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DEVELOPMENT OF RURAL TOURISM IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC: CASE STUDY OF THE SOUTH BOHEMIAN REGION

Rozvoj venkovského cestovního ruchu v České republice: Případová studie Jihočeského kraje

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Annotation

Rural tourism is one of the most significant and especially sustainable forms of tourism, which are further divided into other subcategories - e.g., agrotourism, eco-tourism, hiking, cycling, walking, etc. The South Bohemian Region, thanks to its primary and secondary offer, represents a very suitable area for the promotion and development of this form of tourism. The paper proposes to evaluate the position of rural tourism in South Bohemian tourism and by primary and secondary data to offer specific recommendations for support of rural tourism in the region. Specific suggestions include strengthening cooperation between different stakeholders in tourism or improving transport infrastructure. The questionnaire survey revealed that visitors are interested in rural tourism in the region, with interest in horseback riding prevailing in specific rural activities. The main barriers to the development of rural tourism, which have been pursued by semi-structured interviews, include the lack of cooperation between the tourism stakeholders in the region but with the more or less improving conditions.

Key words

survey, South Bohemian Region, structured interviews, rural tourism

Anotace

Venkovský cestovní ruch patří k významným a zejména udržitelným formám cestovního ruchu, který se dále dělí do dalších subkategorií – např. agroturistika, ekoagroturistika, turistika, cykloturistika, pěší turistika atd. Region Jižní Čechy díky své primární a sekundární nabídce představuje velmi vhodný prostor pro podporu a rozvoj této formy cestovního ruchu. Příspěvek si klade za cíl zhodnotit postavení venkovského cestovního ruchu v rámci cestovního ruchu Jižních Čech a na základě primárních i sekundárních dat navrhnout konkrétní doporučení k podpoře venkovského cestovního ruchu v regionu. Mezi konkrétní návrhy patří posílení spolupráce mezi jednotlivými aktéry cestovního ruchu či zkvalitnění dopravní infrastruktury. Z dotazníkového šetření vyplynulo, že návštěvníci se o venkovský cestovní ruch v regionu zajímají, přičemž z konkrétních venkovských aktivit převažuje zájem o hipoturistiku. Mezi hlavní překážky pro rozvoj venkovského cestovního ruchu, které byly vysledovány na základě polostrukturovaných rozhovorů, patří zejm. nedostatečná spolupráce mezi stakeholdery cestovního ruchu v regionu, ale s více či méně se zlepšujícími se podmínkami.

Klíčová slova

dotazníkové šetření, Jihočeský kraj, strukturované rozhovory, venkovský cestovní ruch

JEL classification: O13, P25, Q17, Z32

1. Introduction

While the world develops noticeably, tourism has experienced a vital role of economics in both developed and developing countries. Tourism is generally assumed to be a viable tool of raising the economic activity of the regions, can promote the destination's image, and positively influence the employment in the destination.

Across the rural regions of the developed world, the issues of population decline, economic change, and community regeneration are universal. For over a century, the dominant trends of industrialization and

urbanization have steadily altered the economic and political position of rural society. In the last 50 years, those trends have intensified. Farm incomes have fallen in real terms. Technological changes have associated with declining revenues to diminish employment in rural areas. In response, rural service provision has reduced: shops, schools, churches, services, and transport facilities have all decreased in numbers and underlying vitality. Typically, rural populations have aged and become less in whole. Many small cities and villages now try to maintain their viability. Throughout the world, local and regional government bodies have intervened to address these issues, with various degrees of success.

In recent years, the rural world has seen new challenges. Nature and landscape conservation is increasingly regarded as significant. Historic buildings and "traditional" agricultural societies are receiving more attention. In some more accessible rural regions, there has been an influx of population, of people unhappy about big city living conditions. But for most parts of the countryside, rural decline issues remain essential. Tourism, on the contrary, presents a picture of thriving growth (OECD, 1994b).

Given the expected growth of tourism, there is great optimism for rural tourism. Numerous institutions, organizations and academic researchers have recognized tourism as a potential economic development tool, particularly for rural communities. Rural tourism can be perceived as a development strategy element to improve the social-cultural, economic and environmental well-being of rural areas. Rural tourism has been recognized as a means of such diversification of the rural economy.

Tourism is also a significant part of the shift in the economic base of agricultural societies (Brandth, Haugen, 2011) promoting thus rural vitality and sustainability (Hall et al., 2003). The synergies and interrelationships between tourism, agriculture and the other sectors of economic activity are more significant with many various stakeholders becoming involved.

Rural tourism is not just farm-based tourism. It includes farm-based holidays but also contains other range of activities, attractions such as ecotourism, agrotourism, walking, climbing, hiking, cycling and riding holiday, sport and health tourism, hunting and angling, art, cultural and heritage tourism, and in some areas, ethnic tourism. Rural areas are vital to the European Union as they reach about 90 % of the territory and hold about 60% of the population. Though economic activity leads to concentrate in urban areas, rural regions generate around 17% of the gross value added and provide more than 20 % of the employment (European Commission, 2011).

According to the OECD can be stated that rural areas are currently experiencing meaningful economic, social and cultural changes. They are mostly induced by the international trade liberalization, the development of information and communication technologies and the strengthening of rural development policy. These areas are confronted concurrently with current weaknesses and new challenges and opportunities. It is widely accepted that farming no longer forms the „backbone“ of rural economies and its contribution to the GDP formation and employment in most rural regions is in relative decline (OECD, 2009).

The primary purpose of the research is to evaluate the position of rural tourism in South Bohemian tourism and by primary and secondary data to propose specific recommendations for support of rural tourism in the region.

2. Literature Review

Tourism is integrated from mass and alternative tourism. Mass tourism is characterized by a large number of visitors seeking holidays in popular resort destinations. Alternative tourism is sometimes referred to as "special interest tourism," "responsible tourism" or "sustainable tourism" and it is usually taken to mean alternative forms of tourism which maintain the contact and understanding of residents' way of living and the local natural environment (Smith, Eadington, 1992).

Rural tourism can be an excellent example of alternative tourism due to its positive impacts which we can recognize. Rural tourism is making a valuable contribution to the better financial situation in the destination, can assist job retention in services such as retailing, transport, hospitality and medical care (Irshad, 2010). Rural tourism can contribute towards funding conservation, encouragement to the adoption of new working practices and "the sense of place" of rural tourism can support good relation between residents and visitors.

Rural tourism is not a new phenomenon in Europe. However, in current years the market has become more complex and distinctive, and there has been a growing interest in tourism as a valuable tool for much-needed diversification of the rural economy (European Commission, 2000). As far as the definition of agricultural/rural tourism is concerned, it is difficult to find a clear and universal one due to its multifaceted nature. Lane (1994) and

Reichel et al. (2000) define rural tourism as the tourism that is located in rural areas while Gannon (1994) as a range of activities, services, and facilities produced by farmers and rural people to attract visitors to their territory to create extra income for their businesses.

By analyzing national definitions of rural, the most common criteria that dominate in the debate on rurality are: (OECD, 1994b):

- population criteria (density and size);
- land uses, and its dominance by agriculture and forestry;
- "traditional" social structures and issues of community identity and heritage.

The preferred criterion is a population density of 150 persons per square kilometer. The rural municipality may vary in size, but they are small, and always with a population of fewer than 10 000 citizens.

The only internationally recognized definition of rural areas is based on the OECD methodology (OECD 1994a; 2009). The OECD rural typology is based on the share of the population which is rural, into the following three types of regions:

- predominantly rural regions (more than 50 percent of the population living in rural communities);
- significantly rural regions (15 to 50 percent of the population living in rural communities);
- predominantly urban regions (less than 15 percent of the population living in rural communities).

The European Commission has consistently used the OECD methodology to define rural areas (European Commission, 2007). However, since 2010, the European Commission agreed on a new typology of „predominantly rural,“ „significantly“ and „predominantly urban“ regions, based on a variation of the previously used OECD methodology. The method builds on a simple approach to building clusters of urban grid cells with a minimum population density of 300 inhabitants per km² and a minimum population of 5000. All the cells outside these urban clusters are considered as rural (Eurostat, 2011).

The current development of rural tourism in the Czech Republic is an opportunity for the growth of structurally depressed regions which usually have attractive natural conditions. The Czech Republic keeps to the OECD definition (Moravec, Novotný, Bocher, Mamdy, Chladek, Leuthold, 2007). Rural spaces cover low-density population areas, with open space and small municipalities of a population less than 10 000. Among other characteristics of rural areas in the Czech Republic belong: the use of land is primarily connected with agriculture, forestry and the protection of nature and landscape; people were living in these areas are inclined to traditionalism; the influence of traditional conventions is often dominant.

3. Methodology

The purpose of the paper is:

- to map the situation in rural tourism in general and in the Czech Republic as well;
- to evaluate rural tourism in the frame of the tourism in the South Bohemian Region;
- by primary and secondary data, propose specific recommendations to support rural tourism in the South Bohemian region.

The analysis and data presented in this paper are based on primary and secondary research. For detection of the current state of rural tourism in the Czech Republic were used the data from the following sources: Czech Statistical Office, Ministry for regional development and South Bohemian tourism organization.

At the same time, the primary research (questionnaire survey and semi-structured interview) was used. The questionnaire survey aimed to identify and specify the interest in rural tourism among visitors of the South Bohemian Region (domestic visitors). Before launching the questionnaire, pilot research was applied to a sample of 15 randomly selected respondents to uncover any ambiguities in the structure and content of the survey. Then 100 printed questionnaires were placed in accommodation and gastronomy facilities, tourist information centers and selected cultural monuments. The return rate was 58 %. The following hypotheses were formulated:

H1: Most of the respondents are interested in participating in rural tourism in the South Bohemian Region.

H2: Cycling is the most popular accompanying attraction in rural tourism in the South Bohemian Region.

Semi-structured interviews aimed to find out whether entrepreneurs in the region (accommodation and gastronomy facilities) perceive rural tourism as a vital tool for future development and whether, in their opinion, cooperation between tourism entrepreneurs in the region is sufficient. A total of 100 business units were approached, only 22 agreed to be interviewed. Respondents were selected through the snowball method. Two hypotheses have been established:

H3: Most respondents agree that rural tourism is an appropriate growth tool for the future development of tourism in the South Bohemian region.

H4: Most respondents argue that cooperation between entrepreneurs in the South Bohemian region is not sufficient.

The questionnaire survey and semi-structured interview were carried out between October 1 and November 10, 2018.

4. Results and discussion

Currently, rural tourism is a significant industry in tourism, covering 10 – 20 % of all tourism activities. Usually, small, often family-run, firms are engaged and are estimated to be more than 2.5 million in Europe, and their importance for employment and the overall development of rural areas is not negligible. The rural environment represents around 60 – 70 % of the inhabited area in European conditions. These areas are a natural place for relaxation and various types of recreation especially for visitors from cities and conurbations (Pilný, 2019).

4.1 Rural Tourism in the Czech Republic

Rural tourism is not new to the Czech Republic. Visits to the rural country, especially with farming families in the form of “summer lodging” were an essential part of pre-war tourism in the Czech Republic. After World War II though, the ties between the urban and rural areas were broken, and rural tourism in its pure form disappeared for a long time. The regular use of cottages and country houses began developing, nevertheless without a direct relation to a typical rural environment. After 1989, the rural country went through significant changes. Agricultural production was restructured, and agricultural undertakings were transformed. As a result of these processes, the number of people employed in the industry decreased substantially. To sustain land-based prosperity and permanent population outside urban centers, it was necessary to look for new tools of economic revitalization. Development of rural tourism and its specific product, agrotourism, is therefore significant for those regions that had been affected by the restructuring and transformation most. It not only introduces new businesses but also encourages the creation of employment and subsequently, the stabilization of population in rural areas. Another cause of the development of rural tourism is the worldwide trend of returning to nature and living in its proximity in harmony.

The Czech Republic is well preconditioned for the development of rural tourism by natural, cultural and historical, social and other attractions. Most favorable ratings usually go to the scenic rural landscape, human potential and extensive communicational network that make a good setting for accessibility to even the most remote villages in the country.

Nevertheless, along with the above advantages, there are also many problems impeding rural tourism development in the Czech Republic. These are primarily the deceleration of rural tourism in municipalities by frequently falsely perceived competition between businesses and the local authority. Effective use of marketing in a municipality requires a suitable organizational and institutional, municipal structure where a regional tourist association plays a prime role. Such associations are missing in most municipalities and regions. A fundamental mistake is missing cooperation of individual businesses. While such collaboration is common in countries with developed tourism, our state shows the mutual jealousy of these businesses. They still have not come to realize that joint action in meeting the needs and requirements of tourists is both important and beneficial. Municipalities do not carry out market researches and do not know their visitors. Owing to this lack of knowledge, they are not able to address particular market segments or evaluate individual tourist seasons. Another, no less critical obstacle may be the partly planned development strategy of different regions and municipalities. Also, the development of rural tourism faces insufficient capacity uneven distribution and not always good quality of collective accommodation facilities (Ministry for Regional Development of the Czech Republic, 2006b; Moravec, Novotný, Bocher, Mamdy, Chladek, Leuthold, 2007).

The Czech Republic has about three types of rural areas, each of which is characterized by different trends (Ministry for Regional Development of the Czech Republic, 2006a). This difference results from their distance from urban areas. Rural areas surrounding large cities, which are affected by suburbanization and witness a significant population increase, affecting their development and particularly their investment priorities. The population works mostly in production and services and commutes to the catchment cities; however, most of the lands are used for agriculture. Rural areas characterized by normal development and located at a greater distance from large settlement centers, but with good transport connection and relatively available infrastructure. These areas have a stable population and undergo an economic diversification process. Such easily accessible rural regions have the potential to become the recreational background for urban areas, which has a specific impact on their needs. Peripheral rural areas, which are scarcely populated, isolated from catchment cities and main transport

network. Such regions can be found in the Czech Republic at the level of districts and micro-regions and include, in particular, the border and the mountainous areas in the north-eastern part of the country.

The Rural Development Programme of the Czech Republic for the period from 2007 to 2013 have proceeded from the National Strategic Plan of Rural Development. It was prepared by Council Regulation (EC) No. 1698/2005 and operating guidelines of the above-stated standard.

The existence and the realization of the Rural Development Programme of the Czech Republic assist in achieving the goals set by the National Strategic Rural Development Plan. Among the primary aims belonged (and belongs) the development of the rural areas of the Czech Republic according to the principals of sustainable development, environmental protection and reducing the negative impact of intensive agriculture (Ministry of Agriculture, 2008). The programme further helps to create conditions for the competitiveness of the Czech Republic in essential food commodities. The Programme also support and expand the diversification of economic activities in the countryside, to develop entrepreneurship, creating new jobs, lowering the unemployment rate in the landscape and strengthening the cohesion of the rural population.

The following documents are valid for the development of rural areas in the Czech Republic from 2014 to 2020:

- Rural Development Programme of the Czech Republic for the period 2014-2020;
- Regional Development Strategy in the Czech Republic (2014 - 2020);
- National strategic plan LEADER 2014+.

Vystoupil&kol. (2007) do not primarily define the rural areas, but they deal with the overall functional-spatial structure of the land use, which determines the ratio of recreational areas in the total area village. The appropriate area for the recreation areas is considered to be forest land, meadows, pastures, gardens, orchards and surface water (flowing and standing water). According to the functional-spatial structure of the land, the Czech county can be divided into three groups of rural areas:

- very favorable rural areas for tourism;
- average favorable rural areas for tourism;
- less favorable rural areas for tourism.

The level of rural tourism development in individual regions of the Czech Republic differs. While in some areas the potential is sufficient (South Bohemian Region, Central Bohemian Region, South Moravian Region), others do not have suited potential for development of rural tourism.

4.2 Rural Tourism in the South Bohemian Region

The South Bohemian Region is the second largest in the area in the Czech Republic after the Central Bohemian Region. Tourism in the South Bohemian Region has long been seen as an essential economic development factor. From both foreign and domestic visitors, this region belongs among the most visited (Czech Statistical Office, 2018) and the most attractive regions of the Czech Republic. Its attractiveness is due to its location, natural wealth, numerous cultural and historical monuments and generally suitable conditions for the development of hiking, biking, horseback riding and family-related experiences (JCCR, 2019). The assumptions mentioned above make the region one of the areas with the highest potential for the development of environmentally friendly forms of tourism, incl. rural tourism.

According to the questionnaire survey, H1 was approved (Most respondents are interested in participating in rural tourism in the South Bohemian Region), and H2 exposed (Hipopotourism was not the most popular accompanying activity in rural tourism, not cycling). Furthermore, respondents pointed to the still insufficiently developed tourism transport infrastructure, but on the other hand, they positively evaluated the quality of hiking trails (including signage) and conditions for horseback riding and cycling. In particular, the offer of leisure activities in case of bad weather is limited compared to the foreign competition.

The interviews were evaluated by the coding method in MS Excel (Švaříček, Šedřová, 2007), during which four main categories expressing the answers of most respondents were created (support for rural tourism, non-functioning cooperation, insufficient financial resources, support for regional food). Based on semi-structured interviews, the following information was found:

- The majority of respondents perceive rural tourism as a form that should be developed in the future and which the South Bohemian region should focus on;
- Respondents add that in addition to natural and cultural attractions, the region also offers local/regional food, which is an integral part of the so-called friendly tourism;

- The majority of respondents also highlighted the high seasonality of the region, and it would be appropriate to expand the offer of tourism to eliminate seasonality;
- Respondents also pointed out insufficient financial support for tourism activities, respectively inefficient acquisition and redistribution of funds;
- The majority of respondents identified cooperation as problematic or inoperative. Only a few respondents evaluated the participation neutrally or positively. Respondents commented not only on collaboration among themselves (among entrepreneurs) but also about local government or residents;
- Despite some critical opinions, some respondents acknowledged that there was more or less improved cooperation with the local government.

Semi-structured interview confirmed both H3 and H4.

Specific suggestions and recommendations to support rural tourism in the South Bohemian region include: coordinated cooperation of tourism stakeholders, improving transport infrastructure, more effective gain and redistribution of funds, encouraging residents' interest in tourism and overall regional developments, creating new, innovative products focused on to improve the offer of tourism out of season, to create packages of services for families with children (to join private accommodation with visitors to cultural and historical monuments).

5. Conclusion

Rural tourism as one of the potential forms of rural enterprising is winning more and more popularity in the world. It is not just a fad but, to a certain extent, the expression of the contemporary approach to nature and the environment. Healthy lifestyles are more visible in daily activities. For example, people are more interested in bio-produce of ecological farms. This trend is gradually becoming more distinct in Czech conditions, as well.

It is essential to examine rural tourism as a vehicle that helps with solving some of the problems in rural areas, such as unemployment, retention of the cultural function of landscape or lower migration of rural population.

As a result of all these positive reasons and benefits, rural tourism should further develop. Nevertheless, we cannot expect that it would reach the same dimensions in the Czech Republic as in more developed countries of the European Union. Considering its different historical development as well as various economic, social and legislative conditions, the Czech Republic will probably focus more on other forms of rural tourism than on agrotourism, which is firmly related with farming or other land-based production. Still, we can assume that the number of agritourism farms will increase even in the Czech Republic and their standard will continually improve, with Czech and foreign tourists not only from Europe but from the entire world as their visitors.

The South Bohemian Region have very favorable conditions for rural tourism development. This region's rural areas dispose of natural and culturally historical potential. According to primary and secondary research can recommend:

- For successful enterprising, the cooperation of all stakeholders (agricultural entrepreneurs, accommodation facilities, gastronomy facilities and providers of other associated services, self-government level) involved is inevitable.
- Further, it is necessary to do marketing at the municipality, region and state levels. The creation and subsequent implementation of a marketing concept must be based on the cooperation of business entities, state administration bodies, and local self-government, as well as all other parties involved, including the village and region population.
- Municipalities should not exert their efforts on everything but focus on a particular tourism product only and base the region image on it.
- To improve informedness about enterprising in rural tourism, the Czech Republic should have more various seminars on this topic.
- For future development of rural tourism in the region is essential to improve transport infrastructure.

For this issue to be comprehensively discussed, it is fitting to continue with primary research targeting the residents. The aim would be to find out how the local community perceives the importance of tourism, and subsequently rural tourism, and how it evaluates the region's potential for the future development of rural tourism and whether this form of tourism can have a positive impact on the quality of life of the region's population. It is possible to continue in the questionnaire survey, which would be aimed at foreign visitors, who are also a significant segment of the region's attendance.

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