

## COMPETITIVENESS OF POLISH RURAL TOURISM PRODUCTS ON THE TOURISM SERVICES MARKET

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**Abstract:** *The objective of this study was to proximate the concept of competitiveness, discuss the criteria used in the inventory of Polish rural tourism products and evaluate their competitive advantages in the Polish and foreign markets.*

**Keywords:** *competitiveness, competitive advantage, rural tourism, rural tourism product.*

**JEL Classification:** *M11, M31*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The interest of the most affluent social groups in relaxation, entertainment and recreation in rural areas dates back to the Middle Ages. Already then, it was common to have a summer residence, which provided a variety of leisure time activities including hunting, fishing, horse riding, picking mushrooms etc. Rural tourism in the modern sense of the term, however, differs significantly from its original forms. Modern forms of rural tourism began to develop from the early 70s of the twentieth century. Relaxation in the country has become a common leisure activity, popular with all social groups, (though more with educated people), and the degree of penetration of rural areas by tourists has grown considerably. The increased popularity of rural tourism has been followed by the extended range of tourist business activities undertaken in rural areas. Consequently, rural tourism has become an evolving and developing field utilizing new technologies<sup>1</sup>.

The multiplicity of definitions of rural tourism still sparks controversy. The simple approach will define rural tourism as tourism which takes place in rural areas. However, a considerable number of experts see this definition as inadequate, mainly due to multi-dimensionality and complexity of this phenomenon. Initially, rural tourism was identified with agritourism, a recreation on a farm. Currently, its scope is much more diverse. Rural tourism is no longer just a holiday on a farm, its products and experiences include educational visits to wildlife habitats and nature reserves, ecotourism, hiking, climbing, cycling, horse riding, sports and health tourism, hunting, fishing, educational and ethnic tourism and sightseeing. From a marketing point of view, the most accurate definition of rural tourism is the one that refers to market expectations. Currently, the image of rural character, which a tourist is looking for, is associated with a green, low-impact, environmentally friendly product, clean air and good food, contact with people and authentic natural and cultural heritage. According to Majewski and Lane rural tourism is:

- located in rural areas;
- diverse, reflecting the complexity of the rural environment, economy, history and location;
- functionally rural – drawing on the characteristic rural assets, such as small scale businesses, open space, contact with nature and cultural heritage, traditional communities and their customs;
- rural in scale - both in with reference to buildings and villages - and therefore usually operating on a small scale;
- traditional in its character, growing slowly and to a limited extend relying on local families<sup>2</sup>.

Due to the wealth of natural and cultural assets, Polish tourism market is an excellent ground for the construction of tourism products. Their multiplicity and diversity contribute to an increasing competition. In addition, the processes of integration and globalization in the world economy significantly boost competition and generate completely new (in terms of quality) pillars of competitiveness. The essence of competition is the ability to supply an offer which, in the eyes of potential customers, is better and more beneficial option compared to rival offers. In today's market, there are three basic types of competitive advantages: quality, price and information<sup>3</sup>. While the basic criteria of competitiveness include the attractiveness of the product, the diversity of an offer, high quality service, good service organization and safety of tourists<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>1</sup>Cf. S. Philip, C. Hunter, K. Blackstock, A typology for defining agritourism. *Tourism Management*, Vol. 31, 2010, pp. 754-748; C.G. Arroyo, C. Barbieri, S.R. Rich: Defining agritourism: A comparative study of stakeholders in Missouri and North Carolina. *Tourism Management*, Vol. 37, 2013, pp. 39-47.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. J. Majewski, B. Lane: Turystyka wiejska i rozwój lokalny. [Rural Tourism and Local Development]. Fundacja Fundusz Współpracy, Poznań 2001, p. 5 and Ragus M.: Ekspertyza w zakresie potencjału produktów turystyki wiejskiej w Polsce i ich konkurencyjność na regionalnym, krajowym i zagranicznym rynku usług turystycznych.[Expertise on the Potential of Rural Tourism Products in Poland and their Competitiveness on Regional, National and International Tourism Market]. PART S.A., Warszawa November 2012, p. 8.

<sup>3</sup> T. Skalska: Konkurencyjność cenowa polskich produktów turystycznych na wybranych rynkach emisyjnych relacji do ofert głównych konkurentów. [Price Competitiveness of Polish Tourism Products in Selected Markets in Relation to the Offers of Major Competitors. Methodological Studies] Założenia metodologiczne badań. Polska Organizacja Turystyczna, Warszawa 2010, p. 7.

<sup>4</sup> K. Pieńkos: Konkurencyjność polskiego produktu turystycznego. [The Competitiveness of Polish Tourism Product] Wyższa Szkoła Ekonomiczna w Warszawie, Warszawa 2005, pp. 242-243.

## 2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

The objective of this study is to present the essence of competitiveness, discuss the criteria used for rural tourism products inventory in Poland and to assess their competitive advantages in the domestic and foreign markets.

The article uses secondary data from “The Expertise on the Potential of Rural Tourism Products in Poland and their Competitiveness on Regional, National and International Tourism Market” prepared in 2012 by the Polish Agency for Tourism Development (PART SA) and the relevant literature.

In order to conduct an inventory of rural tourism products PART SA referred to all regional tourism organizations asking them to identify 5-7 rural tourism products provided in each of the 16 provinces in Poland. The empirical research used questionnaires and telephone interviews. After consulting farm advisory centers and evaluating rural tourism products, PART SA selected 42 products. They were assessed with regard to the following criteria:

- 1) character of the offer (product of rural tourism must be a composition of services, attractions and infrastructure, including at least accommodation, food and attractions of the “rural character”). The indicators included: the idea/distinctive quality, roots in local heritage/rural character, complexity and high quality;
- 2) sustainable development (rural tourism product must be developed in accordance with the principles of sustainable development, that is in harmony with the natural environment, to the benefit of cultural heritage and development of local entrepreneurship). The indicators included: embedding in the local community, the use of ecological solutions, promotion and conservation of natural and cultural heritage and compliance with the local development policy;
- 3) functional model (the rural tourism product can be an individual business or a network of several entities and their activities should involve the local community). The indicators included: active cooperation in developing and expanding the offer, membership of professional organizations and locally recruited staff;
- 4) promotion and information distribution (promotional activities with emphasis on new technologies and innovative solutions, diversification of sales channels, consistency with the area marketing policy);
- 5) certificates and awards;
- 6) accessibility, especially for tourists from the so-called Calypso Group (availability in terms of finance, infrastructure and information, particularly important is the accessibility for Calypso Group including senior tourists, people with disabilities and families with children);
- 7) financing of development (the use of co-financing from the EU Structural Funds);
- 8) significance of the product for the regional economy.

Of the 42 evaluated the products of rural tourism 10 flagship products and 10 priority products were selected, which should provide a basis for conducting informational and promotional activities in the Polish market and abroad.

## 3. ESSENCE AND TYPES OF COMPETITIVENESS

The term competitiveness is used in the literature with many varied meanings. This results in a large number of definitions which stem from diverse understanding of its sources and different approach to its scope. The most capacious definition of competitiveness was proposed at the World Economic Forum in Lausanne in 1994, where it was described as *the ability of a country or company to create greater wealth than their competitors in the world market*.<sup>5</sup> In many approaches to competitiveness the competing subject is not distinguished, (it may be a country, a region or a company), and the described phenomenon is relative<sup>6</sup>. An example would be one of the OECD definitions, according to which *competitiveness is the ability of companies, industries, regions, nations or supranational regions to generate, while being and remaining exposed to international competition, relatively high factor income and factor employment levels on a sustainable basis*.<sup>7</sup>

Many authors define the competition subject in a neutral way. For example, for K. Moszkowicz *competitiveness in a static system means the ability of the company, such as a bank, to operate at a profit. While in a dynamic system, competitiveness is the ability to maintain or improve the current level of competitiveness*.<sup>8</sup> It is also believed that the survival and development of the organization is determined by the market in which the products of this organization find or do not find their purchasers. Hence, the definition stating that: *competitiveness is a permanent ability to design, manufacture and sell products (services) whose prices quality and other attributes are more attractive than the corresponding products (services) offered by domestic and foreign competitors*.<sup>9</sup>

Achieving competitive advantage is one of the core objectives of businesses, (including tourist farms), operating

<sup>5</sup> The World Competitiveness Report 1994, World Economic Forum, Lausanne 1994 p. 18.

<sup>6</sup> P. Filip, B. Sowa: Konkurencja podatkowa jako efekt globalizacji gospodarki światowej. [Tax Competition as a Result of the Globalization of the World Economy] [In:] Najnowsze zmiany polskiego prawa prywatnego i publicznego a funkcjonowanie rynków finansowych. [Recent Changes in Polish Private and Public Law and the Functioning of Financial Markets]. TNOiK O/Rzeszów, Rzeszów 2008, p. 62.

<sup>7</sup> M. J. Stankiewicz: Konkurencyjność przedsiębiorstwa. [Competitiveness of the Enterprise]. [In:] Budowanie konkurencyjności przedsiębiorstwa w warunkach globalizacji. [Building the Competitiveness of Companies in the Context of Globalization]. Dom Organizatora, Toruń 2005, p. 36.

<sup>8</sup> K. Moszkowicz: Konkurencyjność i innowacje – gdzie szukać szansy? [Competitiveness and Innovation - Where to Look for a Chance?] [In:] Tożsamość i strategia przedsiębiorstwa – modele i doświadczenie [Identity and Strategy of the Company - Models and Experience]. Oficyna Wydawnicza Politechniki Wrocławskiej, Wrocław 1997, p. 110.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. M. Kisiel: Internet a konkurencyjność banków w Polsce. [Internet and Competitiveness of Banks in Poland]. Wydawnictwo CeDeWu, Warszawa 2005, p. 15; M. Gorynia: Konkurencyjność w ujęciu mikroekonomicznym. [Microeconomic Competitiveness] [In:] Kompendium wiedzy o konkurencyjności [Competitiveness Manual]. M. Gorynia, E. Łązniewska (Eds). PWN 2009, Warszawa pp. 67-99; E. Łązniewska, R. Chmielewski, P. Nowak: Definicje, modele i studia nad regionalną konkurencyjnością. [Definitions, Models and Studies of Regional Competitiveness] [In:] Konkurencyjność regionalna. Koncepcje – strategie – przykłady. [Regional Competitiveness. Concepts, Strategies – Examples]. E. Łązniewska, M. Gorynia (Eds). PWN 2012, p. 24.

on the market. Tourism managers have to identify and explore competitive advantages<sup>10</sup>. Tourists are confronted with a wide range of tourism products in the destinations that they visit. In the recently published "Tourism Product and Service", Bill Hardman Sr. – the former president of the Southeast Tourism Society – noted that *a tourism product is whatever is put into the promotion, it could be a whole community or an individual facility, such as a park (a site) or a hotel (a property)*<sup>11</sup>. In any industry, a product is developed to meet the needs of potential customers. The development of the tourism industry has triggered the development of tourism products<sup>12</sup>.

#### 4. CHARACTERISTICS OF INVENTORIED RURAL TOURISM PRODUCTS

The inventory of rural tourism products conducted by the Polish Agency for Tourism Development selected 42 products that have been found to offer distinctive characteristics. Of these, 10 flagship products and 10 priority products were selected, which should provide a basis for conducting informational and promotional activities on the Polish and foreign markets. The chosen products are both complex and diverse, so they provide an interesting and varied leisure time offer. They are interactive. Tourists can actively enjoy many activities on a variety of topics, liberate their creativity and pursue passions and hobbies. The theme of the products always refers to the natural and cultural heritage of rural areas. Thematically classified offers are grouped according to the following lines related to the core of the product and the visit purpose:

- 1) unique nature (e.g. "Stawy Milickie" ["Milickie Ponds"], "Rzeczpospolita Ptasia" ["The Republic of Birds"])
- 2) herbs ( "Kraina Rumianku" ["Chamomile Land"], "Małopolska Wieś Pachnąca Ziołami" ["Małopolska Herbs Scented Village"])
- 3) extinct and traditional crafts (e.g. "Kowalska Wioska" ["The Smith Village"] in Wojciechów, "Gospodarstwo u Flika" ["Flik's Farm"])
- 4) horses (e.g. "Babskie Ranczo" ["Women's Ranch"])
- 5) wine-making tradition (e.g. "Winnica Kinga" ["King's Vineyard"])
- 6) culinary heritage (e.g. „Karczma Kaliska” [„Kaliska Inn”], „Tatarska Jurta” [„Tatar Yurt”])
- 7) education on cultural heritage and ecology and crafts (e.g. venues belonging to the network of educational farms : "Synowcówka", "Uroczysko Kępa" ["Kępa Sacred Spot"], "Gospodarstwo pod Lipą" ["Farm Under the Lime Tree"], "Ostoja Dworska" ["Court Retreat"]; "Gospodarstwo Bazyl" ["Bazyl Farm"]),
- 8) venues of outstanding architectural and landscape values (eg "Uroczysko Zaborek" ["Zaborek Sacred Spot"], "Siedem Ogrodów" ["Seven Gardens"], "Wilcza Jama" ["Wolf's Den"]).

The majority of the 20 selected products were family businesses. The promotional activities carried out by the owners/operators of the selected products were very similar and mostly relied on traditional forms (flyers, brochures, participation in trade fairs). Practically the only manifestation of the use of modern technology was the creation of websites, which often are not of the best quality. In addition, their accessibility was hindered due to the small number of used languages and lack of adaptation to the needs of the visually impaired. Some venues began to use social networking platforms, with Facebook being the most popular. Another important marketing tool used by some of the venues was an event where large audiences could be targeted. Good examples here include the hunters' holiday Hubertus, open air painting in Zaborek Sacred Spot or bread festival on Flik's Farm. National, regional and local awards also served as positive recommendations of the offers. Many owners of the selected businesses boast eco-certificates and/or the use of eco-friendly solutions. Finally the owners of the chosen products were members of organizations involved in tourism and local development such as regional and local tourism organizations, local action groups, agritourism associations and specialist organizations (uniting fans of fishing, hunting etc.).

The list of flagship products of national importance was created mainly with regard to the criterion of originality of the offer and its image potential. The flagship tourism products list includes: "Uroczysko Zaborek" ["Zaborek Sacred Spot"], "Małopolska Wieś Pachnąca Ziołami" ["Małopolska Herbs Scented Village"], „Ziołowy Zakątek" ["Herbal Corner"], "Tatarska Jurta" ["Tatar Yurt"], "Kapkozy – Szkoła Wrażliwości" ["Kapkozy – School of Sensitivity"], "Karczma Kaliska" [„Kaliska Inn”], "Trzy Świerki" ["Three Spruces"], "Kowalska Wioska w Wojciechowie" [The Smith Village in Wojciechów], "Wilcza Jama" ["Wolf's Den"], and "Siedem Ogrodów" ["Seven gardens"]. Additionally the list of priority products, which should complement the flagship products when launching promotion and information activities, has been prepared. It included: "Stawy Milickie" ["Milickie Ponds"], "Kraina Rumianku" ["Chamomile Land"], "Rzeczpospolita Ptasia" ["The Republic of Birds"], "Babskie Ranczo" ["Women's Ranch"], "Gospodarstwo u Flika" ["Flik's Farm"], "Gospodarstwo pod Lipą" ["Farm Under the Lime Tree"], "Gospodarstwo Bazyl" ["Bazyl Farm"], "Folwark Zarębice" ["Zarębice Farm"], "Garncarska Wioska" ["Pottery Village"], "Agroturystyka nad Jeziorem Sopięń" ["Sopięń Lake Farm"].

Promotional and informational actions launched for the flagship and priority products will provide a unique opportunity for them to gain better exposure both in the Polish and foreign markets.

#### 5. EVALUATIONS OF COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGES OF INVENTORIED RURAL TOURISM PRODUCTS

High competitiveness in the domestic market was characteristic for most of the selected products. Their competitive advantage over other rural tourism offers was primarily a qualitative advantage. The qualitative advantage manifested itself by:

- originality and uniqueness of the product core, which creates the motivation behind tourist visits,
- complexity of offered services,

<sup>10</sup> .O. Gomezelj, T. Mihalić, Destination competitiveness- Applying different models, the case of Slovenia. Tourism Management, Vol. 29, 2008, p. 294.

<sup>11</sup> J. K. Sharma, Tourism product and services: Development strategy and management options. New Delhi: Kanishka Publishers, Distributors, 2007, p. 23.

<sup>12</sup> J. B. Xu, Perceptions of tourist product. Tourism Management, Vol. 31, 2010, p. 607.

- high quality of service,
- customization of the offered services to individual needs of tourists.

When it comes to price competitiveness the selected products did not differ from other offers of the home rural tourism. However, it should be emphasized that they met the principle of offering exciting leisure activities at a reasonable price.

The information advantage of the selected products was assessed the lowest, which confirms the fact that ineffective marketing and communication are the key problems of this market. Prevalence of traditional forms of promotion (such as printed flyers or participation in trade fairs), and limited use of modern forms of promotion, (restricted to the creation of a website, often of inadequate quality), result in poor position of rural tourism compared to other segments of tourism in Poland. The reasons for this include the prevalence of small scale business in rural tourism, (by definition they are usually small ventures), and ineffective collaboration between business owners, which could potentially reduce the promotion cost.

The assessment of the competitiveness of selected rural tourism products in the foreign market differs considerably from the one done for the domestic market. Priorities of foreign tourists concerning the choice of rural tourism products in Poland are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1** Priority Markets for Rural Tourism Products (by Province)

No.	Province	Priority Markets for Rural Tourism
1.	Dolnośląskie	Germany, Netherlands, Russia, Ukraine
2.	Kujawsko-pomorskie	Germany, Poland
3.	Lubelskie	Poland
4.	Lubuskie	Germany, Poland
5.	łódzkie	Germany, Poland
6.	Małopolskie	No priority markets, Poland (as the primary market)
7.	Mazowieckie	Netherlands, Poland
8.	Opolskie	Germany, Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland
9.	Podkarpackie	No priority markets, Germany and France ( the primary markets )
10.	Podlaskie	United Kingdom, Russia , Poland
11.	Pomorskie	Sweden , Finland , Poland
12.	Śląskie	No priority markets, Poland and Germany ( as primary markets )
13.	Świętokrzyskie	Germany , United Kingdom
14.	Warmińsko-mazurskie	No priority markets, Poland (as a primary market )
15.	Wielkopolskie	Germany, Poland
16.	Zachodniopomorskie	No priority markets , Germany (as a secondary market)

Source: PART SA on the basis of "Poland's Marketing Strategy in the Tourism Sector for the Years 2012 -2020", Polish Tourism Organization, Warsaw, 2012 , pp.203 -218.

The greatest competitive advantage is the price advantage, which was the decisive factor in the selection of Polish rural tourism products by foreign tourists. By far the most important market for Polish rural tourism was

Germany. This is mainly due to the relatively good transport accessibility and refers mainly to the products offered by western and south- western regions. The group of countries of medium importance included the United Kingdom ( the British visited Poland mainly due to the outstanding natural assets of the rural areas), the Netherlands, France, Russia and Ukraine. In the case of Russia and Ukraine the objective obstacle in the development of tourism is the eastern Polish border which is also the border of the European Union.

As for the assessment of quality advantage, it was also significant, although not decisive. For foreign tourists opting for Polish rural tourism products it was important to receive a quality product for a price they perceived as low. Other important criteria included the character of the Polish countryside, with its traditions, preserved natural and cultural landscape of what is now uncommon in Europe as well as well known and appreciated around the world Polish hospitality<sup>13</sup>. These are the elements through which qualitative advantage of Polish tourism products in foreign markets is manifested. As in the case of the domestic market, there is no information advantage of Polish rural tourism products in foreign markets. The effectiveness of reaching foreign tourists can be increased by:

- including the promotion of rural tourism products in the promotion of urban and cultural tourism,
- keeping tourist information points updated about rural products,
- providing information in different languages (at least in Polish, English and German).

The implementation of this approach will increase the chances of encouraging foreign tourists already staying in Poland to take interest in rural tourism and visit the countryside, to extend their stay or return in the future in order to visit Polish rural areas.

## 6. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The competitive advantage of the best products over other offers of rural tourism in the domestic market was primarily a qualitative advantage. It manifested itself in the originality and uniqueness of the product core, (which ultimately becomes the motive for tourist visits), the complexity and high quality of offered services and flexibility in adapting to tourists' individual needs. When it comes to price competitiveness, the selected products do not stand out in this regard but they meet the requirement of offering exciting leisure time activities at a reasonable price. The assessment of information advantage was the lowest. The reasons were the ineffective marketing activities involving mainly traditional forms of promotion such as: printed flyers or participation in trade fairs and a limited range of modern forms of promotion applied on websites.

The assessment of the competitiveness of selected rural tourism products in the foreign market differs considerably from the one in the domestic market. The greatest competitive advantage here was the price advantage, which

<sup>13</sup> According to a study conducted in 2012 by the Polish Tourist Organization and presented in " Poland's Marketing Strategy in the Tourism Sector for the Years 2012 -2020" the major positive associations with Poland of the Germans include beautiful scenery, hospitality, friendly people, exciting cuisine and great atmosphere, of the British – unspoiled natural areas, and of the French – history, architecture, rich culture, authenticity and sincerity of the people.

was the decisive factor in the selection of Polish rural tourism products by foreign tourists. By far the most important market for the Polish rural tourism was Germany. As for the assessment of quality advantage, it was also significant, although not decisive. For foreign tourists opting for Polish rural tourism products it was important to receive a quality product at a price they considered low. Additionally they highly valued the assets of the Polish countryside, with its traditions, preserved natural and cultural landscape, now rather uncommon in Europe, as well as well known and appreciated Polish hospitality. As in

the case of the domestic market also in the foreign markets Polish rural tourism products have not achieved information advantage. The effectiveness of reaching foreign audiences can be increased by:

- including the promotion of rural tourism products in the promotion of urban and cultural tourism,
- keeping tourist information points updated about rural products,
- providing information in different languages (at least in Polish, English and German).

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