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## **COMPETITIVENESS OF RURAL TOURISM**

### **1. Introduction**

Competitiveness is an ability of economic entities, countries, regions or communities to reach their economic goals better, more efficient, at higher level and, before the other participants of the “contest” – ability to create more wealth. Among the competitive advantages important for tourism development two main groups can be distinguished:

- natural tourist attractiveness – often “the gift from nature”, awesome landscapes, extensive woodlands, or results of human activities through centuries like castles, fortresses, monuments, temples, and newer achievements such as tourist infrastructure,
- genuine hospitality supported by skills and knowledge – quality of human resources.

Human beings have always been curious and wanted to know what other people look like, learn about their culture, animal and plant life, landscapes but also new sounds and smells, music and customs – so much to learn, the best - by personal experience. We, as a humankind have been moving from the very beginning of our existence. Since the times of the wanderings of ancient peoples, we have been travelling in ever-widening patterns about the earth. The second very important impulse for travelling, especially relevant today, in our contemporary urban life style in overcrowded cities, is need of rest in more friendly and quiet environment. We need to recuperate our bodies and minds, as there are several way to achieve it, more and more of us choose rural areas as the place of our holidays or weekend visits.

“Tourism can be defined as the science, art, and business of attracting and transporting visitors, accommodating them, and graciously catering to their needs

and wants" [Macintosh, Goeldner, Ritchie 1995]. For scientists, it is the science, for us as human beings – tourism is a pleasure, for some of the rural dwellers looking for jobs and income in tourism – an art of creating good business with adequate income. All progressive countries throughout the world are interested in tourism. The economic advantages of tourism have been recognised by almost all political and industrial leaders. Tourism has been declared the world's largest industry, surpassing autos, steel, electronics, and agriculture. The economic figures show that tourism has grown to be an activity of worldwide importance and significance. For a number of countries, tourism is the largest commodity in international trade. In many others it ranks among the top three industries. Tourism has grown rapidly to become a major social and economic force in the world [Zarządzanie turystyką... 1996]. However, what the countries have done to make tourism a viable, growing segment of their economy diverges widely – from virtually nothing to creating superbly organised, highly productive tourism plants. While the economic benefits of tourism have long been recognised, today attention is being directed to its social impact, which can be positive or negative, depending on how tourism is planned and managed. More and more attention is paid to sustainable tourism development as is in agriculture and rural areas to their sustainable development. And in rural tourism development the natural environment has particularly important role and value as the main factor attracting visitors.

## 2. Rural areas in tourism competition

From the economic point of view tourism is placed high in the hierarchy of needs so it has to compete with more basic ones. That can be easily noticed in the countries with weaker economy, meaning lower family incomes. In such a situation poorer part of population does not participate in tourism or seeks cheaper ways of spending their holidays. Rural tourism, especially farm tourism (agritourism) is perceived as such a way [Curzydło et al. 2002].

Mass tourism, mostly as a consequence of increased amount of free time, better and quicker transportation means, higher personal income and some other factors, found itself in competition with alternative forms of tourism – rural tourism, farm tourism, green tourism, eco-tourism. Growing interest in rural areas as holiday or weekend rest location increased also the competition between the regions attractive for tourists.

Poland provides favourable conditions for development of tourism in rural areas. Fragmented agriculture in private hands creates picturesque landscapes but also economic weaknesses of the farms seeking additional income. Many rural regions are free of pollution and economical farming of small farms means very limited amounts of chemical fertilisers and any other chemical inputs. Several regions of Poland have very different tourists features – mountains, lowland, highlands,

lakes, sea. The attractiveness is further enhanced by varied surface features, landscapes but also by regional folklore, traditions, customs, regional kitchen, costumes and even dialects.

At present, the economic advantages achieved by farmers, especially in small and medium farms (58,8% of farms  $\leq 5$ ha) are too low for maintenance of farmers family on an acceptable level. One of the types of rural tourism – agritourism – is pointed out as a particular chance of farms to start a new activity. It is an activity connected with their farms but that new type of services provided by them, mostly accommodation and board, is being paid by urban dwellers. Other services, directed to local clientele, have very limited possibilities to develop because of very limited resources of rural dwellers.

### **3. Material and methods**

The material presented in the paper sums up parts of the surveys conducted in the years 2003-2005 and concerns factors of competitive advantages from regional point of view. The surveys with questionnaire of urban dwellers were conducted in urban agglomerations (Krakow – 120 persons, Katowice – 85, Olkusz – 80, Radom – 80) and concerned mostly respondents' tourist preferences. Also personal contacts with agritourism associations, farmers providing tourism services and advisory bodies were taken into consideration.

### **4. South of Poland as tourists destination**

While surveying potential rural tourists in four big urban agglomerations (Krakow, Katowice, Olkusz, Radom) the results were unequivocal – the condition number one is clean, unspoiled natural environment, to some extend, even if it means problems with transportation, communication or accessibility.

The tourist attractiveness of areas depends on their natural values and environment recognised as clean and healthy with recreational characteristics. The highest concentration of tourism occurs in the varied mountain region. Here the natural landscape, forests, clean air and waters, possibilities of practicing different sports attract tourists. Additionally mountain areas create possibilities of active and interesting spending time nearly the whole year long, while in the other regions (sea sides, lakes, lowlands) the tourist season is much shorter, with concentration during the summer holiday (July, August). Natural values should be supported by interesting history, monuments, regional tradition and culture. Tourists usually want to enrich their rest with some new knowledge and skills. Tourism organisers should keep it in mind and explore and next exploit also that part of regional “possessions”.

The main competitive advantage of mountain areas is conditioned by their ability to serve as winter sports provider and accommodator. The farms can be at least, a basic provider of rooms to be rented or apartments and meals. Also most of the ski lifts in Polish mountain areas goes through private land. Especially small scale ski lifts are provided by private owners. The duration of winter season is conditioned by amount of snow and temperature as ski runs mostly depend on natural snow. Anyway, the tourist season in the mountain areas is considered to be three times longer (300 days) than at the seaside or lowlands (100) [Kostuch, Lipski 2002], which gives those areas automatic advantage from the economic point of view. The mountain areas have also much longer tradition in tourism services – it means also higher number of hotels, pensions, rooms to rent in private houses and on the farms. The prices of services depend on the area attractiveness, season and quality of services as on many other less important factors. And again the average price of accommodation is the highest in the Podhale region. During the winter time prices are higher as costs are higher (heating) and usually the demand is quite high. In all regions of Poland agritourism services are the cheapest ones as farmers establishing prices of accommodation do not take into consideration the costs of their own work connected with agritourism as they do not count it in agricultural production. Also potential tourists expect much lower prices on farms than in hotels or pensions by 30-50% [Kostuch, Lipski 2002]. That advantage can be diminished with the rise of services quality following the potential tourists requirements, especially concerning accommodation (rooms with bathrooms, apartments). Part (46%) of surveyed persons was willing to pay more for better quality of accommodation. As condition of considering accommodation on the farms in most cases is possibility of renting rooms with individual bathrooms. It seems to be a pan-European tendency according to our Austrian and German partners from agritourist associations.

There is also substantial part of respondents (37%) who choose agritourist accommodation as the cheapest way of spending their summer holiday (except quite young people who choose tents). Only 17% of respondents could not see themselves spending holiday on farms – the reasons were quite differentiated – from opinion that such holiday would be boring to being afraid of “nasty” smells.

What advantage has agritourism if we consider farmers – mostly it is an economic profit that is the higher the more and longer urban dwellers decide to stay on a farm. Part of conditions for that do not depends on a farmer, for instance weather. Organising tourists time to keep them longer through preparing comprehensive information about the region's attractions, history, tradition and so on, should be kept in mind. Tourist services complementary to farms providing rooms or rooms and board, can create an important part of multifunctional rural development, even if the part of those jobs can exist only during the tourist season.

Universally interest in rural areas and preferably farms as holidays place has been growing rapidly – that gives them very important competitive advantage – the problem is if we in Poland as a whole country can use it and win that interest to attract also foreign tourists to our rural areas proportionally to expressed interest.

## 5. Conclusions

Considering tourism we can discuss many aspects of competitiveness. On that background rural tourism seems to have growing competitive advantage – human necessity of finding a rest – holiday place in the least stressful and polluted environment. Rural areas in different parts of Poland as considered as such. To fulfil the needs and expectations – the amount, differentiation and quality of tourist and complementary services must grow. Poland provides favourable conditions for the development of tourism in rural areas. We are quite rich in natural values (for instance national parks, protected areas), history, folklore and hospitality tradition. What we lack consists from small things like proper road signs to much bigger, like technical infrastructure (sewage systems and plants) to proper roads. Accessibility of rural accommodation places, including agritourism farms, gives them automatic advantage to those with more difficult and distant location, although also those farms have their own adherents.

Rural tourism and agritourism have been and can be even better source of income in rural areas although a lot has to be done to attract more tourists and keep them longer in the area. To achieve it rural tourism and especially agritourism need external help – financial and professional. Tourism as such has prove to have significant competitive advantage in winning the major part of families' free disposal resources.

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## KONKURENCYJNOŚĆ TURYSTYKI WIEJSKIEJ

### Streszczenie

Konkurencyjność w turystyce, rozumiana jako zdobycie przewagi ekonomicznej, ma szereg aspektów. Turystyka, jako potrzeba wyższego rzędu musi konkurować w ramach funduszu konsumpcji swobodnej z innymi sposobami jej zaspokajania. Turystyka wiejska konkuruje z innymi formami turystyki alternatywnej – głównie masową i zagraniczną. Agroturystyka jest formą wypoczynku, która w ostatnich latach zdaje się mieć przewagę konkurencyjną i wywołuje znaczne zainteresowanie. Kolejnym aspektem konkurencyjności jest rywalizacja pomiędzy regionami świata i krajów w przyciąganiu turystów.

Badania wskazują, że w Polsce znaczną przewagę konkurencyjną mają obszary górskie, którą zapewnia przede wszystkim znacznie dłuższy sezon turystyczny, długa tradycja usług turystycznych i stosunkowo dobra infrastruktura turystyczna. Następuje też ciągła poprawa jakości usług turystycznych – absolutnie niezbędny warunek osiągania przewagi konkurencyjnej.

Turystyka wiejska jest dobrym i może być jeszcze lepszym źródłem dochodów na obszarach wiejskich i może stanowić istotny element zrównoważonego, wielofunkcyjnego rozwoju obszarów wiejskich, przy spełnieniu określonych wymagań zgłaszanych przez turystów.