This is because the 'otherness' of wilderness is a decisive feature in wilderness tourism [22,23].

Forest management practices may interfere with these requirements and expectations in wilderness tourism. Wallace et al. [24] show that intensive forest management negatively impacts campground utilization. In a similar way, Harshaw and Sheppard [25] found that timber harvesting causes a substantial loss of natural settings, thus lowering the opportunity for recreation in individuals seeking a high degree of naturalness. Relating to harvesting activities, Gundersen et al. [26] state that damages to paths, vegetation, and soils as well as harvesting residuesactivities are not appreciated by visitors. Cognitive dissonance due to unexpected forest characteristics, thus, might lower the touristic value of wilderness areas [27].

In Romania, opportunities for wilderness tourism are numerous [28]. Indeed, natural heritage contributes significantly to the country's tourism [29]. In particular, regions with extensive areas of primary and old-growth forests provide unique tourism opportunities [30,31]. Primary forests are forests that have never been impacted significantly by human activities; old-growth forests have records of previous forest use, but this occurring a long time ago or having only a minor impact, allowing the forests to

develop characteristics similar to those of primary forests [32]. From a tourism point of view, but also from an ecological point of view, these forests are of outstanding value: protected wilderness areas reduce the risk of terrestrial biodiversity becoming extinct [33] and support the provision of a large range of essential ecosystem services. Both forest types are scarce in Europe, thus creating an advantage for Romania, a country that still hosts large stands of primary and old-growth forests [32].

Primary and old-growth forests are very rare, small and fragmented in the EU. They account for less than 3% of the total forest area. Over 90% of them are found in Sweden, Finland (boreal forests) and Romania and Bulgaria (temperate forests). Because these forests are rare, valuable and unique, they are considered to be of the utmost importance for nature conservation [34]. Spatial data analyses, however, reveal that primary forests remain threatened and show significant disturbances. This is particularly noticeable in Romania, as well as in Scandinavia. Barredo et al. [35] therefore conclude that 'there is consensus among scientists that decisive and urgent action is needed for the strict protection of primary forests (p. 11)'. In Romania, however, there are viewpoints from scientists and governmental institutions that contradict international legal obligations and state that the strict protection of primary and old-growth forests (maximal 3% of the total Romanian forest cover) might produce adverse effects. The rationale for this view is that barring the management of forests will consequently put larger economic pressure on the remaining forests [36]. This stance receives the criticism that 'unsubstantiated opinions on such critical topics may encourage or support further destruction of natural areas and their related functions' [37] (p. 63).

Logging in ecologically valuable forest stands has intensified in large parts of Romania during recent decades [38]. According to estimates concerning the spread of primary and old-growth forests in Romania, wild forests could comprise approximately between 500,000 hectares [39] and 700,000 hectares [40]. Many of these forests are not strictly protected and the logging of old stands is ongoing despite the mandatory conservation of defined habitat types and species, as stipulated by EU legislation and conservation programs such as the Nature Restoration Regulation [41], the Habitats Directive, the Birds Directive and the EU-Biodiversity Strategy 2030 [42]. The latter calls for the identification, mapping and strict protection of all primary and old-growth forests in the EU. Non-governmental organizations such as Euronatur (https://www.euronatur.org/en, accessed on 7 May 2025), Greenpeace Romania (https://www.greenpeace.org/romania/, accessed on 7 May 2025) or Client Earth (https://www.clientearth.org, accessed on 7 May 2025) have thus criticized the fact that legal stipulations are often ignored or insufficiently enforced [32]. The potential of Romania's wild forests for wilderness tourism could thus erode. However, it is unclear how forestry activities impact the touristic attractiveness of wild forests.

Against this backdrop, the present paper looks at the following research question: how do forestry activities affect the touristic attractiveness of wild forests? This paper contributes to exploring the importance of wilderness areas as a resource for tourism. More specifically, it addresses the potential impacts of forestry activities on the touristic attractiveness of wild forests—a field of research that has received scant attention so far.

The research question is answered by evaluating expert perspectives on wilderness areas as a tourism resource, using the Făgăraş Mountains in the Southern Carpathian Mountains as a case study. The Făgăraş Mountains are a fast-developing touristic destination in Romania. The area is accessed via the Transfăgărășan Road, a well-known touristic route. Touristic demand has increased in recent years [43]. At the same time, the Făgăraş Mountains contain one of the largest clusters of wild forests in the temperate climate zone of the EU [32,44]. The forests not only represent a valuable touristic proposition, but represent

an important part of the natural capital of Europe. They are, however, endangered by commercial forestry activities [45].

In the following, the concepts of touristic attractiveness, destination attractors as well as wilderness and wilderness tourism are developed. The concepts serve as a background for an empirical study that addresses the research question by collecting voices from forestry, nature protection and tourism via a qualitative approach.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Touristic Attractiveness

Touristic attractiveness is one of the key drivers of destination competitiveness [46]. It helps tourism businesses to gain a critical amount of demand [47,48]. Touristic attractiveness can be defined from both perspectives: supply and the demand. On the supply side, touristic attractiveness is based upon the physical resources of a destination [18]. On the demand side, attractiveness equals a destination's ability to satisfy the expectations of visitors. Mayo and Jarvis [49] define touristic attractiveness as 'the perceived ability of a destination to deliver individual benefits' (p. 22). Touristic attractiveness thus depends not only on the destination's objective qualities but on the visitor's subjective assessment [50]. This also means that changes in the objective endowment of resources, e.g., due to timber harvesting, may or may not trigger changes in the perceived attractiveness of that destination.

Tourism products, and thus touristic attractiveness, are composed of various services. In addition to a destination's accessibility, tourism infrastructure and tourism services, as well as attractions and activities, add up to touristic attractiveness [8,51]. A distinction can be made between main and supporting elements. Main elements include natural attractions, such as lakes and forests, while supporting elements lie within the field of marketing or branding [52]. This is in line with findings that tourism attractions require 'context'. In other words, visitors recognize a destination as appealing when attractions are embedded in complementary contexts, which are suitable spatial, infrastructural or service-related environments [8,53]. Wild forests as natural attractions thereby profit from access routes that fit the atmosphere of remoteness and naturalness, while avoiding large touristic infrastructures such as car parks. The importance of a suitable access route has been emphasized recently in nature tourism [54].

This is consistent with insights suggesting that process-related components of touristic attractiveness have become increasingly important [55]. This applies to sustainable tourism practices in nature tourism destinations in particular [56]. If destinations put emphasis on the sustainable management of resources, tourism activities take place in a way that does not exceed the ecosystem's carrying capacity. In this way, the destination's intactness and attractiveness is kept alive for the next generation. Environmental damage and overused resources, on the other hand, reduce touristic attractiveness [16]. This applies to wilderness areas in particular, which are vulnerable to human intervention [57].

2.2. Forest Attractiveness

Strong forest attractors offer visitors unique experiences [58,59]. They contain resources that are exceptional, difficult to replace or to copy, and are thus rare [60,61]. In forest tourism, biodiversity, especially rare plants and animals, are unique resources [62]. Due to intensive forestry, they are mainly present in wilderness areas [33]. Wilderness areas therefore offer rare experiences that are hardly available elsewhere. Since wilderness areas differ significantly from cultural landscapes, they hold a competitive advantage: destinations that provide visitors with a 'counter-world' are successful [19,63].

Against this, the factors influencing forests' attractiveness have been identified [17]: these include scenic beauty, accessibility (e.g., via hiking trails), but also supplementary

infrastructure and services, e.g., information [62]. In general, it is open forest structures that are perceived as appealing. Equally important are varied forest structures, views into the forest or outlooks on the surrounding environment [64,65]. In a longitudinal study, old-growth forests received high ratings in attractiveness compared to other forms of managed forest (clear-cut, two-story, patch cut, thinning) [66]. Forest management activities can thus reduce the touristic appeal of forests [17,24]. For example, logging or selective thinning have negative effects on visual attractiveness [67]. The same applies to harvest residues, litter and noise [68,69]. Wallace et al. [24] point out that changes caused by forestry can hardly be reversed, or can only be reversed over long periods of time: 'it is difficult for a harvested area to appear unchanged from human influence' (p. 100690).

2.3. Wilderness

The concept of wilderness is a subject of intense controversy. Natural sciences usually define wilderness as environment that is untouched by human intervention. Wilderness is conceived of as being remote, rough, free, empty and untrammeled by man [70,71]. The IUCN [6] defines a wilderness as a 'large area of unmodified or slightly modified land, [. . .] retaining its natural character' (p. 2). Wilderness means areas being rich in biodiversity, with a high proportion of endemic species and habitat types [72]. It means places in which natural processes take place, with a high degree of self-organization [73]. Based on these characteristics, gradations of 'wilderness' occur. The Recreation Opportunity Spectrum (ROS) distinguishes primitive and semi-primitive areas [74]. Lesslie [75] developed a wilderness continuum recognizing that the quality of a wilderness is a relative condition. In some countries, minimum qualities are defined: In Iceland, a wilderness must be at least 5 km away from the nearest human structure, such as power lines or roads [57]. In the United States, the minimum size of a wilderness area is 2020 hectares, in Finland 15,000, in Australia 25,000 and in Sweden 50,000 hectares [76]. The German National Biodiversity Strategy requires a wilderness to be at least 500 hectares [77].

From a social constructivist point of view, a wilderness is where people perceive wilderness. From this perspective, wilderness is dependent on judgements, experiences and attributions of meaning, which differ across time, place and culture [22,78]. Wilderness can thus equally stand for 'a sphere of amorality, a sacred place, a place of fear, of self-assertion, of escape from rules and restrictions, or of relief from stressful everyday life' [23] (p. 339). In this sense, wilderness experiences arise in a highly subjective way [79]. According to environmental psychology, natural areas support recreational processes best if they live up to the visitor's needs and expectations [80,81]. It is therefore clear that not all visitors perceive wilderness as equally attractive in all situations [67,82]. Indeed, old-growth forests may receive fewer positive associations than managed forests in some cases [83].

2.4. Wilderness Tourism

Against this background, the term 'wilderness tourism' has become associated with activities that take place in natural and often remote areas, or, as Saarinen [76] puts it, in a 'harsh and rugged nature' (p. 522). According to Czeszczewik et al. [10], experiencing closeness to nature, including wildlife, is crucial for wilderness tourists. Aspects such as experiencing risks and challenges also play a role, as do aesthetic experiences [7,13]. The main attribute, however, is solitude [84]. Solitude is a 'state of being alone that is characterized by positive feelings of peace, contentment, and relaxation' [85] (p. 621). A precondition for solitude in nature is being away from people and civilization. It is about privacy, but also about being free from social constraints and obligations [86]. When visiting a wilderness, encounters with other visitors are just as unwelcome as traces of human influence [7,87]. In this context, Manning [87] points out that 'many wilderness

visitors find it unacceptable to encounter more than three to five other groups per day along trails' (p. 168).

As a type of tourism, wilderness tourism is situated in the sphere of nature tourism [12]. Nevertheless, it is special in the sense that it puts specific emphasis on the protection of wild forests, and is dependent on these natural assets [14]. With regard to processes of landscape perception—according to the social constructivist paradigm—wilderness tourism could differ from other forms of nature tourism if visitors attribute other values and meanings to wild forests compared to other types of forests [15]. Furthermore, research on tourism mobilities suggest different bodily experiences in wild versus managed forests [88,89]. Wilderness tourism, in its experiential quality, could therefore differ from other forms of nature tourism.

To summarize, wilderness tourism is an exclusive concept and provides specific and unique experiences. People who engage in this type of tourism are usually well-off, physically fit and independent, enabling them to access and cope with demanding terrain [90]. It is precisely this exclusivity that has been a source of criticism of wilderness tourism. Since wilderness is conceived of as being free of humans (visitors are a transient phenomenon), only certain types of activities are welcome; these include primitive, unmotorized forms of recreation such as hiking. However, this conception follows a long tradition of understanding wilderness (i.e., Wilderness Act 1964), which has been crizicized as undemocratic and socially segregating, possibly excluding traditional and archaic human uses of wilderness areas [91].

2.5. Impacts of Forestry Activities on Wilderness Tourism

A prerequisite for wilderness experiences, as conceptualized above, is a lack of human infrastructure [92]. Specifically, in wilderness, there should be no motorized access for vehicles. Instead of wide paths and forest roads, narrow, natural or near-natural trails should predominate [13,93]. Forest management activities can thus have negative impacts on wilderness tourism. For example, intensive timber exploitation alters the appearance of a natural forest landscape and the perception of wilderness significantly. Forest structures, plants and habitats for animals, which are central to touristic attractiveness, disappear [94]. Forest roads are built, affecting existing hiking infrastructure. Beyond its aesthetic value, the value of an environment being untouched and pristine is compromised [95]. This applies in particular to clear cutting or large-scale human intervention. With such changes, the quality of the wilderness experience disappears, particularly the opportunity for solitude and remoteness from everyday life [96].

Beyond that, forestry activities have indirect effects on recreation [96]. These effects are linked to the fact that forestry activities require paved roads to a certain degree. Once built, they allow for a higher number and for new types of visitors with new interests accessing the area. In particular, motorized activities make use of access roads [97]. Thus, the increasing number of visitors reduces the quality of the wilderness and making the area unattractive for the original target groups. This corresponds to insights from research on the reasons why wilderness tourists visit such areas. According to the purism scale for wilderness tourism, strong purists visit the most remote and primitive landscapes, searching for solitude and remoteness. Non-purists, instead, value the least remote areas, an urban-like environment and infrastructure. For strong purists, accessibility, facilities, services and the popularity of an area are critical factors—increased numbers of visitors and crowding will drive them away and lead to a change in the visitor structure [57].

Further insights on how tourist experiences change due to forestry activities come from research on tourism mobilities [88]. According to this approach, tourism experiences are dependent on the bodily encounter with tourism spaces and thus on sensorimotoric

impressions and the movement of the body [89,98]. Differences in the 'sensescape' [99] of a tourism space thus lead to different bodily impressions and consequently to different touristic experiences. In this context, Fossgard and Fredman [54] state that the experience of mountain biking is different if the activity is carried out on soft, dry ground versus wet or hard ground. Stevenson and Farrell [100] emphasize, with regard to hiking, that 'landscape is embodied as the walker treads a path, marks it with their body and feels its bodily effects' (p. 437). Different materialities and different physical environments would thus induce different walking experiences [100].

Since forestry activities impact the quality of the natural environment, it seems plausible that they change the touristic experience. From a societal perspective, this is a loss, since tourism product diversity drops and certain recreational needs can no longer be met [87]. From a regional development point of view, it is a loss, since the area loses its competitive advantage and the opportunity for economic value generation based on wilderness tourism instead of timber harvesting [101].

2.6. Critical Stances on Wilderness, Wilderness Tourism and Impacts of Forestry Activities on Wild Forests

This paper develops the concept of wilderness from an ecological and social constructivist perspective. Both perspectives, however, are not dichotomous, but interrelate with each other in many ways [15]. They could, for example, be perceived as parts of a continuum encompassing a great variety of nature concepts. De Groot et al. [102] cite a mastery of nature, stewardship, and partnership with nature as concepts. In the stewardship model, for example, humans are conceived of as parts of nature, whereas wardship and utilization models see nature as a separate entity [103]. In practical terms, visitors to forests will always synthesize the ecological endowment of a place with their subjective perception [15]. Visitors, thus, co-produce their wilderness experiences with nature—a stance that is close to insights on the formation of cultural ecosystem services [21].

In parallel, the concept of wilderness per se is object to criticism. There are voices that negate the existence of pristine nature: in their view, traces of human activities, like micro plastics, exist everywhere, rendering pristine nature an impossibility [91]. Furthermore, wilderness as a concept is criticized against a neo-colonialism perspective [14,91]. Another strand of literature conceives of wilderness as a dynamic concept: wilderness, thus, is where natural processes can take place and a high level of self-organization in ecosystem processes prevail [73]. From this perspective, even urban wastelands could be wilderness [23]. In the European context, and the Natura 2000 network in particular, wilderness is conceived of as a spectrum of more or less wild areas according to the intensity of human interference. Wilderness is a relative concept, which can be measured along a continuum [42].

In the same vein, wilderness tourism receives criticism. For example, from a feminist perspective, the current understanding of wilderness tourism as the search for solitude and self-actualization in a harsh environment is coined by a predominantly white viewpoint, leaving aside marginalized perspectives [104,105]. Indeed, wilderness tourism has been described as exclusive and socially segregative [90]. The most pronounced critique, however, is that wilderness tourism contributes to the commodification of nature, implying that nature—being part of a commercial product—is to be valued in monetary terms rather than in ecological or ethical terms [106,107].

Wilderness tourism furthermore needs to be evaluated with regard to its position within the sustainability discourse. Basically, sustainable tourism is defined as economically viable tourism that does not destroy the resources on which its future depends, including both the physical environment and the host community [108]. Wilderness tourism tries to strike a balance between preserving wild forests and using them economically; it therefore fits into the concept of sustainable tourism. However, if other sustainability concepts were

applied, wilderness tourism could fall out of sustainability's realm. This, for example, would be the case with de-growth tourism [109], which calls for less intense tourism and less resource consumption. This would afford the self-restriction of tourism and keep places that are currently without tourism free of tourism in the future.

The impact of forestry activities on wild forests is mostly discussed as being negative from a tourism viewpoint [17,24]. However, forestry measures can also increase the touristic value of forests: visitors, for example, often prefer semi-open forest landscapes with a high degree of structural diversity, which usually need management [23]. Other voices suggest that landscape aesthetics are not important in forest management at all [36]. The most far-reaching point, however, is that without human presence, the current Eurasian continent probably would not be covered exclusively with dense forest stands, because large herbivores would downsize the forest cover. From this perspective, the management of wild forests would reverse earlier human interference with ecological processes [110].

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Study Site

Compared to other Eastern European countries, tourism is still in its infancy in Romania [28]. In 2019, the country received 13.4 million tourists, the majority being domestic travelers [111]. With 2.7 million international arrivals in 2023, Romania received fewer visitors than Bulgaria (7.8), Slovakia (5.6) or Lithuania (2.9) [112]. The contribution of tourism to the Romanian GDP remains low, and is below the European average [113]. The country's tourism development strategy aims to promote quality tourism. Cultural and natural heritage is at the center of this strategy; for some time, the country has marketed its destinations with the brand 'Romania—explore the Carpathian Garden' [29]. Particular emphasis is placed on the country's high biodiversity and the primeval forests of Romania as 'high-value natural capital' [30,31,114].

The example case in this study is the Făgăraş Mountains, a central part of the Southern Carpathians, which cover an area of around 200,000 ha. From a tourism perspective, the Southern Carpathians are one of the most important destinations in Romania [30]. In 2023, the outdoor holiday provider Inghams (UK) ranked the Făgăraș Mountains as the second most popular walking destination globally between 2020 and 2023. Their Trail Etiquette Report (2023) reveals that the Făgăraș Mountains experienced a remarkable increase in online search interest, ranking them as the second most popular walking destination globally during that period [43].

The strength of the Făgăraş Mountains is their natural assets, particularly their widespread pristine environment [44]. The mountains are an important reserve for primary and old-growth forests. Over 70% of the Făgăraş Mountains is considered forested [115]. Inaccessible primary and old-growth forests cover around 27,000–61,846 ha of the area [39]. Some of the trees are monumental trees, and some may be among the oldest currently existing in Romania [116]. For primary forests, natural ageing and decomposition are characteristics that lead to a diversity of habitats. The coexistence of different stages of forest development, a high proportion of dead or decaying trees, as well as the presence of old trees or giant trees are a typical feature of primary forest [32]. The Făgăraş Mountains are thus of high importance for nature conservation as they are a habitat for threatened species [115]. Linnell et al. [44] state that 'In terms of its size, species diversity, and ecological integrity the Făgăraș Mountains are clearly an area with a very high biodiversity value' (p. 3).

Intact primary and old-growth forests are a particular focus of EU nature conservation programmes and legislation, such as the EU Biodiversity Strategy 2030, the Habitats and Birds Directives and the EU Nature Restoration Regulation. These overarching EU legal

provisions require the significant deterioration of protected habitats and species to be avoided and appropriate risk assessments based on scientific data to be carried out before forestry activities are pursued [117]. There is high interest from a European perspective in preserving the primary and old-growth forests in the Făgăraş Mountains Natura 2000 site (see Figure 1), especially as this is one of the largest clusters of such valuable forests in the temperate climate zone of the EU [32,44].

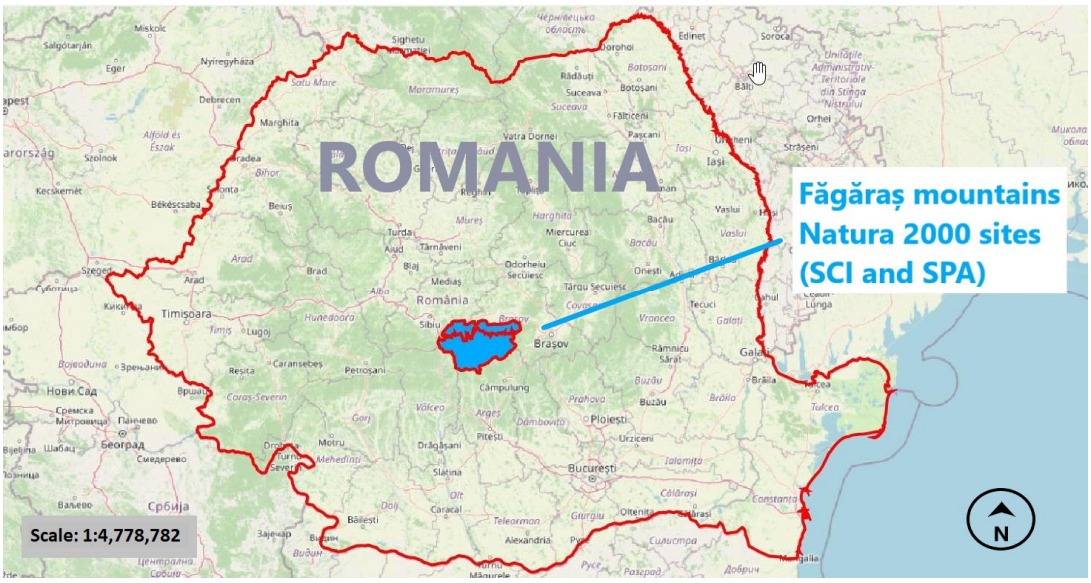


Figure 1. Făgăraş Mountains Natura 2000 site—Sites of Community Importance (SCI) and Special Protection Areas (SPA) (blue), located in the southern Carpathians in central Romania. Map by Ion Holban, QGIS, Base Map © Open Street Map Contributors.

At the same time, Făgăraş Mountains are one of the most significant sites in Romania regarding conflicts between forestry and nature conservation. Although the mountains are protected under EU law (Natura 2000 site), there is still forestry activity in primary forests. This is due to a lack of law enforcement and the intentional ignorance of EU nature conservation law [118], resulting in the fact that the European Commission (2020) has launched infringement proceedings against the Romanian state, which have not yet been concluded [42].

As in other places in the Carpathians, the forests of the Făgăraş Mountains are under great socio-economic pressure. Not only because local communities extract wood for heating purposes. The main impact is that wood from the Carpathians is traded internationally. The region has been subject to large clear-cuts in recent decades. This is fueled by the practice of Romanian wood sales, which is based on stumpage sales, not on the exact calculation of volume; it is thus largely unconcerned with the quantities of wood that are harvested. Reliable data in Romania about the country's harvesting rate is not available [118,119]. At the same time, private forest owners are confronted with a very restrictive legal framework, imposing considerable costs on them and causing them to use forest resources beyond the legal requirement [120]. Thus, both public and private forest owners have been accused of illegal logging and causing ecological damage by NGOs, media and the civil society [120].

To summarize, logging in the area's wild forest threatens biodiversity [32,44]. This is aggravated by the fact that forest road construction has intensified, rendering primary forests accessible [44]. Such forestry 'malpractice'—particularly unregulated logging—poses a challenge not only for biodiversity conservation but for the forests' touristic attractiveness [31]. Other developments, such as the construction of hydropower plants, the

uncontrolled spread of second homes and tourist infrastructure, also pose a threat to the forests of the Făgăraş Mountains [44].

This study focused on three particular valleys in the Făgăraş Mountains: Arpașu Mare Valley, Vișstea Mare Valley, Pojorta Valley. The three valleys were selected because of their high ecological and touristic value and because they are accessible by marked hiking trails. In the Arpașu Mare valley, hiking trails lead from the valley through large areas of primary forest to alpine areas. From the top of Arpașu Mare peak, the Vârtopului Ridge leads to the north, separating the calderas of Podragel and Vârtop. The marked hiking trail forks in the upper part of the valley: one trail branches off to the west, leading through old beech, spruce and fir stands into the alpine Podrăgel caldera. The trail branching off to the east leads to Lake Podragu and on to the Podragu summit. Vișstea Mare Valey lies in the central part of the Făgăraș Mountains at the northern slope of the main range, between Vișstea Mare Ridge and Drăganului Ridge. It is popular with visitors because it leads to the highest mountain peak in Romania, the Moldoveanu. The valley has outstanding scenic attractiveness [121]. Pojorta Valley, in turn, is located at the foot of the Giumalău Massif. The very remote valley narrows into gorges, rendering the area appealing for visitors. The valley hosts vast primary forest stands of beech, sycamore and spruce trees (primaryforests.org).

In the period from 2021 to 2024, at least 24 logging permits were issued in and near the valleys, according to the Romanian wood tracking application (inspectorulpadurii.ro, see Figure 2). Some of the logging areas are in close proximity to primary forests listed in the Romanian 'National Catalogue of Virgin and Quasivirgin Forests'. The Romanian National Catalogue currently protects 72,279 hectares of primary and old growth forests, according to the Romanian Ministry of Environment, Waters and Forests [122]. These forests are considered as intact. The three valleys host over 1250 hectares of primary forests included in the Romanian National Catalogue. International studies, such as the PRIMOFARO study, however, report that the Făgăraş Mountains contain large areas of primary and old-growth forests that have not yet been strictly protected and are in danger of degradation from commercial logging (primofaro polygons, see Figure 2) [39].

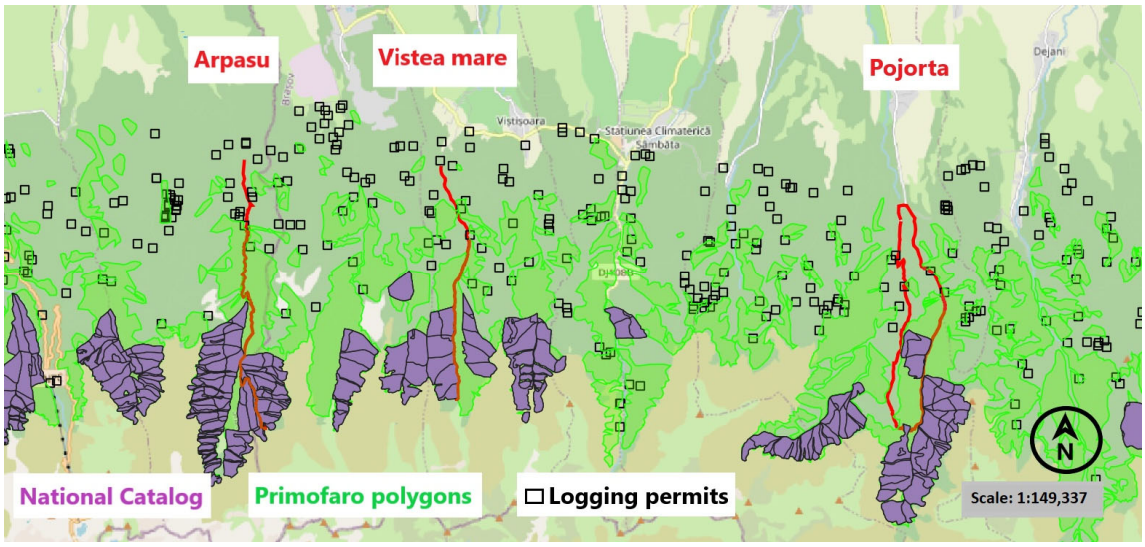


Figure 2. Logging permits and protected primary and old-growth forests according to the Romanian National Catalogue and the Primofaro Study in the valleys of Arpașu Mare, Vișstea Mare and Pojorta. Map by Ion Holban, QGIS, Base Map © Open Street Map Contributors.

Regarding logging permits and logging activities, key findings from 2021–2024 show that logging impacted 138,000 hectares of forest parcels overlapping with potential primary

and old-growth forests [39]. Notably, over half of this area (71,000 hectares) was located within Natura 2000 protected sites. A total of 4.7 million cubic meters of wood was harvested from areas overlapping with potential primary and old-growth forests [39]. Nearly half of this volume (2.3 million cubic meters) came from forests inside Natura 2000 sites. Large-scale operations are transforming forests into barren landscapes. Heavy machinery cuts roads on steep slopes, triggering erosion. These practices equally impact potential primary and old-growth forests inside and outside Natura 2000 sites, suggesting that the designation alone fails to ensure protection.

In the Arpașu Valley, visual evidence of logging was documented in 2016, particularly the construction of forest roads, which are up to 5 m broad and speed up the erosion of soil by approximately 10,000 m^3/km [123]. The visual appearance of the three valleys has accordingly changed. The access routes and parts of the hiking trails are characterized by muddy forest roads, large piles of cut tree trunks at the side of the road, and ongoing forestry work, such as the noise of chainsaws and the traffic of logging skidders and trucks (see Figures 3 and 4).



Figure 3. Forestry activities in Arpașu Mare Valley, Vișstea Mare Valley and Pojorta Valley (from left to right). Photos by Ion Holban, Matthias Schickhofer and Jana Ballenthien.



Figure 4. Pojorta Valley before forestry activities in 2022 and 2023 and after in 2025 (pictures from comparable positions). Photos by Matthias Schickhofer and Ion Holban.

3.2. Data Collection and Data Analysis

This study adopts a qualitative approach. A qualitative survey was conducted and evaluated according to the principles of qualitative content analysis [124,125]. The qualitative approach was chosen for data collection, because participants can answer according to their own priorities, highlighting information they consider as relevant. Qualitative approaches, therefore, help to explore a topic from the perspectives of the participants themselves [126].

Data collection took place in February 2025. The qualitative survey was conducted with experts from the fields of tourism, forestry and nature conservation. The interviews were exploratory in nature, targeting the experts' current interpretative knowledge, subjective orientations, or points of view on wilderness and wilderness tourism and forestry activities in the Făgăraş Mountains. Interviewees were addressed as experts, because unlike laypersons, they possess specific knowledge on wilderness, tourism and nature conservation in the study area; with this knowledge, they furthermore contribute to the discourse on wilderness and wilderness tourism in their respective professional spheres [127].

The recruitment of experts took place on the basis of personal recommendation, recruiting individuals with specific knowledge in the fields of tourism, forestry and nature conversation and local knowledge of the study area. A total of 25 experts were contacted, and 17 took part in the survey. Nine experts contributed from the perspective of nature conservation, seven came from tourism, and one came from the forestry sector. Six experts represented private businesses, four came from associations, two came from an academic background, and five represented individual, non-organized voices. New experts were recruited as long as the interviews yielded new insights. The sample thus provides a sufficient degree of saturation despite the uneven distribution of professions. As is common in qualitative research, the number of experts and the number of statements supporting a certain viewpoint must not be taken as an indicator of a standpoint's significance. Instead, it is the breadth of the information and its degree of detail that are important. The survey was conducted with experts because of their specialized knowledge of the study area and the potential interrelations between landscape, forestry, and tourism, an approach already undertaken in a comparable study by Sæþórsdóttir and Tverijonaite [19]. Expert interviews, in general, are considered an 'efficient and concentrated method' of data generation, especially in the exploratory phase of a project [127] (p. 654).

The survey was semi-structured and guideline-based. This format was chosen to keep the survey as open as possible, but to relate the answers to the research question [126]. The guideline of the survey included five questions: experts were asked to define the concept of wilderness and the concept of wilderness tourism from their point of view. They were asked to evaluate the importance of wilderness tourism for the Făgăraş Mountains and to reflect on what effects forestry activities could have on the region's attractiveness. The related questions had the following wording: (a) What is wilderness to you? Please describe what characteristics, values or meanings wilderness has for you. (b) What is wilderness tourism? For what motives do visitors take part in wilderness tourism? Please describe. (c) What importance, do you think, does wilderness tourism have in the Făgăraş Mountains today and in future? (d) According to your opinion, what kinds of impact (if any) does the logging of forests have on the attractiveness of the Făgăraş Mountains for wilderness tourism? Please add why these impacts might occur. The survey was conducted in writing using an online form in Romanian and English language. Before the data analysis, Romanian answers were translated into English.

The data were analyzed according to the principles of qualitative content analysis [124].

The main categories for the text analysis were formed deductively based on the themes of the survey guideline; subcategories were formed inductively based on the text material

created by the experts. Data analysis comprised the following steps: (a) coding of the text material according to the main categories, and the attribution of the coded text segments to the categories; (b) the inductive definition of subcategories based on the coded material in the main categories; and (c) the coding of the full-text material using the final category system [124]. As a result, each main category comprised several subcategories, each of which comprised several thematically coded text segments, as shown in Figure 5. The text segments in each subcategory were summarized according to the principles of paraphrasing and generalization. This means that slack information was removed, while core messages were carved out and summarized into thematically coherent paragraphs [125]. If text segments were difficult to attribute to a specific category, this was discussed among the research team. The analysis was performed using the software MAXQDA2020.4.2 [128].

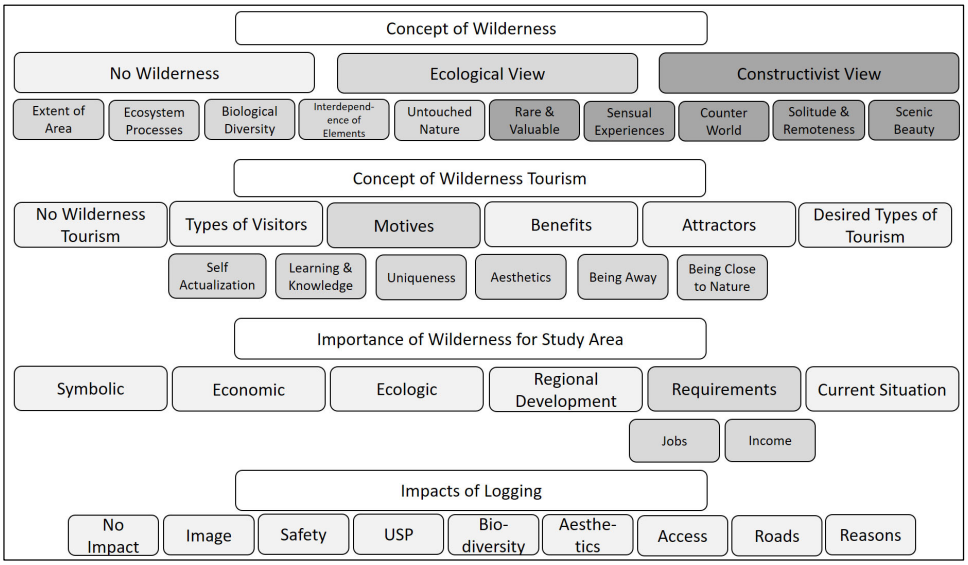


Figure 5. Category system for the analysis of the experts' answers; grey colors indicate the attribution of a subcategory to a superordinate category.

4. Findings

Based on the answers of the experts from tourism, nature protection and forestry, 221 codes were set in MaxQDA. In total, 47 codes refer to the term wilderness, 65 codes refer to the concept of wilderness tourism, 53 codes capture the importance of wilderness tourism for the Făgăraş Mountains, and 56 codes relate to the impact of forestry on the attractiveness of the region for wilderness tourism.

4.1. Wilderness

The findings show that the majority of codes, namely 31, refer to natural sciences' definition of wilderness (I1, I2, I3, I4, I6, I7, I8, I9, I10, I11, I12, I14, I16). Five codes describe wilderness as a geographical area that is free of human influence (I2, I3, I6, I8, I14). Wilderness is a 'space devoid of anthropic traces' (I2:1). Two voices point out that wilderness needs to be free from human infrastructure (I6, I11). The term 'naturalness' is mentioned (I8:2). Similarly, wilderness is understood as an area that is biologically and ecologically intact (I12). Other voices allow for human influences if they are minimal and non-invasive (I1, I9, I10, I16). One statement emphasizes that there is not a separation between nature and man, or wilderness and civilization (I13).

A second group of codes emphasizes wilderness as being rich in biodiversity (I3, I4, I6, I7, I9, I11). Natural processes operate undisturbed in wilderness (I2, I3, I4, I8, I10, I12). Terms such as 'self-regulation', 'dynamism and adaptability' and 'interdependence'

(I3:6-11) are mentioned. Several codes emphasize that natural processes are characterized by 'balance' or 'self-balance' (I3, I4, I10). One code emphasizes that wilderness refers to larger areas (I10).

The constructivist perspective of wilderness is captured by 15 codes (I1, I5, I9, I14, I15, I16, I17). The perspective assumes that wilderness is dependent on human values and the attribution of meaning (I5). According to the experts, wilderness is of particular value because it is rare (I1, I16) and cannot be restored (I5). Wilderness is imbued with meaning, such as contributing to a meaningful life (I5) and to 'life and tranquility' (I15:1). Wilderness is described as an environment which stimulates all the senses (I5, I16) and is of great beauty (I9). Wilderness is a counter-world: 'the scent of dampness, moss, mushrooms, resin, and pine pollen. The wallow of wild boars, the claw marks of bears or deer on trees, the viper basking in the sun, or the chamois whistling at me as if to say, 'What are you doing here?" (I16, 1-4).

4.2. Wilderness Tourism

The experts described wilderness tourism in terms of visitor motives (24 codes from I1, I2, I4, I5, I6, I7, I8, I9, I11, I12, I14, I15, I16, I17), visitor groups (4 codes from I7, I9, I12), attractors (14 codes from I3, I4, I7, I9, I12, I14) and the outcomes of visits to wilderness (14 codes from I1, I4, I6, I10, I13, I16). Hikers and mountaineers are the main visitor groups (I12), along with researchers or visitors with knowledge of primeval forests (I7, I9). The two most frequently coded visitation motives are 'to be close to nature' (I1, I2, I6, I8, I14, I15, I16) and 'to experience something new and to learn something about nature' (I4, I7, I9, I11, I14). Two codes refer to the fact that people want to 'return to nature' (I8) or see species they know from their childhood (I7). Other motives relate to escaping from civilization and from everyday life (I14, I16), finding relaxation (I15), finding one's way back to oneself (I17) or gaining self-perception (I12). Overall, visitors expect to have a unique experience (I1, I5, I6), often connected to aesthetic qualities (I12, I15, I17).

The benefits of visiting a wilderness relate to these findings. In particular, the codes refer to learning effects and to gaining knowledge, especially in the field of nature conservation (I4, I6, I10, I13, I16). The sensual enjoyment of nature is described (I1, I10), as well as the recreational effects of visits to nature (I16). Furthermore, visitors feel their identity enriched when visiting wilderness: 'You discover feelings you didn't think you had, because you didn't know how you're build, you rediscover yourself ancestrally' (I16:7-8).

Attractors, mentioned by experts, are wide-ranging and include general terms such as 'natural phenomena' (I3:14) and 'biodiversity hotspots' (I7:7), as well as specific descriptions: 'from the meadows at the foothills, followed by deciduous forests, mixed forests, coniferous forests, formations of dwarf pine, juniper, and rhododendron, alpine pastures, rocky ridges, and alpine lakes' (I9:12-14). The role of forests as an attractor is emphasized (I3, I9, I12), with old trees being called 'guardians of the mountains' (I9:19). In addition, observing wildlife (I3) is important, especially rare species (I9).

At the same time, experts emphasize that wilderness tourism needs to be sustainable (I3, I7), by protecting the nature it seeks to use (I1, I2, I4, I7, I8, I11, I17). Some voices mention sustainability in connection with guided tours offered by small companies (I4). Others speak of international marketing and branding (I12). One voice suggested that wilderness and tourism are incompatible, since wilderness ceases to exist where tourism takes place (I13).

4.3. Importance of Wilderness Tourism

Wilderness tourism is considered to be of great importance for the study area (I2, I11, I14, I15). The region's forests give it a unique selling point (I1, I2, I4): 'there are not many

places in Europe where tourists can enjoy pure, almost untouched wild forests' (I1:11-12). The forests diversify the touristic product portfolio (I12). Overall, experts consider tourism to be of great economic significance for Romania (I9) and for the development of the study area (I10), particularly when it comes to income generation (I3, I7, I12, I15) and jobs (I4) but also local pride (I9). Experts perceive wilderness tourism as an alternative to timber harvesting (I4, I12), highlighting that wilderness tourism could strike a balance between nature conservation and the economic use of the forest (I10).

In order to develop wilderness tourism, certain conditions apply. Experts speak of a change in mindset among communities and administrations (I3, I5). Forests in the Făgăraş Mountains would need more effective protection. Timber harvesting would need to be banned. Nature conservation and tourism would need to be prioritized over forestry (I12). This would require a well-funded nature conservation administration (I7). As for tourism development, experts hint at the need for professional infrastructures and information (I7, I12, I13), and effective visitor management to prevent the area from degradation (I13, I5).

4.4. Effects of Forestry Activitites on Wilderness Tourism

The majority of codes cover the negative impacts of forestry activities on the area's touristic attractiveness (48 codes from I1, I2, I4, I5, I6, I8, I10, I12, I14, I15, I16, I17). The experts' assessments of the effects of forestry activities on touristic attractiveness range from 'disastrous' (I4) to 'imbalance caused to the forest ecosystem' (I8:10-11). The negative impacts relate to biodiversity as an attractor (I3, I8, I9, I10, I15), to the loss of aesthetic attractiveness (I3, I12, I16), and to the image of the region (I12, I14). In terms of biodiversity, the focus is on the loss of plant and animal species, and the loss of ecological habitats; additional aspects are soil erosion and the loss of water quality (I3, I8), as well as the associated safety risks for communities and visitors (I3, I9, I12).

In the field of aesthetic beauty, the loss of old tree populations is emphasized by the experts: 'The logged areas next to the forest roads often show a picture of devastation. In some cases, very natural forests with ancient, giant trees are also affected. The former primeval forest giants then lie cut up and sad at the edge of the road' (I12:39-42). This is associated with the loss of the region's unique selling point as a wilderness area (I3, I4, I5, I6, I9, I14): 'It's like cutting off the country's potential for differentiation in the world' (I4:20-21).

In addition to forests, experts point to tourism infrastructure being affected by forestry activities. In particular, access routes are destroyed or made unfit for wilderness tourism by forestry machines. They lose their attractiveness due to mud, tracks and harvest residues (I1, I3, I12). Hiking trails in the inner forest stands are also damaged. Due to forest roads being built for transportation reasons, narrow paths transmute into wide roads that can be used by heavy equipment. After the end of timber harvesting, according to experts, these roads are used for motorized forms of recreation: 'The paths become exploitation roads, which after completion, are used by off-road enthusiasts who in turn erode the soil' (I16:17-18).

As for the reasons for these negative effects on touristic attractiveness, experts emphasize unfit forestry practices (I9), particularly clear-cutting without reforestation (I3). As a second reason, they mention the uncontrolled growth of infrastructure. Last but not least, they hint at the fact that the exploitation of forests as a source of income is a widely spread practice and state of mind (I3).

Some voices diverge from the negative assessment of forestry's impacts on touristic attractiveness (I3, I7, I9, I13). Some of the codes suggest that whether there are negative impacts depends on the type of forestry activity. If forestry measures are carried out in accordance with the current state of knowledge and regulation, the impacts would be

acceptable (I7, I11, I13). The thinning of forests, in particular, is considered acceptable (I13). Similarly, one code refers to the fact that local people should be able to continue to use the forest for firewood (I9). However, clear-cutting should be terminated, and areas should be dedicated to specific aims, like thinning or no intervention (I13). In this way, a balance between timber extraction and forest conservation could be reached (I13).

5. Discussion

To relate the results to the literature, the most important points from the qualitative survey are discussed in the following sections. First, the conceptual understanding of the experts regarding wilderness and wilderness tourism, particularly regarding the importance of contexts for attractors, are related to views that already exist in the literature. Consequently, the findings on the impact of forestry activities on the touristic attractiveness of wild forests are discussed in relation to the relevant literature. Based on this, the research question is answered. Practical implications close the chapter.

5.1. Wilderness and Wilderness Tourism

Based on our findings, the experts describe wilderness as free, or almost free, of human interventions. This corresponds to natural sciences' view of wilderness and to IUCN's definition of the term [6]. A high level of biodiversity is emphasized, as well as the predominance of natural processes, as in Newbold et al. [72]. The separation of man and nature, however, is criticized in our study; this criticism is often found in current literature as well [91]. In contrast to the literature, the geographic extent of wilderness is not emphasized strongly, nor is remoteness mentioned as an attribute of wilderness [76].

From a constructivist point of view, the perception of wilderness depends on the visitor's judgements, experiences and attributions of meaning [15]. This perspective is present in the data, albeit to a lesser extent than natural sciences' view of wilderness. Experts describe wilderness as a place of escape, recreation and self-actualization. Wilderness, in the experts' view, is an 'otherness' or 'counter-world'; both terms refer to well-known notions in the literature [19,22,23,63]. Experts consider wilderness as full of meaning, especially since wilderness is rare and cannot be copied or restored easily. Wilderness is thus a valuable resource [60,61]. Experts recognize the uniqueness of wilderness and emphasize that wilderness is a USP, as Erdeli and Dinca [31] and Puczkó et al. [114] did.

The findings concerning visitor motives show that being close to nature is of paramount importance. In addition, aesthetic motives, as well as motives related to the visitor's self, such as self-actualization or contributions to one's identity, play a role. Unlike in the literature, aspects of challenge or risk are hardly mentioned. The notion of 'solitude'—one of the most important visitor motives discussed in the literature [84,86]—is reflected indirectly in the experts' answers. They refer to 'escaping everyday life' and 'recovering' as motives, and associate wilderness with 'life and tranquility', with these terms adding up to an image of solitude and being alone in nature in peace and relaxation [85]. In contrast to the literature, experts emphasize learning and gaining knowledge by visiting primary forests. These could be new aspects to highlight, particularly with respect to wilderness tourism in rare natural environments.

With regard to attractors, our data show a large overlap with findings in the literature. The respondents indicate that both plants and animals are essential to wilderness tourism—a finding backed up by Lee et al. [62]. In terms of vegetation, old forest stands are perceived of as important tourism attractors. Precise descriptions of what kind of forests contribute to touristic attractiveness, however, are largely missing. Here, the literature is more informative [26,64,65,129]. An exception is one expert who refers to the thinning of forests as a measure that could meet the requirements of wilderness tourism. In the

literature, however, thinning is described as having potentially negative effects on forest attractiveness [67].

As in the literature, the expert respondents consider tourism attractors as being embedded in contexts [8,53]. These contexts include access routes and hiking trails. Both are frequently damaged by forest machinery, and could contribute to visitors being disappointed even before reaching the forest. Other important contexts to help tourists include information, a brand identity and touristic infrastructure—all three of them mentioned in the literature [63]. Experts point out that realizing wilderness tourism requires a change in the mindset of communities and administration, a clear prioritization of tourism over forestry, and the effective protection of forests, as outlined by Wallace et al. [24].

It is important to emphasize that experts consider wilderness tourism beneficial only if it is sustainable, a condition also emphasized in the literature [56]. Furthermore, it is pointed out that local actors will only support sustainable wilderness tourism if they benefit economically from it, e.g., by new and secure job opportunities [11,101]. A precondition for this is an entrepreneurial structure, i.e., small and medium-sized tourism enterprises that are able to satisfy guests' needs [130].

5.2. Impacts of Forestry Activities on Touristic Attractiveness of Wild Forests

With regard to the effects of intensive timber extraction on the touristic attractiveness of wild forests, experts mostly recognize a negative effect, as other previous studies have done [24,94,96]. They point to direct as well as indirect effects. The loss of pristine forests and of species and habitats is mentioned as a direct effect. Based on this, experts acknowledge that the region might lose an opportunity for tourism product differentiation. In addition, experts mention the change in contexts due to forestry activities; this includes hiking trails and access roads becoming damaged by forestry machinery, leading to aesthetic losses and to a reduction in overall attractiveness. Indirect effects, however, are hardly mentioned by the experts in our survey. In the literature, these effects include a change in target groups, increasing numbers of day tourists, and an economic loss in the communities concerned [96].

Not all voices from the survey, however, see forestry activities as having negative impacts on the attractiveness of wild forests. Some argue that since not all parts of primary forest areas enjoy strict protection, it is legal for forestry interventions to be carried out. It is noteworthy, however, that this may apply only to those areas not under the protection of the Natura 2000 regime, a protection status called for by the EU Biodiversity Strategy. Thinning, or the extraction of single trees, is regarded as a measure that—if performed cautiously and according to good forest practices—could be compatible with nature tourism, and perhaps even wilderness tourism. From this perspective, forests would be unattractive for visitors only if such standards are not met. Clear-cutting is considered a malpractice, which should generally not be allowed in primary and old-growth forest stands. This resonates with previous studies, lamenting intensified clear-cuts in the Făgăraş Mountains [32,44].

5.3. Synthesis and Evaluation of Research Question

Summarizing the findings, the research question (*how do forestry activities affect the touristic attractiveness of wild forests?*) can be answered as follows: Coming from theory, wilderness can be conceptualized from a social constructivist and a natural sciences viewpoint. According to the social constructivist perspective, wilderness is enacted by subjective interpretation, particularly by a visitor's impression of escaping from everyday life into a counter-world. This illusion may persist in forests managed carefully. Management activities could even enhance attractiveness, as diverse forest structures and outlooks make forests attractive. A first target group of visitors could thus benefit from close-to-wilderness

experiences in carefully managed forests. However, it needs to be noted that similar types of forests exist in large numbers in other places. They are, at most, secondary attractors for visitors. The perspective of natural sciences, on the other hand, emphasizes wilderness as being free of human intervention. Visitors knowledgeable of the characteristics of wild forests are not satisfied by visiting a seemingly natural but in fact managed forest. They seek to visit the original. For this second target group, managed forests lack uniqueness and are less attractive. This distinction would tie in with the findings of the ROS, which distinguishes between various types of wild and managed land, and their target groups [74].

Contexts are important for all target groups—namely for visitors interested in getting away from everyday life in managed forests as well as for those knowledgeable about wild forests and seeking to visit untouched wilderness. Because of the composite nature of tourism attractiveness, contexts contribute significantly to the overall attractiveness. This is underscored by research in the field of tourism mobilities [88,89]. Wide forest roads, damaged hiking trails, harvest residues, piles of mud and traces of forestry are not acceptable for either target group and make a visit to forests unattractive. For all target groups, these interventions are clear signs of human presence and destroy not only the illusion of being in the wilderness, but the actual opportunity for being there. For some target groups, managed forests may work if management activities are not invasive and are strictly controlled so that human intervention is not recognizable. Clear-cuts are not acceptable. For other target groups, there need be no interventions at all. Areas need to be truly untouched, nature conservation needs to be enforced, and forestry activities banned. In between, there is a myriad of positions that appreciate different degrees of both managed and wild forests.

5.4. Practical Implications

For regions with primary forest, this means keeping up diverse opportunities for wilderness tourism. Tourism products in close-to-natural yet still managed forests might accommodate the needs of target groups who focus on scenic beauty, subjective values and escaping to a world that differs from their usual environments. At the same time, truly pristine areas preserve the opportunity for a rare glimpse into nature that has never (or hardly) seen humans' cultivating hand. This might be appealing to those who know about the specificities of primary forest stands, their species, habitats and natural processes, or to those seeking to learn more about them. It might be appealing to many other target groups as well, thus opening up a valuable economic opportunity for communities to live from the forests through tourism instead of timber harvesting. To keep up these diverse tourism opportunities, however, existing wild forest stands need to be protected effectively.

It would be advisable for forest owners and managers in Romania, as well as relevant political decision-makers, to increase efforts to preserve intact wild forest stands and thus offer a rare (and increasingly rare) opportunity to experience untouched, unspoilt nature. Wild forests should be mapped and comprehensively preserved in accordance with the EU Biodiversity Strategy 2030. This would preserve their valuable ecosystem functions for society (e.g., carbon sink and storage, water storage, flood protection, etc.), give visitors the opportunity to relax in pristine forests, and enable the local population to generate additional income through nature tourism. As far as the attractiveness of the forests is concerned, it would be necessary to avoid the destruction of hiking trails or the closure of access routes due to forestry works. The use of heavy machinery and clear-cutting should be avoided or banned. To this end, existing legal requirements (including EU law) must be complied with and violations punished more consistently. Forest management concepts in

forests adjacent to wild forests should be designed to be more nature-friendly. Measures to strengthen legal compliance are needed at the national and international (EU) level.

To achieve this, a change in the Romanian forest policy and governance is needed. With the transition of the country's political system from a communist to a market-based model, the forest sector has experienced several profound changes. Forest lands were restituted to the original owners; regulatory, control and forest management functions were disaggregated; forest districts, but especially forest harvesting and processing activities, were privatized. This implied a change from a centralized, state-led forestry structure to a 'multi-layered' stakeholder structure with diverse and conflicting interests [118]. In order to modernise the sector, a balance must be struck between reducing unnecessary bureaucracy and increasing law enforcement.

Tourism companies and public tourism associations could make a substantial contribution to informing and raising awareness among visitors about the rare and valuable nature of wild forests and their conservation. They could play a decisive role in preventing the destruction of these valuable forests by advocating for expanded protection concepts and more nature-based management in adjacent commercial forests. The touristic use of wild forests should be based on established approaches such as the ROS and include visitor management and zoning strategies that would help keep a core area of the forest protected from visitors, while other parts remain accessible to visitors—for example, via marked trails with restricted access. Here, different levels of management, i.e., different visitor infrastructure, could help to direct visitors to those parts of the forests that meet their needs, i.e., nature-based experiences or complete seclusion and solitude (see ROS management classes).

To realize economic value generation and jobs, tourism bodies and public hands need to invest in tourism capacity building. This, first and foremost, would mean enhancing local populations' propensity and ability to cater for tourism services. However, tourism capacity building also includes community empowerment and participation, and thus transferring decision-making processes to the hands of local stakeholders. Local tourism bodies could help in mobilizing and pooling resources, facilitating group processes and solving conflicts amongst participants. In the area around the Făgăraş Mountains, however, tourism bodies hardly exist on a local level, thus rendering it difficult to develop a community-based, economically and ecologically sustainable form of wilderness tourism. An exemption is the initiative by Foundation Conservation Carpathia, who engage in capacity building. Furthermore, there have been attempts to establish a national park in the region (www.carpathia.org). A helpful measure, however, would be a network of tourism bodies on the local level, built either through political decision-taking or based on private and business initiatives.

Finally, visitors are called upon to visit wild forests in an informed, mindful way, acknowledging that wild forests only remain intact without human traces, encouraging visitors to practice responsible behavior. Based on the present results, wild forest tourism, in this paper, is conceived of as a special form of nature tourism. Wilderness tourism profits from natural environments but also runs the risk of damaging them. Wilderness tourism could thus learn from best practices in nature tourism. For example, in many nature destinations, codes of conduct or voluntary agreements between tourism and nature protection are in place (i.e., code of conduct of the British Mountaineering Council, see thebmc.co.uk, accessed on 7 May 2025). In the region of the Făgăraş Mountains, despite being a popular tourism region, similar commitments from visitors and tourists are still missing. Here, private initiatives could rally and provide a first suggestion for public discussion.

6. Conclusions

Wild forests are increasingly rare in Europe. They are of great ecological importance as they contribute to global biodiversity, carbon sequestration, and important ecosystem services. At the same time, wild forests offer unique experiences for visitors and opportunities for local economic value generation. Beyond that, it is also important to note that simply by knowing of the existence of pristine European nature and by sharing the fascination for it, political awareness and responsibilities for its protection might grow. The uniqueness of wild forests rests on their remoteness and naturalness and the opportunity for solitude and primitive recreation they offer. Forestry activities can impair forest attractiveness in direct or indirect ways. The direct effects of forestry activities include the destruction of species or habitats, or damage to hiking trails by forestry machinery. Indirect effects occur when motorized leisure activities take place on forest roads, making the area unattractive for wilderness tourists. More generally, by losing wild forests, a region loses an opportunity for tourism product diversification and thus opportunities for generating economic value.

The findings of the present study show that wild forests form a rather unique 'USP'. The USP is based on the notion that wilderness is untouched nature, untrammeled by man. Particularly significant are the forests' high biodiversity and the existence of monumental trees. Experts assign a high economic importance to wilderness tourism, and consider it an alternative to logging. The question of whether forestry activities impair the forests' attractiveness for wilderness tourism requires a nuanced answer. For visitors with a high level of knowledge, the main reason for visiting is to see wild forests free of human intervention. These forests require strict protection and law enforcement. Visitors, on the other hand, for whom the subjective aspect of escaping their everyday lives or getting close to nature is important, could be satisfied with forests that are managed responsibly. However, there are plenty of such managed forests in Europe. Highly damaging in either case is the destruction of tourism contexts, such as hiking trails and access points, since these interventions curtail overall attractiveness and deter visitors from making the journey.

Based on this, practical implications can be formulated, ranging from the effective protection of wild forests to informed, respectful behavior on the part of forest visitors and the formation of local tourism committees to coordinate efforts to strengthen local tourism expertise.

7. Limitations

This study has limitations. First, the study took place in one region only. The findings, therefore, cannot be fully generalized. However, they link well with findings from previous studies and deliver new insights and deepen the discussion on wilderness tourism. Second, the study was qualitative in nature. The sample comprised voices from tourism, nature protection, and forestry. If other voices, or another composition of voices, had been chosen, the findings could have differed. Answers were collected in one place and one point of time only. The results thus do not include a comparison between different geographical regions, nor between different points in time. Here, an interesting field for future research emerges. Above that, the question of what motives or tourist types engage with varying degrees of forest naturalness could be a promising field for further research. This could be achieved by engaging in quantitative instead of qualitative methods. A tourism mobilities approach could flank this endeavor by addressing aspects of embodiment in wilderness perception. Nevertheless, the results comprise a great variety of diverging viewpoints and justify the chosen theoretical framework to a large degree. They can therefore be considered rich in content and apt to provide an effective answer to the research question.

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