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# Environmental Management Practices within Agritourism Boarding Houses in Romania: A Qualitative Study Among Managers

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**Abstract:** Small accommodation businesses such as agritourism boarding houses (ATBHs) provide a large share of accommodating capacity in certain rural destinations. Despite their small accommodation capacity, ATBHs consume substantial quantities of water and energy; this consumption implies high environmental costs. The present study aims to explore opinions of ATBH owner-managers regarding water and energy consumption in their businesses, what motivates them to adopt environmental practices, and the specific saving measures used within the tourist accommodation units they manage. A qualitative research was conducted, using semi-structured interviews among 12 Romanian ATBH owner-managers. Data analysis revealed that the interviewed owner-managers understand the importance of natural resource conservation in tourist destinations but they are not willing or have insufficient financial, time, organizational resources, etc. to engage in serious water and energy saving initiatives. Moreover, most interviewed managers indicated that tourists cannot make a significant contribution to natural resources conservation in accommodation units and perceive water and energy saving systems as more effective than the environmental education of visitors in their facility. These findings may be useful to tourism policy-makers and environmental organizations in order to develop effective environmental strategies in ATBHs.

**Keywords:** environmental management; agritourism boarding houses; rural tourism; water; energy; resource saving

## 1. Introduction

Economic development, population growth, and increased stress in everyday life has led to an increased tourism interest in rural destinations, which are less polluted than urban areas and still preserve authentic cultural heritage [1–4]. The growing demand for rural tourism has led to an adequate development of specific tourism offers, resulting in an increase in the number of tourist accommodation units and other small business types that support tourists' needs during their holiday in the countryside. As a result, tourism is now posing a potential threat to rural resources, most acutely when they are exploited beyond their carrying capacities, and/or enterprises are not managed in a sustainable manner [5]. All these factors have led to the emergence of many environmental problems in rural tourism, such as environmental pollution, land degradation, resource depletion, biodiversity loss, and more [6–11]. As such, the development of rural tourism and the protection of the environment must be well balanced with both short- and long-term views. In the short-term, the protection of the environment in rural destinations has become a necessary practice for tourism firms to maintain their competitive position [12] since these practices allows for cost reductions [13,14] and improves their image [15,16]. In the long-term, in recognition of environmental degradation, governments,

along with the green movement within the hospitality and tourism industry, and travelers [17–20], have become increasingly aware of the need for more effective measures to protect the environment in rural destinations [21]. Although much progress has been made, many major challenges to rural environmental management remain to be addressed, especially from the perspective of the impact of rural tourism development and the expansion of small and medium-sized businesses such as agritourism boarding houses (ATBHs). Therefore, the main objective of the present study is to investigate owner managers' opinions regarding water and energy consumption and saving within their ATBH units.

Small accommodation businesses (i.e., agritourism boarding houses (ATBHs)) represent the core service, providing a large share of accommodating capacity in most rural destinations and playing a central role in rural tourism development, poverty relief, and rural revitalization [22,23]. ATBHs have limited budgets and operate their business alone. Therefore, their owner-managers are motivated to conserve important natural, social, and cultural features that are essential to the sustainability of rural landscapes and which contribute to destination competitiveness [24,25]. Font, Garay, and Jones [26] have found that small businesses in the tourism industry are more involved in responsible actions than previously expected. In addition, small business owners have the advantage of being able to react quickly to problems they encounter (including those related to environmental protection by saving resources), but are disadvantaged by the lack of awareness and lack of information about market requirements, changing behavior consumption of tourists, and so on. [26]. However, previous studies tended to ignore the dominant role of owner-managers in environmental practices in the companies they ran [27]. As such, the present study aims to examine ATBHs' owner-managers attitudes towards protecting the environment in general and particularly towards water and energy consumption in the tourist accommodation units they manage (the first objective of the research).

'Environmental management' is defined as 'the equipment, methods and procedures used in the production, product design, and product distribution mechanisms that save energy and natural resources, minimize the environmental problems generated by human activities, and protect the natural environment' [28]. Environmental management practices (EMPs) adopted by smaller firms tend to be implemented ad hoc, rather than within a coherent strategy [29]. The environmental actions taken in such firms involve mainly simple, low-cost measures [30]. In small- and medium-scale accommodation units, the lack of financial resources or an internal arrangement structure are considered as environmental management constraints [31]. Furthermore, in the case of owner-managers, the motivations to adopt EMPs depend on a number of factors [32] and the academic research to identify them is quite numerous [26,32–36]. Thus, previous studies have shown that the main reasons are related to the economic and financial goals, but also to the owner-managers' lifestyle and their need for legitimization within society [26]. Although ATBHs are predominant in rural areas, there is still insufficient research on why these companies would or would not want to protect the environment by saving the resources they use in day-to-day business. As such, the second objective of the research is to find out which the main reasons are for ATBHs to act more sustainably and save resources in the accommodation unit.

Moreover, in environmental tourism literature, there is limited research investigating different types of EMPs by small- and medium-sized enterprises in rural areas. Most of the tourism studies on EMPs focused on hotels in developed countries (e.g., in Spain [37–40]; in Greece [41]; and in the United States [42]). Very few studies have been carried out on the application of EMPs to ATBHs, as small rural businesses located in rural areas, especially in developing countries. ATBHs' managers find it difficult to adopt EMPs as they are both more time-consuming and more difficult to implement, given their inherent size-related limitations [40,43,44]. As Choi et al. [45] stated, it is imperative to further explore environmental practices and their consequences from the perspective of internal stakeholders (i.e., employees and management). Thus, to better understand ATBHs' involvement in EMPs, focusing on the perceptions of their owner-managers is crucial. As such, the third objective of the research is to identify the water and energy saving technologies used in ATBHs.

In the study of six developed European countries, Fassin et al. [46] found that the environmental concerns of owner-managers of small and medium-sized businesses differ from one country to another. For example, Bohdanovicz [21] highlighted that, “generally, hoteliers from the countries of the former Eastern Bloc (Central and Eastern Europe) are likely to be less concerned about the protection of nature per se, except for economic or legal reasons” (p. 663). Romania is one of these countries, therefore it was chosen as a case study for its special characteristics and common features compared to other Central and East European (CEE) countries. Moreover, Romania is one of the countries with the largest tourist accommodation capacity in CEE, ranking fourth place in 2016 regarding both the number of bed-places and bedrooms in hotels and similar accommodation [47]. Furthermore, the decision to examine ATBHs was prompted by their significant position in the Romanian tourism sector as a whole. According to the National Institute of Statistics in Romania [48], this type of accommodation represents 1/3 of the number of establishments of tourist reception and 13% of the existing accommodation capacity in 2017. To the best of the authors’ knowledge, few studies [49–51] have focused on environmental practices or initiatives within the Romanian hotel industry, especially the particularly case of ATBHs. Therefore, it is vital to investigate the environmental perceptions and attitudes of these ATBHs’ owner-managers regarding rural environment and natural resources, in addition to investigating concrete ways to engage in environmental and/or water and energy conservation activities within the accommodation units they manage.

Considering the aforementioned issues, the present study seeks to investigate the general opinions of ATBH owner-managers about water and energy consumption in the tourist accommodation units they manage, the reasons behind the reduction of consumption of water and energy, and water and energy saving technologies used by employees and/or guests. The study focuses on accommodation units such as ATBHs to assess the extent to which these types of units are truly active in saving water and energy resources, describing the attitudes and behaviors of their owner-managers regarding these practices. Accordingly, a qualitative research based on semi-structured interviews was carried out among the managers of the accommodation units of the type of ATBHs in Romania.

The present paper focuses on a specific type of accommodation unit from rural areas (i.e., ATBHs) from a developing post-communist country in the East European region (i.e., Romania), considering that, according to the authors’ knowledge, most studies regarding water and energy consumption were mainly based on international samples and focused on tourism businesses from developed countries. Thus, this research may bring contributions to existing hospitality literature, as it will identify what motivates ATBHs owner-managers’ to implement water and energy saving measures in a developing post-communist country. In addition, this study revealed that there is an apparent difference between attitudes and actions of the owner-managers of the ATBHs: an owner-manager can have a positive attitude towards the environment but this is frequently not translated into appropriate environmental practices.

Therefore, the following research questions were formulated in the context of the present study:

Research question 1: Are ATBHs owner-managers’ interested in saving water and energy in their units?

Research question 2: What motivates ATBHs owner-managers’ to implement water and energy saving measures?

Research question 3: Which are the main methods, systems, and technologies used for water and energy saving in ATBHs?

Research question 4: Are ATBHs owner-managers’ willing to get involved in environmental education activities among their guests?

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Owner-Managers' Attitudes Towards Environmental Protection, Water, and Energy Consumption in Agritourism Boarding Houses

The environmental attitude of the owner-manager of a tourist accommodation unit is its general predisposition either to ignore important environmental issues or to respond through pro-environmental resource conservation and environment protection intentions [52]. Previous studies have shown that a positive attitude of managers towards the environment has profound effects on the extent to which environmental management practices (EMPs) are adopted and implemented in their companies [27,52,53] and that these businesses are more focused on environmental issues [54]. Especially in small self-operated businesses, environmental concern and willingness to act sustainably depend on the attitude and knowledge of the owner-manager [35], who has full control over the use of resources, including those affecting the environment [55]. This is because the owner-manager is the main supporter of environmental protection and the linking element that coordinates EMPs in the company. Several researchers consider that the relationship between managers' attitude and the adoption of EMPs is not so obvious [56] and that problems may arise in the managers' pro-environmental behavior. According to Kang et al. [57], some owner-managers are less willing to adopt environmental practices in their activities as they affect the satisfaction or the 'pampering experience' of those tourists who do not want to give up comfort they expected to receive in the accommodation unit as a result of reduced resource consumption and quality of service standards [58].

Therefore, given the contradictory results of previous research, further studies are still needed to investigate managers' attitudes in small tourism companies about protecting the environment by saving natural resources. Investigating ATBH owner-managers' attitudes in relation to saving resources for protecting the environment in rural areas is useful for several reasons. First, they usually are a major or sole owner and decision-maker in their organization and they have the opportunity to directly shape organizational practices according to their personal values. ATBH owner-managers are able to enact values, other than the company's profitability, which may induce changes in the environmental beliefs of their employees. Second, ATBHs are constrained in terms of their limited resources (i.e., they are small firms), therefore, their survival depends on their exchanges with the economic, social, cultural, and geographic environment, especially in sparsely populated or remote rural areas. The "embeddedness" of ATBHs in their wider environments may make a distinct impact on owner-manager's cognition regarding EMPs. Last but not least, managers' desire to adopt EMPs depends on a number of reasons that can act as motivating factors or as constraints.

### 2.2. Reasons for Agritourism Boarding Houses to Implement Environmental Management Practices

Studies in the tourism sector on the consumption of resources, such as water and energy show that it is imperative to manage them more efficiently in accommodation units [59]. Thus, according to Gössling et al. [60], the energy consumption in hotels is high (about 130 MJ) and this consumption is increasing even more as the accommodation units have several facilities (bars, restaurants, swimming pools, etc.). A typical tourist in Europe uses over 300 liters of water per day, compared with about 150 liters of water consumed by a resident in this area [61,62]. Previous studies [32–36,63,64] also identified a number of reasons for adopting EMPs that can be grouped into three major categories: cost, efficiency (e.g., internal government), and internal forces (e.g., internal green champion). At the same time, multiple barriers or constraints have been identified [32,34,36,64–67] based on type of properties, ownership and location that can be broadly categorized as: cost benefit (e.g., the implementation of EMPs is costly), organizational (e.g., lack of knowledge), and technical (e.g., lack of access to appropriate technology). More recently, Font et al. [26] showed that the reasons for engaging in environmentally friendly activities within a tourist accommodation unit are based on three frames: cost reduction competitiveness, societal legitimization, and lifestyle-value drivers. Cost reduction competitiveness is the traditional resource-based view that suggests enterprises will undertake sustainability actions

that can provide a competitive advantage [26] by reducing costs and improving financial performance. For the tourism sector, different studies were conducted on large enterprises and hotel chains [68–70], but few [26] focused on small businesses, such as ATBHs. Societal legitimization explains engagement in environmentally friendly activities within a tourist accommodation unit as a search for societal legitimization in the eyes of stakeholders [26]. However, in the case of small tourism businesses, sustainability is related with responsibility and is defined by the owner's values: reputation, trust, consensus, and legitimacy. Company legitimization means getting the image of a trusted tourism firm that offers quality services and getting closer to consumers and other stakeholders (as a result of small business size) determines its perception of ethical action [71,72]. The lifestyle-value drivers suggest that much of the individuals' environmentally-friendly behavior is best explained through lifestyle choices and habits informed by values rather than conscious actions [26]. Lifestyle, values, and worldviews are the center of the decision factors for going green in small tourism businesses [64,73]. Moreover, this is not a decision taken at a single point in time, but an element of habit and routine, a part of the enterprise's organizational culture [74], as opposed to a conscious managerial structure, usually present in large scale companies.

The results obtained by Font et al. [26] in a survey of around 900 tourism enterprises in 57 European protected areas revealed 13 categories of motives for being sustainable in tourism, i.e., to protect the environment; it's a personal, lifestyle choice; to improve our society; for cost savings; for marketing and image benefits; in response to customer demand; to meet legal requirements, to gain new information, advice and networks; to improve business management data, etc. Moreover, the study demonstrates a direct relationship between the types of motives and the sustainable actions undertaken by small tourism businesses. Thus, small tourism businesses, which are generally motivated by economic issues, have taken some internal/operational actions that have led to resource saving, but have introduced more advanced measures. Those motivated by legitimization undertake externally different measures, highlighting facing actions, seeking marketing and image benefits from being seen to respond to society's demands. It is those enterprises that are driven by lifestyle, values, and habits that undertake most sustainability actions. The enterprises taking more sustainability actions are also more satisfied with their economic performance even if they do not necessarily perform better than average.

### *2.3. Environmental Management Practices Used in Tourist Accommodation Units*

The hotel industry, due to its very specific function, consumes substantial quantities of energy, water and non-durable products [21,75]. This high consumption implies high environmental costs. As such, hoteliers should be more and more interested and concerned about the application of environmental protection measures, as their state is closely interdependent with the development of tourist activities and the development the tourism sector generally depends on the quality of the environment.

The literature review recently conducted by Alonso-Almeida et al. [76] highlights the main environmental practices implemented by the hotel industry, distinguishing between basic and advanced environmental practices. The basic environmental practices are highlighted in most of the papers published on this topic [13,14,21,32,33,77–81]: energy-saving practices (e.g., motion-sensitive systems, low-consumption lamps, LED technology, temperature control in rooms); water-saving practices (e.g., reducing the amount of water used for showers, toilets, kitchens, and laundry; install water-efficient devices and equipment like low-flow shower heads, diffusers, water-saving sanitary ware, control valves for water pressure); waste management (e.g., install soap and shampoo dispensers in guest bathrooms in order to avoid discarding individually packaged toiletries, various forms of recycling, reuse when possible, zero paper programs); reducing the use of ecologically dangerous cleaning agents; and training employees on environmental measures. Choi et al. [45] used the term "environmental resource conservation efforts" (ERC), for the operational and technical efforts to reduce the use of water, energy, and waste. The advanced environmental practices are equally numerous, but they are mainly implemented by hotel chains [32,39]. These practices include: firm-provided employee training



on environmental issues, quantification of environmental savings and costs [33]; environmentally efficient appliances and equipment [80]; the use of rainwater or other natural sources, the use of well water, ecological clothes drying (outdoors, without the use of machines) [13]; solar water heating systems, adapting opening hours to more efficiently use electricity and water, the use of recycled water for irrigation and solar panels [81]. However, the adopted practices currently implemented by small tourism firms remain in the basic category, although the scope and extension of these practices vary [82] by type of location [83]. In a recent study by Font et al. [26], the main environmental practices mentioned among managers of small tourism enterprises were: use environmentally friendly products; energy and water saving activities; encouraging customers to be environmentally friendly in both the property and in nature; and waste recycling and renewable energy sources (solar, wind, and biomass). However, Coles et al. [78] stated that “the most important issue is not necessarily the number of pro-environmental measures taken by a small and medium tourism enterprise but rather how energy consumption and generation are related within businesses and across the sector more widely”. Moreover, the authors found that managers of small accommodation units displayed low levels of knowledge and understanding about their own bills and consumption, the fuel mix they used, and how their energy was generated. Moreover, a firm’s resources and capabilities for adopting EMPs differ depending on the characteristics and complexity of the business [45]. Therefore, there is a need for additional studies regarding the implementation of EMPs in small-scale accommodation units, such as agritourism boarding houses.

#### *2.4. Specificities of Agritourism Boarding Houses in Romania*

The agritourism boarding house (ATBH) is a tourist reception structure, with an accommodation capacity of up to eight rooms (the locators’ rooms excluded), functioning on the people’s dwellings or in separate buildings, providing for tourists’ accommodation and conditions for meals preparation and serving in special equipped places, as well as the possibility of getting involved in the household’s activities or in handicraft activities. In conformity with the provisions of the current Romanian legislation [84,85], the ATBH must develop at least one activity linked to agriculture, animal raising, growing different types of crops, fruit-tree orchards, etc. The hosts within Romanian ATBHs are in charge of accompanying tourists during their participation in household or crafting activities and they also prepare the meals from natural products grown in their establishment or obtained from local authorized producers. ATBHs operate on a small scale and are sometimes run by owner–managers with non-economic motivations. Almost all the tourist accommodation units are managed by one or more members of the owner’s family and the number of the employees outside the family is reduced. Therefore, the entrepreneurial characteristics and the vision of the owner- managers become very important in the process of adoption and implementation of EMPs in Romanian ATBHs.

During the present decade, in Romania, the ATBHs registered an ascending trend in terms of number of establishments and their accommodation capacity (see Table 1).

**Table 1.** The evolution of the number and the accommodation capacity of agritourism boarding houses (ATBH) in Romania between 2011 and 2017.

Indicators.	2011	2013	2015	2017
Number of establishments of tourist reception (number)	5003	6009	6821	7905
Total in Romania				
out of which:				
ATBH	1210	1598	1918	2556
Existing accommodation capacity (beds)	278,503	305,707	328,313	343,720
Total in Romania				
out of which:				
ATBH	20,683	28,775	35,188	44,499
Accommodation capacity in use (beds-days)	68,417,259	77,028,488	81,872,539	87,655,762
Total in Romania				
out of which:				
ATBH	5,378,364	7,932,634	9,079,901	11,787,897

Note: Number of establishments and existing accommodation capacity on "July 31" of the respective year. ATBHs = agritourism boarding houses. Source: Based on National Institute of Statistics, 2014, p. 22; National Institute of Statistics, 2016, p. 22; National Institute of Statistics, 2018, p. 22.

The favorable dynamics of the number and the accommodation capacity of ATBHs could be the result of both stronger entrepreneurial initiatives and of higher tourist interest in this type of small-scale rural accommodation. According to National Institute of Statistics in Romania [48] in 2017, 99.1% of the ATBHs were mainly privately owned. In addition, the indicator tourists accommodated in tourist accommodation establishments reveals that ATBHs ranked third, after hotels and tourist pensions, with over 1 million tourist arrivals in 2017 [48].

Considering the previously mentioned dynamics, ATBHs in Romania have been the subject of many research [50,86–91], which focused mostly on statistical analysis, marketing (positioning, distribution, promotion, etc.), innovation, human resources, or rural entrepreneurship. Recently, only one paper [92] deals with EMPs, but only those concerning waste management in the Italian and Romanian agritourism structures. These studies demonstrate that Romanian ATBHs are confronted with the same kind of problems inherent in all small size enterprises: dependence on the territory in which the enterprises are located, limited financial resources, skill shortages, lack of long-term strategy, reluctance to implement innovations and new technologies, and problems of accessing credit. Moreover, ATBHs are often run by individual operators (owner-managers), especially oriented to solving day-to-day problems, and whose decisions are often a result of personality, character, values, and how to be the owner-manager [93–95]. In addition, the specific way of thinking, working, and living that has been indoctrinated in the population of Central and Eastern European Countries during the totalitarian political regimes should not be overlooked.

The new socioeconomic conditions in Romania seem to favor a change of attitude towards environmentally sustainable and sustainable businesses in all areas of activity, in general, and particularly in hotels [96]. However, the rational use of water, energy, loss reduction, and the implementation of sustainable practices are generally sporadic within the Romanian tourist accommodation sector. As such, it is crucial to determine how ATBH managers perceive the need to save resources, what motivates them to adopt sustainable practices and what environmental technologies are used in the tourist accommodation units they manage.

### 3. Materials and Methods

#### 3.1. Sampling and Data Collection

The targeted population within this research is represented by ATBHs from Romanian rural tourist destinations. ATBHs were chosen for this research as there are limited studies in the environmental literature focused on this type of small-scale accommodation. So far, most studies regarding water

and energy saving measures in the tourism industry are focused on hotels [42,97–101], as these firms usually have big accommodation capacities, intensive water and energy consumption, as well as high related costs. ATBHs meet additional challenges in implementing water and energy savings due to their size and limited financial power, but also due to the lower environmental attitudes and behaviors of their owner-managers.

The research aims to explore the extent to which these types of accommodation units (i.e., ATBHs) implement water and energy saving measures, in addition to investigating the factors that motivate ATBH owner managers to save water and energy in the units they manage. Therefore, a qualitative research method was employed in the form of semi-structured interviews. In order to carry out the interviews, 2556 ATBHs (the total number of such units in Romania) were selected as a sampling frame for the present study. Purposive and snowball sampling methods were used to select the ATBHs, based on their owner-managers' concern to save resources (i.e., water and energy) within their businesses. More specifically, the selection of such units was a two step-process. First, the 2556 units were searched for on the Internet, using keywords such as: "Romania" and "agritourism boarding houses". Following this online search, 114 ATBHs were identified as having a website. Based on the contact details presented on these websites, the owner-managers of these ATBHs were contacted via e-mail and invited to participate in this study, with a clear specification of the study purpose and a filter question regarding their concern to save water and energy within their tourism business. Only 15 owner-managers indicated their concern regarding resources saving in their ATBH. In the second step of the process, these 15 owner-managers were contacted online and asked whether they could recommend other ATBHs that implement water and energy saving measures. Thus, 10 other ATBHs that save water and energy were identified and their owner-managers were also contacted via e-mail and invited to participate in the study. From the total number of 25 ATBH owner-managers who indicated their concern regarding resources saving, only 12 consented to participate in the semi-structured interviews. This sample included seven ATBHs graded with three flowers and five ATBHs graded with four flowers, according to the Romanian specific grading system for rural accommodation units. Most respondents were females (eight), while four were males and their age varied between 24 and 58 years (see Table 2). The interviews with these respondents were performed between November and December 2018.

**Table 2.** Respondents' demographic characteristics.

ATBH Rating	Respondents' Age	Respondents' Gender
4 flowers	32	feminine
4 flowers	38	feminine
3 flowers	31	feminine
4 flowers	24	feminine
3 flowers	35	feminine
3 flowers	44	feminine
3 flowers	49	feminine
3 flowers	58	feminine
3 flowers	41	masculine
4 flowers	43	masculine
4 flowers	51	masculine
3 flowers	54	masculine

Source: the authors' research.

### 3.2. Data Analysis

Several questions were addressed to participants in the study, which were aimed at highlighting their views on water and energy saving motifs and practices within the accommodation units they manage. Finally, they were transcribed and analyzed using the content analysis method. More specifically, a two-step analytical process was undertaken. First, the ATBH owner-managers were questioned, based on an interview guide which included four discussion themes and 10 sub-themes, which are presented as follows:



1. Managers' involvement in environmental protection activities in their daily routine;
  - Managers' opinions regarding the environmental protection;
  - Environmental protection activities that owner-managers apply in their daily routine;
2. General information about water and energy consumption within the analyzed ATBHs;
  - The importance of water and energy saving within the ATBH;
  - The impact of ATBH's activity on the environment;
  - Measures which may reduce the impact of ATBH's activity on the environment;
3. Involving tourists in water and energy saving initiatives within the ATBH;
  - Owner-managers' perceptions regarding tourists' water and energy saving behavior;
  - Owner-managers' involvement in tourist environmental education initiatives;
4. Water and energy saving systems and technologies in ATBHs;
  - Reasons for implementing water and energy saving systems in ATBHs;
  - The influence of water and energy saving systems on operating costs and tourists' satisfaction;
  - Implementing water and energy saving systems vs tourist environmental education initiatives.

Further, all statements were categorized into different themes. Similarities and dissimilarities between these themes were used to group them into four categories [102]. Themes were categorized based on their content only. This is in line with Glaser and Strauss's [103] recommendation that it is essential to first "ignore the literature of theory and fact on the area under study, in order to assure that the emergence of categories will not be contaminated by concepts more suited to different areas." As such, the four themes which resulted from the statements' categorization are:

- Owner-managers' general opinions pro and against water and energy savings in tourist accommodation units;
- The main motivations of water and energy saving measures;
- Methods/systems/technologies used for water and energy saving in tourist accommodation units;
- The implementation of water and energy saving measures vs. environmental education of tourists.

These themes are described in detail in the following section.

#### 4. Results

The results of the conducted interviews are presented according to each of the themes included in the interview guide.

##### 4.1. Owner-Managers' General Pro and Con Opinions Regarding Water and Energy Savings in Tourism Accommodation Units

Research question 1: Are ATBHs owner-managers' interested in saving water and energy in their units?

The owner-managers were asked to state their point of view regarding water and energy consumption in their accommodation unit. The recorded responses included issues such as: (1) the importance of saving natural resources within tourist accommodation units in order to protect the environment; (2) attracting tourists in rural destinations; (3) increasing tourists' satisfaction; and (4) organizational, financial, or legal motivations for justifying their lack of involvement in water and energy saving initiatives.

From the interviewed managers' perspective, the consumption of water and energy in Romania is very high as a result of Romanian citizens' perception that they are inexhaustible. Therefore, there are no good reasons for people to become environmentally friendly and willing to change their conservation behavior in the tourist accommodation units is extremely difficult.

*"In my opinion, a lot of water and energy is consumed in hotels (...) especially in Romania, where we are not used to saving water or energy or, in general, to have an environmentally-friendly attitude towards the nature. We have a resourceful country and we use them as if they were inexhaustible." (R7)*

Furthermore, some of the interviewed managers indicated that the protection of the environment directly contributes to attracting tourists to the destinations, due to the unpolluted natural environment. The environmental protection also ensures customers' high satisfaction, with a significant impact on the long-term profitability of accommodation units. Moreover, ensuring tourists' high level of satisfaction could have a significant positive influence on their behavioral intentions, reflected in their desire to return to the same holiday destination, to spread positive word-of-mouth about the accommodation unit or even to extend the stay.

*"The environment is vital for any tourism activity, whether you own a hotel or have a restaurant. An area with a neat natural environment, without hazards or harmful factors, is much more attractive to tourists than a threatened one." (R3)*

*"If the natural environment is well-kept and well preserved, managers can have great expectations regarding tourist flows." (R1)*

In the view of the managers, although water and energy consumption are high in tourist accommodation units, it cannot be significantly reduced in order to save such natural resources and contribute to protecting the environment. In addition, these managers considered that the reduction of these natural resources could be associated with a low quality of tourist services offered to guests, which could have negative effects on the long-term profitability of the accommodation unit.

*"Hotels are immense energy and water users (...). Regardless of the number of guests in the unit, it takes energy and water to keep tourist flows." (R5)*

*"There have been a few situations when customers complained about the delayed light sensors' reaction." (R2)*

*"I think I could lower water and energy consumption by reducing the number of light bulbs in the accommodation unit, but I do not want to create an unpleasant impression on tourists, so I do not want to lose quality by saving energy." (R8)*

Further, according to some managers (17%), although the use of advanced technologies seems to be an attractive natural resource saving option, which would allow them to save considerable water and energy, such technologies are not used due to insufficient financial resources needed to purchase them. Additionally, the use of performing water or energy saving technologies represents the value for large accommodation units, which have the financial resources needed to make such investments.

*"I think that if I equip my guesthouse with state-of-the-art appliances for saving purpose, things would be different, but that is a long-term investment that I want, of course, but it is not achievable at this moment." (R6)*

*"Here, in the guesthouse, we have not yet installed high-end systems because there are much more other priorities to be done first, but, for the future, if necessary, I will also apply different water saving systems." (R9)*

It is interesting to notice that owner-managers' views on the water and energy economy are quite different, even contradictory. On the one hand, managers have argued that preserving an unpolluted environment (which is ensured by saving water and energy) contributes decisively to attracting and increasing the satisfaction of tourists. On the other hand, respondents considered that a water and energy saving behavior could be a constrain to ensuring a certain level of quality of tourist accommodation services and products.

However, a significant percentage of interviewed owner-managers (75%) consider that environmental pollution is not determined (at least not significantly) by the activity of accommodation units, which are too small to have a visible impact on environmental protection.

*"Personally, I think there are other reasons, on a wider scale, that influence the degradation of the environment, and, by that, I mean industries that are really harmful to the environment."* (R2)

*"The accommodation unit I manage is small, which is why I think it has very little impact on the environmental degradation."* (R4)

*"I do not think the accommodation unit somehow contributes to the degradation of the environment, I would even say it does not contribute at all."* (R6)

*"I do not think the accommodation unit contributes to the degradation of the environment to the same extent as world plastic production, pollution, maritime trade, facts that really have a negative impact on the environment."* (R8)

*"(...) I do not believe that the accommodation unit that I am leading somehow affects the environment; I do not evacuate waste by inappropriate or toxic methods."* (R10)

Some of the interviewed managers have also noted that the limited or even non-existing resource conservation activities in the tourist accommodation unit they run are related to one of the following facts: the area where the facility is located does not encounter environmental problems; the environment is too degraded to be able to correct something in that area; there is currently no clear-cut legislative/institutional framework regulating the consumption of natural resources by economic agents.

*"My opinion is that tourism companies consume a lot of resources and raw materials, but problems can really be solved by legislation and institutional measures in this respect."* (R5)

*"My opinion about the environment is that for now the Transylvanian region is very well preserved."* (R8)

*"I think the environment is very important and requires serious legislative programs to be preserved."* (R10)

Finally, 25% of owner-managers claimed that involvement in water and energy saving activities within the tourist accommodation unit is not yet a priority for management, as these resources (water and energy) do not significantly increase the profitability of the tourist accommodation unit.

*"I have not been involved in environmental protection activities due to lack of time, not by lack of desire or openness to this activity."* (R9)

*"I did not initiate important environmental protection activities, perhaps due to lack of community initiative, due to lack of time, because I do not deal with direct environmental protection, and I am not part of any NGO. However, I have my responsibility and I work towards keeping the cleanliness and appearance of my guesthouse."* (R12)

The above-mentioned opinions highlight the fact that the managers' arguments of counter-saving of water and energy in tourist accommodation units prevail (seven out of nine arguments are negative, i.e., 77% of the total of arguments). This could mean that managers are not willing or have insufficient financial, time, organizational, resources, etc. to engage in such conservation activities.

#### 4.2. Motives for Reducing Water and Energy Consumption

Research question 2: What motivates ATBHs owner-managers' to implement water and energy saving measures?

In connection with the aforementioned aspects, numerous motives to save water and energy in tourist accommodation units were mentioned by the interviewed owner-managers. Considering that the management of the tourist accommodation units aims to obtain profit, water and energy conservation activities were evaluated by the respondents strictly from a perspective of lowering the operating costs of the unit with a significant impact on ATBH rates.

The most common motive given by the managers for water and energy conservation in the tourist accommodation unit was linked to lowering the costs. The vast majority of owner-managers (around 70%) declared that the cost of water and energy is an important component in the total costs of a tourist accommodation unit with a direct impact on ATBH rates.

*"Water and energy consumption influence the rates of accommodation services. Considering the fact that electricity and water prices have increased in recent years, they have also led to an increase in the prices for accommodation services." (R4)*

However, almost half of the interviewed owner-managers (42%) considered that the percentage of water and energy costs in the accommodation rate, although important, is not predominant, and there are a number of other higher costs that should be taken into account.

*"The light-saving system has influenced energy consumption but not to such an extent as to influence accommodation rates." (R4)*

*"I believe that water-saving systems in accommodation units fail to significantly reduce costs. (...) The share of water and energy costs in the accommodation rate is important but not decisive, many other costs (e.g., heating fuel costs, wage costs) are considered and other services that, taken together, generates a certain tariff." (R6)*

It is important to note that the vast majority of ATBH owner-managers expressed their intention to protect the environment, which could be linked to their interest in being socially desirable, as many other researchers have noted (e.g., [104]).

*"The main reason [to protect the environment] is cost reduction, always. But that does not mean they [i.e., the managers] are careless about the environment." (R8)*

From the managers' perspective, another important reason to reduce water and energy consumption has been linked to the need to ensure the highest reliability of the installations used in the tourist accommodation.

*"Always, the main reason to save is to lower costs and maintain the quality of certain systems, maintaining their reliability." (R3)*

Further, three of the interviewed respondents (25%) thought that the competitive factor to justify the reduction of water and energy consumption within the tourist accommodation unit was critical. In other words, the alignment of the accommodation unit's rates with those of existing competitors on the market is due to the cost reduction, energy, and water consumption playing an important role. Therefore, the reasons for reduction of water and energy consumption in tourist accommodation units are based on the managers' need to reduce their operating costs in order to cope with the existing competition on the market and to attract a high number of tourists through their rates and quality of services included in the accommodation packages.

#### 4.3. Technologies for Saving Water and Energy in Tourist Accommodation Units

Research question 3: Which are the main methods/systems/technologies used for water and energy saving in ATBHs?

The owner-managers' responses regarding practical ways of engaging in environmental protection activities and/or saving water and energy in their everyday life and within the accommodation unit they manage revealed that the majority either do not engage in any environmental/saving activity, or engage in only a few activities that typically do not involve significant time, organizational, and/or financial investment.

*"Apart from saving the resources used in the guesthouse, I have not been involved in other environmental protection activities." (R5)*

*"Until now I have not been involved in environmental protection activities either as a private person or as a guesthouse manager." (R7)*

*"So far I have not been involved in environmental protection activities, that is, I have not been part of any initiative group in this respect, but I am a responsible person and I do not neglect the environment." (R8)*

The water and energy saving methods that were mentioned by the interviewed owner-managers of the research units are as presented in Table 3.

**Table 3.** Technologies used to save water and energy in the studied ATBHs.

Technologies Used to Save Water and Energy in the Studied Accommodation Units	The Units Which Use the Technology (Number and Percent)
Using light sensor systems, the use of LED/economic light bulbs and/or the use of a limited number of light bulbs	8 units (67%)
Rational use of energy and water (including the regulation of water flow to bath water taps)	5 units (42%)
Use of water/water-saving systems in toilets or taps and showers (i.e., small size boilers)	3 units (25%)
Room ads to avoid excess water and energy	2 units (17%)
Rational use of equipment to avoid waste water and energy (e.g., use of washing machines only when full)	2 units (17%)
Regular cleaning of air conditioner filters	1 unit (8%)
Reducing inventory used (replacing lawn and flower bed with stony ground to save water and energy)	1 unit (8%)

Source: the authors' research.

Other activities in which ATBHs are specifically involved to protect the environment are as follows:  
Delivering voluntary activities and selective waste collection:

*"I'm interested in protecting the environment and one of my habits is to sort waste." (R2)*

*"(...) I have been involved in environmental protection activities, I have been a volunteer in waste collection actions several times, and as a manager of an accommodation unit I have been collecting plastic bottles from the guesthouse and took them to recycling centers." (R4)*

Performing environmentally friendly activities:

*"I did not do a lot for environmental protection, but my impact on the environment is quite low. I try to reduce the impact on the environment not only saving some resources but also reducing the amount*



*of products that cause environmental damage. I do not buy bottled water, I use a water filter for consumption, and I do not buy plastic packaged products when there are options for products that are packaged in recyclable paper. Also, I do not use disposable dishes, not even outside my guesthouse; I use wooden or metal kitchen tableware. I also try not to use synthetic textiles in clothing, which disintegrate with washing, and obviously harm the environment.” (R3)*

It is worth mentioning the intervention of R3 manager, who believes that engaging in environmental protection activities should not be limited to a few water and energy saving actions at the workplace but should extend to all areas of people’s life in an ecologic way.

*“(…) I think the environmental initiative implies much more than saving water or energy in a guesthouse, I think it is a way of life and an attitude that needs to be in several aspects of everyday life.” (R3)*

#### 4.4. Use of Water Energy Saving Systems and Technologies Versus Tourists’ Saving Behavior

Research question 4: Are ATBHs owner-managers’ willing to get involved in environmental education activities among their guests?

A brief analysis of practical means used by owner-managers to save water and energy in ATBHs revealed some important differences between their responses. From this point of view, managers can be grouped into three categories, namely:

- Owner-managers who emphasis exclusive on use of cutting-edge technologies for saving water and energy in tourist accommodation units;
- Owner-managers who mainly take into consideration tourists’ saving behavior in accommodation units;
- Owner-managers who use both cutting-edge technologies to save water and energy and tourists’ education in order to save such resources.

When asked to describe the technologies used to save water and energy within the ATBH, more than half of the owner-managers (approximately 60%) appreciated that they are known and strictly applied by the management and employees of the establishment. The managers also considered that the guests are only interested in the quality of services, in terms of the tangible aspects of tourist products and services, the way they are served and the actual consumption experience.

*“Customers greatly appreciate the location, the comfort of the rooms, the cleanliness, the quality of the lighting in the rooms, the meals, all of which are very visible to them. For this reason, I believe that saving water and energy is an issue that preoccupies managers more than customers. (...) I do not think that water-saving systems in a hotel or guesthouse somehow affect the efficiency or operation of the unit; in general, I think this is a much more important issue for the supervisor than for the clients.” (R3)*

In addition, the managers declared that guests cannot make a significant contribution to the saving of water and energy in the accommodation unit, and that a reduction in the consumption of such resources could be associated with a decrease of the quality of the services and the satisfaction of the guests. For example, in one owner-manager’s view, ecological education of tourists is an additional activity that requires considerable financial investment, considerable time and effort that, moreover, are not profitable.

*“You cannot do too much just by educating tourists, because people come from all over, with different attitudes, I would do two jobs instead of one if I would start to train each tourist regarding the resource-saving behavior in the accommodation unit.” (R1)*

Another argument put forward by some of the managers as to why water and energy saving technologies and systems in the accommodation unit are more effective than educating tourists is that the latter represent a highly heterogeneous segment of consumers with different behaviors that owner-managers can not anticipate or control. The difficulty in implementing environmental rules in the tourist accommodation unit is determined by the fact that tourists are “pretentious”, “careless”, or “negligent”, or that the attitudes and behaviors of tourists are difficult, if not impossible, to change.

*“Tourists’ behavior is very negligent and careless (...), there are probably several factors that influence this behavior, but one of them is their belief that they have paid for something, respectively they got the best of the stay so behavior in general being very negligent.” (R12)*

*“Tourists are different (...) I think everyone working in tourism knows there are cases when he/she cannot predict or control certain attitudes or behaviors of tourists who are demanding or careless.” (R3)*

Another issue that respondents have raised in favor of the use of water and energy saving technologies is linked to the quality-price ratio that tourists are considering in assessing the standard of tourism services. In other words, tourists assess the quality of tourist services by comparing the price they have paid with the number of products, services, and utilities (water and energy) they have consumed. Therefore, these tourists use water and energy excessively while staying in tourist accommodation units, often much higher than that recorded in everyday life. This finding is also highlighted in the results of previous studies undertaken by various researchers [105].

*“I think more water is used because, in this case, customers do not save water like at home, but they sometimes use it in surplus or in vain.” (R3)*

Furthermore, the difficulty of changing the attitudes and/or behaviors of tourists in terms of water and energy saving or, more broadly, the protection of the environment is linked to the context and time at which they are asked to act. Different researchers in this field [106] have shown that the ecological education of tourists during their holiday is a difficult process, if not impossible, because tourism consumption is a hedonic one. In other words, tourists will be primarily concerned with satisfying the needs for holiday (relaxation, rest, business, etc.), while protecting the environment is placed peripherally in tourists’ activities. In addition, most of the time, buying a holiday involves a series of financial sacrifices that tourists make for a whole year and engaging in environmental activities for the sake of protecting the environment is an impediment that restricts their desire to relax [107].

*“My opinion is that a tourist accommodation unit’s manager cannot change tourists’ behavior with regard to water or energy consumption. (...) Tourists are too preoccupied with holiday or relaxation to think about the environmental factor.” (R5)*

*“I think there are very few tourists who value the water and energy consumption in the accommodation, most of them do not think about it at all. (...) Unfortunately, I did not get involved in educating my clients, for my part, I think there are very few who would take this into account.” (R4)*

On the other hand, the technologies used in the accommodation units for reducing water and energy consumption do not lead to a corresponding change in the consumption behavior of the guests or in their environmental education.

*“I think water-saving systems in accommodation units are not able to cause a change in customer consumption behavior.” (R6)*

As a result, more than half of the interviewed owner-managers (67%) appreciated that the implementation of water and energy saving technologies is far more effective than educating tourists.

*“Unfortunately, I think technology implementation is far more effective than customer education.” (R4)*

*“It’s much easier to implement saving systems and devices than to educate tourists.” (R5)*

The arguments respondents used to justify the greater importance of water and energy saving technologies against the ecological education of tourists are related to the safety and easy use of equipment and their contribution to growth of efficiency and productivity within the accommodation unit, compared with the tourists’ saving behavior, which is much more difficult to manage.

*“I think the most efficient solution is to install equipment (...) is not an easy process and it costs little, but it is safer than educating tourists.” (R7)*

*“Efficient means practical and if I could equip my guesthouse with new technologies I would not care so much to check the rooms after the customers leave and shut the lights after them, I would have more free time, because the use of the water and energy saving technologies would reduce my effort.” (R12)*

Finally, one manager claimed that water saving in the tourist accommodation unit is an extremely complex activity, which, in order to be efficient, should combine the use of technologies with encouraging tourists to adopt a resources conservation behavior and also with ensuring that the written rules of conduct within the accommodation during the stay are visible to all tourists.

*“There is no easy method to save water in accommodation units as this is a complex activity. My duty is to do everything in my power to get people who enter the guesthouse to see certain rules or appeals, so I appeal to common sense first and second to their environmental education.” (R3)*

However, as two of the interviewed owner-managers declared, the ecological education of tourists is not a difficult process and can be ensured most effectively by the personal example of the employees of the tourist accommodation unit.

*“(...) I am involved in educating the tourists about reducing water and energy consumption; I am the person who responds to the irregularities found in the room when my customers come to the reception for check-out.” (R11)*

Another manager stated that the most effective ways for tourists to be determined to save water and energy in the accommodation unit are: a legislative-institutional framework, with clear rules and regulation to be followed and adoption of a natural resources conservation behavior in order to contribute to the protection of the environment within tourist accommodation units.

*“I am firmly convinced that tourists can also be educated, but by legal methods, not just by talking to them. This is only done at a private level, if we want to achieve at a general level, restrictions must be imposed and recognized by the general public.” (R9)*

Finally, another method of ecological education of tourists, mentioned by one of the owner-managers, is to offer discounts on accommodation rates:

*“A method that would motivate tourists to take care of water and energy consumption would be a discount on accommodation rates.” (R4)*

## 5. Discussion

This paper attempted to fill a gap in the environmental literature by exploring the general opinions of ATBHs’ owner-managers about water and energy consumption in the tourist accommodation units they manage, the reasons behind the water and energy reduction, and the water and energy saving methods used within these accommodation units.

The study indicates that ATBHs’ owner-managers understand the importance of an unpolluted environment in tourist destinations, which is in accordance with previous research [21,35]. However, most respondents consider that the environmental pollution of tourist destinations is not significantly

influenced by the activity of accommodation units, which are too small to have a visible impact. This finding is thus in line with recent studies highlighting that agritourism is a form of tourism with a low environmental footprint [108–110].

Moreover, the interviewed owner-managers indicated that reducing water and energy consumption might affect guests' satisfaction and thus exert negative effects on the long-term profitability of the accommodation unit. This finding is in contrast to other studies' results [13,26,35], which highlight that customers' concern in environmentally-friendly practices while staying in an accommodation unit is a strong incentive for such units to adopt environmental initiatives (including water and energy saving measures). Nevertheless, some researchers [111] indicated that, in some cases, managers have a narrow perspective on their property's environmental responsibility based on a low tourist demand for environmentally-friendly businesses and activities. Likewise, a study by Kasim [110] conducted in Pulau Pinang, Malaysia found that there is little consumer pressure for tourism SMEs (small and medium enterprises) to be green, and they are not expected to be environmentally friendly while staying in such accommodation units due to their reduced size which makes them invisible polluters compared with large-scale resorts.

Results also indicated that most interviewed managers are not willing or have insufficient financial, time, organizational resources, etc. to engage in water and energy-saving activities. Owner-managers' low environmental engagement is determined by three factors: their low level of environmental awareness, the lack of customer pressure, and the permissive legislation.

First, research findings indicate that respondents have a low level of environmental awareness. Some owner-managers are not aware of the environmental problems and only focus on the area where they are located, disregarding the national and/or international environmental problems. Others consider that the environment is too degraded and that the environmental management within ATBHs cannot make a difference in the current situation. This result is in line with previous studies which reported on managers who are unaware of environmental issues and their accommodation's impacts on the natural environment [30,111,112].

Second, the interviewed owner-managers mentioned the lack of customer pressure for ATBHs to become environmentally managed. They indicated that specifically Romanian citizens perceive water and energy as inexhaustible resources, and generally, are not environmentally friendly. Moreover, respondents fear that water and energy saving measures could constrain a certain level of quality in their tourist accommodation services and products, at least from their clients' perspective. This finding is not in line with previous studies, which highlight that consumers growing attention toward ecological issues has fostered accommodation managers to implement environmental management initiatives [23,113–115]. However, the study site of the present research must be considered in this context. Romania is an East European post-communist country and other studies show that tourists' environmental concern may vary across countries [116]. Leonidou et al. [117] indicate that tourists from Western Europe are more environmentally-friendly than their Eastern European counterparts, perhaps due to stricter environmental laws, the presence of environmental pressure groups and a more well-established 'green culture'. Therefore, Romanian tourists might be less concerned about environmental issues and exert little pressure on ATBHs' to become environmentally friendly, as suggested by the interviewed owner-managers.

Third, the permissive legislation factor indicates the lack of clear-cut legislative and institutional frameworks regulating the consumption of natural resources by tourism accommodation in the studied country. In the absence of clear government regulations concerning water and energy saving in tourism accommodation units, such environmental management measures might not represent a priority for their owner-managers. Previous studies have also shown that industry's environmental legislation or policies were either insignificant or negatively related to the implementation of environmental measures [32,34,118].

Although most of the interviewed owner-managers were not interested in engaging in water and energy conservation activities, several respondents indicated a more environmentally friendly approach

of their ATBH operations. The main reasons for saving water and energy in tourist accommodation units are based on managers' need to reduce their operating costs in order to cope with the existing competition on the market and to attract visitors. This result is in line with previous studies [26,32,34,35,64], which highlighted how one of the main motivations for managers to embrace environmental management measures is related to reducing operating costs.

Furthermore, the findings show that, although the use of cutting-edge technologies within ATBHs seems to be an attractive option for saving natural resources, such technologies are not used by the hotel management due to insufficient financial resources needed to purchase them. This result confirms previous studies [31,32,34,36,39,66] that emphasize costs as the main constraint to the implementation of environmental management measures.

The interviewed owner-managers thought that tourists cannot make a significant contribution to natural resources conservation in accommodation units and that water and energy saving systems are more effective than the environmental education of visitors in their facility. The main arguments were related to the safety and easy use of equipment and also to their contribution to growth of efficiency and productivity within the accommodation unit, compared with tourists' saving behavior, which is much more difficult, if not impossible, to control and change. These findings are not in line with other studies [5,42,105,119]. In particular, some researchers [119] postulated that reducing water and energy consumption only using high-performance technologies would not significantly contribute to water and energy saving and thus would have negative consequences for the environment. Other studies [105] found that implementing only the water and energy saving technologies within ATBHs may be insufficient, as tourists can not appreciate the amount of water or energy they consume during their stay in the accommodation unit, which is often higher than the one registered at home. However, Zhang et al. [42] highlighted the importance of managing both operations and customers in order to co-produce balanced environmental-economic outcomes. Likewise, Buffa et al. [5] found that both communication-oriented towards customers (i.e., promotion of green events, green reporting, and green marketing activities) and organizational practices (i.e., waste management and use of renewable energy) are key issues in implementing environmental management in small-scale accommodation units and that these are generally carried out by family members, or even by the hotel owner him/herself. The discrepancy between our study's results and other previous research may be attributed to the limited environmental knowledge of the Romanian ATBH owner-managers' and to their lack of awareness regarding the necessary techniques and educational tools that can be employed within their units.

According to the interviewed owner-managers, the most popular water and energy saving measures implemented within the ATBHs they manage are light sensor systems, the use of LED and economic light bulbs, and/or the use of a limited number of light bulbs (eight ATBHs), rational use of energy and water (including the regulation of water flow to bath water taps) (five ATBHs), and water-saving systems in toilets or taps and showers (three ATBHs). These types of environmentally-friendly activities are also highlighted in previous studies [13,21,32,33,35] alongside other water and energy-saving measures which were not mentioned by the interviewed owner-managers (i.e., wastewater treatment, ecological clothes drying outdoors, without the use of machines, change/modification of the heating system and fuel, building insulation). This gap could be explained by the ATBHs owner managers' lack of knowledge regarding environmental initiatives and technologies.

## 6. Conclusions and Implications

The present paper analyzed to what extent ATBHs owner-managers consider tourists' resource saving behaviors and intend to get involved in environmental education activities. The study is based on a qualitative research, using semi-structured interviews, among 12 ATBH owner-managers from Romania. The findings revealed that although most interviewed ATBHs' owner-managers understand the importance of the environment in tourism destinations, they were not fully conscious of the necessity to save water and energy in their units and fear that tourist satisfaction may be negatively



influenced by this type of initiative. Some of them justified that they were not willing or have insufficient financial, time, organizational resources, etc. to engage in water and energy saving activities. The study highlights that the main factors that determine owner-managers' low environmental engagement: low level of environmental awareness, lack of customer pressure, and permissive legislation. These factors may explain the constraints to implementing environmental management measures (i.e., water and energy saving) in a post-communist developing country like Romania, where environmental laws are not yet established and/or reinforced in the same manner as in developed countries.

In the case of owner-managers, who were interested in saving water and energy in their ATBHs, the main motivating factor is the need to reduce their operating costs in order to cope with the existing competition on the market and to attract visitors. A second reason is the need to ensure the highest reliability of the installations used in the tourist accommodation. The most popular water and energy saving measures that are implemented within the analyzed ATBHs concern the use of: light sensor systems, LED and economic light bulbs, and/or the use of a limited number of light bulbs, rational use of energy and water (including the regulation of water flow to bath water taps), and water-saving systems in toilets or taps and showers. Although the use of cutting-edge technologies within ATBHs seems to be an attractive option for saving resources (i.e., water and energy), such systems were not used by the interviewed owner-managers due to insufficient financial resources needed to purchase them. Another measure aimed at saving water and energy within ATBHs is to educate tourists to behave in an environmentally friendly manner during their stay in the ATBHs and encourage their water and energy saving behavior.

Based on their interest in the use of cutting-edge technologies and the environmental education of tourists within their ATBHs, three types of ATBHs owner-managers were identified:

(1) Owner-managers who emphasize the importance of cutting-edge technologies for saving water and energy in tourist accommodation units.

These respondents believe that visitors cannot make a significant contribution to the saving of water and energy in the accommodation unit, as they represent a highly heterogeneous segment of consumers with different behaviors that cannot be anticipated or controlled. Moreover, the environmental education of tourists is considered an unprofitable initiative which requires considerable financial investment, time, and effort. This finding does not confirm previous studies [13,76], which found that customers' lack of awareness related to environmental practices makes it necessary to invest more in environmental education, thus showing how the environment can be helped through independent gestures. Recent research indicated that devoting in environmental education can be beneficial for agritourism businesses by effectively increasing the pool of their potential customers, who are more willing to revisit and purchase at a premium price [120]. Therefore, a major shift in thinking is required for ATBHs owner-managers.

(2) Owner-managers who mainly take into consideration educating tourists' saving behavior in accommodation units.

These respondents consider that the three most effective ways for tourists to be determined to save water and energy in the accommodation unit consist of: the adoption of a natural resources conservation behavior in order to contribute to the protection of the environment within tourist accommodation units and a legislative-institutional framework with clear rules and regulation to be followed. They believe that ecological education of tourists is not a difficult process and can be ensured most effectively by the personal example of the employees of the tourist accommodation unit. However, this will not be an easy task as the ecological education of tourists during their holiday is a difficult process [105] because tourists are mainly driven by their need to relax and thus may consider environmental activities as impediments [107].

(3) Owner-managers who use both cutting-edge technologies to save water and energy and tourists' education in order to save such resources.

These owner-managers should first focus on implementing different water and energy saving technologies that may facilitate a rational use of such resources. Furthermore, they should focus on

raising tourists' awareness regarding the importance of saving water and energy within the rural destination they are visiting and within the unit they are accommodated in. Such accommodation units might collaborate with government agencies and nonprofit organizations that aim for environmental protection in order to promote environmental education among visitors [120]. Second, these units may implement various environmental education methods such as advertising the environmental commitment in their facilities and inviting guests to participate in environmentally-friendly activities, ecological corners with brochures or multimedia presentations, and seminars on environmental themes.

Given the different position taken by the interviewed owner-managers regarding environmental initiatives in their facility, it is possible that they do not have the necessary information about the practical possibilities of engaging in resource conservation practices. Therefore, rural tourism policy-makers, in collaboration with environmental organizations, should identify the main motivations and restrictions for adopting water and energy saving measures in ATBHs and implement actions, which may induce a resources conservation behavior among their managers. For example, courses may be organized in rural destinations, aimed at educating accommodation managers regarding the importance of the environment in the destination and their role in reducing natural resources consumption within their units. Further, ATBHs owner-managers should be informed by environmental nongovernmental organizations regarding different financing sources for implementing cutting-edge technologies, in order to save water and energy in their businesses. Finally, government incentives such as tax breaks for small accommodation units that implement environmental practices (i.e., water and energy saving systems) may ease the adoption of such facilities within ATBHs.

## 7. Limitations and Future Research Directions

The present study responds to calls requested by other researchers to perform qualitative studies focused on specific countries [26,32] in order to get deeper insights into the managers' motivations to engage in environmental management activities within tourism accommodation businesses. Although it provides interesting information on the studied theme, the research framework has several limitations, which offer perspectives for future research. First, the study focused on a single type of accommodation unit (i.e., ATBHs). Therefore, future studies should be conducted in other types of accommodation units in rural areas, in order to establish a more complete understanding of environmental management practices. Second, the study was based on a qualitative research method that did not provide representative data for all ATBH owner-managers, so the findings cannot be generalized. A quantitative research, based on a survey among a representative sample of ATBH owner-managers, may provide interesting data on their environmental management initiatives and motivations. For example, a possible model based on the results of this qualitative study may be tested in future studies. The model may include factors such as owner-managers' low level of environmental awareness, the lack of customer pressure, and the permissive legislation as well as their influence on the barriers that explain why ATBHs' owner-managers do not implement environmental management measures. Third, the study focuses on a single country (i.e., Romania) and tourist destination type (i.e., rural). Consequently, future studies should capture data regarding water and energy-saving in different types of tourist destinations (i.e., rural vs. urban destinations) and in different countries (i.e., developed vs. developing countries). Moreover, future research could measure tourists' perspective on natural resources saving practices while staying in such rural accommodation units for further comparisons with ATBHs' owner-managers' perspectives. Fourth, the present study focuses on only two types of environmental management initiatives (water and energy saving measures). Accordingly, future studies could focus on ATBHs owner-managers' opinions and behaviors regarding other environmentally-friendly practices (i.e., waste management and use of renewable energy).

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