
Perception of the Significance of Tourism Development Based on the Example of the Residents of Sławno County (Western Pomerania, Poland)

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Abstract:

Purpose: It aimed at determining the factors that influence tourism development, with particular emphasis on the level of territorial awareness of Sławno County residents, the involvement of local government authorities, as well as the relations among stakeholders in the development of tourism.

Design/Methodology/Approach: In autumn 2022 FGI qualitative research was conducted among the representatives of local government authorities, tourist entrepreneurs and leaders of the local community interested in tourism development in the county.

Findings: As the FGI participants stated, the main factor influencing the perception of tourism significance for the socio-economic development of the county was the spatial differentiation of tourist attractions between the coastal zone and the rest of the county. A lot greater opportunities for the development of recreational tourism were said to be located in the coastal zone. What may develop in the part of the county located further than 4-5 km from the Baltic Sea coast is sightseeing tourism and rural tourism. This area has advantages that are interesting for tourists, yet they are currently insufficiently accessible.

Practical Implications: Attention was drawn to the necessity of activating local leaders and of actions aimed at shaping awareness and awakening social and economic activity among the inhabitants. In order to balance the benefits of tourism development for all inhabitants of the county, it was proposed to expand the infrastructure and create new tourist products that would make use of previously poorly accessible tourist attractions in areas located outside the coastal zone.

Originality/Value: Particular attention was paid to the possibilities of tourism development in areas located in the hinterland of the seaside recreation zone and solutions were proposed for its social and economic activation.

Keywords: Tourism potential, territorial awareness, social participation.

JEL codes: O21, O18, O43.

Paper type: Research article.

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1. Introduction

The significance of tourism as a factor of socio-economic development at the local level is widely perceived as a positive phenomenon (Niezgoda, 2011). This is an area that requires the cooperation of various public and private entities, as well as the inhabitants themselves. The issue of cooperation for the sake of tourism development is of particular importance in supra-local terms.

Larger administrative units, such as e.g. counties and provinces may constitute an example of such a situation. Sławno County is located in northern Poland in the central part of the Baltic coast. Taking the physical and geographical division into account, the county is located within two mesoregions: the Słupsk Plain and the Słowiński Coast (Kondracki, 2002). The basic differentiation of natural environment values within these units has a fundamental impact on the possibilities of tourism development (Figure 1).

The north-western part of the county that is adjacent directly to the Baltic coast (the length of the coastline is 44 km) is part of the so-called Seaside Recreation Zone (Szwichtenberg, 2018). During the two summer months of 2019 (July and August) the area of 55 coastal communes belonging to this zone and occupying 2.5% of Poland (7.9 thousand km²) was visited by 1.8 million tourists, which accounted for 21.3% of overnight stays in the entire country (GUS, 2020).

Tourism is considered the most important economic sector in this part of the county. This is a typical phenomenon for many coastal areas in Europe (Budzich-Tabor, Burch, and da Silva 2014; Rosa, 2012). According to A. Szwichtenberg (2006), we deal with a monofunctional area along the Polish coast of the Baltic Sea, where tourism, the hotel industry in particular, is of decisive economic importance.

Figure 1. Research area.



Source: Own elaboration.

The southern and eastern part of the county located inland (the Słupsk Plain) has a completely different character. It is an area used for agriculture, including significant forest complexes and devoid of major tourist attractions (Duda, Duda, and Śledziński, 2014; Parzych, 2014).

Such a large diversification of tourist attractiveness of the area of Sławno County is of fundamental importance for the perception of tourism as a factor of socio-economic development. The residents of the part of the county that is considered less attractive for tourists do not treat tourism as an important source of income. Despite this, the county authorities take actions related to making the existing tourist attractions available and plan investments in tourist infrastructure.

Therefore, this article aims at attempting to answer the following questions:

1/ How does the spatial differentiation of tourist assets affect the assessment of the possibilities of tourism development?

2/ How do the stakeholders assess the current state of cooperation for the growth of the importance of tourism in the county?

3/ What actions should be taken in order to achieve a more sustainable development of tourism in the entire county?

2. Literature Review

Research on the perception of the importance of tourism development in local and regional terms is widely conducted all over the world (Williams *et al.*, 1995; Andreck and Nyuapane, 2011; Marković and Klarić, 2015), including Poland (Niezgoda, 2011; Mika, 2013; Głabiński and Duda, 2017).

One of the commonly held views is that the process of planning tourism development should also take into account local, specific factors that may cause different attitudes towards this phenomenon. In addition, as noted by Kudłacz (2103), it is the local knowledge possessed by institutions and inhabitants of a given area that is most useful. That is why the participation of inhabitants is such an important issue in creating tourism development at the local level.

Spiegel (1971) expressed an original view on this matter many years ago. He stated that citizen participation meant the actions of people who were not part of the formal system of legislative power or administrative hierarchy, but still wanted to influence the effectiveness of programs and people responsible for direct policy and implementation of plans.

This is of particular importance in areas with a low quality of social capital, lack of a sense of solidarity and responsibility, and passivity. These problems concern a large part of the West Pomeranian Voivodeship (Głabiński, 2014; Głabiński and Duda, 2017). The feeling of lack of identification with the surrounding natural and cultural

environment is not conducive to the involvement of local communities in activities for tourism development.

According to Markovič and Klarič (2015), tourism develops primarily in the most touristically attractive areas. Their view is based on the research conducted in Croatia, where a narrow coastal zone has been of intensive tourist use for many years, whereas inland tourist activity is minimal. As the authors state, this leads to excessive development of tourism in areas attractive to tourists. We observe a similar situation in the area under study.

Fernandez-Morales (2003) analysed similar phenomena in the context of seasonality and spatial concentration on the example of southern Spain. He found out that areas with a diversified tourist offer, associated not only with the 3 x S symbol, coped better with the negative effects of seasonality in tourism. In addition, a comprehensive approach to exploiting the region's tourism potential better served its inhabitants.

The phenomenon of overtourism has become a widely discussed problem in recent years (Dodds and Butler, 2019). It also refers to the Polish Baltic coast (Głąbiński, 2023), whose section is the seaside part of Sławno county. It is a very serious threat to the further functioning of tourism in coastal areas. Unfortunately, some residents and tourists are still not fully aware of the significance of this problem.

The most important problems of modern tourism, including the problem of its sustainable development, are concentrated in coastal areas. One of the proposed solutions are actions to increase the level of environmental awareness of tourists and residents of coastal areas (Orams, 1997; Budeanu, 2007; Głąbiński, 2014; 2015; Adamopoulos and Thalassinou, 2020; Pociovalisteanu and Thalassinou, 2009).

The means of local policy in the form of tourism development strategies can constitute a tool for such activities (Szostak, Głąbiński, and Duda, 2020). The conclusions and recommendations contained in these documents should take into account the opinions of all parties interested in the development of tourism in a given area.

3. Research Methodology

Various research approaches of a quantitative and qualitative nature are used among the research methods on social phenomena related to tourism. The Focus Group Interview (FGI) is one of the increasingly applied qualitative research methods. The use of this method in research on tourism has been described in more detail in the literature (Horneman *et al.*, 2002; Möller, Weiermair, and Wintersberger, 2007; Głąbiński, 2015). What is an important issue is that the results obtained during the study are characterised by the so-called typological representativeness and they

enable drawing conclusions regarding both the studied phenomena and their relations.

In connection with the above, in October 2022, two ZWGs were carried out in cooperation with the district office in Sławno and the Darłowska Local Tourist Organization. The first of them was attended by nine, and the second by seven respondents who represented the county authorities, individual communes, tourist entrepreneurs and local leaders operating in the field of tourism.

The interviews lasted approximately 2 hours and were recorded and then transcribed. The following stage of the research was a detailed analysis of the statements in terms of the discussed issues which led to the final effect - the developed recommendations that the county authorities can take into consideration when developing planning documents regarding tourism development.

4. Research Results

4.1 Evaluation of the Advantages of Tourism and Infrastructure and their Use in the County

As the participants of the focus group interviews state, the values for natural tourism related to the sea are rated the highest. This is clearly confirmed by the opinions: *"The seaside district has its own communes that are located by the sea, and some of the communes that are not located there have, perhaps a smaller, share in tourism."* *"No sea, no tourism."* The respondents pointed out that they are primarily seasonal in nature. *"Seasonal value only."*

In addition, these values themselves determine the recreational behaviour of the majority of incoming tourists. *"People who want to lie down, fully aware of being in a crowd, come to the seaside more often."* This opinion confirms the fact that the part of Sławno County that is located directly on the Baltic Sea, is geared towards mass tourism. *"There is something specific of the fact that there are people who are looking for a crowd."*

Other recreational behaviours usually result only from the lack of favourable weather conditions. *"If they come to the seaside, then only when it rains, maybe they will visit our attractions."* This way of perceiving the tourist values of the county by incoming tourists is very well reflected in the following opinion: *"This man will want to lie on the beach, and if it rains, maybe he will look for this attraction with the kids, he will go and see it."*

This opinion clearly defines the way of thinking of the inhabitants, local authorities and local tourist entrepreneurs. Natural values related to the Baltic Sea (possibility of bathing, sunbathing and other forms of recreation by the sea) are the most important factor attracting tourists to the area of the county, and all other

circumstances are secondary and incidental. This statement refers to the quite common view that natural and climatic factors related to the variability of weather conditions make it possible to participate in certain forms of tourism throughout the year (Głąbiński, 2019).

The respondents pointed to the need of extending the tourist season at the seaside. *"We winter swim ourselves, so we also try to show this aspect of the sea in winter."* Creating a health resort in the town of Dąbki constitutes yet another advantage contributing to the year-round attractiveness of a part of the commune of Darłowo. The respondents drew attention to the existence of *"a health resort where the main therapeutic aspects are: treatment of the upper respiratory tract in children and adults."*

Apart from the coastal zone, the respondents drew attention to the natural values enabling active tourism. *"These kayaks are used all year round now."* *"We have active fishing, we have kayaks, we have a canoe marina that connects the area of the city of Sławno and the commune of Sławno."* *"We have the Grabowa River, which is easier than the Wieprza for canoeing."*

Unfortunately, as another FGI participant stated: *"The Grabowa River which is not navigable at the moment. There is a problem with the removal of trees lying in the riverbed. We have a kayaking marina in Grabów, which is not fully used because of it."* This opinion points to the existing but untapped potential for kayaking tourism.

The participants of the FGI pointed out that the areas of natural value are covered by forms of protection. *"In general, we have three Natura 2000 areas in the municipality, four in total if we count the Baltic Sea."* Apart from the general knowledge about the existence of Natura 2000 areas, none of the respondents could say anything about their particular tourist attractiveness.

The elements of tourist infrastructure are closely related to specialist values. *"Our water sports centre in Dąbki is a great base for water sports, i.e. canoeing, windsurfing, kitesurfing."* On the other hand, it was emphasised that the lack of tourism development might also be an element attracting tourists. *"Some sections are very wild and even tourists don't mind that there are no toilets, for example, showers and so on..."*

The values for a narrow circle of stakeholders were also noticed. *"We definitely have some eagle nests... And as far as ornithology is concerned. There are relatively many kites and white-tailed eagles. Those ornithologists who hide there cover themselves with a sheet and sometimes stay there for a few days."*

As the participants of the FGI claim, the cultural values relate primarily to the coastal zone. *"There are more cultural values in this region directly located by the sea than in these southern communes."* Among the historic buildings, a special place

is occupied by the Pomeranian Dukes' Castle in Darłowo. *"The Castle of the Pomeranian Dukes is one of the basic elements of the promotion of our city, which is why we use the name "Royal City of Darłowo" and the entire tourist strategy is built around it."*

Among the facilities built especially for tourists coming to the seaside, the respondents pointed out: *"In the village of Krupy there is the Leonardia amusement park. The park is wooden, in an open, green area."* The park was built by a private investor and aims at serving groups of children and teenagers, as well as families with children.

The respondents also stated that sacral monuments are an important element of cultural heritage. *"In terms of culture, a lot of post-Cistercian monuments."* These objects are connected by a trail. *"It is a Cistercian route, surrounding the commune of Darłowo for 100 km"*. Another cultural trail is the trail of St. Jacob. *"The trail of Saint James also runs through the commune, and it also runs through all our communes."*

Archaeological heritage was also noticed. *"We have the Borkowskie Megaliths, the oldest sight of this type in Poland."* However, as it was pointed out, it is not a tourist attraction yet in its current state. *"There are a few stones or boulders in Borków, and basically everything, and the boulders themselves will not speak to anyone."* Thus, the respondents are undoubtedly aware that this facility is at most a tourist value, but it requires development in order to become the object of greater tourist interest.

Respondents noted that the historical half-timbered buildings in rural areas are a certain asset too. *"We are a county here, which lies in this land with a checkered pattern, i.e. half-timbered houses."* Unfortunately, due to the location of most of the more attractive facilities of this type in the neighbouring district of Słupsk in the province of Pomeranian Voivodeship, these assets are hardly used.

4.2 Evaluation of Cooperation between Tourism Entities in the County

The representatives of particular interest groups (public administration, entrepreneurs, non-governmental organisations) to a large extent perceive the willingness to cooperate of other parties in a different way. Some entrepreneurs believe that since they pay taxes, they do not have to engage in activities for the development of tourism. *"I pay taxes, do you do anything? Okay, so leave me alone, I won't add anything from myself."* According to administration officials, *"NGOs come when they need money for something."*

Entrepreneurs, on the other hand claim that the public administration does not support their activities, to which the representatives of this administration admit themselves. *"We certainly do not promote private entrepreneurs on the office's website."* The representatives of local governments complain about the lack of

involvement of the tourist business. *"The social activity of business is not visible." "Various entrepreneurs don't really want to understand, they don't really see the need, they only see profit here and now."*

On the other hand, some representatives of local governments see the willingness to cooperate on the part of the tourist business. *"This cooperation varies, but we have some good examples and good practices."* Larger companies, especially hotel companies from coastal areas, are the ones which are most involved in activities for the benefit of the region. They see the benefits of cooperation with the local government. This situation also applies to cooperation within the Local Tourist Organisation. *"The bigger the company, the better it sees cooperation."*

According to the respondents representing LOT, this is due to the level of preparation of staff working in large enterprises. *"More specialists are employed in these enterprises and they know what benefits result from cooperation."* This opinion indicates that it is hotel entrepreneurs who want to develop cooperation that contributes to, among others, extension of the tourist season which lasts slightly over two months in the climatic conditions of the Polish Baltic coast.

What is more, the cooperation between local governments is not always assessed positively. *"Not all municipalities are members of LOT."* The discussion showed that inland communes were not interested in cooperation within LOT, because their authorities did not perceive tourism as an important factor in local development. Initially, all municipalities became members of the organisation, but the need to pay the annual membership fee of the same amount for all resulted in resignation from participation. The reason was that coastal communes drew much higher income from tourism than inland communes.

4.3 Major Problems and Directions of Activities Contributing to Tourism Development

The issue of inhabitants' regional identity constitutes one of the basic problems that concern Sławno County as well as the entire Western Pomeranian Voivodeship is (Głabiński and Duda, 2017). *"The region does not have the identity that others have. It is known that only after the war did people come and settled down. On the one hand, it is very attractive that these people are renewing various branches of different cultures."*

The issue of awareness related to the history of Western Pomerania has a fundamental impact on the perception of the entire heritage of the region and treating it as elements of the tourist potential. This is certainly one of the reasons why natural values are of dominant importance in the opinion of the respondents, as the cultural ones are still mentally "foreign" to residents and local authorities.

Another issue was the fundamental difference in the assessment of the importance of the tourism economy between the coastal zone and the inland areas. In the coastal zone, the existing tourist attractions are intensively used, and private investors appreciate the existing potential.

Interest in other forms of tourist activity is closely related to weather conditions. *"The sun doesn't always shine, tourists can't always lie on the beach, and that's when the offer is presented in our centres or attractions are shown."* Other existing tourist attractions in the county are used only when the prevailing unfavourable weather conditions prevent sunbathing and swimming in the sea.

For this reason, there are ideas for investments in facilities that are currently lacking. The discussion proposed the construction of specific thematic objects related to the sea. *"We are planning a fishing gallery."* This idea refers to tourism related to sea fishing, i.e. pescaturism, which has been increasingly popular in Western Europe (Piasecki, Głabiński, and Francour, 2016).

Interestingly, despite the local authorities declaring the importance of values related to King Eric of Pomerania, whose ashes rest in the church in Darłowo, this fact is not sufficiently used in the opinion of entrepreneurs *"No use of King Eric in promotion."* There were also proposals, albeit partial, to organise events. *"A historic open-air performance is necessary."* At this point, it should be noted that Darłowo is the only city on the Polish coast, apart from Gdańsk, which can show connections with important historical figures such as the rulers.

Historical heritage is definitely more important in Darłowo as King Eric lived the last 10 years of his life in Darłowo and is buried here. He was, moreover, the king of three countries: Denmark, Sweden and Norway.

Attention was also paid to a historical event that has untapped potential, i.e. a penitential procession related to the flood caused by the tsunami in 1497 in Darłowo. *"There are plans to expand this event and include it in the calendar of such typically seasonal events."* What was pointed out in the discussion was that the procession is organised each year in Darłowo on September 14 and its date should be changed. *"Perhaps to change the date to involve more people and expand it with additional elements."*

The biggest plans for infrastructure development, however, concern the inland area. They result from the assessment of the current situation. *"There is no infrastructure and no good promotion."* What's more, the respondents stated that completely different forms of tourism dominate in this area. *"The zone located inland is more likely to concentrate agritourism farms that deal with the use of products, our regional ones."* They pointed out that, in connection with the existing values of a specialist nature, sightseeing and active tourism should be developed.

The financial capacity of local governments constitutes the main problem. *“First of all, there is a lack of financial resources.”* Local government officials see the sources of financing investments in tourist infrastructure in successive EU programmes. *“Search for the resources we hope and look forward to from this next perspective.”*

What was also pointed out in the discussion was that the residents’ knowledge about the region of residence is quite low. When local government authorities organised trips around the county for residents, they said: *“The residents of the county travelled around the county and were surprised how many cool things they didn't know about. Many places that are undiscovered, even for the inhabitants of the county.”*

This confirms the thesis about the low level of territorial awareness of the inhabitants of Sławno County. In addition, it indicates that the popularisation and promotion of little-known tourist attractions of this area requires implementing long-term activities in this matter.

5. Final Conclusions

The area of Sławno County has significant recreational values related to the coastal zone. They are quite well accessible to tourist traffic. The tourist attractions of the part of the county located inland beyond the so-called Seaside Recreation Zone are accessible to a small extent, and the level of awareness of their existence, both of residents and tourists, is quite low. These values are of a touring and specialist nature, and their access requires large financial outlays, initially for development and, at a later stage, for the maintenance of this infrastructure.

The hotel base in the coastal zone is highly developed and, according to Szwichtenberg (2018), the number of tourists in the summer season exceeded the natural absorptivity of this area long time ago. On the other hand, the accommodation infrastructure in the inland part of the county is very modest and consists of agritourism farms and one hotel in Sławno.

Therefore, it is necessary to take actions aimed at spatial and temporal deconcentration throughout the year. Among these activities, the following should be indicated:

- providing access to the values and expanding the tourist infrastructure in the inland part of the county, with particular emphasis on canoeing, cycling, fishing and sightseeing tourism,
- preparing staff for the needs of specialist and sightseeing tourism (specialist training),
- creating tourist products affecting the extension of the tourist season, with particular emphasis on the coastal zone, and thus using e.g., the rich cultural and

historical heritage of Darłowo by initiating, organising parties and events, adapting the existing historic buildings to modern requirements (Castle of the Pomeranian Dukes, Church of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Darłowo, St. Gertrude's Chapel),

- using the person of King Eric of Pomerania to promote the cultural values of the region (city games, fairs, other events),
- using the historical fact of the tsunami and flood of 1497. to build an educational-entertainment-museum facility presenting knowledge about natural processes in an attractive way,
- establishing cooperation with the "Checked Land" initiative in the province of Pomerania as another element serving to deconcentrate tourist traffic, since the eastern part of the powiat is rich in half-timbered buildings,
- necessarily developing and providing proper access the megalith in Borków for this type of buildings in France (Carnac), Italy (Nuraghi in Sardinia), Sweden (Ales Stenar) are the object of tourist interest all year round.

Another element of activities for the sustainable development of tourism is the initiative of specialist training for tourism staff and engaging students of tourism faculties from Koszalin and Szczecin for this purpose.

What constitutes an important problem of an organisational and institutional nature is the issue of strengthening and better profiling of the operation of the Darłowo Local Tourist Organisation (DARLOT) or the establishment of a separate LOT for the land part of the county called Wieprza and Grabowa valleys. DARLOT is an organisation that brings together entrepreneurs and municipalities that benefit from tourists coming to the seaside.

The second LOT should have a completely different character and its existence for a long period of time will require financial and organisational support of the local authorities involved in its activities. The existing forms of cooperation between local authorities, entrepreneurs and non-governmental organisations require significant modifications. It is necessary to coordinate activities on the scale of the entire county.

Undoubtedly, undertaking investment activities will depend on the political situation related to the functioning of Poland in the European Union. Without European funds, the implementation of the suggested solutions and activities will be basically impossible.

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