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Rural tourism as a priority area for the development of agro-houses and rural areas of Ukraine

Abstract. The main purpose of this paper is to identify and present a theoretical perspective on the possibilities and benefits of rural tourism development in Ukraine. Because of the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war, this type of tourism has a chance to become a leader in the domestic tourism sector and, at the same time, ensure the sustainability of the domestic tourist traffic, with all its socio-economic benefits. The methodological basis of the paper was the systematic approach to the studies describing Ukrainian rural tourism and its development. It plays a significant role in the structure of the economy of rural areas, benefiting not only the economy but also socio-cultural and ecological development. In the long run there should be a gradual formation of new rural tourism infrastructure, especially in areas such as micro-tourism, mini-hotel farming and the construction of hunting and fishing lodges. At the project level, it is necessary to create new models of agro-settlements.

Keywords: Ukraine, rural areas, tourism, benefits, development

Introduction

In modern economic conditions, the tourism sector can be positioned as one of the most crucial industries in both national and global economies due to its high income levels and rapid development pace (WTTC, 2023). The reasons for this success include significant demand for travel across various destinations and the high profitability of tourism services. In the economies of most countries, the tourism sector not only stimulates economic development but also plays a substantial role in enhancing the social development of regions, agro-houses, and contributes significantly to increasing the revenues of national and local budgets.

The development of rural tourism in Ukraine's regions is one of the strategies to engage the population in entrepreneurial activities, leveraging the human resources of rural areas, agro-houses, and natural-recreational resources. There is a demand

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among tourists for leisure in picturesque rural areas aimed at rejuvenating both physical and spiritual well-being. The overall socio-economic impact is achieved through the employment opportunities created, overcoming spatial asymmetry in the development of regional economies, and rejuvenating society's productive forces.

As green tourism is a strategic component of the tourism industry, it forms a crucial link in the local economy and its structure, revealing the economic-production functionality of rural territories.

The main purpose of this paper is to identify and present a theoretical perspective on the possibilities and benefits of rural tourism development in Ukraine. Due to the significant destruction of the country's main centers as a result of the Russo-Ukrainian war, rural tourism has a chance to become a leader in the domestic tourism sector and, at the same time, ensure the sustainability of the domestic tourist traffic, with all its socio-economic benefits, especially those vital in case of the ongoing conflict (Shcherban, 2022).

Literature review

The numerous works of Ukrainian researchers, dedicated to explore the development of rural tourism, were published in Ukraine and abroad. Among them studies of authors like Bondar (2014), Kravchuk (2014), Papp (2015), Vasiliev et al. (2016), Ivashina (2017), Malska et al. (2019), Korkuna, Korkuna and Kulyk (2020), Osinska and Ostrovska (2022), Chernyshova and Osipchuk (2023) are worth mentioning. However, despite the significant number of publications, there is a lack of comprehensive studies with specific recommendations for the development of rural tourism and its role in the economic structure of rural territories.

The concept of rural tourism as a socio-economic category has become popular among the Ukrainian public thanks to scholars and researchers. However, many tourism industry professionals, while understanding the challenges of tourism in general, do not always pay sufficient attention to rural green tourism. It is evident that, in contemporary conditions, emphasis should be placed on the rapid development of this specific direction of tourist activity and its impact on the economy of rural areas.

Currently approximately 1.3 billion people travel worldwide each year (UNWTO, 2024), with one-third choosing rural tourism in EU (EPRS, 2023). The importance of rural stays in the domestic market of a country might be greater than in other sectors of the tourism industry. For example, in France, total expenditure per person for the stay is significantly larger in rural areas than in urban ones (Bel et al., 2015).

According to the World Tourism Organization, tourism can play a huge part in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals until 2030, contributing more or less to all 17 of them. In particular, tourism may mostly affect decent work and economic growth, responsible consumption and production and the sustainable use of marine resources (UNWTO, n.d.). Currently, rural tourism is most prevalent (by number of beds in rural areas) in France, Italy, Germany, Greece, Austria, Croatia and Spain (EPRS, 2023).

Thus, some European countries have joined forces to form cooperation in organizations like e.g. RuralTour – European Federation of Rural Tourism (RuralTour, n.d.).

According to the World Tourism Organization within the UN, the number of international tourist arrivals in 2023 increased to 88% of pre-pandemic level, with export earnings from international tourism amounting to USD 1.4 trillion (UNWTO, 2024). It's worth noting that tourism contributes to the development of many associated industries, such as the hotel and restaurant business, the food industry, the transportation sector, information and communication technologies, and various other sectors.

In global practice, alongside the development of agricultural activities in rural areas, non-agrarian sectors of employment, particularly rural tourism, have become additional sources of income for the population. Since 1972, agritourism has been recognized as a separate branch of the economy. In Western European countries, rural tourism has exhibited sustained growth since the early 1960s. Currently, this phenomenon is widespread, although the regional models of functioning for this type of destination vary significantly.

Today, rural tourism is developing at a rapid pace and attracts a significant portion of foreign tourists in some countries. Multiplicatively, rural tourism, especially under the implementation of targeted development programs, positively influences the preservation and development of rural territories, the rational utilization of their resource potential, stimulates the development of personal subsidiary farms, and expands the demand for environmentally friendly, natural food products. It also contributes to the improvement of rural areas, rural construction, folk crafts, culture, and uniqueness, addressing the overall socio-economic issues in rural territories, particularly employment problems in rural areas. All these factors ultimately impact the competitiveness of rural territories, leading to an increase in the well-being of residents (Papp, 2015).

The development of rural tourism should be based on the following principles:

- environmental protection, minimizing damage during tourist activities, and ecological monitoring of the state of tourism development in the area;
- controlled use of tourist service technologies;
- social justice for local communities (profits and other benefits from this type of activity should be distributed on a parity basis, taking into account the interests of the local population);
- aesthetic harmonization of tourist nature use (tourist infrastructure should organically blend into the historically formed environment and preserve the unique characteristics of each locality).

Researchers believe that for successful rural tourism development, a region should possess certain characteristics, including a clean environment, low levels of urbanization and industrialization, limited intensity of agricultural and forestry activities, a favorable agricultural structure (medium-sized farms), a harmonious agro-cultural landscape, and low incomes among the population (which would encourage their engagement in this sector), as well as available building resources.

Research methods

Ukraine is the country, where theoretical aspects of the development of rural tourism have become popular in science relatively recently, in last 10 years. Unfortunately, global turmoil (first the pandemic, and from 2022 a full-scale war with Russia) meant that these issues were pushed into the background, giving way to far more urgent problems. Therefore, the prospects for the development of Ukrainian rural tourism and rural areas are still insufficiently understood and require further, in-depth studies. Moreover, the current political situation is significantly changing the image of Ukrainian tourism, generating both threats and opportunities for its rural version (Kudinova, 2023; Samsonova, 2023).

The methodological basis of this paper was the systematic approach to the studies describing rural tourism and its development, with global background, but particular focus on Ukraine. Thus, the main basis of the article was the analysis of previous studies, reports, insights and publications devoted to the global image of tourism, especially rural one, and possibilities and benefits of rural tourism development in Ukraine.

Research results

The conducted research confirms that Ukraine has a high tourist-recreational potential. The country possesses unique natural and recreational resources, objects of national and world cultural and historical heritage, where important economic, cultural, and social events take place. In many regions, there is a wide range of potentially attractive tourist sites and complexes that are popular among both domestic and foreign tourists. The presence of diverse tourist-recreational resources in the country allows for the development of practically all types of tourism, including recreational, cultural-exploratory, business, active, health, and ecological tourism, as well as rural tourism, and more.

Unfortunately, due to certain reasons such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the full-scale invasion of Russia into Ukrainian territory, the development is progressing slowly and non-systematically. One of the priority types of tourism that needs to be emphasized in the process of industry development and attracting additional tourists (including foreigners) in the long run is rural tourism. For Ukraine, this direction can become an important source of income for rural areas and a market niche for many rural entrepreneurs.

Rural tourism is a relatively new and promising direction that allows urban residents to immerse themselves in the traditional way of life of rural communities. The essence of this type of tourism lies in leisure in rural areas, specifically in agro-settlements, where all organizational aspects of tourist accommodation (including food, recreation, services etc.) are taken care of by the hosting family. Rural tourism offers relaxation opportunities for those who, for various reasons, cannot afford other types of tourism. Its attractive features include fresh air, a homely atmosphere, untouched nature, natural products, tranquility, and a leisurely lifestyle. According to experts' estimates, the potential annual demand for this type of tourism is approximately 600,000 people.

The development of rural tourism or hosting guests in the homes of rural residents is promising for the regions of Ukraine. Currently, this type of tourism is well-established in Central Europe. Typically, individuals opting for this form of leisure split their vacations and spend one part of their break in rural areas within agro-settlements. This form of recreation provides unique values. In Europe, the rural host is recognized as valuable – the person who shares personal impressions and stories passed down from their parents and grandparents with their guests. Indeed, everyday things like fresh air, hospitality, natural and cultural landmarks, and various forms of active leisure, such as participating in agricultural activities, transform into values (Papp, 2015).

As demonstrated by practice, there is significant international interest in this specific form of leisure. Interestingly, in Western Europe today, there are approximately as many bed spaces for tourists in rural areas hosted by locals as there are in hotels (EPRS, 2023). The development of tourism leads to the revitalization of the village and its life, as local resources, opportunities, and products produced in the village – wine, cheese, fruits, vegetables, traditional crafts, and local crafts – are involved (Kudinova, 2015). However, for the development of rural green tourism, economic and organizational prerequisites must be created (Kalna-Dubinyuk et al., 2019), and there must be a desire from local authorities to promote and develop this type of tourism, effectively utilizing the existing housing stock, including agro-settlements.

Ukraine is a significantly large European state both in terms of territory and population. However, unlike most European Union member states, it is less urbanized. The density of rural population per unit of rural land is quite uniform across all Ukrainian regions, except for mountainous areas. This serves as a good basis for comparing the effectiveness of rural green tourism in different regions, assessing the situations in their rural territories, and forecasting development in the medium term.

Taking into account the substantial share of rural population in Ukraine's demographic structure and the complexity of social issues in Ukrainian rural regions, it is necessary to evaluate the real situation in the sphere of rural green tourism in Ukraine as a whole and within groups of Ukrainian regions when forecasting and planning regional development. The assessment of the effectiveness and prospects of the chosen course of development in the Ukrainian tourism sector is impossible without comparing it with general trends in EU member countries, especially new members and neighboring countries of Ukraine.

Trends toward urbanization, which were characteristic of most countries in the last century, have somewhat slowed down. There is a tendency for a reduced share of large cities in the distribution of urban population. The percentage of rural population has slightly increased in Poland (almost 39%, significantly higher than in Ukraine – just under 32%), indirectly indicating the success of rural reforms, as people choose rural areas for living.

For Ukraine, another recent trend is the stabilization of the rural population share at around 33% (SSS, 2023). This is a relatively high indicator. On the one hand, such a high share of rural population may indicate the availability of human resources in rural areas.

On the other hand, this quantity of rural population can serve as a basis for diversifying the economy and developing sectors in its structure that require a significant workforce, including rural green tourism and the expansion of agro-settlements' activities.

As evident from statistical observations, only the mountainous regions of Ukraine – Zakarpattia, Lviv, Ivano-Frankivsk, Chernivtsi – have a rural population density per hectare more than twice the average Ukrainian indicator (SSS, 2023). On the other hand, the lowest rural population density per hectare is found in the Luhansk and Mykolaiv regions. This is understandable as these territories are currently occupied and are near the front line.

To increase the share of small and medium-sized enterprises in the structure of rural tourism and, consequently, for the comprehensive development of rural territories, a set of measures is needed to attract investments in strengthening the tourist infrastructure of villages. The creation of a strategic planning system for tourism development in rural areas is essential. This involves not only developing a state-targeted program for the development of rural tourism but primarily the necessity to develop and implement programs for the socio-economic development of municipal entities at all levels – from rural settlements to districts and regions.

The state's interest in the development of rural tourism is primarily based on the fact that it is approximately 20 times cheaper for the state to create normal conditions for a rural resident in the countryside than to provide similar conditions in the city. Consequently, most European countries actively encourage the development of rural tourism by offering incentives and preferences for the effective functioning of agro-settlements.

What makes rural tourism attractive is that, at the initial stage, it doesn't require significant investments or large capital contributions but can bring substantial benefits to many citizens of the country. It expands the market for domestic goods and services, creates new jobs, and contributes to the inflow of foreign currency.

In the long run, as experience and resources accumulate, there should be a gradual formation of new rural tourism infrastructure, especially in areas such as micro-tourism, mini-hotel farming, the construction of hunting and fishing lodges, mini-stores, etc. At the project level, it is necessary to create new models of agro-settlements and other buildings.

It can be stated that rural tourism plays a significant role in the structure of the economy of rural areas, benefiting not only the economy but also socio-cultural and ecological development. The key aspects justifying this role are outlined in Table 1.

The country's natural, historical, and cultural potential has the capacity to attract millions of tourists. In the current economic conditions, rural tourism serves as a stabilizing factor, contributing not only to maintaining a normal standard of living for rural residents but also to the development of service infrastructure, household services, and the social sphere. This circumstance allows us to consider the national characteristics and traditions of the population as an important resource for tourism activity. To achieve this, it is essential to objectively assess the crafts, industries, and overall national craftsmanship of Ukrainians. Historical facts indicate that each nation

Table 1. Key roles of rural tourism in the structure of rural economy

Area	Relations and effects
Economic development	Attracting tourists to rural areas leads to improved economic development of these territories. Visitors spend money on accommodation, food, excursions, and other services, contributing to the growth of local income and businesses.
Income diversification	Rural tourism can become an effective means of income diversification for agricultural enterprises and local residents. Introducing new directions, such as agrotourism or ecotourism, allows for additional economic benefits.
Creation of jobs	Tourism development leads to the creation of new jobs in rural areas (agro-settlements, hotels, restaurants, tourist agencies, as well as in sectors related to the production of traditional rural goods and crafts).
Infrastructure development	The increasing popularity of rural tourism can contribute to the improvement of infrastructure, such as roads, hotels, restaurants, and entertainment. This can serve as a stimulus for the development of other sectors of the rural economy.
Support for local producers	Tourists visiting rural regions purchase local products and cultural items, contributing to the support of local producers and the development of agricultural enterprises.
Ecological focus	Agroecological Tourism is aimed at preserving nature and ecosystems. It fosters environmental awareness and prevents conflicts in the conservation of natural reserves and landscapes.
Preservation of cultural heritage	Interaction between tourists and local residents promotes the exchange of cultural experiences. Tourists have the opportunity to learn about local traditions, while local residents can expand their cultural horizons.

Source: own elaboration.

is characterized by its distinctive craftsmanship, which, as culture develops, finds original and unique forms and methods of reflecting and comprehending objective reality (Papp, 2015).

Summary

The rural tourism serves as the primary tool for stimulating economic and socio-cultural development in rural areas and is a crucial priority for the development of rural territories in Ukraine. In the current realities of Ukraine, rural tourism is one of the most effective ways to rehabilitate veterans and all citizens of Ukraine. It is worth emphasizing that the main target of Russian aggression in the form of rocket fire and bombing are urbanized areas where the infrastructure that is crucial for the functioning of the country is located. Therefore, rural areas (outside the areas of direct fighting in the east and south), especially in the western Ukraine, remain a place where the destruction is much smaller and the threat of war is less visible, allowing for a relatively peaceful stay. Therefore, recreation in the countryside becomes a key element of ensuring mental well-being for the conflict-weary society, including representatives of military structures. This is even more important because the current political

situation significantly limits or even blocks many other types of tourism, including international travels. Rural tourism is therefore becoming a key element in the transfer of funds between regions of the country.

It should be remembered that this currently privileged position of rural tourism does not exempt those responsible for its shape from rational planning of development activities and implementation of solutions that will ensure the possibility of long-term consumption of sensitive and limited resources of rural areas. Thus, to achieve successful rural tourism development, it is essential to consider issues of sustainable development, involvement of the local population, active development of agro-settlements, and preservation of nature and cultural heritage.

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