

SUSTAINABILITY ASPECT OF TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN THE EAST AUKŠTAITIJA REGION, IN LITHUANIA

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Abstract. *The author of the paper discusses the tourism development from the sustainability aspect in the East Aukštaitija region, in Lithuania. The scientific problem - the tourism development trends have not been sufficiently studied at regional level in Lithuania and tourism in the regions developed without a clear long-term development strategy and consistent implementation of the programme. The aim of the research is to explore tourism development by sustainability aspect in the East Aukštaitija region, in Lithuania. Many scientists have analysed trends in sustainable tourism development. However, tourism development conditions at region level have not been researched, only sporadic research studies have been performed. The main problems of tourism development in the aspect of sustainability in the East Aukštaitija region are as follows: seasonality, lack of investment in sustainable tourism, lack of knowledge about the essence of sustainable tourism and the principles of local politics, undeveloped infrastructure. The most important activities for the development of sustainable tourism are the responsible tourist approach to the use of natural resources; investment in sustainable tourism development; tourism development, planning and control; legalization of sustainable tourism development in national strategic documents.*

Keywords: *tourism, tourism development, tourism region, sustainability.*

Introduction

Due to the influence of economic, social and political globalization processes, tourism has become one of the leading industries in many countries. According to the data of the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) (2017) and the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) (2017), currently tourism is the third largest economic sector in the world and on a global scale creates 10% of gross domestic product (GDP). The tourism sector employs 1 in 10 people worldwide, revenue from tourism services exports in 2017 accounted for 30% of global services exports and 7% of global exports of goods and services. In 2017, total revenue from the tourism sector in Lithuania amounted to EUR 2.03 billion or 4.9 percent of GDP, tourism services accounted for 4% of total exports of goods and services (Report of the Lithuanian Hotel and Restaurant Association (RLHRA), 2018). It is forecasted that the number of international

tourists could increase up to 1.8 billion by 2030. Over the last decade, tourism has become an important economic sector in Lithuania - since 2009 each year inbound tourism revenue steadily has increased. Tourism is an economic activity that primarily promotes economic growth, but in order to maintain competitiveness in the international tourism market, it is necessary to seek sustainable tourism development, which is an assumption for creating a competitive tourism system (National Tourism Development Programme 2014-2020) [NTDP 2014-2020]. Promoting the development of tourism business, based on the concept of sustainable tourism development, there is a need to plan and manage the available tourism resources accordingly.

Many scientists have analysed trends in sustainable tourism development: Hunter (1997) & Hassan (2000) analysed the main principles of sustainable development; Hall (2004) & Woodside (2009) analysed the concept of sustainable tourism; Niedziolka (2012) analysed the guidelines for sustainable tourism development and management practices; Jovovic (2013) analysed sustainable development in the context of tourism and others. In Lithuania these issues were analysed by Čiegis & Zeleniūtė (2008) and Armaitienė & Zacharčenko (2012) and others. Povilanskas (2010) explored the principles and conditions for sustainable development of resorts. However, tourism development conditions at region level have not been researched, only sporadic research studies have been performed.

The object of the research is tourism development from the sustainability aspect in the East Aukštaitija region, in Lithuania.

The aim of the research is to explore tourism development from the sustainability aspect in the East Aukštaitija region, in Lithuania.

Tasks of the research are:

1. To explore tourism development from the sustainability aspect in the regions from the theoretical aspect.
2. To analyse tourism development from the sustainability aspect in the East Aukštaitija region, in Lithuania.

Research methods. The author of the paper applied the analysis of scientific literature, quantitative research – a survey, document analysis and questionnaire data generalization. Taking into account the specifics of research, this method is considered to be an important data collection method. Data sources: RLHRA 2018, NTDP 2014-2020 and others documents. Tourism development from the sustainability aspect was discussed and the research results were presented.

The survey sample. The survey involved 5 tourism experts, specialists, responsible for tourism development in tourism information centres and tourism and business information centres in the five districts of the East Aukštaitija region, Lithuania (representatives of the Anykščiai and Molėtai tourism and business information centers and the Ignalina, Utena, Zarasai tourism information centres).

The paper introduces a discussion in the form of discourse on sustainable development in the East Aukštaitija region, in Lithuania.

Scientific discussion on the topic of sustainable tourism development in the regions

Sustainable development is a fundamental principle of future development, began to develop in 1980 and is widely recognized in recent years. The basics of the concept of sustainable development were formulated in 1980 in the World Defence Strategy, published on behalf of three international institutions: the International Union of Nature Conservation (IUCN), the United Nations Environment Programmes (UNEP) and the World Wildlife Fund (WWF). The document declares that the rational use of natural resources is an integral part not only of public development but also of environmental protection. The World Commission on Environment and Development's report "Our Common Future, 1987" (Report of the World..., 1987) formulated the concept of sustainable development.

Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (Report of the World..., 1987). In 2003, this term was legalized in the National Strategy for Sustainable Development (NSSD) approved by the Lithuanian Government. The European Union (EU) has also paid much attention to the development of sustainable tourism. The EU Sustainable Tourism Development Policy is implemented through the European Commission's Communications "Basic orientations for sustainability of European tourism" (2003), "A renewed EU Tourism Policy: towards a stronger partnership for European tourism" (2006) and "Agenda for a sustainable and competitive European Tourism" (2007).

According to the definition of the UN WTO, „sustainable tourism development meets the needs of today's tourists and host regions while protecting and enhancing their future potential. Such development should lead to the management of all resources that will meet the economic, social and aesthetic needs while preserving cultural integrity, essential ecological processes and biodiversity and life support systems”. Sustainable tourism must maintain a high level of tourist satisfaction, provide tourists with meaningful awareness of sustainability issues, and promote sustainable tourism practices among them.

Woodside (2009) argues that the concept of sustainable tourism encompasses three approaches: tourism dynamics, sustainability and overall dependency. The dynamics of tourism influence the economy of the region, the physical health of the region's inhabitants and the regional environment (environmental protection). Sustainability is the use of natural resources without

harm or destruction ecological balance. General dependence is emerging between tourism and the economy or natural resources.

According to Hall (2004), sustainable tourism is often compared to natural or ecotourism. Analysing sustainable tourism activities, it is important to understand what types of tourism it covers. According to Niedziolka (2012), sustainable tourism development guidelines and management practices apply to all forms of tourism, including mass tourism and various other tourist segments.

Armaitienė & Zacharčenko (2012) argues that sustainable tourism development is a tourism development and planning concept that encourages the development of tourism while preserving the natural environment of nature and culture.

Sustainability requires the harmonization of environmental, social and economic needs. Three key principles for sustainable tourism development are distinguished: 1) Economic sustainability; 2) Social sustainability. 3) Sustainability of the environment. These three factors in many cases depend on each other and can be both mutually reinforcing and competing areas of activity.

Each country or region needs to set its own priorities and goals in developing tourism. On a global scale, tourism, which is one of the largest service sectors, continues to develop intensively, resulting in both positive and negative impacts on a variety of macro environments: economic, social and natural. Creating tourism destination attractiveness requires adapting the concept of sustainable tourism development, which can be used to plan tourism activities in different regions. Sustainable tourism development is an assumption for a competitive tourism system.

In 2005 the UN WTO and the UN Environment Programme have set an agenda for twelve sustainable tourism goals that include economic viability, local prosperity, quality of work, social equality, a visitor's satisfaction, local control, community prosperity, cultural richness, physical integrity, biodiversity, resource conservation and environmental purity (Action for more sustainable European tourism, 2007). The overall challenge for the tourism sector is to remain competitive, while at the same time covering sustainability and recognizing that long-term competitiveness depends on coherence.

Global practice shows that the principles of sustainable tourism need to be clearly defined and consistently and logically integrated into the country's legal and regulatory framework, including legislation related to tourism development, to ensure the development of sustainable tourism. Strategic documents such as the NSSD (2011) and the LTDP 2014-2020 should be mentioned. The goal of sustainable development in Lithuania is set as follows: to reach the current EU average in terms of economic and social efficiency by 2020, do not exceed EU allowable standards in accordance with environmental pollution targets, and comply with the requirements of international conventions limiting environmental

pollution and contribution to global climate change (NSSD, 2011). It is noticeable that the LTDP 2014-2020 does not include indicators to measure the impact of tourism on the environment, cultural heritage and local communities. Such tourism indicators are very important in helping to identify problem areas that may arise in tourism destinations.

The trends and priorities of the world are changing, so it is now especially important that the tourism sector would be competitive and sustainable. By integrating sustainability factors into their activities, the participants of the tourism sector will save its competitive advantage.

According to the Guidelines for sustainable tourism development of the Republic of Lithuania (2017), the seeking results of sustainable tourism development are as follows:

- annual rise of Lithuania's position in the competitiveness and tourism competitiveness index by three places from the previous year's level;
- growth of tourism in the regions, with the result that at least 30% foreign tourists to visit the regions by 2025;
- increase in the number of internationally certified tourism service providers up to 25 entities until 2025;
- annual growth of tourism-generated GDP by 3% on average every year from last year's level, increasing the GDP generated by tourism to 5% by 2020, achieving the current average of the European Union;
- annual increase in export of tourism services by 15% every year from last year's level.

One of the priorities for the promotion of sustainable tourism development is to consolidate the development of regional tourism as one of the strategic goals of Lithuanian tourism development. Sustainable tourism ensures fair economic return to the local community, the protection of cultural and natural heritage.

In summary, sustainable tourism as a priority branch in Lithuania is quite new and therefore there are various problems. The solution of tourism problems can only be solved by balanced state organization (government, the Ministry of the Economy and Innovation, policy makers) and the Tourism department, which will implement and coordinate action plans to promote the improvement of tourism business in the country. In order to meet the needs of sustainable tourism and to popularize its ideas, a number of special programmes have been developed, with their exclusive labelling forms allowed. Certification is one of the key and widely applied tools to ensure the integration of sustainable development principles into the tourism sector and the competitiveness of the sector. There are well-known international certification programmes in the world to ensure consumer confidence. More and more consumers from Western Europe, the Nordic countries and distant markets are choosing certified services and agree to

pay higher prices for them. Currently widely recognized international certificates are “Green Key” and “Blue Flag”.

Analysis of tourism development from the sustainability aspect in East Aukštaitija region

The survey involved 5 tourism experts, specialists, responsible for tourism development in tourism information centers and tourism and business information centres in five districts of the East Aukštaitija region, Lithuania. The tourism experts were asked to evaluate sustainable development performance indicators for the East Aukštaitija region from the lowest (1 point) to the highest score (10 points). The distribution of the results of the received answers is presented in Fig. 1, where the graphical representation of the current situation (blue line) and trends (red line) in sustainable development is presented.

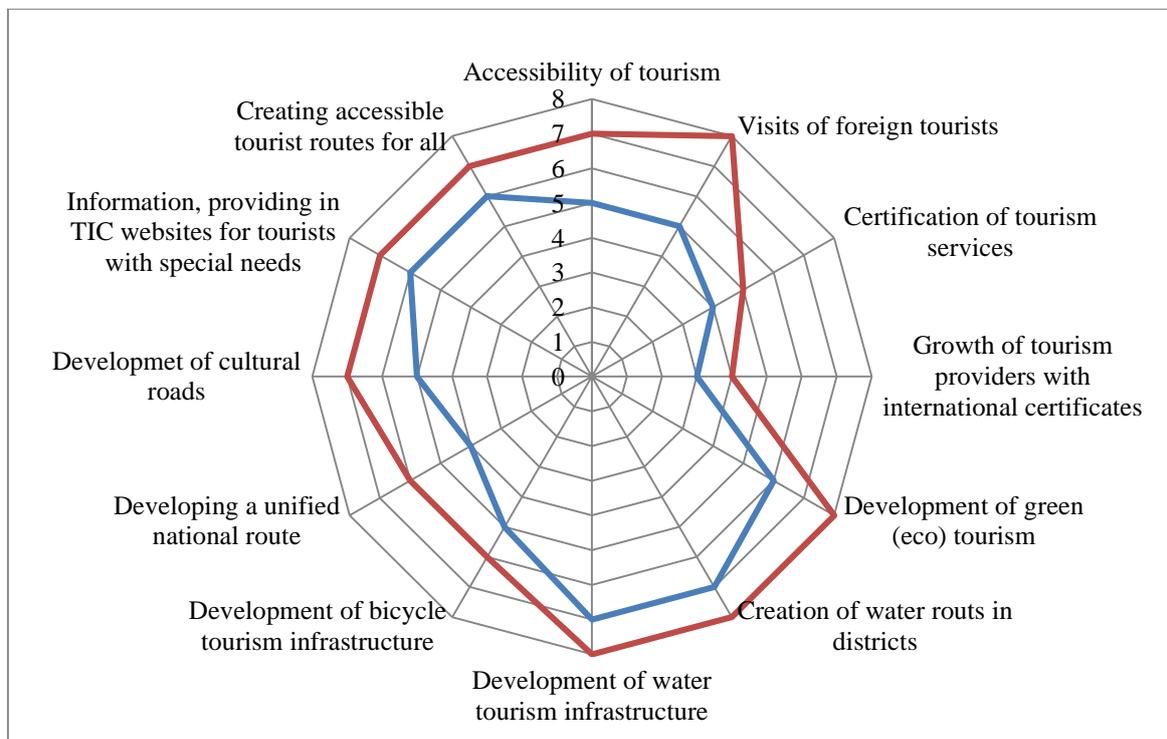


Figure 1 Evaluation of the current situation and trends in sustainable development (created by the author based on the research)

None of the sustainable development results indicator was rated at 9 or 10 by the tourism experts. The fact that these indicators were evaluated by the tourism experts at a rather low score indicated that sustainable tourism in the East Aukštaitija region was developed only in protected areas. The region is distinguished by the abundance of state-protected areas - the protected area covers

an area of 147345.73 ha (20.46% of the region's territory). Looking at the assessment of the current situation and trends in the sustainable development results indicators for individual districts, it should be noted that one of the five districts of the East Aukštaitija region evaluated the development of water routes at 10 points. It should be noted that there are 1002 lakes in the region of East Aukštaitija (The feasibility Study. Targeted investment in tourism development in East Aukštaitija Region, 2013).

Assessing the current situation of sustainable development, indicators such as the development of water routes in a district (average score of 7 points) and the development of public and private infrastructure for water tourism and the development of regional routes (average score 7 points) were evaluated. A little lower score was given to green (ecotourism) (average score of 6 points); official TIC sites on a separate column provide information for tourists with special needs (average score of 6 points) and routes accessible to all (including people with disabilities (average score of 6 points)).

Even lower scores indicate sustainable development with indicators such as accessibility of tourism sites (accessibility to disabled people) (average score of 5 points); foreign tourists visits (average score of 5 points); development of bicycle tourism infrastructure (average of 5 points), creation regional routes and the development of cultural roads (average of 5 points).

The tourism experts gave the lowest scores to the increase in the number of tourism service providers having international certificates (average score of 3 points); certification of tourism services (average score of 4 points) and development of a unified national route linking different regions of Lithuania and enabling tourists to plan longer-term trips (average score of 4 points). It should be noted that there are no institutions actively distributing certificates in Lithuania. In Lithuania, the Global Sustainable Tourism Council's certification is not used for hotels, tour operators and tourist destinations. Certification is particularly important in the health tourism sector. Unfortunately, the natural health factors (clay, water, sludge, etc.) currently used in Lithuania are not certified. Certification would not only encourage responsible use of natural resources and the reduction of environmental impact, but would also contribute to a more successful image of Lithuania as a modern and international country that complies with international tourism standards. Therefore, in order to increase the visibility of Lithuania as a tourism destination, as well as its competitiveness, it is necessary to actively promote the certification of sustainable tourism services. The Sustainable Tourism Guidelines (2017) recommend sustainable tourism promotion activities.

When evaluating the average trends of sustainable development result indicators, indicators such as visits of foreign tourists (average score of 8 points) were rated at the highest score; development of green (ecological) tourism

(average score of 8 points); creating water routes in the area (average score of 8 points); development of public and private infrastructure for water tourism (average score of 8 points); creating regional routes (average score of 8 points). All assumptions for the development of eco-tourism are developed in Aukštaitija National Park and other state regional parks of the East Aukštaitija tourism region (Utena Region Development plan for 2014-2020).

Low scores were given to sustainable development performance trend indicators such as bicycle tourism infrastructure development, regional routes (average score of 6 points) and the development of a unified national route linking different regions of Lithuania and enabling tourists to plan longer-term trips (average score 6 points).

Evaluating the average trends of sustainable development performance indicators, the lowest score was measured by indicators such as increase in the number of tourism service providers with international certifications (average score of 4 points) and the certification of tourism services (average score of 5 points).

When analysing the problems of sustainable tourism development in the region of East Aukštaitija, the most important ones are highlighted: seasonality, insufficient investment in sustainable tourism, lack of information and lack of knowledge about the essence and principles of sustainable tourism in local policies.

The tourism experts, asked to mark the three most important activities affecting the development of sustainable tourism, identified the importance of investments in sustainable tourism development, the importance of tourism development, planning and control, and the importance of a responsible tourist approach to the use of natural resources.

Conclusions

1. Sustainable tourism development in the regions is an assumption for a competitive tourism system. In the long term, competitiveness depends on sustainability. Sustainable regional development is part of a global sustainable development, and sustainable development is one of the components of regional success.
2. The tourism experts gave the lowest scores to the increase in the number of tourism service providers having international certificates; certification of tourism services and development of a unified national route linking different regions of Lithuania and enabling tourists to plan longer-term trips. Analysing tourism development from the sustainability aspect in the East Aukštaitija region, in Lithuania, the most important problems are highlighted: seasonality, insufficient investment in sustainable tourism, lack

of information and lack of knowledge about the essence and principles of sustainable tourism in local policies. The tourism experts noted three most important activities affecting the sustainable development of tourism: the importance of investing in sustainable tourism development, the importance of tourism development, planning and control, and the importance of a responsible tourist approach to the use of natural resources.

Summary

The author of the paper discusses the tourism development from the sustainability aspect in the East Aukštaitija region, in Lithuania. The scientific problem - the tourism development trends have not been studied at region level in Lithuania and tourism in regions developed without a clear long-term development strategy and consistent implementation of the programme. In the scientific discussion, the author analyses aspects of sustainable tourism development in the regions: many scientists have analysed trends in sustainable tourism development. However, tourism development conditions at region level have not been researched, only sporadic research studies have been performed. Tourism development from the sustainability aspect is discussed; the results of the research (analysis of scientific literature and a questionnaire, analysis of strategic documents) are performed. It is widely acknowledged that tourism can significantly affect the local environment. Tourism can make positive and negative impacts on the regions and countries. The positive impact of tourism can contribute to the sustainable development of the region. However, despite its high positive impact, tourism still has many negative consequences for the natural, economic and cultural environment of the host region and the world. The goal of Sustainable Tourism Development is to minimize negative impacts and maximize positive impacts. In summary, sustainable tourism as a priority branch in Lithuania is quite new and therefore there are various problems. The main problems of tourism development in the aspect of sustainability in the East Aukštaitija region are as follows: seasonality, lack of investment in sustainable tourism, lack of knowledge about the essence of sustainable tourism and the principles of local politics, undeveloped infrastructure. The most important activities for the development of sustainable tourism are the responsible tourist approach to the use of natural resources; investment in sustainable tourism development; tourism development, planning and control; legalization of sustainable tourism development in national strategic documents.

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