

CREATING TOURIST SPACE ON THE BASIS OF NATURAL ENVIRONMENT AS AN ELEMENT OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT, CASE OF THE STEPNICA COMMUNE

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Abstract

Purpose – the aim of the paper is to point out the possibilities for creating space that is attractive for tourists using environmental resources, while respecting the rules of sustainable development. **Design** – the research example is the commune of Stepnica, situated by the Szczecin Lagoon (Poland). It has been indicated how useful is the natural environment in creating tourist space, and how it can be used to build tourist products

Methodology – The "desk research" method was used to an analysis of the current level of tourism development. On the grounds of the PAPI method were presented the activities in the interest of developing sustainable forms of tourism in the commune of Stepnica. Information were collected by using available secondary data, and through a questionnaire addressed to commune's government, a local tourist organization and the residents.

Approach – Achieving balance between the environment, tourists, the local community and service providers is only possible when the active subjects of this arrangement (meaning all except the environment) are willing to agree to impose restrictions on themselves, without which reaching a compromise is impossible. It is one of the main challenges for sustainable tourism, since it takes a high level of ecological knowledge and the awareness of long-term consequences of one's actions to agree to such restrictions.

Findings – The conducted research prove that existing natural resources can be used to create an attractive, and sometimes unique, tourist space. Using natural elements to develop varied forms of niche tourism can be a basis for sustainable tourism development and supplement (or balance out) mass tourism.

Originality of the research – Findings should be useful for local authorities to indicate opportunities for using the knowledge, awareness and involvement of the local community to overcome the obstacles in the way of sustainable tourism development.

Keywords sustainable tourism development, local development, tourist organizations, Stepnica (Poland)

INTRODUCTION

Creating space is a permanent and dynamic process which constitutes not only the effect of human activity, but also changes undergoing in the natural environment. Anthropogenic changes of the space should imply changes ordering the space and aiming at achieving the spatial order which is the main category of sustainable development (Meyer 2011, 25). Nowadays, when such spatial features as limitation and depletion as well as limited renewability of the natural resources have become

apparent, it is more and more important to acknowledge the natural environment as the fundamental determinant of development but also functioning of socio-economic systems, while resigning from the paradigm of maximizing the economic return. It is not a new solution as it has been propagated since the second half of the 20th century (Problems of Human Environment 1969), but still it is not sufficiently reflected in the undertaken activities.

Respecting the natural environment is particularly significant in terms of the tourism space which constantly changes its range. The extension of the tourism space mainly stems from the expansion of areas which are already taken by tourism (which are most often based on typical natural tourism values such as climate, access to water bodies, mountains) as well as taking new areas which offer attractive values for a modern tourist (most often, these of the unusual character). In the latter case, areas of unique natural conditions, where the ecological balance is fragile and easy to upset, are more frequently exploited by tourism. For various reasons, making the tourism development stop in such areas does not seem real, however, one can try to create space within them where the principles of sustainable development are respected, which combined with tourist education (raising their ecological awareness and encouraging self-restraint) should have the desired effects.

The objective of the study is to present new possibilities of creating attractive space for tourists on the basis of the natural resources, while observing the principles of sustainable development. The researched case is the Stepnica commune located at the Szczecin Lagoon (Poland) and having the natural resources which are partially unique.

1. CREATING TOURISM SPACE ON THE BASIS OF THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

The classical definition of the tourism space formulated by S. Liszewski (Liszewski 1995, 94) says that it is “a functionally distinctive part (sub-space) of the geographical space considered in a broad sense, that is as a sub-space consisting of the elements of the Earth’s natural layer (the natural environment), permanent effect of human activity in this environment (the economic environment) as well as the human environment in terms of the social aspect”. Nowadays, the tourism space more frequently is identified with the part of the geographical space where the phenomenon of tourism movement occurs (Włodarczyk 2009, 74). The tourism space undergoes constant quantitative and qualitative changes. Quantitative changes are eventually positive as the process of disappearance of the tourism space (despite the growth in its intensity) stays in the background of the emergence of a new tourism space and the extension of the existing one. The extension of the tourism space can be considered in terms of various perspectives: geographical, time and perceptual (Stasiak 2011, 42). It is most noticeable when new parts of the tourism space develop in the areas which have not aroused tourists’ interest so far and for various reasons they have become attractive for the mass tourism movement. The new parts of the tourism space more frequently use the main natural resources, what stems from the deepening trends in leisure in a good-quality space (clean natural environment) and seeking new experiences (unique places, phenomena, situations).

The natural environment, including all elements of the animate and inanimate nature, determines the functioning of the socio-economic systems in a primal way and its impact depends on a type of activity and is variable in time (Meyer 2002, 51). Tourism uses the natural environment potential widely in both direct (creating tourism attractions and products) as well as indirect ways (using raw material resources). The impact of the natural environment on tourism is especially visible in the initial period of the mass tourism development and the most popular tourism product called 3xS, the later expansion of various forms of qualified tourism, including downhill skiing, as well as the current tendency to seek new experiences or learning about unique and endangered elements of nature (Meyer 2016, 183). It is assumed that for tourists the natural environment can be (Holden 2000):

- source of emotional experiences when a tourist becomes emotionally involved in the contact with the environment,
- setting for undertaken activities when the environment only has a practical function,
- social system when the environment is a place of social interactions which a tourist focuses on,
- source of identity if a tourist identifies with a given place to such an extent so that they integrate with it.

Possible fields in terms of using the natural environment by tourism indicate that at the present stage of the tourism development all elements of the natural environment can be used (intentionally or not) in the process of creating the tourism space. The intensification of the natural environment exploitation by tourism is also influenced by changes connected with an increase in leisure time and ways of using it. Selecting a healthy and ecological style of living (also when travelling) results in replacing passive leisure with spending free time actively and an increase of expectations concerning the quality of the natural environment in the area where the activity is undertaken. On the supply side, creating (or modifying) tourism products involves developing an offer for currently emerging new forms of tourism and groups of tourists (recreational democracy) and completely new products which aim at attracting existing (or new) clients through their distinctiveness (these are most often niche products).

The natural environment forms the basis for the majority of such activities, but its significance is marginalized in both practice and theory (Krzyszowska-Kostrowicka 2007, Kożuchowski 2005, Meyer 2002, Zielińska 2013). The prevalent studies try to indicate possibilities and methods of quantifying natural resources as well as methods of a quantitative approach towards them in the research on the tourism area potential (Tucki 2003, Fornal-Pieniak and Żarska 2014, Kumar and Kumar 2008), and to describe the natural environment in tourism areas. There are also frequent deliberations on landscape and its importance to tourism (Kulczyk 2013, Nitkiewicz-Jankowska and Nitkowski 2010, Wyrzykowski 1991). Scientific deliberations (and research studies) currently focus on the second side of the environment-tourism relation, that is on the impact of tourism on the environment (mainly the natural environment), what in the context of the paradigm of the sustainable development of tourism is fully justified (Kowalczyk 2010, Zaręba 2010, Niezgodna 2006, Mika 2014, Dickinson 2015, Hughes, Weaver, Pforr, Routledge 2015).

2. NICHE FORMS OF TOURISM AS AN ELEMENT OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Sustainable development can be considered as a megatrend in modern tourism which is of key importance to the way of creating tourism products and providing services to tourists (Meyer 2015, 29). A trend (or trend estimation) means noticeable monotonicity of the course of a given phenomenon in time, whereas megatrends are the most visible and long-term changes which alter people's behaviour and go beyond one area of life and one geographical region (Kucharska 2014, 223). The necessity of developing in a sustainable way, and not only in terms of achievable current benefits (and sometimes future ones), occurred in the mid-20th century and from the beginning it was implemented in all fields of functioning of socio-economic systems. Stable and sustainable development is defined as social and economic development which is able to satisfy the needs of the modern society in a way that does not hamper the possibility of satisfying needs of future generations (Panasiuk 2011, 93). Sustainable tourism means tourism that respects the needs of modern tourists and regions of tourism reception, while guaranteeing the possibility of satisfying such needs in the future (Kurek 2007, 474).

One can distinguish a lot of various activities and solutions supporting sustainable tourism development undertaken in terms of both creating tourism products (by organizers and tourism regions) and functioning of the elements of tourism and paratourism infrastructure (accommodation facilities, transport) as well as ecological education for tourists. One of the effects of pursuing the sustainable tourism development is niche tourism which has not been unambiguously defined in Polish literature on the subject, however, it is most often described intuitively as a type of tourism undertaken by small groups of people who have special needs, create a sort of sub-market and providing services to them is unprofitable for big companies. In Polish literature on the subject there is a view that niche tourism is connected with facilities that hardly fall under the mainstream of tourism such as: London toilets or Paris canals (Kozak 2008); and niche tourism (of special interests) stands in opposition to commercial tourism (Kurek 2007). Since the 21st century, English literature has promoted niche tourism as one in opposition to mass tourism and the following division of tourism has been proposed (Robinson, Novelli, 2005, 7):

- 1) Mass tourism which means a great number of tourists in the known surroundings
- 2) Niche tourism involving tourists who have specified non-standard interests and needs, and create a narrowly defined group of people having the same type of specialized needs. Niche tourism is divided into macro and micro niches:
 - a) macro niche - culture, micro niches e.g. heritage, religious, ethnic tourism;
 - b) macro niche - the environment, micro niches e.g. natural tourism, geotourism, ecotourism;
 - c) macro niche - countryside, micro niches e.g. agritourism, enotourism;
 - d) macro niche - city, micro niches e.g. business, congress, sport tourism;
 - e) macro niche - other, micro niches e.g. photography, volunteer, dark tourism.

Niche tourism is part of demand trends concerning the current style of living promoting the individualization of needs and fulfilment of own passions and dreams which are often combined with care of the quality of the natural environment as ecological awareness increases. As part of the environment macro niche, it is possible to develop various forms of tourism based on the natural environment. The combination of the expectations of tourists inspired by a ecological style of living and the possibilities of creating new, unobvious and unique tourism products by organizers means the expansion of tourism into areas which have been previously inaccessible (or hard to reach), underdeveloped or dangerous (or combining all these aspects) and the further, often intensive (which does not have to mean harmful) exploitation of the natural environment (Meyer 2016, 185).

A conscious exploitation of the natural environment as the basis for the development of niche tourism can be a chance for areas which have a clean and individual natural environment. Creating the space where the natural environment is its main value and not only pleasant and unnoticeable surroundings where tourism activity is undertaken enables not only preserving unique natural values but also stimulating sustainable development locally.

3. THE POSSIBILITIES OF DEVELOPING NICHE FORMS OF TOURISM ON THE BASIS OF THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT ON THE EXAMPLE OF THE STEPNIKA COMMUNE

The Stepnica commune is located in the western part of the Zachodniopomorskie Voivodeship in the north-western part of the Goleniowski district at the Szczecin Lagoon. The area of the commune is 294 km², including developed and urban areas which constitute only 0.3% (the average population density is 16 people/km², <http://stat.gov.pl>). A dominant part consists of water (around 39.7%) and forest areas (32%) and is supplemented by agricultural areas with bogs and wetlands (28%). When taking account of the natural diversity of the commune, three mesoregions can be distinguished (Kondracki, 1994): Lower Oder Valley (western and north-western part of the commune), Goleniów Plain (eastern and southern part of the commune), Gryfice Plain (a part, the north-eastern part of the commune) mostly used agriculturally.

3.1. Usefulness of the local environment for tourism development

The uniqueness of the specific elements of the natural environment (or its complexes) contributed to including selected areas in the European Ecological Network Natura 2000 (<http://ine.eko.org.pl>). Three natural reserves have been created here and 8 trees, prevalently oak trees, have been protected as natural monuments. As a result of the cooperation between Polish and Dutch naturalists, Nature Park of the Szczecin Lagoon was created which idea was to devise a model of environmental protection management in the area valuable in terms of nature and uniqueness in Europe (*Strategia Rozwoju Gminy Stepnica do 2025*, 2014, 28).

Diversity and uniqueness of the natural environment make it dominate over cultural values. The anthropogenic potential in tourism development is relatively small and is based on historical sites entered into the register of objects of cultural heritage (Voivodeship Office for Preservation of Objects of Cultural Heritage in Szczecin, <http://www.wkz.bip.alfatv.pl>). Numerous mass events organized in the Stepnica commune are local and do not have the potential for the development of tourism products, although some of them (mainly connected with sailing) could increase their impact if specific steps were taken.

Tourism infrastructure in the Stepnica commune is satisfactory for current needs. According to the Central Statistical Office of Poland, there are only two accommodation facilities in the commune (<http://stat.gov.pl>), however, on the commune website there is the information about 17 accommodation facilities (with contact information) which can accommodate 323 people in total. Catering facilities in the commune are mainly seasonal.

There are local and regional tourist routes which run across the Stepnica commune, e.g. Pomeranian Way of St. James, International Cycling Route around the Szczecin Lagoon R-66 (35 km) and Berlin-Szczecin-Baltic Waterway. It is also possible to use the water environment to organize kayaking trips on the rivers (Gowienica and Krępa) and/or the Szczecin Lagoon (<http://www.latarnik-kopice.pl>). However, these are not marked and adequately equipped routes. There is a tourist information centre in the commune which works only in the summer season, but there is a tourist information telephone line available all year and a regularly-updated website (www.stepnica.pl).

Using the natural environment for tourism activity (mainly recreation) concentrates in water and forest areas. Within the Szczecin Lagoon and Róztoka Odrzańska in the Stepnica commune there are, among other things:

- sailing marinas in Stepnica and Kopice (the so-called Marina at the Cape of Tortuga Pirates), yacht marinas in Gąsierzyno and Basen Rybacki;
- beach (around 7,100 m², access to water at around 280 m), in the summer season there is a life-guarded bathing area (Błękitna Flaga 2015 and 2016) and additional infrastructure;
- a dock where passenger fleet boats can be moored;
- places designated for fishing.

Tourist and recreational activities undertaken in the Stepnica commune are mainly based on the natural environment resources and involve recreational tourism (sunbathing), active tourism, including: recreational and sport sailing, surfing, windsurfing, kitesurfing, kayaking, walking and cycling tourism, nordic walking, specialist tourism (recreational fishing, nature observation), sightseeing tourism. Apart from anthropogenic values, agritourism is also developing in the commune.

3.2. Planned forms of tourism development

3.2.1. Local authorities

There are two strategic documents in effect in the Stepnica commune which concern issues connected with tourism development. “Development Strategy of Stepnica Commune to 2025” states that “the mission of the Stepnica commune to 2025 is to achieve sustainable development ensuring high-quality life for its residents”. On the basis of the prospective diagnosis of the socio-economic state (also, among other factors, taking account of tourism and the natural environment), it was found that the mission can be carried out when using the natural resources and conditions which are the greatest asset of the commune and enterprise (*Strategia rozwoju gminy Stepnica do 2025*, 2014, 122). Three strategic objectives have been established:

- 1) Development of the local economy based on tourism
- 2) Quality of life of the commune residents
- 3) Welfare of the natural environment

Tourism development is considered in terms of undertaken activities aiming at the introduction of a few large and original tourism projects which could be the basis for promoting the Stepnica commune as a place for unique recreation, including e.g.:

- multifunctional all-year-round facility such as a marina or a hotel with a conference centre;
- equestrian centre, a complex with a hotel (for people and horses) and a training facility with a large sport arena with a grandstand;
- floating complex of all-year-round cottages (made of wooden logs, with terraces), on the rafts moored to the dock;
- small zoo specialized in deer;
- organization of a regional event, e.g. ballooning event over the Szczecin Lagoon and tracking yachts.

The second document is “Strategy for Tourism Development in Stepnica Commune to 2020” and defines a tourism mission of the Stepnica commune as (*Strategia rozwoju turystyki gminy Stepnica do 2020 roku*, 2011, 69):

- an area of developed tourism economy where tourism movement of Szczecin and Germany is used;
- a place to undertake ecological, water and qualified tourism, with developed marina, sailing and fishing facilities, and with a lot of additional infrastructure;
- a tourist-friendly place.

The key aspects of tourism development that require extensive development activities and are specified in the document are: information and promotion, tourism attractions and products, transport accessibility, ecotourism, public infrastructure, tourism infrastructure and the Szczecin Lagoon. As part of these aspects, strategic objectives and operational activities have been proposed. Although the natural environment was acknowledged (in the process of area diagnosis) as the basis for tourism development, proposed objectives and operational activities rarely concern it. Out of many operational activities recommended in various areas, only one directly refers to the use

of the natural environment in order to create tourism attractions/products (developing ornithological trails along the commune coast). The activities discussed in detail in the Strategy for Tourism Development in Stepnica Commune to 2020 (they can be considered as significant as they have been elaborated) do not concern the natural environment, but these are proposals for tourism attractions/products based on anthropogenic values (e.g. Cistersian Route or Saint Otto of Bamberg).

3.2.2. *Stepnica Tourism Organization*

Since 2011, in the Stepnica commune Stepnica Tourism Organization “Not Only for Eagles” (SOT) has been actively operating. Currently, it brings 17 members together (including 6 business entities and 11 private individuals, <http://www.stepnica.org.pl>). SOT is an author of a slogan promoting the commune “Stepnica Commune - Land of Sails and White-tailed Eagle” and a website www.stepnica.org.pl, and it also runs a tourism and nature information center. In 2014, SOT with its partner from Germany (HOP Cross-Border Network of the Oder Delta) conducted the project “Nature Protection and Tourism in the Cross-Border Region of the Szczecin Lagoon and the Oder Delta” (<http://www.stepnica.org.pl>) which indirect result was acknowledging the Oder Delta as the eighth area of the Rewilding Europe (out of 10 planned pilot areas in Europe). The Polish-German area “Oder Delta”, including the Szczecin Lagoon with its wide surroundings, the Wolin and Usedom islands and Wkrzańska Forest (in total around 200 thousand ha), is considerably covered with non-usable areas or areas used very extensively. There are large protected areas within it: the Wolinski National Park, Wilderness Area Ueckermunder Heide, protected areas in the Piana delta, nature reserves: Czarnocin, Olszanka, Święta, Lake Świdwie. The environment of the Oder Delta is an important habitat of wild animals such as: migratory birds, wolf, moose, wild boar, deer, beaver, otter, porpoise, grey seal, European bison. A few of them create the so-called Big Seven of the Oder Delta: white-tailed eagle, European bison, grey seal, Atlantic sturgeon, European beaver, wolf and Konik. It is assumed that 2/3 of lands and water basins in the area should be left to become wild and be protected, what will cause that in 10 years’ time wild life will be very visible, human interference will be limited to the minimum and the Oder Delta will become a place of intensive nature tourism development of a niche character (<http://www.kp.org.pl>).

Currently, SOT creates a tourism offer that uses the uniqueness of the natural environment resources addressed to children and teenagers (expeditions into wild places, outdoor games using the natural environment) as well as adults (observation, photography, painting small species in large groups, <http://oderdeltasafaris.com/>). The diverse offer and the possibility of its modification in terms of needs, interests and tourists’ potential are definitely features of niche tourism which, in addition, should support the protection of the natural environment and maintenance of it in the least changed form.

CONCLUSION

The presented case of the Stepnica commune clearly indicates limitations and barriers to sustainable tourism development. The natural environment of the commune has a great potential (due to its diversity and quality) for the development of mass as well as niche tourism. The limitations identified in the strategic documents in the form of a large share of protected areas of various types should be rather considered as an asset in terms of the commune sustainable development as they are a real barrier to intensive development of not only them but also their surroundings. The awareness of importance of tourism for the commune development (where other possibilities of development are small) is confirmed by strategic documents (although they lack coherence), however, despite declarations, the proposed solutions do not support sustainable tourism development. The vast majority of proposals included in the strategic documents treat the natural environment only as the background to the planned tourism attractions/products and infrastructural solutions. The programmed tourism development in the Stepnica commune is based on the forms of mass tourism and only marginally refers to niche forms of tourism. Moreover, none of the documents encompasses the thorough evaluation of values of the natural environment and the assessment of tourism receptivity and capacity of the area, what seems to be of key importance when planning tourism development. A reliable assessment of the maximum number of tourists who can stay in the commune without detriment to the natural and social environment should be a starting point for planning sustainable tourism development. Only then, one can define forms of tourism and tourism attractions/products dedicated to them which can be created on the basis of the area potential.

Other vision of tourism development in the Stepnica commune is presented and conducted by the Stepnica Tourism Organization - Not Only for Eagles. The product offer consistently developed for several years by SOT is based on the values of the natural environment of the commune, has educational values and also uses other local resources (in order to provide accommodation or catering services). Implementing such solutions can be considered as following the guidelines of sustainable development beneficial to the environment (small groups, scarce interference in the environment), the local community and economy (benefits from providing services to tourists) as well as tourists (a direct contact with the clean and unchanged nature). Locally, it can be an example of sustainable tourism development in environmentally valuable areas.

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