New Horizons Foundation Eco-Tourism Research Project Description

Description of the organization: New Horizons Foundation (FNO) is a non-profit organization located in Lupeni, Romania, in the Eastern part of the Carpathian Alps. New Horizons is the pioneer both of adventure education (building the first ropes course in 1999) and service learning in Romania. The mission of New Horizons Foundation is to “promote top quality experiential education models that advance life skills among youth as a means for sustainable development”.

Description of community partner: While in Lupeni, Romania, researchers will work on various eco-touristic development projects, largely within the parameters of the young peoples’ “IMPACT” service-learning clubs New Horizons began in 2001. Lupeni is very safe, very beautiful, but also one of the poorest places in Romania: the Jiu Coal Mining Valley, with an unemployment rate sometimes over 50%. There are roughly 20,000 people living in Lupeni, however due to the fact that coalmines are closing, the population is dwindling. Ecotourism development is the only viable future for this region—which is why this project and internship is so vital!

Some of New Horizons Foundation’s achievements are the following: built first ropes course and introduced the discipline of outdoor/adventure education, following the work of Project Adventure USA; pioneered outdoor education curricula with University of Timisoara; introduced service learning to Romanian educational system; published numerous books and publications related to outdoor education and service learning; grew our IMPACT service learning model in 14 countries; developed national policy for non-formal education that has been adopted by Ministry of Ed; host semester abroad program that was voted in top 10 study abroad programs in the U.S. among students.

Social issue: Around the globe, eco-tourism, but especially mountain-biking, is quickly becoming one of the most popular forms of vacationing. The Jiu Valley is a beautiful and relatively isolated mountainous region that has experienced economic free-fall because of the rapid closing of the mines that fed the forced industrialization under Communism. Because of the striking natural beauty especially of the Retezat and Parang mountains that “bookend” the Jiu Valley, tourism and especially outdoor sport tourism, have been identified as a promising way forward.[Nita, 2014 #1443, p. 169].

However, due to the communist legacy of social and political apathy, and traditional reliance on the coal-mining industry, relatively little has been done to develop this capacity beyond the Straja and Parang ski areas. Trails are relatively unmarked, touristic locations unadvertised or unknown. The rich cultural and natural assets existing already, or that can be developed, remain largely untapped. This internship will help develop the local eco-touristic capacity in general, but at first focusing on the mountain biking dimension, but not only.

Impact of project on the community (Community engagement): There is a strong case for the economic benefits this eco-tourism project focused on mountain-biking can bring. In the US and Europe, with global warming and other factors, many ski areas have become dual use. The market for this is growing rapidly in Romania as there is economic recovery, but there are very few mountain biking areas that
are family friendly. Fortunately, the Straja ski area (just in Lupeni’s backyard) is well-positioned to attract tourists from the entirety of Western Romania, and even as far as Hungary. The audience this could attract is large because the telegondola/telecabina and chairlifts makes it so one does not have to be extremely athletic to enjoy the trails. The social benefits can be great as well. There is the growing need to provide healthy experiences in nature and exercise. Youth need healthy and safe outlets for adventure. Also, as this is primarily a social project, ecological and sustainability principles will be taught.

**Research project description:** During your internship, you will get the opportunity to do a research project pertaining to ecotourism in the Jiu Valley. The intern will need to develop a question that they want to research and determine how to do the research, show how the research will advance the project, and carry out the research during the internship. Listed below are some ideas for topics you might want to choose:

- Map cultural and eco-touristic assets: This will mean recording and updating the inventory of attractive features in the area
- Evaluate perceptions about tourism: Both internal and external to the Jiu valley This is especially important for the youth. Do they feel there is a future for their region?
- Evaluate the functioning, or lack thereof, of the local touristic information sites; Are they being used? Are they helpful?
- Research trail conditions and flag with GPS and trail marking systems
- Research other nature or outdoor related recreation activities
- Research marketing possibilities for ecotourism, but especially MTB; use case studies (success stories) from other coal-mining regions such as West Virginia
- Analyze the eco-tourism value-chain and make proposals (what are the gaps in the eco-tourism service industry?) that can be helpful to the local community;
- Exploring (and potentially informing ) the ways that recreation impacts a region;
- Exploring the civic question of the linkage between caring for the common good (i.e. not littering) and attracting tourists;
- Exploring what investments in infrastructure lead to higher tourism

**Methodology:** The methodology will vary depending on the research topic you choose, but methods could include on-line surveys, data collection in the field, or interviews with actual or potential tourists (many speak English).

**Student profile:** The ideal student for this role will be one who is interested in working for a non-profit or NGO to do development work in the field of outdoor recreation or tourism. Because of the variety of possible research topics, we encourage students of any field to apply and come use their particular skills and knowledge to advance this project. Knowledge of Google Maps, GIS, or GPS systems is desirable, but not required.