

RURAL TOURISM AND AGRO-TOURISM IN SLOVAKIA

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A b s t r a c t. The main objective of this work is to briefly present the natural beauties and cultural attractions in Slovakia, its favourable conditions and development possibilities for the agro-tourism sector. Furthermore, there are described the tasks and activities of organizations responsible for agro-tourism and rural tourism (EUROGITES in Europe, SARTA in Slovakia). The whole tourism industry, including rural tourism and agro-tourism, is growing rapidly worldwide. Slovakia, regarding its geographic location in the centre of Europe, has extremely favourable conditions for rural tourism, especially for agro-tourism. Beside the natural richness, such as mountains, caves, water areas, mineral waters, springs with healing effects, rich fauna and flora, also historical buildings, held in relatively good state, and many live traditional crafts can attract the modern tourists. Regarding all this, Slovakia is able to satisfy the needs of the most demanding our or foreign tourists.

INTRODUCTION

The rural development and multifunctional agriculture were the subject of analyses of many authors [Fáziková 2009, Kopeva 2011]. These studies pointed focused on sustainability on rural areas.

Rural services in Slovak Republic provide many type of accommodation in small facilities (family houses, cottages, small farms and larger pensions), they differ in quality of facilities and services provided [Jarábková 2008].

The development of rural tourism and agro-tourism brings the new and perspective option for rural areas. The exact number of agrarian enterprises doing business in Slovakia by individuals is not known, whereas the absence of a central register of individual farmers [Mura, Kozelová 2012]. Rural development is determined by various natural, social and economic conditions. The main challenge of multifunctional development of rural areas is the agri-tourism [Žmija, Kuczek 2004].

The origin of agro-tourism in Europe dates back to the nineteenth century when the only form of accommodation in rural areas was offered mainly by farm holders. In the second half of the twentieth century, with a more widespread availability of private transport and

generally greater amounts of leisure time, tourism grew to be one of the biggest and most significant global industries [Húska 2003]. Agro-tourism is successful because it shows the lifestyle of the people in the past, when they had strong contact with the nature and the environment, as they were working on the fields, harvesting crops and caring for animals. It represents a style of vacation in which the accommodation is offered on farms. It started with the aim to improve the farmers' life especially in mountainous regions and in areas with a developing economy. Opportunities of introducing agro-tourism have been successful in keeping the residents of such regions at home, therefore preventing depopulation of the countryside and on the other hand the architectural heritage is preserved through the renovation of buildings, the regional cultural heritage is promoted and furthermore the income of farmers is improved [Otepka, Habán 2007].

MATERIAL AND METHODS

According to available data, published in literature, emphasis was put to evaluation of tourist possibilities in Slovakia using method of decomposition. Chosen components of decomposition as a parts or activities of tourism were as follows: components connected with natural environment, components connected to surroundings originated in human activities, components bounded to organizational expectations and activities.

There was used an adapted method of SWOT analysis according to criteria suitable for rural tourism and agro-tourism [Habán, Otepka 2004]. It is possible to evaluate Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (e.g. SWOT analysis) on the basis of monitoring and decomposition of initial components in the area of interest.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

TOURIST ATTRACTIVENESS OF SLOVAKIA ENTERED IN THE UNESCO LIST OF WORLD HERITAGE

The list of world cultural heritage of UNESCO (the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization) nowadays contains seven the best known Slovak localities: Historic Town of Banská Štiavnica and the Technical Monuments in its Vicinity (date of inscription: 1993); Levoča, Spišský Hrad and the Associated Cultural Monuments (date of inscription: 1993, extension: 2009); Vlkolínec (date of inscription: 1993); Caves of Aggtelek Karst and Slovak Karst (date of inscription: 1995, extension: 2000); Bardejov Town Conservation Reserve (date of inscription: 2000); Primeval Beech Forests of the Carpathians and the Ancient Beech Forests of Germany (date of inscription: 2007, extension: 2011); Wooden Churches of the Slovak part of the Carpathian Mountain Area (date of inscription: 2008), which are the most valuable Slovakian tourism attractiveness (UNESCO, 2012). Typical souvenirs from Slovakia are dolls dressed in folk instrument – fujara (folk instrument on the UNESCO List), folk costumes – kroj, decorated folk hatchet – valaška, wooden pitcher – črpák, carved wooden figures, ceramic objects, crystal glass and above all products made from corn hucks and wire, notably human figures (URL 1, 2012).

There are nine national parks in Slovakia: Tatra National Park (TANAP, 74,111 ha, 1948), Low Tatra NP (NAPANT, 110,162 ha, 1978), Slovak Paradise NP (19,763 ha, 1988), Pieninsky NP (PIENAP, 22,444 ha, 1967), Small Fatra NP (23,262 ha), Poloniny

NP (29,805 ha, 1997), Muranska Plateau NP (21,698 ha, 1997), Great Fatra NP (40,371 ha, 2002), Slovak Karst NP (34,611 ha, 2002), where tourists can enjoy different activities while they are in virgin nature. In Slovakia, there are more than 4,100 caves known up to the present time. Caves, some of them of world importance, constitute very attractive phenomena of the Slovak landscape. The first natural locality entered in the UNESCO List of World Heritage the underground cave systems of the Slovak and Aggtelek karst. Now 12 caves are opened to the public visitors. Four of them: Ochtinska aragonite cave, Domica cave, Jasovska cave and Gombasek cave were entered to the World Natural Heritage of UNESCO in 1995.

OTHERS TOURIST ATTRACTIVENESS OF THE SLOVAK RURAL AREAS

In the consequence of the varied ecological conditions, Slovakia is extremely rich in plant and animal species. About 2,400 original vascular species, and even more species of lichens, mushrooms, and mosses occur here and it is more than compared to, say Poland, area of which is six-fold larger. Many plants and animals are protected under legal provisions.

Vacancies in nature provide for satisfying demands of visitors in world – known spas, hunting areas, fishing places, needs for tourism, alpinism and some other sports. Natural beauties and landscape of Slovakia as a complex unit predispose this country, especially regions of High and Low Tatras, together with some other regions, to become known in the world. Highlands in Slovakia represent about 2 million ha, including 800 thousand ha [Babinsky 2003], almost one third, of agricultural land.

Slovakia is rich in thermal springs, which are very attractive for tourists. Exploitation of this wealth is useful for both: production of early grown vegetables in hot water heated greenhouses and for using warm water for thermal swimming pools. The thermal springs are located mainly in southern Slovakia regions.

CULTURAL ROUTES IN SLOVAKIA

There are already some thematic routes joining the ideas of European cultural routes in Slovakia: CIO – Human Route, The Amber Trail, The King Matthew Kingdom, The Gothic Route, and Imperial – Royal Route “Magna Via”, Iron Route, Czech Route and Russian Route. There are at least five Wine routes projected in Slovakia: Small Carpathian Vine Route, Nitra – Royal Vine Route, Hont Vine Route, Tokaj Vine Route and Vine Route of Zahorie. These projects are knotting on “European Vine Magistral”. Each of them has different items from viticulture and viniculture, which are oriented to renew of a typical traditions in these regions for the benefit to the agro-tourism [Habán, Otepka 2004].

Slovak cycling routes, used mainly by active tourist, are 5,400 km long at the present time. The routes are signed by standard system of sights. Grape growing areas of Small Carpathian belong also to the attractive regions of Slovakia, as well as “Tokaj” region and some other grape growing areas in southern and central Slovakia. “Wine routes” are gradually being introduced, enriching thus agro-tourism in the selected regions. This is one of the efficient ways to connect the interest of tourists in regional history, culture and folklore with the opportunity to taste local gastronomic specialties and typical wines.

Slovakia can become an important place for economics, cultural and scientific contacts of East and West in coming years. Slovak rural areas have to prepare for this important

task deliberately, using the assistance of all respective sectors of state administration. In 1992 “Program of agro-tourism development” for support of agro-tourism was founded. The goal is to build up a network of pensions, restaurants, shops and snacks, supplied by agricultural enterprises with their own final products. The official statistics about tourism as a whole industry is not measured separately for rural tourism and agro-tourism. Our visitors usually are coming from: national guests (80%) and international ones (20%), mainly from Czech Republic, Germany, Poland, Hungary, Austria, Russia, USA, Ukraine, Italy, Holland, Great Britain, France, others [Habán 2011].

RURAL TOURISM AND AGRO-TOURISM IN SLOVAKIA

Agro-tourism and recreation have matched and even exceeded tourism growth generally. It represents a style of vacation in which the accommodation is offered on farms Húska [2003]. Holiday on a farm can be very interesting especially for children, where they can feed and stroke the animals and monitor their behaviour. Children visiting the farms often have never seen a live swine, sheep, cow or a goat. It is a nice experience for them, when they can try to drive a tractor or a combine (controlled by an adult). Kids can climb on, in and over hay, or play hide-and-seek game in the barn area. Other children activities are for example, making potato stamps, leaf prints, bird refuges, hair wreaths from flowers, playing vegetable or animal bingo with cards, corn mazes and many other games.

Agro-tourism attractions and activities can take many forms:

- direct sales, what includes selling the farm’s products, agriculture-related, handmade gifts, souvenirs, educational experience such as school tours, agricultural heritage exhibits, wine and food tasting, cooking and making preserves [Otepka et al. 2005];
- outdoor activities, for example cattle drive activities, horse riding, fishing, patch tours, sleigh or wagon rides, picnicking, wildlife viewing, hunting, sitting by the camp-fire, animal feeding, visiting or working in the milking house, cropping forest fruits, mushrooms and medical herbs, farming in the field, in vineyard, in orchard;
- entertainment – concerts or special events, harvest festivals, fairs, promotional events;
- handicrafts – tannery, lace-making, pottery, tile making, blacksmith, tinkery, basketry, wood carving, wooden single production and joinery.

Slovakia has a relatively underdeveloped tourism industry, especially when we compare it with its neighbouring countries and competitors: Hungary, the Czech Republic, Austria and Poland. Total number of farms involved in rural tourism in Slovakia is approximately 62 (from that 42 in agro-tourism), while this proportion in Hungary is almost 6800 and in the Czech Republic approximately 355-400. The Ministry of Economy for the Slovak Republic has elaborated the development plan “Tourism Development Strategy of the Slovak Republic until 2013”, what seeks to address these problems. The country has both very large agricultural enterprises and numerous small ones, which are family owned. The number of the tourist farms has been increasing particularly, when the non-governmental associations were established to promote rural and agri-tourism.

The European Federation of Farm and Village Tourism (EUROGITES) represents professional and trade organizations responsible for rural tourism from 24 countries of Europe. The product goes from the rural bed-and-breakfast, self-catering in farms or private homes, up to small rural hotels and guesthouses. EUROGITES has been contributing to special satellite studies and statistics about this sector since 2004 within the WTO. This

federation takes part in the European Congress on Rural Tourism, which next year will take place in Hungary. It organizes also in Spain next year a symposium on new trends and challenges for rural tourism with intention to bring together public authorities related with rural development and tourism and interested individual professionals to discuss these trends and challenges. The EUROGITÉS Catalogue, what presents the offers for rural tourism is issued yearly. In this catalogue are included the most representative agro-tourism farms in the European rural tourism network. EUROGITÉS announces every year a week, under the name of the European Action Eco Agro Tourism Week. In this week various events and programmes are organized in the member countries and the objective of this event is to make the rural tourism more visible and to fully establish it among other forms of tourism [URL 2, 2012].

The Slovak Association for Rural Tourism and Agro-tourism (SARTA), which exists from 1993, has recently about 300 members from all over the Slovakia. The members are private persons, agricultural enterprises, farmers, and legal organizations. Main activities are consult and advisory services, presentation of members, catalogues, etc. SARTA has already prepared a “quality grading accommodation services”, which can be used in agro-tourism pensions. It is a guarantee for maintaining high quality pensions and all offered services included. Agro-tourism in Slovakia is based according to official Regulation of the Ministry of Economy No. 277/2008, on the, where are a minimal standards for quality of accommodation services marked from minimum one (*) up to maximum five stars (*****) [URL 3, 2012].

SWOT ANALYSIS FOR RURAL TOURISM AND AGRO-TOURISM IN THE SLOVAKIA

SWOT analysis with the aim to determine the opportunities for rural tourism and agro-tourism and other related conditions to be created is designed as follows:

1. STRONG POINTS	2. WEAK POINTS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – geographical location – attractive environment – favourable infrastructure – easily access by means of the nearby international roads – relative closeness to Vienna and Budapest – places of interest, both cultural and natural – agricultural and sheep breeding tradition – premises suitable for rural tourism and agro-tourism – hardworking, friendly, hospitable people – wide range of sport facilities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – low awareness of the opportunities for rural tourism and agro-tourism – insufficient infrastructure for the purposes of tourism (accommodation facilities) – shortage of finances and low accessibility of external resources necessary for building - renovation for rural tourism and agro-tourism purposes – insufficient promotion of the protected landscape – low level of co-operation of inhabitants – non-functioning public transport, except during working days – indebtedness of companies dealing with agriculture

3. Opportunities	4. Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – large and unique agricultural settlements well suited for rural tourism and agro-tourism – large number of farmers with private property – possibility of getting subsidies from funds – possibility of staff training – chance to get information and experience from Austrian and Hungarian farms and mutual cooperation – exploitation of expertise and experience from abroad – possibility of utilization of the natural environment – development of activities for the well-off clientele (e.g. horse riding, golf, etc.) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – lack of interest on the side of governmental institutions – low support of local authorities – competition (other tourist places) – impact of unemployment in some of the regions, lower standard of living.

Source: own research.

CONCLUSIONS

Rural tourism and agro-tourism is a style of vacation in which hospitality is offered on rural and farms. This may include the opportunity to assist with farming tasks during the visit. Rural tourism and agro-tourism is often practiced in wine growing regions. It has often been proposed as a means to prop up a local agricultural economy when local producers are no longer economically competitive otherwise, therefore this business will be very important part of farm income in our country as well as in many other agriculture productive countries.

Slovakia has a relatively underdeveloped tourism industry, especially when we compare it with its neighbouring countries and competitors: Hungary, the Czech Republic. Total number of farms involved in rural tourism in Slovakia is approximately 62 (from that 42 in agro-tourism), with comparison to the Czech Republic (approximately 355-400).

Rural tourism and agro-tourism stimulates the economic growth, increases the viability of underdeveloped regions and improves the living standards of local population. It seems to be an appropriate tool to revitalize the declining rural areas and to ensure their sustainable future by job creation, farm support, landscape and nature conservation or the maintenance of rural arts and crafts as tourist attractions.

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Miroslav Habán, Milan Macák, Pavol Otepka

TURYSTYKA WIEJSKA I AGROTURYSTYKA NA SŁOWACJI

Streszczenie

Głównym celem opracowania jest przedstawienie przyrodniczych i kulturalnych zasobów Słowacji w kontekście możliwości rozwoju sektora agroturystycznego. Ponadto, opisano zadania i działania podejmowane przez instytucje odpowiedzialne za agroturystykę i turystykę wiejską (EUROGITES w Europie, SARTA na Słowacji). Branża turystyczna, w tym turystyka wiejska i agroturystyka, rozwija się dynamicznie na całym świecie. Słowacja ze względu na położenie geograficzne w centrum Europy ma bardzo korzystne warunki do rozwoju turystyki wiejskiej i agroturystyki. Oprócz naturalnych bogactw, takich jak góry, jaskinie, akwenty wodne, wody mineralne, źródła lecznicze i termalne, bogata fauna i flora, turystyka może rozwijać się dzięki zabytkowym budowlom, które są zachowane w relatywnie dobrym stanie. Atutem jest też wytwarzanie wielu tradycyjnych produktów i kultywowanie rzemiosł.

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