

ANALYSIS OF CONSUMERS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF THE TOURISM SECTOR IN THE LITHUANIA REGIONS

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Abstract. *In the article, the author analyzes the attitude of consumers towards the sustainable development of the tourism sector in the Lithuania regions. The purpose of the research is to analyze the attitude of consumers towards the sustainable development of the tourism sector in the Lithuania regions. During the research, a quantitative survey (questionnaire survey) was conducted. Data collection methods - analysis of scientific literature and sources, document analysis, questionnaire survey. The article analyzes the consumers' attitude towards the sustainable development of the tourism sector from a theoretical point of view and presents the results of the conducted research. It is concluded that the respondents consider the following factors of sustainable development of the tourism sector to be the most important: development of ecological tourism; accessibility of tourism; creation of tourist routes accessible to all; certification of tourism services; development of the common national route and development of bicycle tourism infrastructure, etc. According to the respondents, the following problems of sustainable development of the tourism sector are usually encountered: economic problem: insufficient investments in the development of sustainable tourism; lack of knowledge about the essence and principles of sustainable tourism in local politics; underdeveloped tourism sector infrastructure, etc.*

Keywords: *consumers' attitudes, Lithuania regions, sustainable development, tourism sector.*

Introduction

According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization and the World Travel and Tourism Council, tourism is one of the largest economic sectors in the world (United Nation World Tourism Organization [UN WTO]; World Travel and Tourism Council [WTTC]). The development of the tourism sector, in accordance with the principles of sustainable development and efficient use of recreational resources, can be a driver of regional economy and business development in them, as it attracts investments, creates jobs and increases income, and stimulates demand growth (Štreimikienė, Švagždienė, Jasinskas, & Simanavičius, 2020). The sustainable development of the tourism sector encourages individual regions to compete with each other in order to attract more tourists, while at the same time increasing the competitive advantages of the tourism regions, and the competitiveness of the regions is inseparable from the growth and sustainable development of the tourism sector.

Relevance of the topic. The relevance of the sustainable development of the tourism sector and the sustainable development of regions is reflected in strategic documents of different levels: global level, European Union level, national level and sectoral level. March 25, 2021 the adopted EU sustainable tourism strategy draws attention to the impact of the tourism sector, promoting a balanced regional structure, positive impact on regional development and preservation of biodiversity, social welfare and economic security of local communities, etc. [EU Sustainable Tourism Strategy (EU STS), 2021]. In 2014, supporting the position of the European Union on issues of sustainable development goals among the named priority areas - poverty, inequality, health, food safety, education, gender equality, water and sanitation, sustainable energy, sustainable consumption and production, biodiversity, soil poverty, sea and ocean issues (EU STS), 2021). Taking into account the situation in Lithuania, one of the main priorities of Lithuania's sustainable development strategy is moderate, sustainable economic development and regional economic development. Attention to the principles of sustainable development and sustainable regional development is reflected in the *National Progress Plan 2021-2030* [National Progress Plan 2021-2030].

The scientific problem of this research is formulated as a question - what is the consumer's attitude towards the sustainable development of the tourism sector in the regions of Lithuania?

The attitude of consumers/tourists towards the sustainable development of the tourism sector and their behavior was analyzed by Lithuanian and foreign researchers: Chhetri and Kumar (2022); Juška and Kinderis (2022); Li (2022); Siems, Seuring, and Schilling (2022); Ingaldi and Dziuba (2021); Han (2021); Wang, Kumar, Ruan, Saad, Garza Reyes, Kumar (2021); Çavuşoğlu, Demirag, Jusuf, and Gunardi (2020); Kuchinka, Balazs, Dan Gavriletea, and Djokic (2018), et al. The attitude of consumers/tourists to the sustainable development of the tourism sector and their behavior among young people was analyzed by the following Lithuanian and foreign researchers: Dragolea, Butnaru, Kot, Zamfir, Nuță, Nuță, Cristea and Ștefănică (2023); Alexanderova (2022); Šaparnienė, Mejerė, Raišutienė, Juknevičienė and Rupulevičienė (2022); Puiu, Velea, Udristioiu and Gallo (2022), Rennon, Peysson (2022); Zalega (2019); etc. The attitude of the local population towards the sustainable development of the tourism sector was analyzed by Akinci and Öksüz (2019) and other researchers. The attitude of tourists coming from other countries to the sustainable development of the tourism sector was analyzed by Mazhenova, Choi; Chung (2016); Stacchini, Guizzardi and Costa (2022); and other scientists.

The object of the research is the attitude of consumers towards the sustainable development of the tourism sector in the Lithuania regions.

The purpose of the research is to analyze the attitude of consumers towards the sustainable development of the tourism sector in the Lithuania regions.

Research tasks:

1. To carry out a theoretical analysis of consumers' attitude towards the sustainable development of the tourism sector in the regions.

2. Conduct a survey of consumers' attitudes towards the sustainable development of the tourism sector in the Lithuania regions.

Methodology. During the research, a quantitative survey (questionnaire survey) was conducted. Data collection methods - analysis of scientific literature and sources (performed in order to reveal the users' attitude towards the harmonious development of the tourism sector in the regions from a theoretical aspect), document analysis, questionnaire survey. The latest scientific literature and the latest scientific articles in Lithuanian and foreign languages were analyzed.

The survey sample. The questionnaire survey was conducted in 2023, in the months of May - June, surveying users/tourists, distributing the survey link on the portal www.apklausa.lt and social networks, among traveling people. 423 respondents were interviewed. The research is considered exploratory.

Theoretical analysis of the sustainable development of the tourism sector in the regions

In order to achieve the competitiveness of the tourism region and when planning tourism activities in the regions, the concept of sustainable tourism development is applicable - an essential principle of future development, reaching back to 1980 and widely recognized recently. The foundations of the concept of sustainable development were formulated in 1980 in the document "World Conservation Strategy" published on behalf of three international institutions - the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) and the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), which declares that the rational management of natural resources use is an integral part not only of social development, but also of environmental protection [World Conservation Strategy (WCS), 1980]. The report of the World Commission on Environment and Development "Our common future" (1987) formulated the concept of sustainable development: "sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present society without reducing the ability of future generations to meet their own" [Our common future OCF], 1987). Agenda 21 adopted by the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 envisages sustainable development as the main and long-term strategy for the development of society, and the Sustainable Tourism Charter was approved at the Sustainable Tourism Conference held in Lanzarote in 1995, which the first principle indicates that tourism development must be based on sustainability criteria: long-term ecology, economic viability approach, as well as ethical and social justice towards local communities must be observed

[Agenda 21, 1992; Sustainable tourism charter (STC), 1995]. The European Union has paid and continues to pay a lot of attention to the sustainable development of tourism.

The concept of sustainable tourism, which includes the principles of sustainable development, has gained a lot of interest in recent years. In addition to economic objectives, sustainable tourism includes the assessment of environmental and social dimensions, focusing on reducing, correcting or improving negative environmental, social and economic. Finally, sustainable tourism contributes to the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) agenda (UNWTO and UNDP, 2017).

In promoting the sustainable development of the tourism sector, a very important role belongs to each tourism user (potential tourist), who chooses one or another form of tourism and thus shapes the supply of this sector (Dagiliūtė, & Bartkutė, 2014). It is important how each tourism user perceives and practically expresses his choices and actions, which affect the implementation of the sustainable development of the tourism sector. In order to understand the behavior of sustainable consumption, it is important to pay attention to the consumer himself and aspects related to his behavior (Juška, & Kinderis, 2022). User behavior is the various emotional, mental and behavioral reactions of a person, processes that lead to the decision to purchase or not purchase a service or product. User behavior is shaped by personal, psychological and social phenomena (Radu, 2022). Making the decision to use harmoniously depends on the desire and self-determination of the users themselves. Often, to act or consume more sustainably means paying more money or giving something up (Saari, Damberg, Frömbling, & Ringle, 2021). Sustainable consumption behavior depends on the attitude towards sustainability, the degree of intention to contribute to sustainable consumption and the desire to act, regardless of variable factors (Juška, & Kinderis, 2022). Conscious, environmentally friendly behavior when a tourist/consumer consumes products or participates in the service provision process is perceived as sustainable consumption in the tourism business (Xiang et al., 2021).

The sustainable use of tourism services requires making decisions related to limiting comfort, the obligation to protect cultural and natural heritage, and respect the local community. The sustainable use of tourism services is the behavior of a tourist, which usually manifests it through a person's internal motives, when purchasing and using a tourism product or service (Juška, & Kinderis, 2022). Motives are mostly related to being closer to nature and protecting it. In the tourism business, the concept of sustainable consumption behavior helps to reduce the negative social, environmental, cultural and economic impact by respecting and supporting the local community and its decisions (Zgolli, & Zaiem, 2018).

Consumers' expectations are changing, they show greater consumer awareness and concern about environmental issues, and they are now considered a key factor in consumer decision-making. Environmentally friendly consumers play an essential role in achieving the goals of sustainable development and contribute to the transition of companies to a sustainable business model.

Methodology of the survey

Research methodology and instrument. The quantitative method chosen for the research is a questionnaire survey. A questionnaire of 16 questions was drawn up. In the introductory part of the questionnaire, the purpose of the study was presented, the purpose for which the collected data will be used and anonymity was ensured. Formulated questions were prepared taking into account the data of the analysis of the scientific literature. When compiling the questionnaire, groups of questions were used: a group of special questions (questions aimed at finding out how consumers understand the concept of "sustainable development", whether they themselves are responsible consumers; consumers' attitude towards the sustainable development of the tourism sector in the regions; respondents' opinion on the problems of sustainable development and the most important activities for the sustainable development of the tourism sector and a group of demographic questions (demographic and social characteristics of the respondents).

Research ethics. When distributing the questionnaires, ethical principles were followed (privacy, confidentiality, voluntary decision-making, etc.). Each respondent was free to choose whether to participate in the research. The data is used to summarize, preserving the anonymity of the respondents.

Results of survey of consumer attitudes towards the sustainable development of the tourism sector in the Lithuania regions

Demographic and social characteristics of the respondents. Every third respondent (34.1 %) belongs to the 19-30 age group, every second respondent (22 %) belongs to the age group 31-40, respectively every second respondent (19.5 % each) belongs to the 41-50 and 51-60 age groups and 4.9 % respondents belong to the age group of 61 - 65 years. 80.5 % answered the questionnaire questions - women and 19.5 percent men. Almost half of the respondents (46.3 %) live in the city, 29.3 % live in a big city, 12.2 % live in the countryside and 9.8 % respondents live in a small town. Almost half of the respondents (41.5 %) have obtained a higher university education, 26.8 % - higher non-university education, 29.3 % respondents have secondary education, 2.4 % respondents have secondary - professional education. Almost half of the respondents who answered the questions in the questionnaire (48.8 %) are employees, 31.7 % respondents

work and study, 7.3 % respondents work as officials, 4.9 % respondents are students, 2.4 % respondents are housewife. Most of the respondents (43.9%) live in the Eastern Aukštaitija region (the region includes the Anykščiai, Ignalina, Molėtai, Utena and Zarasai districts); 26.8 % respondents live in Vilnius region (the region includes the municipalities of Vilnius city, Vilnius district, Širvintos and Trakai districts); 9.8 % live in the Pajūris region (the region includes the municipalities of Klaipėda city, Klaipėda district, Palanga city, Kretinga, Neringa and Šilutė districts), respectively 7.3 % each live in the Southern Dzūkija region (the region includes the municipalities of Druskininkai, Lazdijai and Varėna districts) and in foreign countries, respectively 2.4 % respondents lives in the Nemunas Žemupis region (the region includes the municipalities of Kaunas city, Kaunas District, Birštonas city, Kaišiadorys, Jurbarkas, Šakiai and Prienai Districts) and Žemaitija Uplands region (the region includes the municipalities of Telšiai and Plungė districts). When respondents were asked how much money they spend on travel on average per year, the answers received were: four out of ten respondents (39 %) spend 501 - 1000 EUR, every third respondent (31.7 %) spends 1501 EUR and more, every second respondent (22 %) allocates up to EUR 5,000, 7.3 % allocates 1001 - 1500 EUR.

For the majority of respondents, the concept of "sustainable development" is understandable (48.8 %) or partially understood (41.4 %). They do not understand or do not know these concepts - respectively 4.9 % each. respondents. When asked to explain how the respondents understand the term "sustainable development", the respondents state that "sustainable development is economic, social and ecological development that meets the needs of the present without jeopardizing the ability of future generations to meet their own needs", "such development that meets the needs of the present", without endangering future generations, conserves natural resources", "development aimed at ensuring people's well-being", "sustainable development, including sustainability, conservation", "expansion without harming anyone (future generations, nature)", "sustainability, harmonious processes of society for well-being", "coherent, balanced regional or community development in both economic and social areas", "harmony everywhere," "this is the activity that is created and grows without harming or overshadowing the environment and those around it, providing benefits", "ecologically sustainable, does not harm the environment, uses renewable sources", "not only economically efficient, but also uses natural resources responsibly, is socially responsible, protects heritage", "is the development of a certain area combining economic, social and environmental aspects", etc. Such answers of the respondents demonstrate their knowledge of sustainable development issues.

According to the respondents, the term "sustainable development" includes responsible consumption (26.5 %), sustainability (46.3 %), saving/economy (18.5 %), resilience (7.9 %) and other dimensions (0.8 %).

Respondents were asked to identify the five most important factors for the sustainable development of the tourism sector. The answers of the respondents are presented in Figure 1, where the factors of sustainable development of the tourism sector are arranged from the factors that received the most answers from the respondents to the factors that received the least answers.

Respondents consider the following factors of sustainable development of the tourism sector to be the most important (see Figure 1): 1) development of ecological tourism (18.5 %); 2) accessibility of tourism (for people with disabilities) (14.4 %); 3) creation of tourist routes accessible to all (13.3 %); 4) certification of tourism services and development of a common national route (respectively 9.7 % each); 5) development of cycling tourism infrastructure (8.7 %) and etc. (see Figure 1).

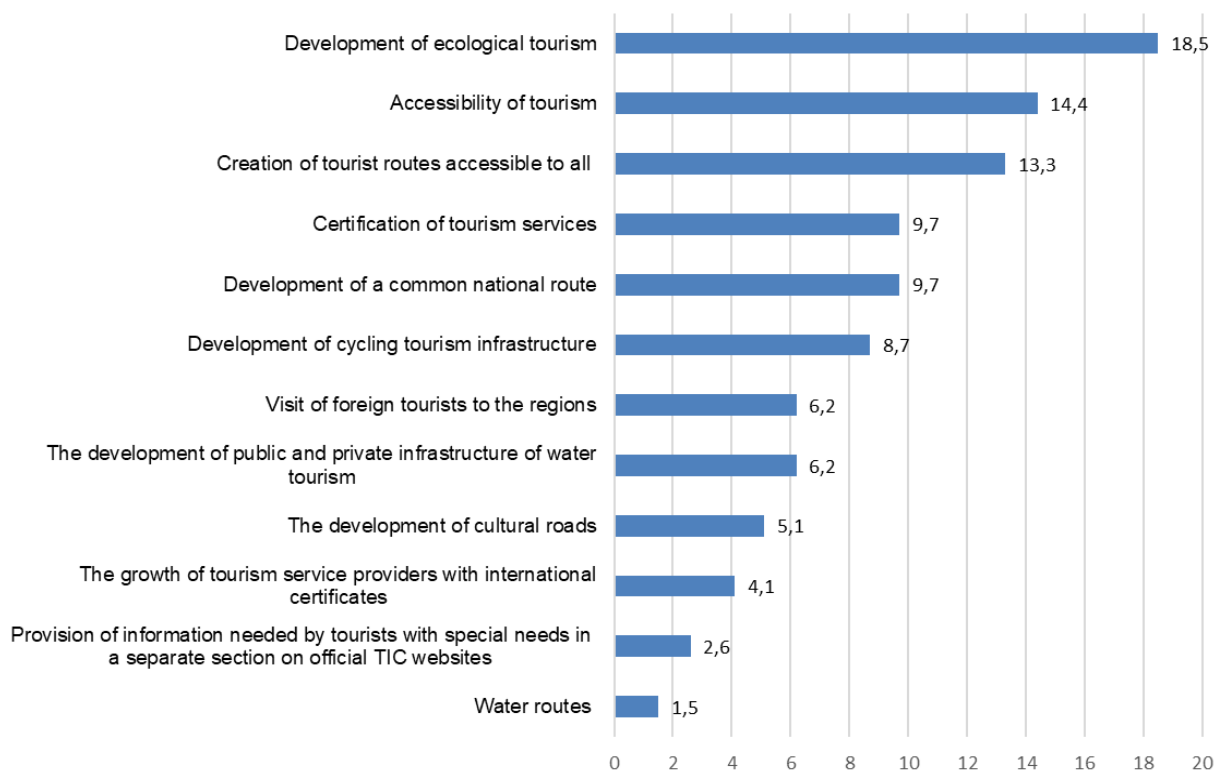


Figure 1 Evaluation of the most important factors of sustainable development of the tourism sector from the point of view of consumers, percent (compiled by the author based on research data)

The respondents were asked to identify the three most important problems that are usually encountered in the sustainable development of the tourism sector. According to the respondents, the following problems of sustainable development of the tourism sector are usually encountered (see Table 1): 1) economic problem: insufficient investments in the development of sustainable tourism (21.8 %); 2) lack of knowledge about the essence and principles of sustainable tourism in local

politics (20.3 %); 3) undeveloped tourism sector infrastructure (18 %) and etc. (see Table 1).

Table 1 The most important problems of sustainable development of the tourism sector, percent (compiled by the author based on research data)

No.	Problems of sustainable development of the tourism sector	Respondents, percent
1.	Economic problem: insufficient investments in the development of sustainable tourism	21,8
2.	Lack of knowledge about the essence and principles of sustainable tourism in local politics	20,3
3.	Undeveloped tourism sector infrastructure	18,0
4.	Seasonality	15,8
5.	Lack of information	12,8
6.	Excessive use of natural tourism resources	8,3
7.	Unqualified tourism specialists	3,0

Respondents were asked to single out the three most important activities that are most important for the sustainable development of the tourism sector. According to the respondents, the three most important activities for the sustainable development of the tourism sector are the following: 1) investments in the sustainable development of tourism (30.4 %); 2) responsible attitude of the tourists themselves towards the use of natural resources (23.2 %); 3) legitimizing the development of sustainable tourism in the country's strategic documents (17 %) and etc. (see Table 2).

Table 2 Distribution of the most important activities for the harmonious development of the tourism sector, percent (compiled by the author based on research data)

No.	The most important activities for the harmonious development of the tourism sector	Respondents, percent
1.	Investments in the sustainable development of tourism	30.4
2.	Responsible attitude of the tourists themselves towards the use of natural resources	23.2
3.	Legitimizing the development of sustainable tourism in the country's strategic documents	17.0
4.	Development, planning and control of the tourism sector	15.2
5.	Increasing income of local residents	8.0
6.	Certification of tourism services	5.4
7.	Another option (recognition of the tourism sector as a priority branch of the econom)	0.8

After asking respondents whether they are interested in sustainability, conserving, responsible consumption, it turned out that the vast majority of

respondents are interested in sustainability, conserving and responsible consumption (70.7 %), 29.3 % heard about it. Less than half of the respondents (34.1 %) consume responsibly, while the majority (even 65.9 %) try to be responsible consumers as much as possible. When the respondents were asked whether they use responsibly while traveling, the majority of respondents (58.5 %) answered that they always try to use responsibly, including during travel. Less than half of the respondents (36.6 %) do not always use responsibly, but at least try to do so. 2.4 % respondents use responsibly in everyday life, but do not do so while traveling.

Conclusions

1. In promoting the sustainable development of the tourism sector, a very important role belongs to each tourism user (potential tourist) who chooses one or another form of tourism and thus shapes the supply of this sector. In order to understand the behavior of sustainable consumption, it is important to pay attention to the consumer himself and the aspects related to his behavior.
2. Respondents consider the following factors of sustainable development of the tourism sector to be the most important: development of ecological tourism, accessibility of tourism and development of tourist routes accessible to all, certification of tourism services and development of a common national route and development of bicycle tourism infrastructure, etc. According to the respondents, the three main following problems of sustainable development of the tourism sector are usually encountered: economic problems: insufficient investments in the development of sustainable tourism; lack of knowledge about the essence and principles of sustainable tourism in local politics; underdeveloped tourism sector infrastructure, and etc. According to the respondents, the three most important activities for the sustainable development of the tourism sector are: investments in the sustainable development of tourism; responsible attitude of the tourists themselves towards the use of natural resources; legalization of sustainable tourism development in the country's strategic documents.

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