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TOURIST TRAILS AS AN ELEMENT OF A RURAL TOURIST PRODUCT AND THEIR POPULARITY AMONG THE INHABITANTS OF POLAND

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ABSTRACT: The article presents the results of the research on the familiarity and popularity of selected tourist trails, which are located in rural areas of Podlaskie and Mazowieckie provinces, among the inhabitants of Poland. The research (using the diagnostic survey method) covered 459 adult Poles. The selection of respondents had quota-random character. The survey sample reflects the structure of the Polish population in terms of gender and main age groups. The conducted research proved that the familiarity and popularity of tourist trails located in rural areas is very small. Therefore it is necessary to intensify the promotional activities for this type of attraction.

KEY WORDS: tourist trail, thematic trail, rural tourism

Introduction

Rural tourism is a type of tourism currently developing fast and widely promoted. Besides Polish Tourist Organization high activity in this area demonstrates the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, as well as the Polish Federation of Rural Tourism "Gospodarstwa Gościnne". However, it is worthy of note that rural tourism, until recently viewed through the prism of "peace and quiet", is dynamically changing its shape. The country becomes a place to perform many other functions of tourism, not only a holiday one. Increasingly accentuated and used in rural tourism products is their cognitive value. Cultural sphere of the country, with its folklore, rituals, customs and habits, remains unknown to most city inhabitants, but more and more often is something increasing curiosity and desirable. One of the more appreciated traditions of the village are often the unique and unusual regional dishes.

One of the most attractive ways to explore the cultural and natural resources of the rural areas in the author's opinion is through the thematic tourist trails. Regional and local tourist organizations are especially active in this field, because in the design, marking and promotion of particular trails and objects they see the chance of developing tourism in the area of their functioning. This process results in lot of themed hiking trails existing in rural areas.

The concept and essence of the tourist trail

In the former Polish lands, the first tourist trail, marked by signs in 1880 by Leopold Wajgel, was a trail from Krasny Łuh (Ług) to Howerla in the Czarnohora mountain range in the territory of today's Ukraine. Seven years later (1887) Walery Eliaszkowski, using the cinnabar stripes, marked (first in the Tatry mountains) trail to Morskie Oko, going from the village of Zakopane through Polana Waksmundzka and Psia Trawka (Midowicz, 1986). Nowadays in Poland there are more than 79 thousand kilometers of marked hiking trails (Tourism..., 2017). In fact, there are many more, as in recent years many municipalities and various social organizations, active in the field of tourism and recreation, undertook actions to mark new tourist trails (Gospodarek, 2008).

The history of marking the tourist trails in Poland is almost 140 years old and has a tremendous impact. Despite this, there is no single and universally accepted definition of a tourist trail in scientific literature. Moreover, there is also no specific legislative act regulating this issue. For the few years, thanks

to the Ministry of Sport and Tourism, the work on the project of draft assumptions for the Act on tourist trails is in progress, however it is still a long way to sign the relevant legislation.

The most frequently cited definition of the tourist trail was suggested by the Polish Tourist and Touring Association (PTTK) in the "Guide to marking tourist trails" (2014), where it was specified that the tourist trail is path set in terrain and marked with homogenous signs (symbols), equipped with devices and informative signs, allowing tourist with average level of skills and experience its crossing regardless of season, but except extreme weather conditions. As noted by Stasiak (2006), the activists of this organization are eager to narrow the meaning of this term only to trails determined according to PTTK standards.

In a similar way the idea of tourist trail defines many other authors. Pawlusiński (2007) states that the trail is a guided tourist path, marked in the field with tables or informative signs, connecting places and objects that are attractive in terms of sight, nature or culture. Werner (2010) defines this element of the tourist space as paths being traced, uniformly marked and of adequate width, ensuring a safe passage for visitors of any skill level. Another author proposing the definition referring to PTTK's findings is Kotarski (2007), who states that the hiking trail is a path set in the field with special, unified signs placed on posts, fences, trees, buildings and other objects, which facilitates mountain, kayak, cycling, horse riding, skiing or hiking trips. Among the authors who proposed the definition of a tourist trail corresponding to the PTTK's meaning can be presented Potocki (2004), Rogalewski (1977), Rogowski (2012), Świnicka (1979), Wyrzykowski and Marak (2010), as well as Lijewski, Mikułowski and Wyrzykowski (2002) and others who, in their definitions, emphasize the necessity of marking tourist trails with appropriate signs and symbols. In a similar way, the essence of tourist routes is presented in foreign literature (e.g. Moore, Ross, 1998; Moore, Shafer, 2001; Jensen, Guthrie, 2006; Timothy, Boyd, 2014; MacLeod, 2017).

At this point mention should be made of the proposition of the definition formulated by the authors of the presuppositions to the draft law on tourist trails, who defined tourist trails as marked paths with accompanying objects, designed and adapted for a specific form of tourism, combining places, objects, natural and cultural values, settlements and other elements of space, as well as trails intended for practicing specific physical and active recreation (Assumptions to the draft of the Act on Tourist Trails 2010 after: Stasiak, Śledzińska, Włodarczyk, 2014). It should be emphasized that the existence of a trail due to those regulations is not dependent on its tracing in the field.

Similarly the tourist trail is defined by Kruczek (2005), who claims that it is every trail (not always marked), which was set in the tourist area for pur-

poses of visitors, leading to the most attractive places (sites) with a number of regulations, including, among others, those about security and values protection. Stasiak (2006) also notes that the current dynamic development of tourism is accompanied by new, previously unknown solutions. Increasingly popular are becoming the so-called virtual trails – trails not marked in the real space, but existing on tourist maps, in guides and information and promotional materials, as well as on the websites. The existence of such trail is stated only by the information boards functioning next to the particular objects. The popularity of such system is due to the fact that motorized travelers do not need the continuity of marking and the marking of long-distance trails is very expensive. Moreover, in urban space, saturated with various information carriers (signs, advertisings, posters etc.), the standard signs of the trail may easily become imperceptible. Thanks to the rapid development of mobile satellite navigation technology (GPS), traditional marking of hiking trails is often replaced by navigation systems, commonly used by mobile phones and recently even by watches. In this approach, without taking into account the necessity of marking a trail, a virtual trail is a set of places (attractions) suggested to be visited by a tourist, and the trail, order and way of travel are dependent only on the visitors' preferences. Trails organized in such way Stasiak (2006) defines as thematic ones, which serve primarily cognitive tourism, while marked tourist trails, accompanied by special signs (pictograms placed in visible for tourists spots, in a sight distance one from another) are inseparable elements of qualified tourism.

As Tomczak (2013a) notes, defining a thematic trail is possible with use of the enriched definition of a tourist trail. It is necessary to take into account the factual content, which stands as a thematic core. Such trail should create an integral whole that allows the tourist to focus on a coherent theme, through which traveler begins to perceive the crossed space. Thus, the thematic trail can be understood as an integrated and managed linear system of recreational penetration (the concept of linear systems of recreational penetration was used by Styperek (2002), who, apart from the tourist trails, also includes to this group didactic, health and walking paths.), consisted of objects representing a given subject in space, connecting them trail and elements of the accompanying offer that may be related to the subject in different ways (events, characters, stories, genius loci of the place etc.). This type of trail should make possible to cognize and understand the essence of the subject, as well as to facilitate the visitor traveling through appropriate land development (Tomczak, 2013b).

Due to the analyzed further thematic trails located in the rural areas, whose core are mostly cultural values, it is necessary to characterize here the concept of the cultural trail. In Polish literature quite broad definition of it

was presented by Gawęł (2011), who identifies such trail as a set in field and marked trail combining objects and places selected according to a clear criteria of thematisation, which moreover are an unique and representative example of the cultural heritage of a given region, community, ethnic group, national minority or nation. Through presenting the material heritage, the trail should enable cognizance and popularize the intangible heritage, treating both areas as an integral whole. It should be noted, however, that unmarked cultural trails are not included in this definition. It seems to be very debatable nowadays, as the exclusion from the circle of cultural trails of designed, but unmarked trails, which aim is to present tourists the anthropogenic values of a given area, seems to be an unreasonable action, especially due to the analysis of many existing paths.

The problem of the cultural trail was more widely defined by Puczek and Ratz (2007, p. 133), who understood it as a thematic (not necessarily marked) trail, which has a focusing point – cultural value or element of cultural heritage, with crucial role of the cultural attractions. This definition seems to be much more comprehensive and consistent with the current direction of development of this type of trails.

Functions of the thematic trails

Tourist trails are an important component of tourist infrastructure. They are considered as an element of internal communication accessibility. Stasiak (2006) notes that the tourist trail can't be seen only as a road or path with signs painted on rocks or trees. Crucial here is an additional infrastructure located along the trail and facilitating (or sometimes even enabling) visitors to penetrate the area. It consists of, among others, signposts and tables with time of passage (in the mountains) or distances (in the lowlands), information boards with a description of the trail and a topographic map of the area, places to rest or shelters in case of bad weather conditions. In many places (especially in mountain areas) there are also various types of artificial facilities, like stairs, handrails, ladders, buckles, chains etc.

Tourist trails have many functions, however among them two basic can be distinguished. The first one is realized for tourists and consists in allowing and facilitating them to visit the most interesting tourist attractions of the area. The trails are usually traced to make possible reaching the most valuable sightseeing sites (sacred and secular monuments, natural peculiarities etc.). Their course should enable to cognize interesting phenomena and participate in unusual events (e.g. related to folk culture or unique religious events). Mikos v. Rohrscheidt (2009) adds that the structure and composi-

tion of the services of a large group of trails is an important component of creating the opportunity of adventure in authentic sites, which undoubtedly has a huge impact on the overall feelings and experiences of tourists. The path of trail should also be designed in a way giving visitors a chance for aesthetic experience (e.g. the possibility to admire beautiful landscapes). It should also be noted that the important role of tourist trails should be to bring tourists to attractions important for sightseeing, but, for various reasons, less known and under-promoted. From the tourist point of view there is also another great advantage – sense of security from walking along the marked trail, with the awareness of the time of reaching the final destination. Those aspects are very comfortable for the visitors, who usually are traveling in an unknown area.

The second basic function of the tourist trails is the protective one (ecological), which means reducing the negative impact of tourism on the natural environment of the area. As noted by Stasiak (2006), it is a way of channeling tourist traffic along the traced paths, limiting or even preventing (e.g. in national parks) the penetration of tourists in areas of particular value or with little resistance to anthropopressure. Such actions allow to avoid the risk of exceeding the tourist absorbency limits of an area, what most often has a negative impact on its environment. Apart from the protective function, the trails also have another significant influence on the area, where they are located. They make local tourist offer more concrete, creating a new tourist brand for a group of places and objects located on the path of the trail (Mikos v. Rohrscheidt, 2010), which can result in controlled increase in dynamics of tourism development in a particular place. This process can be especially important for rural trails, which mostly are lacking the popular attractions that generate mass tourism, thus should attract visitors with authenticity, originality and high quality of well-promoted offer.

Purpose and research methods

The purpose of the article is to present the familiarity and popularity of selected tourist trails located in rural areas of Podlaskie and Mazowieckie provinces. The research method was a diagnostic survey with use of the survey technique. The research covered 459 adult Poles. The selection of respondents had random character. For this reason, the sample is not representative. The research tool was the survey questionnaire, filled in during the direct interviews with the respondents. The pollsters were students of full-time and part-time studies of Tourism and Recreation at WULS (SGGW) in Warsaw. They conducted the research among their families, friends and

neighbors in their hometowns in the spring of 2017. The survey consisted of 30 questions, and its structure was reflected in the analytical part of the article. The survey questionnaire was tested during pilot studies conducted among WULS-SGGW students.

Respondents' characteristics

Among the 459 respondents 52.3% were women. The largest age group was between 30 and 45 years old (29.3%). The majority of respondents were people with secondary education (42.3%). 39.2% of the respondents were residents of cities with over 200 thousand inhabitants. Details on this subject are presented on the figure 1.

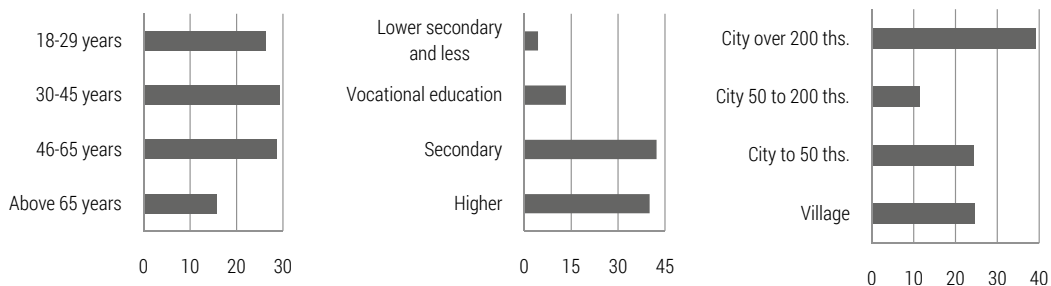


Figure 1. Age, education level and place of residence of the respondents

Source: author's own work.

Residents of all provinces were among the surveyed. However, people from Mazowieckie (43.4%), Podlaskie (12.4%) and Lubelskie (9.8%) provinces were dominant.

Results of the research

The familiarity and popularity of tourist trails in the rural areas of Mazowieckie and Podlaskie provinces among the respondents was quite diversified. The most popular trail in Mazovia was Chopin Trail, visited by almost one third of the surveyed. Also in case of this particular trail the smallest number of people, who were not aware of the existence of such trail, was observed (table 1).

Table 1. Familiarity and popularity of selected tourist trails in Mazowieckie province among the respondents [%]

	I have not heard	I heard something, but I do not know what it is	I know this trail, but I was not there	I visited this trail
Drewniane Skarby Mazowsza / <i>Wooden Treasures of Mazovia</i>	63.0	20.9	12.0	4.1
Mazowiecki Szlak Tradycji / <i>Mazovian Trail of Tradition</i>	68.2	18.7	10.2	2.8
Mazowsze na Filmowo / Mazovia in the film	68.4	17.9	10.0	3.7
Sakralne Pęry Mazowsza / <i>Sacred Pearls of Mazovia</i>	61.4	19.4	11.8	7.4
Szlak Bitwy Warszawskiej / <i>Trail of Warsaw Battlefield</i>	29.8	26.8	30.3	13.1
Szlak Chopinowski / <i>Chopin's Mazovia</i>	25.5	19.0	23.7	31.8
Szlak Folkloru i Smaków Mazowsza Mazowiecka Micha Szlachecka / <i>Trail of Folklore and Taste of Mazovia Mazowiecka Micha Szlachecka</i>	72.3	13.9	8.7	5.0
Szlak Książąt Mazowieckich/ <i>Trail of Dukes of Mazovia</i>	34.0	23.7	25.3	17.0
Szlak Papieski na Mazowszu / <i>Papal Trail in Masovia</i>	42.7	24.0	20.7	12.6
Szlakiem Mazowieckich Skarbów / <i>Trail of Mazovian Treasures</i>	67.3	18.5	10.2	3.9
Average	53.3	20.3	16.3	10.1

Source: author's own work.

Quite popular were also trails of the Mazovian Dukes and the Warsaw Battle. It is worthy of note that these three most visited trails are the projects of the Mazovian Regional Tourist Organization, realized within the framework of the Mazovian Heritage Project. The high recognition and popularity of these trails is probably a result of the extensive and intensive promotion. The remaining trails, whose originators are subjects with smaller financial capacities, were significantly less familiar and not so frequently visited.

Much less familiarity and popularity among the respondents had the trails in Podlasie province. The most frequently visited one was the Royal Oak Woods Trail in Białowieża. Its popularity is probably a result of location in the well-known and often visited Białowieża Forest. The Podlaski Stork Trail was comparatively popular to the Royal Oak Woods, while other trails had a minimal popularity among the respondents (table 2).

Less familiarity and popularity of the trails in Podlasie can be explained in some way by the peripheral position of the province. In the opinion of the author it is not without significance that on the website of the Podlaska Regional Tourist Organization (PROT) people can find information only about the Podlaski Stork Trail. This is not the only negligence on the PROT site. At the beginning of August 2017, the last change in one of the 4 main links titled Tourist Product Catalog is dated on October 2014, and the newest inscription

in the Discover Podlasie link (another of the four main links on the home page) is from November 2016. Therefore the question should be asked: what is the idea of displaying these links...? Another example of negligence in the field of promotion of the analyzed trails may be the fact that despite the two prizes awarded by PROT in the regional stage of the competition for the Best Tourist Product – POT Certificate Fairy Tale Trail of Suwalszczyzna was the least popular among the respondents. It should not surprise though, because on the official website of the trail, in the tab marked “news” there are only 2 items (both from February 2015) and one of them, named Offer of trips and green schools for 2016 is still in preparation.

Table 2. Familiarity and popularity of selected tourist trails in Podlaskie province among the respondents [%]

	I have not heard	I heard something. but I do not know what it is	I know this trail. but I was not there	I visited this trail
Baśniowy Szlak Suwalszczyzny / <i>Fairy Tale Trail of Suwalszczyzna</i>	79.1	13.9	4.8	2.2
Carska Droga na Bagnach Biebrzańskich / <i>Tsar's Road in the Biebrza Marshes</i>	66.9	17.9	8.7	6.5
Kraina Otwartych Okienic / <i>The Land of Open Shutters</i>	72.1	14.6	10.7	2.6
Kresowe Wędrówki po Podlasiu / <i>BorderHiking in the Podlasie Region</i>	76.5	15.3	5.7	2.6
Podlaski Szlak Bociani / <i>Podlaski Stork Trail</i>	49.9	20.3	21.8	8.1
Podlaski Szlak Kulinarny / <i>PodlasieCulinaryTrail</i>	69.5	17.2	10.9	2.4
Podlaski Szlak Tatarski / <i>Podlasie Tatar Trail</i>	54.2	20.7	20.7	4.4
Szlak Dębów Królewskich w Białowieży / <i>Royal Oak Woods Trail in Białowieża</i>	49.7	18.5	15.9	15.9
Szlak Frontu Wschodniego I Wojny Światowej / <i>Trail of the Eastern Front World War I</i>	61.4	18.1	13.9	6.5
Szlak Tradycji Rękodzieła Ludowego Województwa Podlaskiego / <i>Trail of FolkCrafts of Podlaskie Voivodship</i>	73.6	14.8	8.7	2.8
Szlak Walk Partyzanckich / <i>Trail of PartisanFights</i>	64.7	19.6	12.0	3.7
Average	65.3	17.3	12.2	5.2

Source: author's own work.

Of course comment about the promotion of these trails in the web was made with reason. As it is clear from the research conducted (figure 2), the Internet for a significant majority of the respondents was a main source of information on the discussed trails.

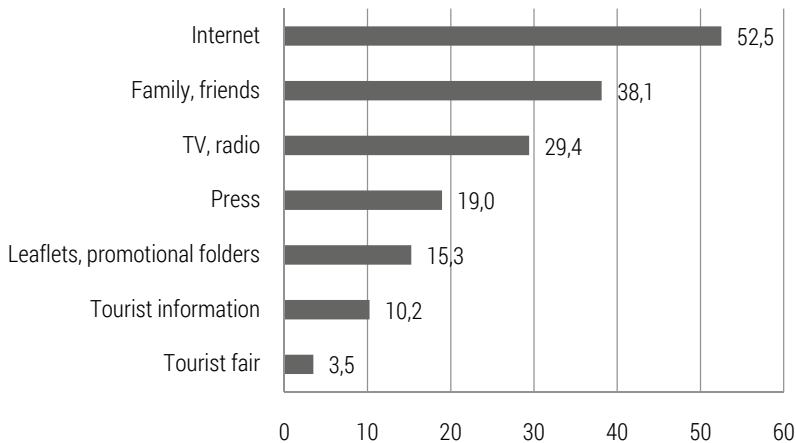


Figure 2. Sources of information on analyzed trails indicated by the respondents [%] (respondents could choose more than one answer)

Source: author's own work.

It can also be assumed that regardless of the source from which the interested groups will obtain the first information on any of the trails, for more details they will turn to the Internet. Taking into account the trails administrators care of websites, with which trails should be promoted, the chance to find the desired information, as well as to visit a particular trail by tourists, is unfortunately very low.

Conclusions

Rural areas are increasingly more attractive for tourists. Natural and cultural values of the country are eagerly discovered and visited by the inhabitants of the cities. Interesting and increasingly used form of presentation of the countryside are thematic trails, thanks to which visitors have the opportunity to get acquainted with the most interesting places or objects of visited area. However, it should be noted that despite the efforts of many organizations active in the development of rural tourism, the familiarity and popularity of this type of tourist trails is low. On average over half of the respondents were not aware of the existence of the analyzed trails in Mazowieckie prov-

ince. In case of Podlasie trails it was 2/3 of the surveyed. These results indicate the necessity to undertake extensive and intensive promotional activities to popularize such attractions in rural areas. It should also be stressed that the most accessible and widely used promotion channel, the Internet, is neglected in many cases with no particular reason. This was proven for example by checking the content of the websites of certain trails and finding the out-of-date information presented in the Internet.

As emphasized by Bogacz-Wojtanowska, Gaweł and Góral (2016), it is very important to manage trails. It should be conducive to strengthening their ties with the social environment (impact of the trail on building the cultural identity of the local community) and their professionalization (the trail treated as a tourist product, enabling the use of tangible and intangible cultural heritage). The basic task of people creating the cultural heritage trail (or entities trying to strengthen such structures) is to develop appropriate management, having a real impact on the operation of objects on the trail – the lack of such a management entity prevents any of the roles described above.

It is also worth taking into account the latest trends in creating and satisfying the needs – experience marketing and experience economy. It is precisely the emotions, sensations, impressions that a modern cultural tourist is looking for, and the heritage trails are perfectly adapted to their creation. The multitude and diversity of trails allow to create attractions that will not compete with each other and will contribute to increasing the tourist attractiveness of the region and the growth of tourism in its area.

It should be noted that the research was only aimed at recognizing the popularity and knowledge of selected trails. It seems necessary to conduct more detailed research on tourist trails in the countryside. It should be included in them elements that may increase interest in such trails, as well as to get suggestions from interested ones, that is tourists.

The contribution of the authors

Jan Zawadka –conception, literature review, analysis and interpretation of data – 50%

Joanna Pietrzak-Zawadka –conception, literature review, analysis and interpretation of data – 50%

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