

EVALUATION OF THE BENEFITS OF THE CERTIFICATION LEADING QUALITY TRAILS – BEST OF EUROPE: CASE STUDY LUŽNICE VALLEY HIKING TRAIL

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Abstract

Purpose – The article presents the results of a study evaluating the efficiency, benefits, and contribution to the sustainable development of destination of the Certification Leading Quality Trails – Best of Europe in the Czech Republic in Lužnice Valley Hiking Trail.

Methodology – The cost-benefit analysis was used for the evaluation of the efficiency of the certification. HEAT (Health economic assessment tool) method was used for quantification of the economic benefits from improving health due to hiking activity on the monitored route. The evaluation of non-financial benefits was based on indicators of the sustainability of destination development in the economic, social, and environmental areas, and on the aspect of visitors' satisfaction.

Findings – The economic efficiency of the certification is low. However, the non-financial benefits of the certified trail are significant. The research showed the benefits of the trail certification in several aspects: the improvement of the quality of the tourist hiking trail led to greater satisfaction of tourists and their better experience. Another benefit is the increase of the image of the destination (Toulava). The certification of the trail contributed also to the sustainable development of the destination in all three pillars.

Contribution – The investigation confirmed the importance and benefits of the trail certification. There was a significant improvement in the quality of the route and increased tourist satisfaction. This creates potential for further sustainable development of the destination and related services. Therefore, it is recommended that other hiking trails in the Czech Republic also undergo certification.

Keywords: Walking Tourism, Certification, Hiking Trail, Leading Quality Trails, Lužnice Valley, Czech Republic.

INTRODUCTION

The current lifestyle of the majority of the population necessarily requires a certain counterweight in the form of active rest and return to nature. Walking is one of the basic human locomotor activities. An increase in the requirements for mental activity and a reduction in natural physical activity is a result of the current sedentary lifestyle. Tourism uses natural human movement, which physically engages the whole body, and thus improves health and physical condition. Health aspects of hiking, as well as aerobic activities in general, are among the basic elements of prevention of non-communicable diseases, especially cardiovascular diseases, diabetes II. type and overweight. Movement in the fresh air, in nature, and with friends or new acquaintances has a positive effect on

both the physical, mental, and social condition of a person (Havelka 2020). After exercise, a person feels relaxed, is more efficient, more balanced, and reduces their sensitivity to everyday stress. During group activities, one establishes new social contacts, develops one's social intelligence, and more easily identifies one's role in society. The development of walking tourism can bring also social and economic benefits to residents and communities if properly developed and managed (UNWTO 2019).

Marking of tourist routes in the Czech Republic has a 120-year tradition, the system of marking is perfectly elaborated. The Czech Tourists Club takes care of the maintenance of markings of more than 43,000 km of hiking trails throughout the Czech Republic, on which over 69,000 signposts and signs are installed (KČT 2021). Hiking has long been one of the most widespread leisure activities of Czechs, but in recent years there has been a noticeable decline in interest. Improvement of the quality of hiking trails should contribute to an increase in the number of tourists and to the sustainable development of the destination. Therefore, the Czech Tourists Club decided to modernize the approach to the management of hiking trails and started to evaluate selected trails according to the rules of Certification Leading Quality Trails – Best of Europe. The first certified route in the Czech Republic was the trail along the Lužnice river. Its section between cities Planá nad Lužnicí - Týn nad Vltavou in the length of 55 km gained the Certification Leading Quality Trails – Best of Europe in the Czech Republic.

The aim of the study, the results of which are presented in this article, was to evaluate the efficiency, benefits, and contribution to the sustainable development of destination of the Certification Leading Quality Trails – Best of Europe in the Czech Republic. The survey was conducted on the first certified route in the Czech Republic: Lužnice Valley Hiking Trail in southern Bohemia in 2019–2020. The cost-benefit analysis was used for the evaluation of the efficiency of the certification. Using the method HEAT the economic benefits of improving health due to hiking on the monitored route were quantified. The evaluation of non-financial benefits was based on indicators of the sustainability of destination development in the economic, social, and environmental areas.

The investigation confirmed the importance and benefits of the trail certification. It creates the potential for further sustainable development of the destination.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

The issue of sustainability is particularly important on the agenda of international and European institutions (EU 2019). To maintain sustainability it is crucial to harmonize economic interests and environmental needs and to balance the technological progress and environmental limits. It means that sustainable development rests on three basic pillars: the economic, the social, and the environmental ones (Polášková 2011). The results of the research of Simeoni (2019) confirm the importance of walking tourism in sustainable development. A few studies underlined that residents' sense of well-being and their support for tourism development were connected with how the outcomes of tourism were evaluated by the members of a community (Andereck et al. 2005). This means that if residents perceive a positive benefit-cost ratio, it is more likely that they

will support tourism and take active roles in tourism activities (Scaglione and Mendola 2017). Economic benefits from tourism, like employment and economic gain, were used as indicators to examine community attachment, residents' quality of and satisfaction with life, and attitudes towards tourism (Lee and Brahmašreene 2013). Although economic benefits were a significant predictor, a combination of factors, such as social, emotional, and economic, performed better in analyzing how residents' perceived values influence the quality of life, their satisfaction with life, and support for further tourism development (Woo, Kim and Uysal 2015, Ramseok-Munhurrun and Naidoo 2011). According to Sweeney and Soutar (2001), important aspects of tourism development were also those intangible values that can be derived from attachment to a place or personal benefits. Since communities may have different traditions, cultures, and natural resources, residents' level of support and attitudes towards tourism development and perceived quality of life may depend on the nature of a destination.

Ecotourism is considered an important sustainable development tool because it is "responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people" (United Nations Environment Program, 2002). Ecotourism not only brings economic benefits to local communities such as increasing local employment and income but also makes tourists "more aware of nature and more supportive of its conservation via changes in their behaviour, greater political support and larger financial contributions for such conservation" (Tisdell and Wilson 2002; Tisdell 2003).

Experts research various aspects of walking and hiking tourism, e.g. relation and commitment of individuals to walking tourism in United Kingdom (Davies 2018). Published research results confirm the demands of tourists for a quality hiking experience and for safety in walking tourism (Choi et al. 2017), (Ham, 2018). Although tourism is a traditional activity in the Czech Republic, there is no current research work on this topic. Tourist trails as a linear form of tourist infrastructure fulfill various functions: recreational, ecological, economic, social, ensuring safety (Kołodziejczyk 2019). Marked hiking routes, trails, and natural corridors that are used in harmony with the environment offer opportunities for sports, tourism, and recreation. These initiatives try to improve the quality of life and give the opportunity for sustainable economic activities for the local communities and towns. They help local communities add value to their natural and human heritage. (Arendt 2004, Fabos 2004, Fabos et al. 1995). This encourages tourism and thinking about the urgent need for developing sustainable tourism offers and products. All these issues relate, directly and indirectly, to the assessment of the sustainability of the infrastructure, sites, and objects of the natural environment. Although many regions and local communities are conscious of the unpolluted environment and natural resources available in their areas, they lack competence and experience on how to develop the economic potential of these valuable tourism resources, in a contemporary and international tourism offer. Furthermore, it is essential that these regions do not just focus on the existing needs of tourists, but also on the development of tourism destinations, assuming sustainability principles and preserving available natural resources, landscapes, and biotopes. The Certification Leading Quality Trails – Best of Europe is one of the possible activities to support all of the above-mentioned issues.

2. METHODS OF RESEARCH

The survey was conducted on the first certified route in the Czech Republic: Lužnice Valley Hiking Trail in southern Bohemia between November 2019 and November 2020. Economic and non-economic benefits in connection with route certification were monitored.

Primary data collection was carried out in the form of a questionnaire survey among visitors to the trail (223 respondents – visitors of the monitored trail, 12 questions detecting length of stay on the route, expenses, experience). Quantitative data were supplemented by the opinions of experts and local entrepreneurs, and destination representatives in the form of semi-structured interviews (6 interviews – Destination management company Toulava, Tourist information office, accommodation and catering facilities providers, questions identifying the experience with the change after route certification and benefits for sustainable development). The annual number of hikers on the trail is monitored by a motion sensor installed on the route. The attendance of the trail was rounded to 12 000 tourists in 2020.

The cost-benefit analysis was used for the evaluation of the efficiency of the certification. The method HEAT (Health economic assessment tool) was used for quantification of the economic benefits from improving health due to hiking on the monitored route. The evaluation of non-financial benefits was based on indicators of the sustainability of destination development. The evaluation of the contribution of the trail to the sustainable development of the destination was performed according to own methodology. From the sustainable development indicators recommended by Závodná (2015), the 4 most relevant were consistently selected in each pillar (economic, social, environmental). Evaluation of visitors' satisfaction complemented the complex research approach.

3. INTRODUCTION TO THE TOPIC AND ISSUES

3.1. Certification Leading Quality Trails – Best of Europe

The certificate 'Leading Quality Trails – Best of Europe' is awarded by the European Ramblers' Association (ERA). ERA was founded in Germany in 1969 and this umbrella organization comprises 65 ramblers' organizations from 35 European states (in 2021) (ERA 2021c).

With the "Leading Quality Trails – Best of Europe", the ERA sets a European standard for walking tourism. The rating/grading as 'Leading Quality Trails – Best of Europe' is an award as well as a transparent method to optimize the overall route infrastructure. In countries that already have a functioning route network, such a system can strengthen walking tourism further. The use of the criteria system 'Leading Quality Trails – Best of Europe' renders the attractiveness of routes measurable and guarantees a high-quality walking experience. The system of criteria captures the variety and uniqueness of different landscapes, infrastructures, and routes character in the different regions of

Europe. To be awarded the certificate, the trail must meet strict criteria in terms of trail surfaces, attractions, and availability of services and transport, simple navigation system.

The system aims to upgrade walking trails and to support walking tourism in terms of giving the walking tourist an overview and decision aid and giving regard to ecology and nature preservation of the destination (ERA 2021b).

The subject of this study was the evaluation of the benefits of the certification “Leading Quality Trails – Best of Europe“ on the first certified Czech hiking trail Lužnice Valley Hiking Trail (Stezka podél Lužnice). The results will be used in deciding whether the certification process may be beneficial for other destinations.

3.2. Toulava Destination and Lužnice Valley Hiking Trail

Toulava is a tourist area spread on the boundary of south and middle Bohemia, between Prague and Šumava mountains. The center of the region is the city of Tábor. This diversified tourist destination originated in 2013 and is the youngest one in the Czech Republic. In 2018 it became the first certificated area of the tourist destinations in the whole country. Characteristic features of the tourist region Toulava is a low network of settlements and agricultural landscape not much used by tourists. However, there is a dense network of cycle trails and hiking routes. The region is one of the less-visited in comparison with other areas of the Czech Republic.

The Lužnice Valley Hiking Trail leads through the Lužnice river valley from the spring near the Austrian village Karlstift through the towns of Weitra, Gmünd, and Litschau crosses the border between Austria and the Czech Republic near Chlum u Třeboně, then leads through the Czech towns Veselí nad Lužnicí, Soběslav, Sezimovo Ústí, Tábor and Bechyně to the mouth of the Lužnice into the Vltava river. The route is 240 km long.

Proceedings of the certification of the route began in 2011. In 2019, a part of the route of the length of 55 km (between cities Planá nad Lužnicí - Sezimovo Ústí - Hýlačka lookout tower - Pintovka forest park - Tábor - Bechyně - Týn nad Vltavou – confluence Lužnice and Vltava rivers) acquired the certificate from the European Association of Tourist Clubs as the first in the Czech Republic. The route was included in the list Leading Quality Trails – Best of Europe. Toulava (2021). The Lužnice Valley Hiking Trail is thus among the 19 routes in Europe on this prestigious list. The Czech Republic became only the 10th European country to have such a route (ERA 2021a).

In the years 2011–2019, the route was evaluated and modified to meet the requirements of the certification criteria. Adjustments of this trail required a lot of effort. The already existing trail had to be adapted – information signs and boards had to be built as well as information boards with links to all services in the surroundings. Maintenance of the trail – terrain work, repairs had to be ensured. Some parts of the trail had to be relocated from asphalt roads to nature paths. Local providers of accommodation and other services had to be addressed and contracted, providing luggage transport service had to be arranged. Four subjects took part in the realization: Organization of destination management Toulava (main initiator and organizer of the project), city authorities on the trail (trail

modifications in their territory), Czech tourists club (negotiations with ERA), Regional Office of South Bohemia (project financing).

It was expected, that due to the creation of a certified route more tourists come to the region, the demand for tourism services will grow, which will support the development of the local economy. The project emphasizes sustainable development of the region and tourism.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Financial Benefits - Cost-benefit analysis

Work on the certification of the trail took place between the years 2011–2019 in two phases. The costs incurred during this period were significant. Cost data were collected from the three organizations involved in the project (Toulava destination company, Czech Tourist Club, South Bohemian Regional Authority).

Lužnice Valley Hiking Trail was marked and its passability was modified 100 years ago. The preparation of its certification consisted only of an evaluation and improvement, not of the building of the entire new route. These historical costs were not included in the cost-benefit analysis.

The first phase (2011-2018) included the evaluation of the condition of the 240 km long tourist route. The costs for this stage consisted mainly of personnel costs. In fact, they were not charged because the work was done as volunteer participation of the members of the Czech Tourists Club and other cooperating institutions (e.g. Prague University of Economics and Business). The costs were estimated according to the number of hours and only $\frac{1}{4}$ costs were included in the calculation (the estimate is CZK 120 000 / approx. 4 800 EUR), which corresponds to the ratio of the length of the certified route to the total length.

In the second phase (2019), physical adjustments of the certified section of the trail were carried out (retrofitting with furniture, relocation of one part of the original trail, signing of the new part, identification of providers of tourism services). Furthermore, the certification documentation was processed and the certification fee was paid. These costs are in the amount of CZK 660 000 (ca 26 500 EUR).

Operating costs for trail maintenance per year are calculated between 3 groups of entities. The Czech Tourists Club is responsible for maintaining the trail markings. The cost is ca CZK 300 per 1 km, the route is renewed once every 3 years. The maintenance of the physical route is paid by the municipalities through whose territory the trail passes. The management and marketing of the trail are provided by the destination management organization Toulava. The annual operating costs for route maintenance are calculated at 15% of the investment costs. Their annual amount is estimated at CZK 100 000 (ca 4 000 EUR).

A motion sensor counter is installed on the route. The year-round attendance of the trail is rounded to 12 000 tourists in 2020. The trail does not generate any direct income, entry to the trail is free of charge. Indirect, multiplied revenues can be estimated as a model based on average tourist expenditure CZK 350 (15 EUR), (source: authors' research) and the number of tourists per season at 12 000 hikers (source data from the counter). CZK 350 (15 EUR) / person/day, number of tourists at 12 000 (2020) means revenues in tourism enterprises of 180 000 EUR (food, local transport, accommodation, entrance fees to the monuments, purchase of souvenirs, maps, tourist cards, regional products) (source: authors' research).

4.2. Results – method HEAT

Health economic assessment tool (HEAT) for walking and cycling was used to calculate the health benefits (WHO 2017). HEAT, based on several input data: the average length of the route per person (15 km), the number of people who used the trail (12 000), the cost of enabling such a level of tourism (CZK 100 000), and the mortality of certain diseases, can inform calculation to what extent tourism contributes to the prevention of non-communicable diseases. In the long run, a healthy population means lower health care spending. The HEAT method is based on statistical estimates, its outputs should be considered as indicative.

The level of tourism on the Lužnice Valley Hiking Trail according to the HEAT evaluation prevented in the assessed period of 1 year (2020) 0,2 premature deaths. Mortality is monetized using the Value of Statistical Life (VSL) of 1 730 000 EUR/death. This corresponds to an economic value of EUR 361 000 per year.

4.3. Results – Support of sustainable development

The contribution of the Lužnice Valley Hiking Trail to the sustainable development of the destination was evaluated according to the methodology developed for the purposes of this study by the authors. 16 criteria were evaluated in 4 categories (pillars environmental, social, economic, visitors satisfaction). Rating scale 0 – 4, where 0 means “does not contribute, 4 means “strong contribution”. The degree of contribution to the fulfillment of the criteria was evaluated on the basis of semi-structured interviews.

Table 1: **Rating of the support of sustainable development**

Criterion		Grade
A		
Environmental pillar		
A1	Minimalization of negative effects of hiking on the environment	2
A2	Tourist flows management	4
A3	Enlightenment, interpretation of territory nature values	3
A4	Protection of nature	2
B		
Social pillar		
B1	Increasing the image of the destination Toulava	4
B2	Promoting the pride of residents in their territory	3
B3	Integration into/support of the regional development plan	4
B4	Support of the visitor's interest in the community and the environment	2
C		
Economic pillar		
C1	Growth in tourism performance	4
C2	Use of local resources	3
C3	Job creation, business opportunities for residents	2
C4	Growth of recreational value / competitiveness of the territory	4
D		
Visitors satisfaction		
D1	Authentic experience in the region	4
D2	Breadth of recreational, educational opportunities across generations	4
D3	Getting acquainted with the visited region	3
D4	Infrastructure provision of tourism	4

Source: Elaborated by the authors (2020).

The Lužnice Valley Hiking Trail contributes to sustainable development of the region and tourism. The average value of the evaluation of the indicators of the contribution to sustainable development is in the equivalent to 3,25. The limit indicators for the concept of bearing capacity of the area have not yet been set for the trail. The number of visitors to the route and the whole area is still far from reaching the full potential capacity.

E.g. an increased interest in local products offered under the TOULAVA regional product® brand was reported (ARZ 2021). Certification of regional products is a separate project supporting the preservation of local crafts.

4.4. Results - Non-financial benefits

During the first year after the introduction of certification (in 2020), the number of visitors to the destination increased. Hiking along the Lužnice Valley Hiking Trail is spread over the seasons from spring to autumn. It generates demand for foodservice and accommodation facilities. The increased interest is also recorded on the Toulava website

on the trail information page. The accommodation establishments reported an increased interest in accommodation expressly to cross the trail. Visitors expressed satisfaction and a pleasant experience with the route.

However, it must be taken into account that tourism was atypical in the year 2020. On the one hand, domestic tourism and interest in nature trips have increased. On the other hand, the European potential of the Lužnice Valley Hiking Trail could not be developed because incoming tourism was significantly limited.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Lužnice Valley Hiking Trail has experienced its first season. Moreover, the season was influenced by the COVID pandemic. Nevertheless, according to the feedback from entrepreneurs, there was increased movement of people on the trail as well as a higher number of overnight stays in accommodation facilities.

In the cost-benefit analysis, it was possible to work only with limited input data. The financial evaluation of costs was calculated as a model, as a large volume of work on certification was provided by volunteers from the ranks of the Czech Tourists Club. The trail does not generate direct financial effects (its use is not charged), i.e. the expenses of tourists in connection with their movement on the tourist route were monitored. For most tourists, the expenses directly related to tourism on the route were low. The direct economic efficiency of the certification is low.

However, the multiplier economic benefits and the non-financial benefits of the certified trail are significant. The survey showed the benefits of the trail certification in several aspects: improvement of the quality of the tourist hiking trail led to greater satisfaction of tourists and their better experience. An increase in the number of tourists and the extension of the length of their stay has also been demonstrated. The certification of the trail contributed also to the sustainable development of the destination in all three pillars. Listing the Lužnice Valley Hiking Trail on the prestigious list of the best trails in Europe Leading Quality Trails – Best of Europe means also the increase of the image of the destination Toulava. This creates the potential for further development of the destination and related services.

Note in conclusion: The increase in the number of tourists on the route between 2019 and 2020 cannot be clearly justified by the certification of the route. The year 2020 was atypical due to measures against the spread of covid-19, a strong increase in domestic tourism was recorded in all natural localities in the Czech Republic.

CONCLUSION

The investigation confirmed the importance of the trail certification. The research showed the benefits of the trail certification in several aspects: greater satisfaction of tourists; contribution to the sustainable development of the destination in all three pillars; increase of the destination's image. This creates the potential for further sustainable

development of the destination and related services. This was also confirmed by the development of tourism in 2020, which was significantly affected by restrictions against the spread of the covid-19 epidemic. The contemporary tourist route helped in the year of the increase in domestic tourism and the number of trips to nature to the reduction of negative impacts of tourism on nature and to the sustainable development of the destination Toulava. Therefore, it is recommended that other hiking trails in the Czech Republic also undergo certification.

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