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Assessment of the Tourism Potential of the Weltyń Lake District

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Abstract:

Purpose: The article aims to highlight the tourist potential of the Weltyń Lake District, which stems from its location and its natural and landscape features. The article poses the following research hypothesis: the lack of comprehensive tourist infrastructure limits the region's potential to be fully exploited. In reference to the stated objective and adopted hypothesis, the article poses the following research question: what specific actions should planners and service providers in the tourist industry take to fully exploit the Weltyń Lake District's potential? In attempting to answer this question, the article first refers to a key element: the presentation of proposals for measures to optimally exploit the tourism potential.

Design/Methodology/Approach: To achieve the set goal, a critical analysis of the literature on the subject was conducted, alongside an observational approach supported by arguments for the generalised theses. The methods of induction and deduction, comparison and generalisation, and synthesis were also employed.

Findings: The analysis identified key actions to optimise the use of the potential of the studied area. Based on the analysis, it was shown that the infrastructure must be expanded and modernised, including adapting it to the requirements of contemporary tourism in a way that which does not endanger the nature and landscape, which are the most important elements of the tourism potential of the Weltyń Lake District.

Practical Implications: The proposals presented in the article could inspire planners and tourism operators, drawing attention to the Weltyń Lake District's tourism and sightseeing potential.

Originality/Value: The article presents the results of own desk research. This issue has not been discussed in any previous publications from international forums.

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1. Introduction

The aim of this study is to identify and locate the attributes of the environment that constitute the tourism potential of the Wełtyń Lake District. An analysis of their structure in relation to an attempt to determine the scale of potential utilisation allowed for a critical evaluation to be made.

A thorough characterisation of the resources made it possible to identify those elements that can be directly or indirectly converted into specific forms of tourism. Based on the findings of the fieldwork and the literature reviewed, solutions that could increase the use of the Wełtyń Lake District's potential were proposed.

The study area, whose name is arbitrary, is located in the West Pomeranian Voivodeship, in the Gryfino County. It covers part of the Gryfino and Stare Czarnowo municipalities. It belongs to the physical-geographical mezoregion of the Wełtyń Plain (Kupiec and Adamkiewicz, 2006; Pieńkowski, Gamrat, and Kupiec, 2004) and forms part of the Szczecin Coastal Plain (Kondracki, 1998).

The name Pojezierze Wełtyńskie (Wełtyń Lake District) comes from the name of the largest lake, Lake Wełtyń, and is used by the local population. The area is referred to as such in the Gryfino Municipal Guide (Kozak, Konopnicki, and Anklewicz, 2002) and in the guidebook "Ziemia Szczecińska. Szlaki piesze" (Kucharski, 1988), as well as on the official website of the city and municipality of Gryfino and on the "Rynek Turystyczny" portal.

Alongside the lakes of the Wełtyń Lake District region, Drawsko, Myślibórz and Wałcz, as well as the Choszczno, Ińsko and Szczecin areas, which are highlighted in some studies, Wełtyń Lake DIstrict has been included in the zone of lakes in the West Pomeranian Voivodeship, as set out in the "Tourism Audit of the West Pomeranian Voivodeship" (ZROT, 2005).

2. Literature Review

Before identifying and presenting the tourism potential, it is necessary to verify the concept itself, which is the subject of research for many authors (Ijatuyi, Yessoufou, and Patrick, 2025; Lolaxon, 2024; Achmad, Abdillah, and Amani, 2023; Ancuţa and Jucu, 2023; Gryshchenko, Babenko, Bilovodska, Voronkova, Ponomarenko, and Shatskaya, 2022).

Hajar, Priadi, and Saputra (2022), Hoang, Dang and Van Rompaey (2022), Paramitha (2022), Rezvani, Nickravesh, Astaneh, and Kazemi (2022), Wessels and Douglas (2022). Murniati, Maski, Noor, and Ekawaty (2021), Puška, Pamucar, Stojanović, Cavallaro, Kaklauskas, and Mardani (2021), Soeswoyo, Jeneetica, Dewi, Dewantara, and Asparini (2021).

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For the purposes of this study, the meaning of tourism and sightseeing potential is understood as the possibilities of engaging in tourism (from the perspective of both supply and demand), stemming from individual circumstances. Tourism potential is therefore defined as all elements of the geographical environment and human behaviour that can be utilised for tourism purposes (Kaczmarek, Stasiak, and Włodarczyk, 2002).

Its components are structural and functional resources, which create conditions for the development of tourism. Structural resources, sometimes referred to as tourist attractiveness (Bieloborodova, 2023; Gu, Hunt, Jia, and Niu, 2022; Roman, Abraham, Niedziółka, Szczucka, Smutka, and Prus, 2022), consist of attractions and tourist development, as well as transport accessibility.

Functional resources are created by the tourism development determinants specific to the area, which include ecological, socio-demographic, psychological, cultural, technological, economic and political factors. Due to the research methods used in tourism and the intangible nature of functional resources, this study focuses on the characteristics of structural resources, which are more tangible to tourists.

The aforementioned tourism and sightseeing potential indicates an attempt to gather knowledge about the Wełtyń Lake District that could be useful for developing tourism and sightseeing.

3. Results – Tourism Potential of the Weltyń Lake District

3.1 Research Area

The Wełtyń Lake District is characterised by a concentration of water bodies. The exact reservoirs included in the area are not specified, but according to various sources, there are between 10 (Kucharski, 1988; Kozak, Konopnicki, and Anklewicz, 2002; UMiG Gryfino, 2002), or 12 (Urbański, 2002) and 83 (ZROT, 2005).

The present study will focus on two municipalities, Gryfino (excluding the Lower Oder Valley belt) and Stare Czarnowo (south of the Bukowa Forest edge), due to factors including the accumulation of landscape resources, infrastructure and tourist traffic, residents' attachment to the lake district name, and the central location of Lake Wełtyń and the village from which it takes its name.

The Wełtyń Lake District area should therefore be defined as being within the boundaries of Gryfino County in the West Pomeranian Voivodeship, bounded in the west by the Lower Oder Valley Landscape Park, in the east by the Bielice municipality (Pyrzyce County, Pyrzyce Basin), in the north by the Puszcza Bukowa Szczecin Landscape Park (Bukowa Forest), and in the south by the Banie municipality.

The area's tourism potential is constituted by natural attractiveness, history and tradition, combined with the cultural offer and tourist infrastructure.

3.2 Natural Resources

The local reservoirs are characterised by their suitability for various types of waterbased recreation. They are used by anglers, as well as by those who enjoy canoeing, windsurfing, sailing and swimming. The Weltyń Lake District forms part of the Baltic climatic district of Szczecin, which has a distinct character (Kozak, Konopnicki, and Anklewicz, 2002). The local climate is one of the mildest and warmest in Poland, with a fairly high number of sunny days and little precipitation (Borówka, 2002). The post-glacial landscape makes the area extremely attractive.

The area around Lake Wełtyń is particularly outstanding in this respect, characterised by a varied shoreline and three forested islands. Numerous hills provide natural lookout points. The Tywa valley is morphologically interesting too, it is a river with slopes up to 20 metres high (Korzeń, 2007) and has the characteristics of a mountain stream, as well as the highest water gradient in the Szczecin area (Urbański, 2002).

The study area contains a large number of monument-sized erratic boulders, which have been used for gravestones and memorial stones. The variety and abundance of flora and fauna in the lake district also indicate the area's potential for exploratory tourism. The Łąki Storczykowe nature reserve (Orchid Meadows) on the eastern side of Lake Weltyń is particularly notable.

The Wełtyń Lake District borders the Szczecin Landscape Park Puszcza Bukowa (Bukowa Forest) to the north. Lake Glinno forms the link between the two areas, and in the vicinity there is a nature reserve called Źródliskowa Buczyna (Spring Beech), as well as a dendrological garden dating from 1823 which is famous for its giant sequoia.

The Wełtyń Lake District is encompassed by the Ecological Network of Protected Areas (ESOCh) and the NATURA 2000 network, which includes the Wełtyń Lakes Special Protection Area (SPA) and the Wzgórza Bukowe (Beech Hills) Special Area of Conservation (SAC). Rural manor parks dating back to the 19th and 20th centuries in Wysoka Gryfińska, Drzenin, Wirówek and Chlebowo combine nature and cultural heritage.

3.3 Cultural Resources

The Cistercians, who settled in nearby Kołbacz and took over the local villages in the 13th century, played a major role in the development of the cultural landscape of the Weltyń Lake District – almost every village has an old, mostly granite church and many historic buildings. Prominent among these is the 15th century church in

Wełtyń (Rymar, 2005), which is famous for one of the most valuable late medieval wall paintings in Western Pomerania, only discovered in 1961.

Churches are usually surrounded by historic cemeteries. Also one of Poland's 13th German Soldiers' Cemetery has been opened in Glinna. In the Wełtyń Lake District, the rural layout of some villages has been recognised as a monument. Wełtyń, which is a large, polygonal village with a triangular market square, stands out among other villages.

According to some sources, Wełtyń was once a town and had a market and even a hospital at that time (between 1642 and 1898). Wełtyń celebrated its 800th anniversary a few years ago. There is no shortage of historical places and archaeological sites in the study area.

In the 1990s, excavations were carried out on a hill near Wełtyń, which, among other things, is considered to be one of the richest in Pomerania or Western Pomerania due to the vast amount of material. The landscape of the described area used to be enriched by a number of mills, of which the best preserved is the mill in Osuch, which is now used as an accommodation base.

The most important manifestation of the traditional folk culture of the inhabitants of the Wełtyń Lake District, who come from many regions of Poland, mainly from the borderlands, is the music they perform. In the 1960s and 1970s women's singing ensembles were established, which still perform to this day, e.g. "Wełtynianka".

The "Wacław Suzynowicz Dulcimer Band from Wełtyń", founded in 1975, is unique in Poland – the first band in Western Pomerania, and perhaps even in the country, to have three musicians playing this rare instrument. To this day, the dulcimer is played by various folk ensembles, which are among the best in their category in West Pomerania: "Bartkowiacy", "Wełtynianka" and "Borzymianka".

The district of Gryfino, including Wełtyń Lake District, has stood out on the cultural map of Poland as a "dulcimer basin" since the mid 1970s. Legends and stories are also an interesting manifestation of the customs and beliefs of the former inhabitants. The knowledge of legends from the times of the Griffins' rule may encourage tourists to set off with the legend as a guide to selected corners of the lake district.

3.4 Tourism and Leisure Facilities

Despite the multitude of reservoirs, the number of bathing sites is far from sufficient. The official and only guarded bathing site in Gryfino municipality is located on Lake Steklno, but the beaches in Binowo and Glinna in Stare Czarnowo municipality are also popular.

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The accommodation base of the Wełtyń Lake District is made up of so-called second homes (weekend cottages), resorts, camping grounds, campsites, agrotourism farms, flats and private accommodation. Their standard varies greatly. Most are seasonal facilities. In addition to the services provided on their premises, there are no purely catering facilities.

They consist of, among others: "Binowo Park Garden Rooms" flats next to the golf course, the "Bukowina" Scout Centre in Binowo, the Glinna camping lodges next to the Bukowa Forest, the "Raczki" agrotourism farm, "Domek pod Żurawiem" in Wełtyń, specialising in special events, the "Wirówek" farmhouse, the "Stary Młyn nad Tywą" agrotourism farm and fishery in Osuch, the "Raj" agrotourism farm in Włodkowice, the "Gościniec Ptasi Dwór" holiday centre in Steklno.

Construction and renovation work is currently underway on the premises of the former "Pod Muszlami" and PSS Społem/"Szałamaja" centres on Dzicza Island on Lake Wełtyń.

The offer is enriched by marinas and water equipment rentals or services for horse riding e.g., Stajnia Wełtyń or Hańczówka in Wełtyń. The accommodation base of the Wełtyń Lake District is also made up of several hundred second homes created, among others, by privatising holiday resorts established here since the 1960s.

These include "Rusałka" and "Knieja" on the western shore of Lake Wełtyń, cottages on the other shores and islands, on Lakes Wirów, Steklno and Binowo. They are mainly owned by residents of Szczecin, Gryfino and Wrocław. They are used for holidays with family and friends and occasionally also for rent. In terms of numbers, they outnumber organised accommodation made available to tourists.

The accessibility of the Wełtyń Lake District for road transport is based on a system of roads of varying technical condition. The national road 31 (through Gryfino) and provincial roads 119 and 120 run through the area and its environs. Access from Szczecin and Germany is facilitated by the A6 motorway and border crossings, as well as the S3 motorway, which is part of the E65 system connecting Scandinavia with southern Europe. There are also many sections of county and municipal roads. The Lake District has a network of passable roads and paths, suitable for walking and cycling.

4. Discussion

The high species diversity of animate nature is conducive to the development of cognitive, nature, agro- and ecotourism. Local rental companies should include nature observation equipment in their range of products. The natural potential, which is evidenced by the fact that part of the lake district is included in the NATURA 2000 special bird protection area "Jeziora Wełtyńskie" (Wełtyń Lakes), could be better exploited through the construction of platforms and

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roofed viewing towers equipped with telescopes and educational boards.

The proposed location for such a facility is the eastern side of Lake Wełtyń, near the "Łąki Storczykowe" (Orchid Meadows) nature reserve, which should be accessed from the Wełtyń Plain trail. The construction of a tower north of Wełtyń, between Lakes Krzywienko, Brudzno and Gardzienko, would perhaps spread the tourist traffic to areas of lesser natural value.

Furthermore, an observation platform could be erected between Gardno and Drzenin, on Lake Gardno, which is an important habitat and breeding ground for amphibians, reptiles and birds, among others. Similarly, several hills could be developed as lookout points, e.g., Wirowskie Hill, Chmielnik Hill near Borzym and the hill opposite Wełtyń.

A private museum is an idea to attract tourists. The facility, harmoniously integrated into the lakeside landscape, could serve as a museum, an information centre and a workplace for local guides. It should be equipped with a room and equipment for seminars, workshops and conferences, and educational activities should be aimed primarily at children and young people. Field information points could also be located in community centres, libraries, accommodation facilities or grocery shops, even if some of them only distribute advertising material.

More campfire sites with shelters, benches and litter bins would be useful in the area. Glades are developed in this way in Wirów and in the Wełtyń forest near "Rusalka". More information boards should be provided with maps of the area showing the course of the hiking trails. There is a distinct lack of landscaping, especially slips for launching boats, kayaks or SUP boards, toilets and containers for selective waste collection on the western shore of Lake Wełtyń, which has been used as a 'wild beach' and camping area for many years.

Due to its proximity to Gryfino, among other things, there is also a definite need for a beach and bathing area at Lake Wełtyń, which has functioned successfully here for many years. Such infrastructure is also suggested at the lakes in other recreation development zones (Binowo, Glinna, Wirów, Borzym, Sobieradz, Steklno, Chwarstnica).

In order to fully exploit the potential of the lakes, greater availability of swimming equipment is also needed. 0An attraction would also be a rope park, which could be created in the north of the lake district, near Glinna or Binowo, where the stand of trees is sufficiently permanent. It would also be worthwhile to enrich the areas adjacent to some playgrounds and sports fields with outdoor gyms, which are popular with adult users in such locations.

Another idea for increasing the share of active tourism in the overall tourist

traffic in the Wełtyń Lake District is the construction of health trails, which can be laid out and equipped with gym equipment and waste bins in the forests between Wirów and Wełtyń, Bartkowo and Gajki (yellow hiking trail and green bicycle trail) or between Mielenko and Steklno (yellow, bicycle trail).

The green hiking trail "Leśny" in the section between Wełtyń and Żelisławiec, where it runs along a dirt road, could become a nature education trail presenting, for example, different species of trees whose seedlings would have information boards.

A good example of such a path is the Apple Tree Avenue in Wirów, created as part of the tree adoption programme. It would be useful to include bicycles, rollerblades or Nordic walking poles in the rental range. Bike paths and trails In order to encourage tourists to visit the more popular parts of the Weltyń Lake District, an open-air shooting range is proposed near Lake Sobieradz, offering, for example, archery lessons.

Revitalising the Wełtyń Lake District as a tourist attraction would be facilitated by adapting historic buildings for inns, agri-tourism or guest houses, such as the 19th century manor house in the village of Dołgie, which is currently for sale along with 2 ha of historic parkland. It is located approx. 300 m from Kamień Lake, and an amendment to the local zoning plan has established residential and service uses for it, including tourism. The revitalisation process should adapt the site for people with disabilities.

5. Conclusions

The development of the tourist infrastructure in the Wełtyń Lake District is gradual and is geared towards tourists who like to be active. In contrast, services provided through accommodation facilities are still geared more towards passive leisure tourism, which is related to the degree of diversity on offer, but also to the material situation in which the accommodation facilities are located. It is important to note, however, that despite the small investments, the Wełtyń Lake District is visited by quite significant groups of tourists.

The proposals for the development of tourist facilities and offers represent only one possible concept, and their implementation depends on a whole range of factors. However, they can serve as inspiration for planners and tourist operators.

Our own research indicates a lack of adequate promotion of the Weltyń Lake District as a region and, above all, sources of information about it. The local accommodation base is hardly presented on popular platforms for finding and booking accommodation, such as Booking.com, Airbnb, Trivago, Nocowanie.pl or Meteor-Turystyka.pl.

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Thanks to the range of resources, both general leisure and sightseeing tourism have good opportunities for development here. Favourable conditions also exist for active tourism and agrotourism. The Weltyń Lake District should be viewed as a whole, where different types of tourism do not have to be mutually exclusive. The various forms of tourism activities carried out here confirm that a combination of several functions is not only possible but also desirable for visitors.

However, it would be advisable to diversify the offer. This is because it is necessary to bear in mind the preferences of tourists who have so far been interested mainly in passive holiday recreation. Tourism development planning should take into account the demand for this type of service in a relatively small area.

The characteristics of the potential elements seem to prove that due to, among other things, its resources and location, the described area is a convenient recreational area and an interesting, distinctive territorial unit.

However, it is certainly not a place suitable for mass tourism and is an attraction primarily for those seeking peace and quiet in the nearby agglomeration of Szczecin. At the same time, it should be remembered that all its beauty lies precisely in this seclusion, which is lacking in the immediate vicinity of the constantly expanding cities.

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