

CATEGORISATION OF RURAL ACCOMMODATION FACILITIES AND ITS POPULARITY AMONG POLISH CITIZENS

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ABSTRACT

The categorization of rural accommodation facilities has been operating since 1997. Unfortunately, the popularity among farmers in rating their accommodation facilities is very low. The reason of this may be in fact that the average Polish citizen has no awareness of existence of such system. This article discusses the essence of the categorization system of rural accommodation facilities and presents the results of the research on the level of knowledge of Polish citizens about the subject. Through questionnaire research carried out on a sample of 830 respondents can be concluded, that awareness of the existence of the categorization system and knowledge about it is among the Poles very small.

Key words: rural tourism, agritourism, categorization

INTRODUCTION

Rural tourism in Poland has a long history and interest in this type of leisure is constantly growing among tourists. This process is also intensified due to active promotion and propagation of such type of tourism, made by various institutions and organizations. The effectiveness of those actions may be among other things confirmed by constantly growing number of operating objects of rural tourism, which meet the needs of the increasing number of people visiting rural areas.

The owners of many rural tourism objects have adopted quantitative strategy, believing that low price will return with high demand. However, others base on high standard with rich and attractive offer, trying to reach out to more rich clients, who demands adequately higher quality of service. The quality of services in hotels is manifested by star-rating, obtained as a result of the categorisation process. The quality of service of rural accommodation for a long time could be deduced only from the room price, owners' assurance or an opinion from a satisfied tourist. It has changed at the end of the XX century, in the second half of the 1990s, when The Polish Federation of Rural Tourism "Friendly Farms" (Polska Federacja Turystyki Wiejskiej "Gospodarstwa Gościnne") was established in the same time with the categorization system of rural accommodation facilities (WBN). This solution allowed the owners of the rural tourism farms to voluntarily submit their objects for evaluation to define the level of quality. The star-rating expressing the quality of the hotels is commonly known. However, not many people is aware that the similar grading system exist for the rural tourism facilities, which uses the sun symbol instead of stars. Therefore the aim of this article is to present information about the categorization

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system of the rural accommodation facilities. The author has carried out a research on the level of awareness and knowledge about the subject among the citizens of Poland.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The research was conducted using a diagnostic survey method, which was carried out among 830 adult Poles. The respondents were selected randomly from the main age classes and sex structure of Polish citizens. A survey questionnaire was used as a research tool during a direct interview with respondents. The pollsters were 2nd year students of full- and part-time studies of Tourism and Recreation Faculty on Warsaw University of Life Sciences – SGGW. The survey was conducted also among their families, friends and neighbours in their family villages in spring of 2016.

ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF CATEGORIZATION SYSTEM OF RURAL ACCOMMODATION IN POLAND

Legal framework, which regulated the aspects of providing tourist services in Poland, is the Act of 29 August 1997 on tourist services [*Ustawa z 29 sierpnia...*]. This document defines eight types of hotel facilities, where accommodation is offered. However, there are no agritourism farms or others rural accommodation facilities among them. It is worthy of note that agritourist farm is not a term defined by law. Both in Act on tourist services and in Act on freedom of economic activity there is only mentioned renting rooms by farmers or places for tents in their farms. Such objects are classified as different objects providing the accommodation, after meeting the minimal requirements. Those requirements were specified in implementing note to Act on tourist services, which is Ordinance of Minister of Economy and Labor from 19 August 2004 about hotel objects and other objects, where accommodation is provided [*Rozporządzenie...* 2004]. Only minimal requirements of furnishing other objects, where accommodation is provided (rural accommodation can be classified here) were specified there. Moreover, it should be underlined that on the contrary to the hotels (except hostels) rural accommodation facilities are not subjected to an obligatory star-rating categorization. However, because of the dynamic development of rural tourism after 1989 the minimal requirements and low criteria which rural accommodation facilities should have met back than, in the second half of the 1990s of the XX century it was necessary to take some action to put in order the quality of rural accommodation.

The origins of categorization of rural accommodation in Poland should be looked for in PHARE TOURIN programs, which were realized in 1990s of the XX century and were aimed to support development of Polish tourism. PHARE TOURIN II rural tourism in rural and forest areas, realized in 1996–1997 [Seroka-Stolka 2007] had a great deal in the process. One of the program's component named "Rural tourism development" had a category of operations called "Rural accommodation development". Its main purpose was to develop and promote the accommodation system within rural tourism [*Dorobek Programu...*]. Within this program many actions were undertaken, with crucial significance in creating categorization system of rural accommodation [more: Majewski 2003, *Dorobek Programu...*]. For example:

- preparing the categorization system of rural accommodation (with the help from the experts from the western countries, and taking an example from the systems functioning in the other European countries);
- initial categorization, carried out to collect experience;
- preparing the manual handbook *Guidelines for categorization inspections of rural accommodation facilities*;
- preparing tips for accommodation providers, registration and categorization forms;
- appointing and training the group of field inspection personnel.

Moreover, the breakthrough for rural tourism in Poland was the establishing of Polish Federation of Rural Tourism "Gospodarstwa Gościnne" (PFRT "GG") – organisation for registration, inspection and categorization

of rural accommodation objects. The organisation unites agritourism associations. The Federation was registered in 1996 and its activity has started in 1997. Thanks to support from PHARE TOURIN II program it has been provided with computers so as with the registration and categorization system of rural accommodation. In the early stage of functioning of the pilot program approximately 1,000 farms were categorized (it could categorize only one room in each farm). In 1999, by the decision of The Ministry of Physical Culture and Tourism, the categorization system of rural accommodation objects has become the property of the Federation [*Odpowiedź ministra...*].

The intention the creators of categorisation system was to keep an appropriate level of services and the positive image. In this context the categorization was and still is the warranty of proper quality of services, depending only on a given category. Its idea is to put the particular types of accommodation objects into a defined category, which refers to the quality of furnishings and proposed services, what allows to clarify the offers and set them in clear order [*Program rozwoju...*]. Accommodation providers can join to the WBN categorization system voluntarily but the verification process is payable.

At the beginning WBN categorization system was complicated, with many number of criteria and characteristics to be evaluated (since 2013 there was a change that was described further). Each category was marked with a symbol of little sun. System have four rating classes: standard, one, two and three suns. The facilities to be categorized were:

- guest rooms (rating available: standard, one, two and three little suns symbols);
- independent houses (rating available: standard, one, two and three little suns symbol);
- group rooms (rating available: standard);
- farm's camping sites (only standard rating available).

Only the facilities which met the requirements specified in already mentioned ordinance about hotel and other objects where accommodation services are provided could be categorized. Therefore, the guest rooms and independent houses had to firstly meet the minimal requirements specified there (what granted them a standard category), before they could enable them to obtain a sun symbol rating. Group rooms and farm's camping sites could obtain only a standard category. Because of the restrictions of this paper detailed specifications of particular types of rural accommodation units and categories were not discussed. Details about them may be found in "Program of development and promotion of categorization system of agritourism and rural tourism objects in Poland", which was elaborated by the team of experts under the guidance of Iwona Majewska. Each category was issued for two years and after that time it could be prolonged for the same period, after the positive opinion of the director of a local agritourism association (or someone empowered by him) or of an expert from Agricultural Advisory Centre (AAC), for the people who were not members of PFRT "GG".

To sum up the WBN categorization rules till 2013, it should be noted that the focus was set mainly on meeting basic criteria of providing the accommodation. The focus on criteria linked with preparing non-accommodation offer (e.g. possibilities of leisure activities in farm) was marginal. There was no specialization of farms depending on their additional offers or the profile of an agricultural activity performed there. Moreover, the elements related with the regionalization of the offer so as maintaining a rural character of accommodation in the field of architecture, furnishing or provided services were not taken under consideration. [*Program rozwoju...*].

Thanks to the financing from Ministry of Sport and Tourism, in 2012, the work on modifying and improving WBN categorization system had begun. The planned results of the works were [*Program rozwoju...*]:

- the project of modification, worked out by the team of experts and the people with practical experience. The project was based on the analysis of the similar systems in other countries and on works focused on improving the quality of rural tourism offer, conducted by the European Federation of Rural Tourism EUROGITÉS, where the PFRT "GG" is also associated;
- project tested by making categorization in selected facilities and conducting a survey among potential tourists checking their needs and expectations in this area;

- modernisation of the IT system;
- training the team of rural accommodation inspectors to conduct evaluation according to the modified system;
- promoting the system of evaluation of rural accommodation facilities among potential tourists and service providers;

The new system has started on 1 of January 2013 and it had significant changes. First, it was simplified (less criteria of evaluation and shorter scale of marks – without standard category), with group rooms and farm's camping sites no longer being categorized and two brand new categories of objects: rural lodge and lodge at farm. This allowed to distinguish clearly between agritourism farms and other facilities of rural tourism, without where practical farming was not performed. The time of validity of obtained category was extended from two to four years.

Accommodation provider, who decides to categorize his facility, gains right to publish his offer in the Federation's promotion materials and use its reserved logotype. Categorization is carried out by the inspector of PFRT "GG" at the request of the facility owner. The cost of categorisation of a facility with up to five rooms or two independent houses is 350 PLN for the members the Federation, or 700 PLN for non-associated owners. In case of categorizing more rooms, there is a surcharge of 20 PLN for each additional room and 50 PLN for each independent house. If the owner fails to prepare his lodge in the first term, he is obliged to pay 120 PLN – it is a cost of a second visitation of an inspector (www.pftw.pl). In some special situations, it is possible to cancel given category and the recommendation granted by PFRT "GG". This may take place in case of finding the severe negligence in quality of offered services, especially discrepancy between real condition of the lodge and standard expected from obtained category or legal exclusion from accommodation provider's native agritourism association. The reason may be for example guests' complaints about low quality of services.

There is a number of significant and diversified benefits from categorization. For accommodation providers, it is the reliable confirmation of particular standard of the service. Obtaining the category allows to publish the offer in promotion materials co-financed from state budget and PFRT "GG". The offer can be also displayed in the Federation's tourist information and reservation systems, as well as at the national and international tourist fairs, including official state stands co-financed from the state budget. Moreover, the category without any doubt increases the level of competitiveness of the facility on the market. The profits for the tourists should also be listed: clearly defined standards, reliable information, simplification of purchase decision and the sense of security [Wyrwicz 1998]. Operational and efficient WBN categorization system is also important factor in motivating the development of rural tourism in Poland. It guarantees an appropriate level of rural tourism services quality and creates the positive image, what brings new opportunities at the regional, national and international markets.

Between 1997 and 2006 PFRT "GG" has categorized total number of 1,432 facilities. During last few years a lower number of categorized facilities is noticeable, as well as lower popularity of the system among the owners. The details of that process are presented on Figure 1.

In 2014 there were 283 categorized rural accommodation facilities. At the time of preparing the article (November 2016) the Federation reported 1,271 lodges recommended (www.agroturystyka.pl), when 233 of them were categorized (40 with three stars, 90 with two stars and 103 with one star). What is interesting, 30 lodges were rated in standard category, which was cancelled in the beginning of 2013 and the last time when it was granted for two years, was 2012. The other 1,008 facilities were not categorized, but the quality of the services offered there was guaranteed by the Federation. Webpage of PFRT "GG" also allows looking up offers based on thematic aspects, for example there are offers for the people interested in picking mushrooms, fishing or horse riding, there also offers for families with kids, available accommodation at a farm or an eco-farm.

Declining trend may be observed not only in total number of categorised facilities, but also in the number of the facilities which are willing to prolong their category validation in the system. In 2012 only 13% of

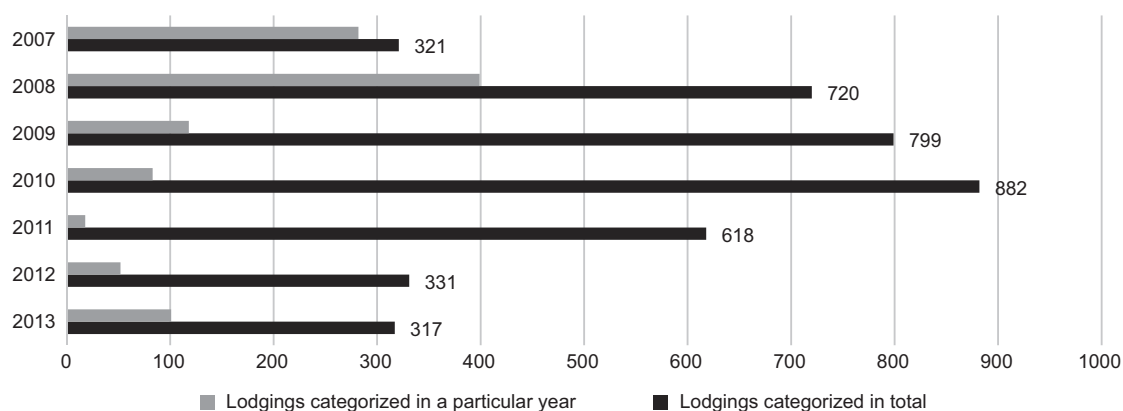


Fig. 1. All facilities with granted category and facilities with obtained categories between 2007 and 2013

Source: Author's work based on data of PFRT "GG".

399 facilities were signed up for a second evaluation, in 2013 it was just 11%. In 2014 this figure was even lower – only 9.6%. That brings the obvious conclusion that owners of those facilities have not seen any benefits from categorization.

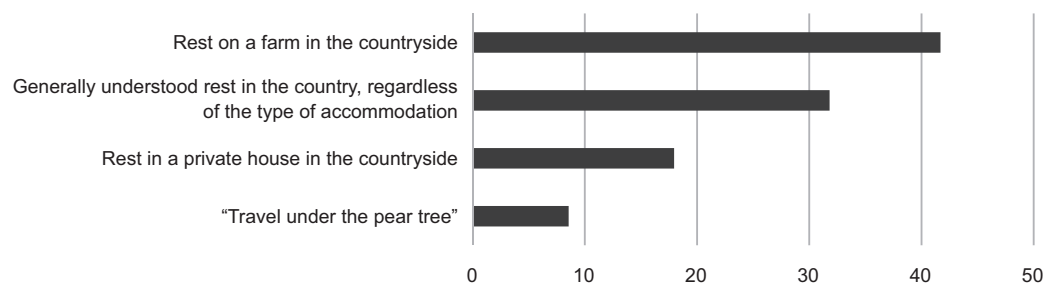
RESEARCH RESULTS

Among the respondents there were more women (50.7%). The age structure of the survey group was varied and approximately reflected real society structure in this aspect. People in the age between 18 and 24 years old were 11.1% of all the respondents. People at the age of 25–39 years were 29.8%, between the age of 40 and 59 years were 30.4% and seniors (in the age of 60 and older) were 28.8%. The respondents were well educated: 42.7% of them have graduated from university and 36% graduated from high school. The significant number of the respondents (27.5%) were white-collar workers, while other main groups were blue-collar workers (14.9%), pensioners and annuitants (18.8%) and students (10%). Among the respondents there were inhabitants of all the regions – the most numerous group of respondents were from Mazowieckie (56.5%), Lubelskie (7.2%), Łódzkie and Podlaskie (4% each). Most of them mainly were from cities (74.3%) and 32.4% of them lived in the cities with population bigger than 200 thousand people.

A Significant part of the respondents understood the term agritourism, as a holiday at the farm, in rural area. Many of them has defined it generally as a rest in the country or in private house in the country. Some respondents related agritourism with "self-arranged countryside holidays". The detailed results are presented in Figure 2.

It might be surprising that despite over 25-year-old history of agritourism in Poland, this term was defined properly only by approximately 40% of the respondents.

Only 8.6% of the respondents were aware of the system. This percentage is far from the result of research conducted in 2014 by the Federation's representatives during AGROTRAVEL fair in Kielce, picnic "Recognize good food" in Warsaw and TOUR SALON fair in Poznań, made on 206 respondents. During that research, almost 70% of the respondents had the awareness of existence and functioning of WBN categorization system in Poland. The reason of such discrepancy may be in respondents' selection – in research made by the Federation took part people, who often spend holidays in the country and pick up agritourist offer. Another reason may be in way of asking the question, which may decide about the received answer. Form "Do you even know that in Poland exists categorization system of rural accommodation?" strongly determines the type of response. Only

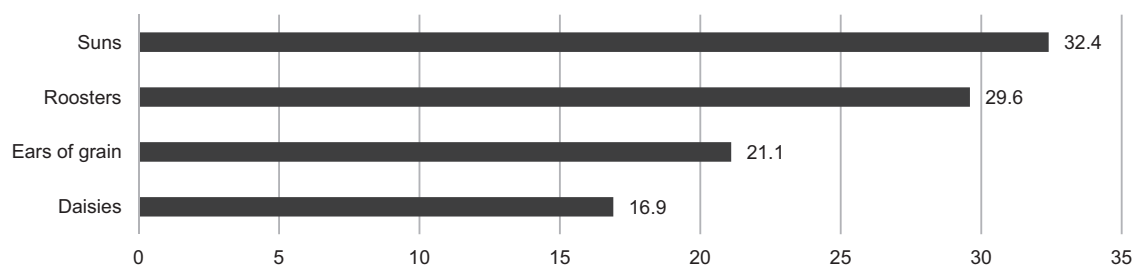


N = 830

Fig. 2. The respondents' understanding of agritourism

Source: Author's research.

23.3% of respondents claimed that rural accommodation in Poland is not categorized and 68.2% had no knowledge about it and has given no answer. Only one third from those declaring knowledge about WBN categorization system (3.9% of all people) could say what symbol is used for marking WBN categories (Fig. 3).



N = 71

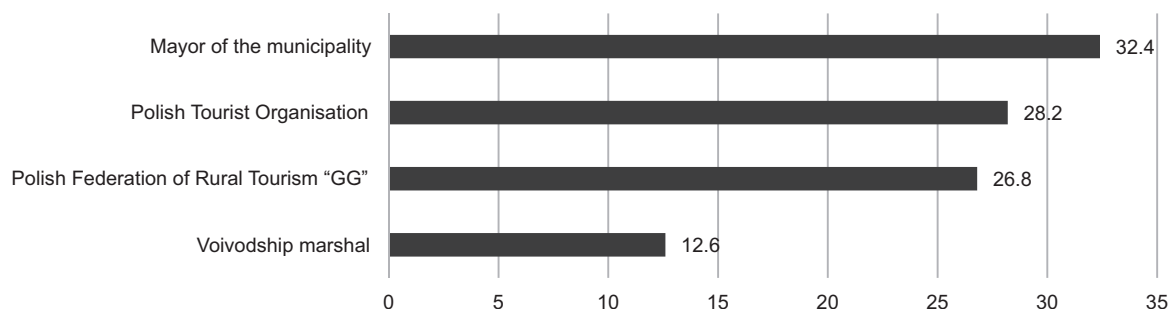
Fig. 3. Symbols used to mark WBN categories according to the respondents' choice

Source: Author's research.

It may be presumed that on giving the right answer here, except the actual knowledge the resemblance between the symbols used for categorization of the hotels and rural accommodation facilities, had some impact. Awareness about the hotel categorisation is surely much higher than about the rural accommodation facilities categorisation.

Only small number of the respondents with awareness of existence of categorization system of rural accommodation could point out proper institution, responsible for the evaluation (Fig. 4). One third of this group claimed that this is the competence of local mayor, while only one quarter (2.3% of all people) gave the right answer. There were also answers pointing Polish Tourist Organization or voivodship marshal. The second choice may be caused by the fact that he is responsible, i.a. for categorization of hotel objects.

Polish Federation of Rural Tourism "Gospodarstwa Gościnne", which logo is presented below (the first on the left), uses couple of graphics to promote rural tourism objects (Fig. 5). "Rest at a farm" ("Wypoczynek u rolnika") is reserved only for agritourism farms, "Holidays at eco farm" ("Urlop u ekoroelnika") for agritourism farms with ecological cropping, while "Holidays in the country" ("Wypoczynek na wsi") is reserved for other rural tourism facilities. Acquaintance with those logotypes among the respondents was marginal. The logo of PFRT "GG" was recognised most of all, as it can be linked with almost 20-year-old activity. The detailed answers for this question are presented in the table.



N = 71

Fig. 4. Institution responsible for WBN categorization according to the respondents' choice

Source: Author's research.



Fig. 5. Logo of PFRT "GG" and graphics used by the Federation to mark promoted rural tourism objects

Source: Website of the Polish Federation of Agriturism (PFTW) <http://pftw.pl>.

Table. Respondents' acquaintance of logotypes used by PFRT "GG"

Answer given	Logo of PFRT "GG"	"Holidays at eco farm" logotype	"Holidays in the country" logotype	"Rest at farm" logotype
"I see it for the very first time"	79.2	90.5	86.5	88.7
"I've seen it somewhere, unfortunately I don't know the meaning of this graphic"	16.7	7.7	10.8	9.0
"I know the meaning of this graphic"	4.1	1.8	2.7	2.3

N = 830

Source: Author's own research.

Graphics used by the Federation for marking the facilities of particular types of rural tourism were totally unknown for the vast majority of the respondents. The reasons of that may lay in relatively short period of their existence (since beginning of 2013). However, this problem may also be caused by inadequate or inefficient promotion of those undertakings.

CONCLUSIONS

Polish Federation of Rural Tourism "Gospodarstwa Gościnne" is the most active and efficient organization working for developing the rural tourism in Poland. Its actions are multidirectional, however, they mainly focus on improving the quality of rural tourism offer and promoting this type of holidays. Moreover, the Federation

takes part in publishing, research, training and integrating projects. One of the qualitative tools is the system of rural accommodation categorisation, constantly improved since 1997. Basing on the research carried out, it may be concluded that effectiveness of this tool is unfortunately marginal, as tourists are not aware of its existence – less than 9% of the respondents knew it. Moreover, only one third of them could properly indicate the symbol used for marking the categories. In author's opinion, this lack of social awareness has caused declining interest of rural accommodation providers in evaluating and categorizing their facilities. If most of the interviews with potential clients would have started from the question about objects' category, for sure most of the accommodation providers would have joined the system long ago and have their facilities categorised. Unfortunately, the lack of those questions (resulting from the lack of awareness of the system) together with obligatory fee and the necessity of preparing facilities for the evaluation are successfully discouraging objects owners from obtaining the warranty of quality expressed with the symbols of little suns.

The issue of the lack of awareness of existence of the system among potential and present tourists visiting rural areas had been noticed by PFRT "GG" long time ago. An attempt to solve it was made by preparing webpage, number of printed catalogues and brochures so as the and presence during the different tourist fairs. It supposed to help promoting the system however, the effectiveness of those actions (defined mainly by the Federation's limited resources) leaves much to be desired. Chances for change should be looked for in the Federation's "Program of development and promotion of categorization system of agritourist and rural tourism facilities in Poland", within program IV named "Promotion and marketing communication", many actions were planned to promote this system among potential tourists and encourage accommodation providers to evaluate their facilities. The program will be realized between 2016 and 2020, therefore it is necessary to wait with patience for its results. However, there is a hope that such a crucial tool for improving quality of rural tourism services as the WBN categorization system is, will finally become commonly known and appreciated by tourists, as well as used by the rural accommodation providers.

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KATEGORYZACJA WIEJSKIEJ BAZY NOCLEGOWEJ I WIEDZA NA JEJ TEMAT WŚRÓD POLAKÓW

STRESZCZENIE

System kategoryzacji wiejskiej bazy noclegowej funkcjonuje od 1997 roku. Niestety, zainteresowanie usługodawców poddaniem swoich obiektów ocenie jest niewielkie. Powodem tego może być fakt, iż przeciętny mieszkaniec Polski nie ma świadomości istnienia takiego systemu. W pracy omówiono istotę systemu kategoryzacji wiejskiej bazy noclegowej oraz zaprezentowano wyniki badań dotyczące wiedzy Polaków na jego temat. Dzięki badaniom ankietowym przeprowadzonym na próbie 830 respondentów można stwierdzić, że świadomość istnienia systemu kategoryzacji i wiedza na jego temat jest wśród Polaków bardzo mała.

Słowa kluczowe: turystyka wiejska, agroturystyka, kategoryzacja