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THE ATTRACTIVENESS OF BIAŁOWIEŻA FOREST

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ABSTRACT: The forest complex area of the Białowieża Forest is a great monument of history and culture, and also a place of many important historical events. The motive of arrival to the Białowieża Forest is mainly the attractiveness of the area, geographic location, international events and historical conditions.

The purpose of the study is to analyze and evaluate tourist traffic in the area of Białowieża Forest on the basis of surveys conducted in the month of June 2016. Frequently opinions are expressed that tourists come to Białowieża for a longer holiday or they are engaged exclusively in a kind of scientific research. Therefore the author decided to investigate such a supposition, trying to find out, by survey research, from which places and towns and for how long tourists come, as well as what is their main purpose of arrival.

The author of the study has conducted a study using the questionnaire technique among the owners of accommodation facilities and eating places, as well as visitors to the municipality Białowieża and the Forest. Studies have shown that there is currently no unified vision of creating attractions for the Białowieża Forest, and above all systemic solutions at the level of commune and the region.

KEY WORDS: attractiveness, tourist attractions, the municipality of Białowieża, Białowieża Forest

Introduction

The municipality of Białowieża, together with Białowieża Forest, can be classified as one of the most attractive and most valuable sites in Poland and even in Europe, due to its unique nature, multiculturalism and multiethnicity (Hajnowka 2014). There have been published dozens of articles on Białowieża Forest in magazines and compact positions, but groups of tourists who tend to visit Białowieża and Białowieża Forest the most frequently and readily have not been presented in detail so far.

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The attractiveness of each area is primarily determined by its climate, unpolluted environment, the varied configuration of its terrain, and existing attractions. Although tourists rarely refer to the issues of environmental protection, however natural and cultural values are an important component that decides of the choice of a travel destination. Selecting his or her recreation destination a tourist as a rule looks for areas with relatively higher share of values and tourist attractions. However, not only forest areas and surface water, but also tourist infrastructure determines the possibilities of tourism development of the area. The study concerns only the area of Białowieża Forest in Poland.

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Characteristics of the study area

The municipality of Białowieża is entirely located in Białowieża Forest, which includes the following settlements: Budy, Czerlonka, Grudki, Podcerkwy, Pogorzelce, Przewłoka, Teremiski, and Zwierzyniec (figure 1). Apart from the municipality of Białowieża, Białowieża Forest also covers the areas of municipalities of Hajnowka, Narewka and Dubicze Cerkiewne. Practically in all places in the municipality of Białowieża, to a greater or lesser extent, tourists can enjoy accommodation and regional cuisine (Jalinik 2016, p. 314). Białowieża Forest is a vast forest complex situated on both sides of the bor-

der between Poland and Belarus, which is a remnant of four ancient forests: Białowieża, Ladzka, Świsłocz, and Szereszewska Forests.



Figure 1. The location of the municipality of Białowieża

Source: www.bialowieza.gmina.pl [10-06-2016]

The municipality of Białowieża represents 12.52% of the area of the country of Hajnówka. According to statistics the municipality covers the area of 203.2 square kilometers, including 8% of agricultural land and 88% of woodlands (Hajnówka 2016). The municipality is inhabited by 2696 people, and 47.6% of them are women, and 52.4 are men. The population density is 13.2 inhabitants/km². The age pyramid of the residents of the municipality of Białowieża is shown in figure 2.

Białowieża Forest is a forest complex of an area of approximately 150 thousand ha, which was divided during World War II by the state border. Its western part is located in Podlasie province (62.5 thousand ha), and the eastern part in Belarus (87.5 thousand ha). The forest is situated in the basin of two rivers: the Narewka and Leśna (Kozieł 2010, p. 271-284). In 1986 it was recognized as a protected landscape area, which covers 3.200 hectares. In Białowieża Forest it can be seen the last surviving fragments of original forests in the European lowlands, and the biggest European animal – the European bison. Generally it can be said that this place is a habitat for various species of flora and fauna.

A distinguishing feature of each tourist product is its impossibility of storage, although its distribution may be booked (but also in a specific place and time), and it is both produced and consumed (Panasiuk 2007, p. 107-110). The most valuable part of the forest, in terms of the nature, is protected

within the boundaries of Białowieża National Park and 20 nature reserves. The entire Polish part of Białowieża Forest was recognized by UNESCO in 2006 as a World Natural Reserve, due to its unique natural values (Chocian, Kotowska 2008, p. 21).

Białowieża is a tourist town, which is the heart of Białowieża Forest. It stretches from east to west over a length of 55 km, and from north to south of 51 km.

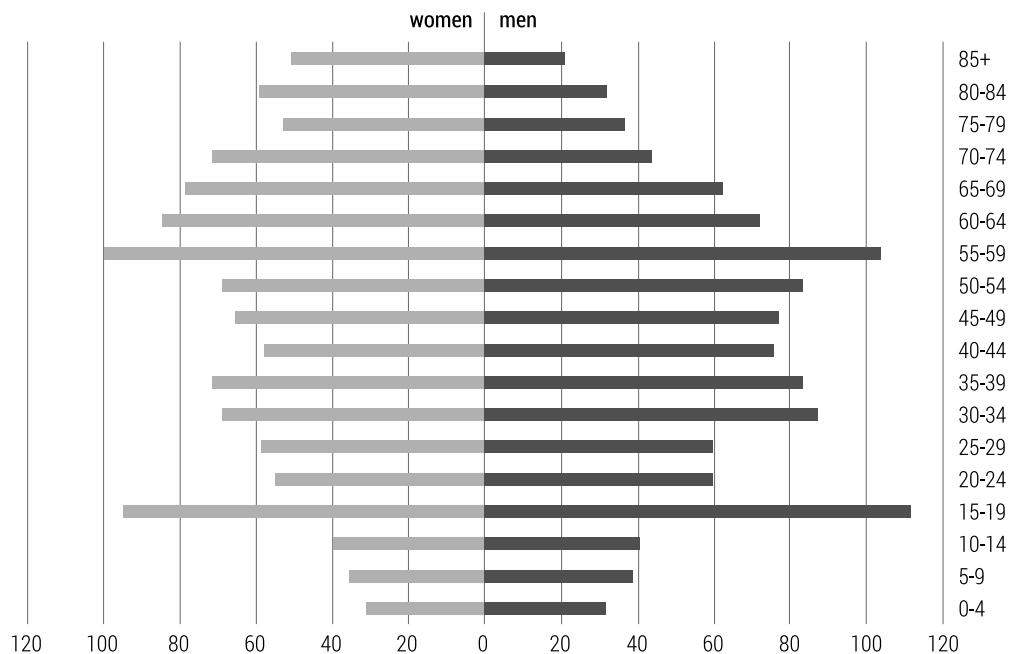


Figure 2. The residents of the municipality of Białowieża

Source: www.polskawliczbach.pl, based on GUS data (Białowieża 2014).

The statistics show that the majority of the residents are people 19 to 59 years of age. It is also observed insufficient number of births and quite a big number of the elderly. The reason for this is a small number of jobs, and as it is said by some residents, that Białowieża is only “a storehouse” of middle aged and elderly people.

A characteristic feature of Białowieża Forest Complex is the presence of almost all forms of legal protection of nature (connected by ecological corridors), such as:

- A national park;
- The areas of the Net of Nature 2000;

- Nature reserves;
- Protected landscape areas;
- Natural monuments;
- Ecological areas (Bołtromiuk, Jakimiuk 2006, p. 20).

The first and one of the most important components of a tourist offer, in addition to tourist attractions, is the accommodation, catering and tourist information, which enables tourists to stay on the territory of the municipality of Białowieża longer than one day. In this respect the area of the municipality is developed unevenly. The situation is improving from year to year, and new accommodation facilities are appearing, but their standard often differ from the expectations of consumers. However, it should be said that in the area of the municipality there are some places where there are no categorized accommodation facilities. This is also proof of a low standard of accommodation. There are also only few attractions. Therefore tourists do not tend to stay in the municipality of Białowieża for a long time.

The methodology of research

The research has been carried out in accommodation facilities existing in the municipality of Białowieża, which is located entirely in the area of Białowieża Forest. The choice of the research area was deliberate. The list of facilities and their localization was received in Białowieża Municipal Office. According to the obtained data in June 2016 77 accommodation facilities were operating (hotels, boarding houses, farmhouses, apartments, hostels, and camping sites).

The study was conducted among the owners of accommodation facilities and the customers staying on leisure, using the method of a diagnostic survey, including a questionnaire technique. 90 research tools were directed to the customers and 80 of them were directed to the owners of accommodation facilities. The surveys contained for the owners of facilities and customers contained 32 and 36 questions respectively, of closed and open type. All owners of accommodation facilities and customers were asked to fill in their surveys. 8 facility owners and 10 customers did not give their answers.

The questions of the research surveys related to the following issues: the motive of choice of Białowieża Forest as a holiday destination, the purpose of arriving to Białowieża, age and sex of visitors, and their place of residence, the reason for visiting Białowieża, interests, the knowledge of foreign languages, countries foreign visitors were from, the evaluation of tourist and recreational infrastructure, the time of arrival, their expectations of tourists during their stay in the municipality of Białowieża, the length of stay in

Białowieża, and positive and negative assessment of staying in Białowieża and in Białowieża Forest in terms of its attractiveness.

It has demonstrated on the basis of the research data how attractive is Białowieża and Białowieża Forest, and what is an average period of stay of visitors, and how they justify their stay there.

The research result and discussion

Forest areas are an important factor in the attractiveness of a region, and with an efficient and optimal forestry policy they can constitute a significant element in the development of tourism. The development of tourism and recreation in forest areas is one of the most important forms of the use of non-productive c\functions of forests. As it was stated by Gaworecki (Gaworecki 2010, p. 376), forest areas are a desired terrain to go in for varied forms and kinds of tourism. It is important, from a tourist point of view, to have not only natural values in forest areas, but also historical and cultural ones. Forest areas play an increasingly important role as sites of tourist-recreation, especially near big urban centers, where their residents willingly want to take advantage of the pristine environment and to be away from the noise and pollution of the city. Undoubtedly Białowieża Forest is one of such places.

Well-organized tourist facilities not only can create ideal conditions for relaxation, but also they can facilitate to get to know such a complex and somewhat mysterious ecosystem. However, mass tourism, poorly planned and organized, is a very serious threat to forest areas. As it turns out, the expectations of respondents concerning forest areas and the use of forest resources are varied. The research has confirmed that guests visiting forest areas recognize their non-productive functions, especially in the field of tourism infrastructure, ecology, and conservation and preservation of biodiversity. While productive functions were less important for respondents, although they took a critical stance on the fact of "disorder" in the forest (fallen trees), where not only people but also animals have some difficulty in moving around.

In answer to the question concerning the associations people have with Białowieża and Białowieża Forest 79.5% of the respondents said that their associations are tied with bison and woodland, while for 13.5% of them the unpolluted environment is the most important thing, and 7% of the respondents associate the area with the regional cuisine. As for the main motive of visiting the area the majority of respondents answered that they were interested in active leisure (figure 3).

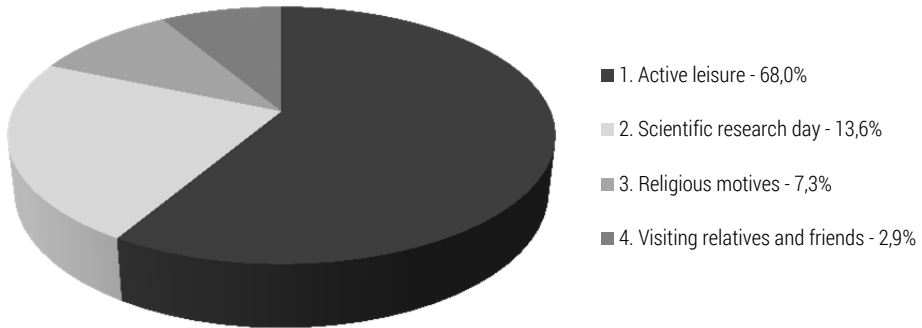


Figure 3. The reasons for choosing a trip to Białowieża and Białowieża Forest

Although the customers declared that their stay had a recreational character, the time of their staying was generally very short, according to the answers of both of the owners of accommodation facilities and the customers themselves (figure 4). It should be also added that the longest stays were in July and August, and the shortest were in winter months, in December and January. As a reason the respondents answered that there are too few tourist attractions, and there is a presence of mosquitoes. They suggested increasing the number of bike paths, and the expansion of the rental base of recreational equipment (mainly bicycles, kayaks, the equipment for Nordic walking, and winter sports equipment). They expressed their regret that there are very poor transport links (there are infrequent coach lines, but there is no railway connection at all) – drawing 6. They indicated that in one week' time they are able to visit all the interesting places, and then the days become less attractive, so they decide to return to the places of their residence.

It should be noted, however, that, according to the owners of accommodation facilities, the number of people visiting Białowieża municipality have increased in 2016 in comparison with the previous year and the other years. The information in the media associated with a spruce bark beetle, which had attacked spruce trees, was an important factor here, as it provoked the interest of Polish residents in Białowieża Forest. Another reason is terrorist attacks in several European countries, and therefore a large number of people had decided not to go to these countries, and ultimately they chose Białowieża as a destination of their holiday trip. According to the accommodation owners in the municipality of Białowieża, Białowieża Forest is visited mainly by tourists from the following Polish regions: Mazowsze, Łódź, Wielkopolska and Silesia. These are people who used at least one week of accommodation services. Besides Polish residents the biggest numbers of foreign visitors to Białowieża forest came from Germany, France, Russia and Spain.

Among the other nationalities the respondents mentioned tourists from Belarus, the United States, the Netherlands, Austria, Japan and Great Britain (Badania 2016). The respondents stated that, for example Belorussians were interested mainly in shopping tourism rather than in recreation in Białowieża.

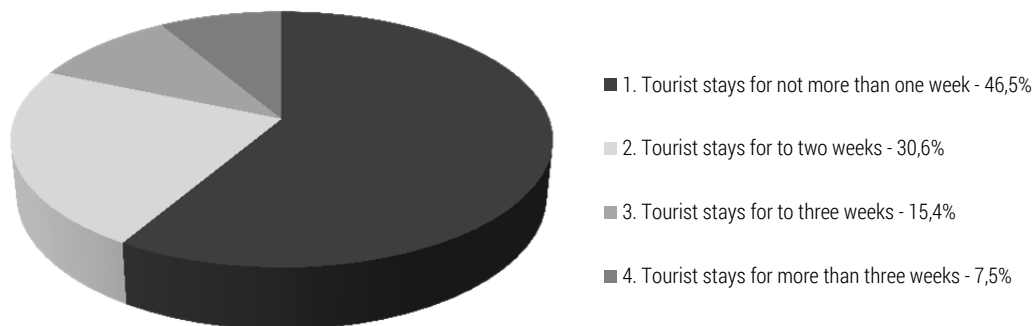


Figure 4. Tourist stays in accommodation facilities in the municipality of Białowieża

The most numerous group of tourists coming to Białowieża and Białowieża Forest is between 36 and 45 years. They mostly have secondary and higher education and are employed in institutions, production plants and services (figure 5). Among the visitors 64% were male and 36% were female. This shows that married couples were not predominant, and they usually plan a family recreational stay of several days. Therefore, in this case we can see mostly short “sightseeing trips”.

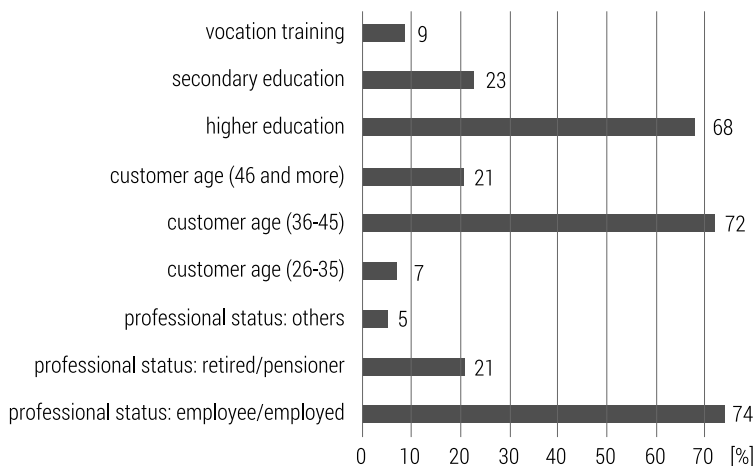


Figure 5. Characteristics of visitors to Białowieża and the Forest

Service providers emphasize the fact that tourist guides in Białowieża have a growing knowledge of foreign languages. Tourist guides most frequently communicated with tourists in English, German and Russian. To the question of whether you plan to visit Białowieża and the Forest again 75% of respondents responded positively, and 79% of them found the place attractive.

Although a significant proportion of respondents found the area of Białowieża Forest attractive, the next question, of an open type, concerned things that could discourage customers in the area. The answers to this question are shown in figure 6.

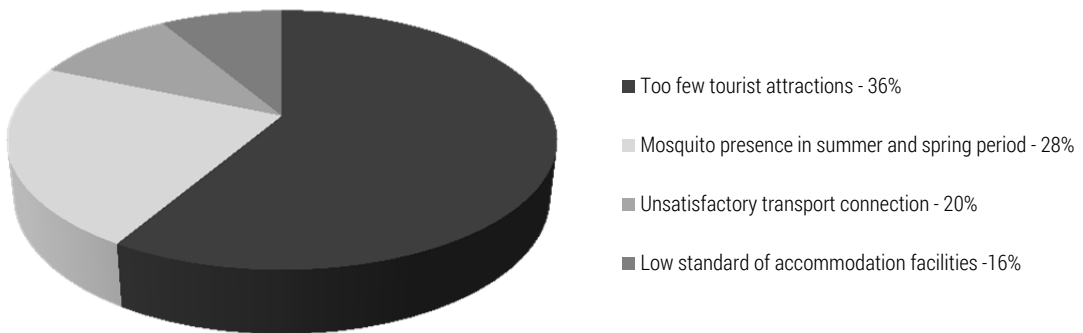


Figure 6. Attractiveness rating of Białowieża and the Forest

The majority of respondents believe that in order to encourage tourists to visit Białowieża and the Forest it is advisable to increase the number of tourist attractions. It has been suggested that a rope park should be created, and also a pitch with a running track with the possibility to play team games, as well as indoor swimming pool, a bowling alley and a bike rental. These are the main attractions that could attract significant numbers of tourists. Despite the presence of mosquitoes, a significant part of respondents replied that there are measures to prevent that threat and this can help. It has been postulated to restore the railway connection, as it would help newcomers to come and leave without much mental stress. It was noted that despite existing coach connection there are still not enough rides, and in addition to that they are of low quality, which impairs riding comfort.

Typically each tourist did not only mention what was good about the place, but he or she also expresses his or her opinions concerning what should be improved and what malfunctioned there. There are two hotel facilities in the municipality of Białowieża (a four star and three star ones). As the

surveys have shown the other accommodation facilities did not please the tourists in terms of comfort.

Summary

The contemporary development of civilization causes continuous growth of interest in recreation in areas with contamination-free environment. This results primarily from rapid urbanization, the changes in professional structure of inhabitants in favor of white-collar work, and the improvement in their economic situation. The existence of natural, scenic and cultural values is a significant factor in attracting tourists to the municipality of Białowieża and the Forest. And the main attraction is the fact that there are here forest areas of great beauty. It should be kept in mind that forest areas are for people, but they should be skillfully used in order to improve mental and physical health, and not to infringe the principle of sustainable development.

The research results have showed that in the area of Białowieżą Forest efforts should be made to increase the number of tourist attractions, to improve the conditions of accommodation and ensure the efficient coach and train public transport connection, as well as to create more bicycle paths and the expansion of rental base of recreational equipment (mainly of bicycles, kayaks, equipment for Nordic walking and winter sports equipment).

If the proposed projects find their fruition, it is a high probability that the stays of tourists will be longer and it will be even more interest in recreation in Białowieża Forest. This will also improve the municipal budget and the financial situation of the residents of the municipality of Białowieża. It was noted that the asphalt surface in Białowieża itself is too weak. This causes difficulties in driving a motor vehicle and even riding a bike or roller-skating.

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