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## NATURAL AND CULTURAL RESOURCES OF GREEN KURPIE AS DRIVERS OF TOURISM DEVELOPMENT

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**ABSTRACT:** The purpose of this paper is to present the natural and cultural resources of the region of Green Kurpie (identified with the Green Wilderness of Kurpie) as drivers of tourism development. The region under analysis, located across two voivodeships: Mazowieckie and Podlaskie, has special natural resources: woods and nature reserves which preserve the natural beauty of the Kurpie Forest, as well as its own culture manifested in original buildings, ornamentation, folk handicrafts, clothing and local dialect. It is a theoretical and empirical article. The author applied the following research methods: deductive studies of literature on the subject and questionnaire studies with the use of a standardised questionnaire survey carried out among 400 respondents from 12 voivodeships in Poland (N=400). In the eyes of the respondents, vast forests, natural reserves, a wealth of rivers and meadows, as well as a distinctive culture: local dialect, unique architecture, crafts and folk costumes are conducive to the development of nature and culture tourism in the region. Although most respondents believe that the region is attractive for tourists, they also see the necessity to take additional measures to active policy on wider tourism promotion.

**KEY WORDS:** natural areas, cultural resources, tourism attractiveness

## Introduction

Tourism development in a given region depends mostly on natural resources, but sometimes on cultural heritage as well. Green Kurpie, stretching across the Mazowieckie and Podlaskie voivodeships, is a region which stands out in many respects when compared to other regions. The presence of large forests, interesting terrain, numerous rivers, meadows, and dunes are resources which render the region unique in terms of climate, allowing the development of nature tourism.

This article contains a presentation of the natural and cultural resources of Green Kurpie. Prior to categorising the resources, deductive studies of the literature on the subject were performed to attempt to systematise the meaning of “tourism resources”, “tourism values”, and “tourism attractiveness”. In addition, the article presents the results of a survey carried out among 400 tourists visiting 12 Tourist Information Centres in Poland. The studies were designed to answer the following question: do the nature and culture of Green Kurpie actually define that region and foster tourism in the analysed area?

## An overview of literature

In Polish literature on the subject, the notions of “resources”, “values”, and “attractions” in terms of tourism are sometimes interchangeable and sometimes deemed separate concepts. According to Kowalczyk (2013), the aforementioned notions should be treated separately. Tourism resources may be understood as objectively existing environmental and cultural attributes (both tangible and intangible) that can attract potential tourists. Though resources are an objective category, values are more subjective and should be treated as resources valued by every tourist individually. Thus, not all resources may be values (Kozak, 2009). Thanks to their diversity and often their uniqueness, tourism values stimulate mental experiences in the tourist’s mind, trigger aesthetic impressions, generate interest, are an important part of education, and can create an environment for rest and recuperation.

Whether a given piece of space is attractive in terms of tourism depends on the objective presence of certain conditions in it, on the one hand, and on its subjective reception and assessment by tourists, on the other hand. Thus, just like Kowalczyk (2013), the authors of this article consider tourism attractiveness as attributes of an area resulting from a group of natural and cultural (anthropogenic) features which attract tourists and get them interested in an area.



**Figure 1.** Interrelations between the notions of “tourism resources”, “tourism values”, and “tourism attractiveness”

Source: author’s own work based on (Kowalczyk, 2013).

Determinants of tourism development in an area include environmental and cultural factors alongside economic, marketing and market, organisational and legal, as well as infrastructural factors. Tourism development is dependent on such natural values as, among other things, woodiness, flora, the number of water reservoirs, quality of the environment, landscape diversity (as proved by Kowalczyk 2001; Machnik, Kurczewski 2014; Mickiewicz 2006 and others) and cultural values and their condition (i.a. monuments of architecture and construction, traditional folk culture) (see Stasiak, 2007; Mikos von Rohrscheid, 2008; Jędrzyk, 2008). Values attract tourists and are the fundamental element of tourism supply (Gołembski, 1999).

Natural and cultural values lead to the development of “culture tourism” and “nature tourism” in a given area. There are numerous definitions of both of those forms of tourism in the literature. According to Mika (2008), nature tourism entails any journeys whose main purpose is to discover, observe or admire nature, especially those of its parts that have been least affected by human activity. On the other hand, Zaręba (2008) believes that nature tourism includes any forms of tourism whose purpose is to discover wild nature, “tamed” nature or even nature organised by people. Cultural tourism entails travelling in order to discover cultural heritage which, in a broader sense, is also understood as everyday life, science and technology and geographical environment (landscapes, their interpretation, etc.), as well as literature on various regions and cuisine perceived as an art of living (Buczowska, 2008). Such interpretation of culture tourism allows for including aspects of nature in culture. In the approach preferred by culture tourism scholars, the term of “nature and culture tourism” also appears. Mikos v. Rohrscheidt (2008) suggest that nature and culture tourism is a form of tourism where the main purpose of travelling is discovering natural values and travellers wish to discover protected natural heritage or natural heritage arising from human activity or to increase their knowledge about the surrounding world.

As suggested by Kowalczyk, the authors of this article assume that natural and cultural environment resources are attributes of the environment and the cultural landscape, both tangible and intangible and they begin their analysis with this assumption. The surveys carried out among the respond-

ents in Poland sought to value the previously categorised resources (and to give them the status of values) and then to assess the natural and cultural tourism development potential in the Green Kurpie region.

## Research methods

The goal of this paper is to present the natural and cultural resources of Green Kurpie and their importance for nature and culture tourism development. It is a theoretical and empirical article. The theoretical part is based on the literature on the subject, journal articles and statistical studies and it was to serve the presentation of natural and cultural resources of the analyzed area. In turn, qualitative research in the form of a questionnaire survey was used to assess the importance of these resources in the development of nature and cultural tourism. Empirical research was carried out in July and August 2016 among randomly selected tourists visiting the Tourist Information Centres located in 16 voivodeships in Poland. To that end, an original questionnaire survey consisting of 18 open and closed questions was designed and used. The questions were divided into three sections. The authors tried to obtain information on, i.a. tourists' opinions about the nature and culture of Kurpie, reasons for coming to Green Kurpie, the status of Green Kurpie when compared to other Polish regions attractive in terms of tourism and respondents' recommendations regarding tourism development trends in a given region.

In total, 316 women and 84 men took part in the survey (N=400) from 12 voivodeships in Poland. The division of the respondents by age is illustrated in figure 2. A majority of the respondents were 19-25 years old. Slightly fewer respondents were between 26-35 and 36-45 years old. The fewest respondents were over 45 years old (8%) and below 18 years old (5%).

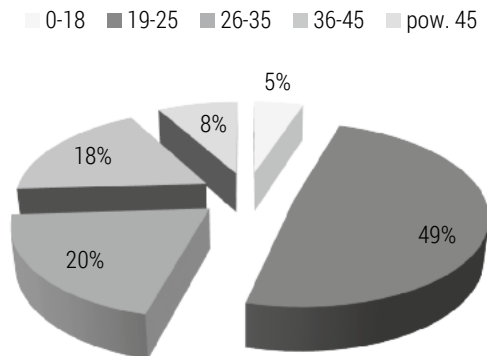


Figure 2. Age of the respondents

Source: author's own work based on the conducted research.

A majority of the respondents were residents of the Warmińsko-Mazurskie voivodeship (96 people), the Podlaskie voivodeship (68 people) and the Mazowieckie voivodeship (60 people). Fewer of them were from the Zachodniopomorskie voivodeship (36 people), the Kujawsko-Pomorskie voivodeship (32 people) and the Łódzkie voivodeship (7 people). The Pomorskie and Śląskie voivodeships were represented by 16 people each. The Świętokrzyskie and Wielkopolskie voivodeships were represented in the study by 12 people each. The fewest respondents were from the Dolnośląskie and Lubelskie voivodeships. The diversity of the places of residence of the respondents made it possible to collect diverse opinions about the natural and cultural values of Green Kurpie and their importance for tourism development.

## Results of the research

### Natural resources of Green Kurpie

The Kurpie Forest may be divided into two areas – the Green Wilderness and the White Wilderness. It is very difficult to draw the administrative boundaries of Green Kurpie. Chętnik defined those boundaries as follows: The Green Wilderness covers the following towns and cities: Kolno, Myszyniec, Chorzele, Przasnysz, Ostrołęka and Nowogród; parts of the following poviats (a powiat is an administrative area of Poland, lower than a voivodeship, but larger than a municipality): Łomża, Kolno, Ostrołęka, and Przasnysz (Suchowiecki, 2010). Currently, one may claim that the Green Wilderness covers the Mazowieckie and Podlaskie voivodeships. It is assumed that it stretches across the following municipalities and communes: Baranowo, Czarnia, Zbójna, Kadzidło, Turośl, Lelis, Myszyniec, Nowogród, and Łyse. Table 1 presents data on the area of individual municipalities and communes in Green Kurpie, the forest area, and the forest percentage share (table 1).

The area of the Kurpie Forest is 1705 km<sup>2</sup>, where forests constitute 34.22% of the total area. As far as the size is concerned, the largest municipalities and communes include: Kadzidło, Łyse, and Myszyniec. When it comes to the size of forests in absolute terms, the communes of Kadzidło, Łyse and Zbójna have the largest forests. Taking into account the percentage of forests in the total area, most forests – 46.5% – are in the commune of Zbójna, quite fewer – 39.8% – in the commune of Kadzidło, and 39.5% in the commune of Czarnia.

**Table 1.** Share of forests in the total area of Green Kurpie

Municipality/ Commune	Area of the municipality/commune [km <sup>2</sup> ]	Forest area [ha]	Forest share [%]
Nowogród	101	2,365.01	23.40
Turośl	199	5,411.17	27.20
Łyse	246	8,748.00	35.40
Lelis	196	7,391.48	37.60
Kadzidło	258	10,307.87	39.80
Czarnia	93	3,658.10	39.50
Baranowo	198	6,125.84	31.00
Myszyniec	228	5,683.01	24.90
Zbójna	186	8,652.07	46.50
Total/share	1,705	58,342.55	34.22

Source: author's own work based on the data of the Statistical Office in Warsaw and Białystok in 2016.

A considerable share of forests affects, among other things, the number of nature reserves which are abundant in the region of Kurpie. Table 2 illustrates data on the nature reserves in individual municipalities and communes.

**Table 2.** Nature reserves located in individual municipalities and communes of Green Kurpie

Municipality/ Commune	Nature reserve	Established	Area [ha]	Type of nature reserve	Accessibility for tourists
Czarnia	Czarnia	19/10/1964	141.87	Forest	Can be accessed from the "Barci kurpiowskich" hiking trail
	Surowe	26/10/1964	4.57	Forest	Non-accessible
Kadzidło	Podgórze	10/03/1987	37.76	Forest	Can be accessed from the "Wach" bicycle path running near the nature reserve
	Torfowisko Karaska	03/08/2000	402.69	Peat-bog	Non-accessible
Lelis	Olsy Płoszyckie	23/09/1997	140.86	Forest	Accessible
Łyse	Mingos	17/12/1971	13.46	Forest	Accessible near the external borders
	Tabory	01/09/1974	17.21	Forest	Accessible near the external borders
	Torfowisko Serafin	29/12/1998	184.92	Peat	Accessible

Municipality/ Commune	Nature reserve	Established	Area [ha]	Type of nature reserve	Accessibility for tourists
Turośl	Ciemny Kąt	01/07/1984	125.95	Forest	Accessible near the external borders
	Czarny Kąt	15/04/1989	32.97	Forest	Accessible near the external borders
Zbójna	Kaniston	01/08/1984	136.59	Forest	Accessible near the external borders
	Łokieć	15/04/1989	139.50	Forest	Accessible near the external borders

Source: author's own work based on the data of the General Directorate for Environmental Protection, of the Forest Districts of Myszyniec, Nowogród, and Ostrołęka.

The six communes of the Kurpie Forest comprise 12 nature reserves with a total area of 1378.35 ha. For the most part, they are forest reserves; only the "Torfowisko Karaska" nature reserve in the commune of Kadzidło and the "Torfowisko Serafin" nature reserve in the commune of Lelis are peat-bog reserves. Accessibility of most of the peat bogs for tourists gives them an opportunity to discover stands of trees typical of Green Kurpie and to actively spend time in nature.

## Culture of Green Kurpie

The culture of Kurpie is distinct in both tangible and intangible aspects. One of the first characteristic features of the region that can be seen after crossing the borders of Kurpie are Kurpian houses. Originally, Kurpian houses were divided into an entrance room and a living room. As a consequence of transformations, new rooms appeared – there was an entrance room, an alcove, a living room and a small storeroom. Houses were built along the street, with their front towards the road. Wooden beams of the front of a Kurpian house were decorated – most frequently with animal heads at the top (so-called "śparogi" in Kurpian). Windows had shutters which were usually blue with flowers painted on them. Walls were decorated with Kurpian paintings and paper-cut art created by women (*Kurpiowszczyzna...*, 2007).

Another determinant of the culture of Kurpie are folk costumes. Women's costumes included headwear (characteristic hat called "czółko" in Polish for unmarried girls and shawls for married women), a linen shirt, a corset or a vest and a broad ankle skirt. On top of that, women wore an apron made of white cloth with crochet lace or colourful embroidery. Their traditional, bast shoes were called "kurpie", from which the name of the region is derived.

Women's clothing was complete with amber jewellery. Men dressed primarily in brown, covering their heads with a hat or a peaked cap. They donned caftans or long coats of cloth ("sukmana") worn over a shirt and a pair of linen trousers. Traditional footwear included slippers, clogs and top-boots for the wealthy. Finishing touches on men's costumes were added with a pipe, a snuffbox or a cane. Presently, despite certain changes that have occurred over time, the Kurpian costume is still an important and cherished element of the culture of Kurpie.

Since Kurpian land was not good for farming, people originally engaged in fishing, forest bee-keeping and amber processing. Amber emerged in Kurpie in the process of relocating deposits originating from the Tertiary by Pleistocene glaciers. Kurpian people usually found amber when they were fishing. Most of this resource was found in the Rozoga, Szkwa, and Piasecznia Rivers.

Apart from amber processing, forest bee-keeping was also a very important part of the culture of Kurpie. An event commemorating the passion of Kurpie for forest bee-keeping is the Kurpie Honey Harvest ("Miodobranie Kurpiowskie" in Polish) that is celebrated every year on the last Sunday of August and it is attended not only by numerous bee-keepers, but also by tourists.

The inhabitants of Green Kurpie were also sculptors; they usually made religious sculptures. Wooden figures of Saint John of Nepomuk and the Pensive Christ may be found in houses, wayside shrines and forests (Niedziałkowska, 1981).

The region of Kurpie has also its own local dialect. Kurpie has developed its own local dialect spoken even today, but mainly by the elder population, though the characteristic Kurpian accent can also be heard among the younger generation of Kurpians. The local dialect of Kurpie belongs to the group of Masovian local dialects (the Masovian dialect). Even though the region of Kurpie is said to be homogeneous in terms of language and culture, it is diverse thanks to northern Masurian and southern Masovian settlers.

A majority of the respondents confirmed that the culture of Kurpie is distinct (78%). The respondents had no doubt as to the diversity of the culture of Kurpie. Behaviour, customs, and folklore art are values that, in their opinion, make the region stand out. It makes cultural tourism possible there. The Kurpian people may employ well-preserved Kurpian values in, among other things, service provision activities and, thus, earn a profit.

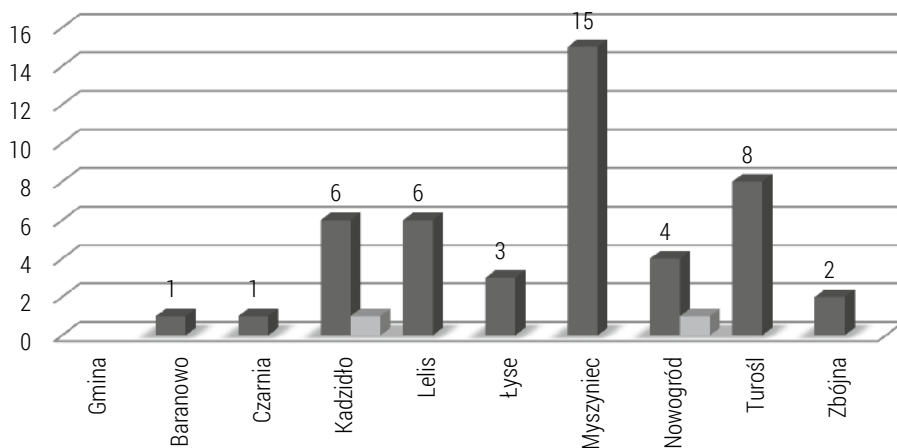
A majority of the respondents (67%) selected the local dialect of Kurpie as being the most distinctive element of the region. Although today it is spoken mostly by the elder population and the younger generation usually uses few Kurpie-specific words, the Kurpian accent is noticeable for non-inhabitants of the region of Kurpie.



Half of the respondents (52%) also found traditions and customs as determinants of cultural distinctiveness of Kurpie. During major religious holidays and local festivities Kurpians wear traditional Kurpian costumes. The fewest respondents said that Kurpian buildings make the culture of Kurpie more distinct. Probably, that is because there are fewer and fewer typical Kurpian houses in the region. They are being replaced with new houses, not necessarily in the traditional Kurpian style. Old houses can be still seen in an open-air museum in Nowogród or in the “Zagroda Kurpiowska” museum in Kadzidło.

### Development of nature and cultural tourism in the region of Green Kurpie

Within the scope of tourism infrastructure, a prerequisite for tourism development of any region is accommodation, which includes hotels, guest-houses, camping sites, agritourism locations and other lodgings (Kisiel et al., 2014). The overview of current accommodation facilities available in the Green Kurpie region was based on data from the Central Registration and Information on Economic Activity (CEIDG) and the National Court Register (KRS) with reference to the Polish Classification of Activities (PDK) (figure 3).



**Figure 3.** Accommodation facilities in Green Kurpie

Source: author's own work based on data from Central Registration and Information on Economic Activity (CEIDG), <https://prod.ceidg.gov.pl/ceidg.cms.engine/> [14-08-2017]; National Court Register (KRS), <https://ems.ms.gov.pl/krs/wyszukiwaniepodmiotu?t:lb=t> [15-08-2017]; <http://www.krs-online.com.pl/> [15-08-2017].

Companies registered in the municipalities of the Kurpie Forest include 48 economic entities engaged in economic activity classed in section I, unit 55 of the Polish Classification of Activities (PKD). The largest concentration of those entities was observed in the municipalities of Myszyniec and Nowogród and in the commune of Turośl. The overwhelming majority were single owner businesses, those entities provide tourists with accommodation either as their main economic activity or as an additional line of business secondary to their main occupation, usually in the agricultural sector.

Since Green Kurpie is located on agricultural land, it has seen an especially marked expansion of agritourism. Benefitting from the natural qualities of the region, owners of different facilities organise cycling and kayaking trips, horseback rides or sleigh rides. Tourists can also venture into the lush forests to pick blueberries or go mushroom hunting. Owners serve regional delicacies such as milk products or honey from their own apiary. In an effort to fully cater to the needs of prospective clients, they invest in recreational infrastructure such as tennis courts, sports grounds, playgrounds and other facilities dedicated to sport and active leisure.

Tourism in Kurpie also draws on the rich history of the region. Its traces include multiple monuments and tombs that commemorate the events of the January Uprising, the Swedish Deluge and other wars. History enthusiasts can broaden their knowledge by visiting Kurpie history museums in Ostrołęka and Wach. Some agritourism farms offer meetings with folk artists and lessons in Kurpie crafts: sculpture, making tissue paper flowers or cut-outs. As emphasised by the owners, these workshops are a valued attraction for people interested in learning new skills while on holidays.

There are no official statistics on the number of tourists in the region of Green Kurpie. However, some estimates can be provided on the number of participants in the biggest events that are the most famous among visitors (table 3).

**Table 3.** Number of participants at the largest cultural events in the region of Green Kurpie in 2016

Event	Estimated number of participants
Kurpie Honey Harvest (Myszyniec municipality)	40,000
Kurpie Wedding (Kadzidło commune)	10,000–15,000
Palm Sunday (Łyse commune)	10,000

Source: author's own work based on the data from the Regional Centre of Kurpie Culture (RCKK) in Myszyniec, Kurpie Culture Centre (CKK) in Kadzidło and the Municipal Centre of the Culture of Sport and Recreation (GOKSR) in Łyse.

The most popular event of 2016 was the two-day Kurpie Honey Harvest. According to the data collected by the Regional Centre of Kurpie Culture (RCKK), it was attended by a total of approx. 40,000 people. Many visitors came from outside of the Kurpie Forest. Kurpie Wedding and Palm Sunday were attended by approx. 20,000-25,000 people in total. Both events originated as local celebrations but with the passage of time they have evolved into huge folk festivals and magnets for tourists interested in the culture of Kurpie.

In the survey conducted, most respondents (56%) indicated that they visited the region of Green Kurpie. Within this group, 54% visited the region multiple times, 29% – twice, and 17% – once. The results reveal that Green Kurpie is perceived as a region worth more than one visit. The motives inspiring its visitors are presented in figure 4.

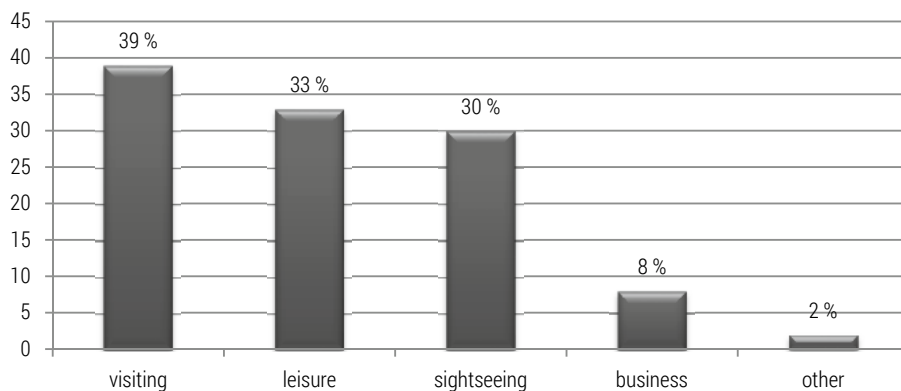


Figure 4. Reasons for coming to Green Kurpie according to the respondents (%)\*

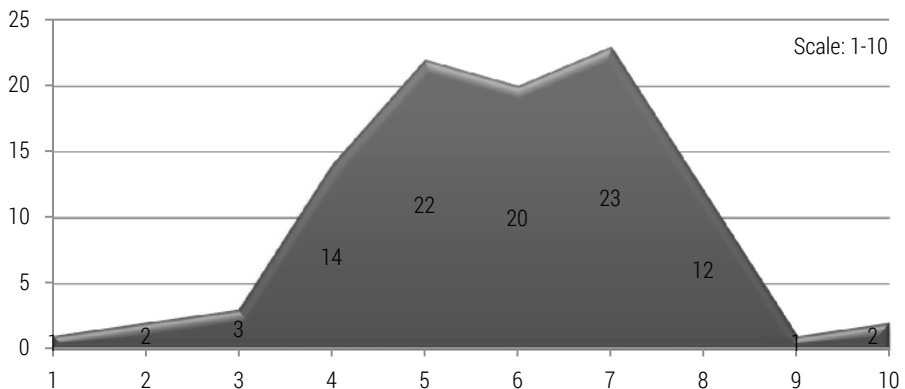
\*multiple answers possible

Source: author's own work.

The respondents came to Green Kurpie to pay a visit (39%), for leisure (33%) and for sightseeing (30%). During their stay, they expected hospitality, 'conditions conducive to relaxation', and 'a respite from everyday responsibilities in a natural environment'. In addition, the respondents appreciated opportunities to explore the culture of the region. A small group (8%) came for business purposes. Those people valued the availability of attractive deals on accommodation and the opportunity to taste Kurpie cuisine.

The survey reveals that tourists are drawn to Green Kurpie mainly because of attractive natural conditions and rich cultural resources of the region. However, a prospective tourist expects local decision makers to create conditions where in those assets can be enjoyed to the fullest. In addition, visitors appreciate clear and widely accessible information on leisure activi-

ties available in the region. Therefore, in order to unlock the potential of Green Kurpie, local authorities ought to highlight its assets and minimise the inconveniences which, in the eyes of the respondents, include insufficient promotion of the region in mass media. In their mind, promotional activities should involve not only advertising cultural events but also reviving the old traditions of Kurpie. One respondent suggested arranging dance parties which used to be very popular in the region. Despite its beautiful nature, the region is believed to lack man-made tourist attractions which would allow visitors to fully enjoy their stay. Furthermore, limited transport accessibility and insufficient number of parking lots make it difficult for tourists to reach their destinations in Kurpie and often leads them to giving up the idea of visiting. The respondents also noted a scarcity of agritourism farms. Their opinions are affected by two factors: firstly, an insufficient promotion of specific facilities and secondly, a gap between the rapidly growing demand and the slowly changing supply. Another weakness of the region is the insufficient number of tourist signs which complicates finding the most interesting tourist attractions.



**Figure 5.** The position of Kurpie among other regions by the potential for tourism development in the assessment of survey respondents [%]

Source: author's own work.

Both the strengths and weaknesses of Kurpie impact its position on the map of tourism regions in Poland. On a scale from 1 to 10, 22% of the respondents rated the position of the region as average (rate 5) in comparison with others. Almost one-fourth of the respondents favourably evaluated Kurpie's potential for tourism development (rate 7) and a handful viewed the position of the region unfavourably (figure 5). In conclusion, there are varying opinions on the placement of Kurpie in the ranking of regions by their potential for tourism development. Such a discrepancy may result from many reasons,

including different preferences and expectations of tourists. The qualities which some people would appreciate (e.g. calm, serenity) could seem problematic for other, more active visitors looking for an adventure. Thus, it is necessary to continually adapt the services to individual expectations so that all visitors can find something for themselves.

Undeniably, nature and culture are the main factors defining Kurpie. However, one cannot overlook activities aimed at making the region more competitive and recognisable. In the opinion of 76% of the respondents, Kurpie shows potential for becoming a region widely known for its culture and nature tourism. In the age of the Internet, promotion of a region is far easier than before. Therefore, areas that have tourism potential and can fulfil it in a custom-made advertisement campaign are certain to become popular tourist destinations. 14% of the respondents had no opinion on the future development of tourism and recreational attractiveness of the region. One-tenth believed that despite its incontestable natural and cultural values, the Kurpie region does not stand a chance of becoming a tourism region widely recognisable either in Poland or abroad.

## Conclusions

The abundance of natural and cultural resources distinguishes Green Kurpie from other Polish regions. Nature constitutes a particularly valuable asset. In the eyes of the respondents, vast forests, natural reserves, a wealth of rivers and meadows deserve to attention above all. In turn, the greatest distinguishing feature of Kurpia's distinctive cultural in the eyes of tourists are local dialect and traditions and customs. These resources are conducive to the development of nature and culture tourism in the region.

Although most respondents believe that the region is attractive for tourists, they also see the necessity to take additional measures to improve its transport accessibility, place clear tourist signs and ensure broader promotion of the region and its accommodation facilities. It is also worth emphasizing that because the possibility of using the valuable natural areas by the public is most often carried out in conjunction with the cultivation of favourite forms of tourism, scientific research on environmental management (Manfredo et al, 2003; Bruskotter, Fulton, 2008) suggest or even recommend monitoring exploiting the environment in terms of its use for tourism purposes. Such activities are intended to help central and local authorities to anticipate people's intentions in the use of natural resources and to create an appropriate policy in the field of environmental protection, and at the same time opportunities to associate people with the natural environment (Bengston et al., 2004).

Finally, it is worth mentioning that the municipalities of Green Kurpie have a good chance of enhancing their offer with the use of EU funds available for 2014-2020, particularly under the Regional Operational Programmes for the Mazowieckie and Podlaskie voivodeships. Will the region leap at this opportunity? We shall try to answer this question in upcoming years.

### The contribution of the authors

Roman Kisiel – conception – 40%; literature review – 20%; acquisition of data – 20%; analysis and interpretation of data – 30%

Joanna Zielińska-Szczepkowska – conception – 20%; literature review – 40%; acquisition of data – 40%; analysis and interpretation of data – 30%

Dominika Taradejna – conception – 40%; literature review – 40%; acquisition of data – 40%; analysis and interpretation of data – 40%

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