

The Development of Agri-tourism in Opole Province, Poland. From Inexpensive Holidays in the Countryside to Experiential Marketing

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Abstract: The aim of the article is to show the evolution stages of agri-tourism in the Opole Province between the years 2002 and 2014. The bases for the study are as follows: archival and current data on the development of rural tourism, field research and interviews conducted in agri-tourism farms of the Opole Province. The research presents the stages of agri-tourism development in the Opole Province and identifies its basic tendencies. During the study the following basic trends were observed: the shift from agri-tourism to rural tourism, creation of family businesses implying an increase in the number of beds and service offer; experiential marketing – forming a specific offer for a specific recipient; increase in the standard of services and the development of active recreation; development of eco-tourism enriched by educational activities.

Key words: *agri-tourism offer, the Opole Province, agri-tourism development, agri-tourism farms*

1. Introduction

Agri-tourism in Poland is a dynamically developing branch of tourism. Starting from the 90s of the 20th century, gradual increase in the number of agri-tourism farms has been recorded. The cause of this phenomenon should be sought in the development of a tourist offer in rural areas, in strongly increasing level of services and in a noticeable shift from mass tourism to sustainable tourism (Wojciechowska, 2011). The area where the development of rural tourism can be easily observed is the Opole Province.

The Opole Province is situated in the south-western part of Poland, on Silesian Lowlands. It is the smallest province in Poland, covering the area of 9,411.87 km². The presented area is inhabited by 1,013,950 citizens. Average population density equals 108 pers./km². The Opole Province is characterized by its unique natural and cultural values. The most valuable natural areas are protected in three landscape parks: the Opawskie Mountains Landscape Park, Stobrawa Landscape Park and St. Anne Mountain Landscape Park. The Opawskie Mountains Landscape Park protects

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the uppermost areas of Opole Province along with its unique plant communities and rock formations. Stobrawa Landscape Park protects dense forest areas of significant biodiversity, natural river valleys with oak-hornbeam and riparian forests as well as one of the largest areas of inland dunes in Poland. St. Anne Mountain Landscape Park protection areas include the remains of an old volcanic cone, beech woods and xerothermic grasslands. Both geographical location and turbulent history of this region make the three cultures: Polish, German and Czech, interfuse. Their mutual influence is reflected in folklore, architecture and land development. The Opole Province is a land with rich tourism potential: historical sacral buildings, more than 160 castles and palaces as well as numerous museums are the fundamentals for theme trails such as the Trail of Medieval Polychromies of Brzeg, the Trail of Wooden Sacral Architecture and the Cistercian Trail. Excellent natural values, six quite large artificial water reservoirs, waterways formed by natural watercourses as well as areas of dense forests form the basis for numerous hiking, bike and water tracks. Such high tourism potential provides an excellent basis for the development of tourism.

The aim of the paper is to identify the stages of the evolution of agri-tourism in the Opole province and to identify its basic tendencies.

2. Material and methods

The basis for the paper constituted long-term observations of Opole agri-tourism market (2002-2014) (Woś, 2008, 2009; Puciato, Winiarz, and Woś 2010; Drobek, Woś, and Mateja, 2013), which allowed to observe the changes in agri-tourism farms' structure. The second part of the research (3.2013-8.2014) includes diagnostic surveys and direct interviews with the owners of 129 agri-tourism farms from the Opole Province. This survey and interviews allowed the researchers to characterize the farms, their touristic potential and the offer prepared for tourists and gave the opportunity to find the main trends in its development. The analysis was supplemented by due diligence of Opole Agricultural Advisory Centre (AAC) documentation and by the Opole Provincial Tourist Organisation (OROT) data.

3. The stages of agri-tourism evolution in the Opole Province

The origins of agri-tourism in the Opole Province date back to the 80s of the 20th Century; however a significant growth of the number of agri-tourism farms is noted after the year 1990. In the reported period, as a result of economic changes, profitability of agriculture farms decreased (Wilk and Keck-Wilk, 2013), particularly of medium and small farms, which led to the search of alternative sources of income. The excellent way to obtain such income was the development of rural tourism which

enabled the farms to generate different sources of income in professions related to agriculture and the environment, to create new jobs as well as fully exploited the tourist potential of a village (Kosmaczewska, 2006; Sznajder and Przezbórska, 2006; Bramwell, 1998), relatively poor tourist offer usually related to the accommodation and poor catering services (Zawadka 2010). A characteristic feature of available accommodation was a relatively low price compared with similar services offered by hotel industry. This situation caused the increase of interest in countryside recreation. Agri-tourism farms in the Opole Province provided relatively high standard in comparison with similar facilities offered by other provinces. The reasons can be traced in specific character of the recipients who, in the early 90s, consisted mainly of sentimental tourists from Germany who searched for accommodation in small towns and villages connected with the history of their family and relatives. High standards of recreation and accommodation were crucial for this particular group of recipients. In the same time high interest in rural tourism was noted among domestic tourists who highly valued contact with natural environment slightly transformed by a man, small distance from cities and relatively low costs of recreation in comparison with other offers of a tourist market.

Another stage of rural tourism development was the period of mid 90s of the 20th century and the early 21st century when it was noted that a significant role was played by Agricultural Advisory Centres (Koniorska, Pałka and Wrońska-Kiczor, 2012; Wojciechowska, 2014) which provided agri-tourism trainings, organized study trips revealing good practices, offered legal, financial and tax advisory services as well as help in raising funds for the development of farms (Matejek, 1999; Kurtyka, 2008). In the same period farms which provided services in rural areas were clearly divided into 3 categories.

- *An agri-tourism farm* - located in the rural areas where the basis for the creation of a tourism product is a single farm or a group of farms providing accommodation, catering and recreational services and enabling tourists to involve actively in works carried on the farm.
- *A rural tourism farm*- a form of tourism that takes place in rural environment. Rural tourism does not require a service provider to offer participation in the work of the farm or running a real farm.
- *Tourism in rural areas* - a form of tourism implemented in the rural environment, not related, usually, to agricultural activity whose organizers and service providers are often people who do not originate from the rural community.

This division resulted from specific activities carried out in rural areas (Flanigan et al., 2010, 2014). A dominant form were agri-tourism farms formed on a basis of agricultural farms being constantly associated with agriculture, elements of which

were also included in a tourist offer of a farm. Farms classified as rural tourism providers are the farms whose owners ceased their agricultural activities and concentrated either on providing tourism services or on different kind of economic activity supplemented by tourism services (Philips, Hunter and Blackstock, 2010). In this case it was important to connect farm owners with rural areas through family traditions. In case of farms providing tourism in rural areas their owners were not directly related to rural environment (urban residents who bought old farmhouses or land in the countryside) but only provided tourism services in rural areas, their activity was not related to agriculture though.

The unquestionable stimulus for agri-tourism development and varied tourist offer in rural areas was the establishment of Local Activity Groups (LAG) in the years 2006-2008 (Wojciechowska, 2009) which were non-governmental organizations consisting of agri-tourism farm owners, local government representatives and local activists promoting the development of tourism in a region. Establishment and functioning of LAG enabled to gain funds for cultural and natural heritage promotion, for tourism and recreation development, for modernization of already existing tourism infrastructure and for innovative initiatives related to sustainable development of rural areas. In the Opole province until now 16 associations of this type have been created. Their activities enabled full exploitation of tourism potential of the region, generating profits and activating local societies.

The last decade was a period of intense agri-tourism development in Poland (Przezbórska-Skobiej, 2014). Increasing interest in recreation (Cichowska and Klimek, 2011) of this type and competition in the agri-tourism market leads to distinct expansion of services available on farms and to progressive specialization. Farms' offers are dedicated to particular groups of recipients: families with children, the elderly, active tourists, companies organizing social trips for their employees. Increasing standards and scope of services make some of agri-tourism farms evolve towards small family businesses offering accommodation, catering and recreational services. It helps to create new jobs in rural areas, encourages young people to stay in home villages and to create an interesting tourism offer allowing for a complete use of tourism and intellectual potential of a region (Baum, 2011; Brandth and Haugen, 2011).

4. Results of the study

Data concerning the number of agri-tourism farms in the Opole Province have been collected since the year 2002. Basing on the data collected by Central Statistical Office it can be noticed that the number of agri-tourism farms in the whole country and in the Opole Province in the period between the years 2002 and 2011 was

increasing (Tab. 1). Particularly intense increase in the number of farms in the Opole province was noted in 2006 in comparison with 2002 - 21.6%. In the same time the number of farms in the whole country increased only by 10%.

The number of beds in agri-tourism farms in the Opole Province was also increasing faster in that time (increase by 61% in comparison with 32% in the whole country). Between the years 2006 and 2011 figures concerning the increase of number of farms and beds in Opole province were similar to the whole country and were respectively: 8.9% (for the country 8.8%) and 18.7% (for the country 17.6%).

Table 1. Number of agri-tourism farms and beds in the Opole Province

| Number of agri-tourism farms | 2002 | 2006 | 2011 |
|---|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| <i>Opole Province</i> | 83 | 101 | 110 |
| <i>Poland</i> | 6546 | 7214 | 7852 |
| Number of beds in agri-tourism farms | 2002 | 2006 | 2011 |
| <i>Opole Province</i> | 580 | 934 | 1109 |
| <i>Poland</i> | 53216 | 70300 | 82694 |

Source: Authors' calculations based on Central Statistical Office of Poland data.

There has been systematic increase in the number of farms in the Opole Province (in 2014 there are 129 agri-tourism farms). Firstly, the increase in the number of agri-tourism farms is implied by the constant growth of interest in countryside recreation, as well as in an interesting and varied offer prepared by agri-tourism farms. On the other hand, although the Opole Province is the part of Poland where agriculture still plays a significant role, due to the declining profitability of agricultural production, farm owners look for additional source of income. Moreover, prosperous agri-tourism farms situated nearby inspire others to create new ones.

The research conducted in 2013-2014 shows (Drobek, Woś and Mateja, 2013) that a typical agri-tourism farm in the Opole Province is created on the basis of an agricultural farm, has the area not bigger than 3 ha (usually 1-2 ha) and still conducts agricultural activities to a limited extent (plant cultivation and animal husbandry for their own needs and for guests). The farms are usually situated in attractive natural surroundings, usually in small villages and on the outskirts of bigger ones. Guests are served usually by no more than 2 workers (owners) over the age of 36, usually of secondary education, professionally active who treat agri-tourism as an additional source of income. The main reasons for starting agri-tourism farms are: searching for additional income, full exploitation of farm potential, and continuation of

professional activity (especially for those who are retired and still wishing to work actively) and implementation of passion.

Studies of tourism conducted in the Opole Province in 2012 by Puciato and Grabiński (2012) showed that among people visiting the Opole Province foreign tourists, the group that constitutes 30% of the whole, are strongly dominated by the Germans (53%) and the Czechs (20%). The most frequent motives of arrival at the Opole Province mentioned by respondents were: relaxation, sightseeing and visits to family homes. The structure of tourists visiting the Opole Province and their motives of arrivals shapes the offer of agri-tourism farms which adapt it mainly to the requirements of foreign tourists.

On the basis of research conducted among 129 owners of agri-tourism farms in the Opole Province it has been found that 62 farms provide only basic accommodation and catering services (Figure 1). More than a half of respondents (67 farms) admit that their offer includes: extensive recreational facilities which enable active recreation on a farm or sports equipment rental (bicycles, skis, canoes) for the full use of a recreational potential of the region.

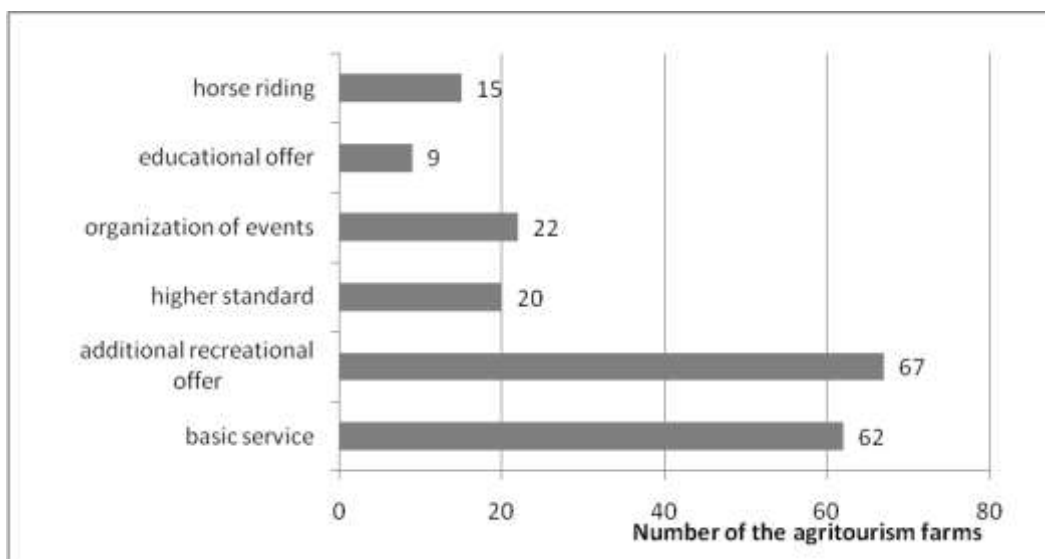


Figure 1. Services available in the analyzed agri-tourism farms

Source: Authors' calculations.

During the interviews, the agri-tourism farm owners pointed out that the most significant trend in the development of agri-tourism is the increasing interest of tourists in active recreation and therefore the necessity of continuous enrichment of the agri-tourism farm offer as a way of attracting new customers and keeping already

existing ones. While analyzing the changes in the offers of agri-tourism farms in the Opole Province as well as the history of their development, several tendencies can be noticed (Fig. 2). One of them is the extension of the available services offer, which is declared by over 52% of owners of explored farms. The extension of the offer relates in particular to the possibility of active recreation (sports equipment rental, guided tours around the area) and activities organized on a farm (handicraft workshops, bread baking, collecting herbs, educational classes for children).

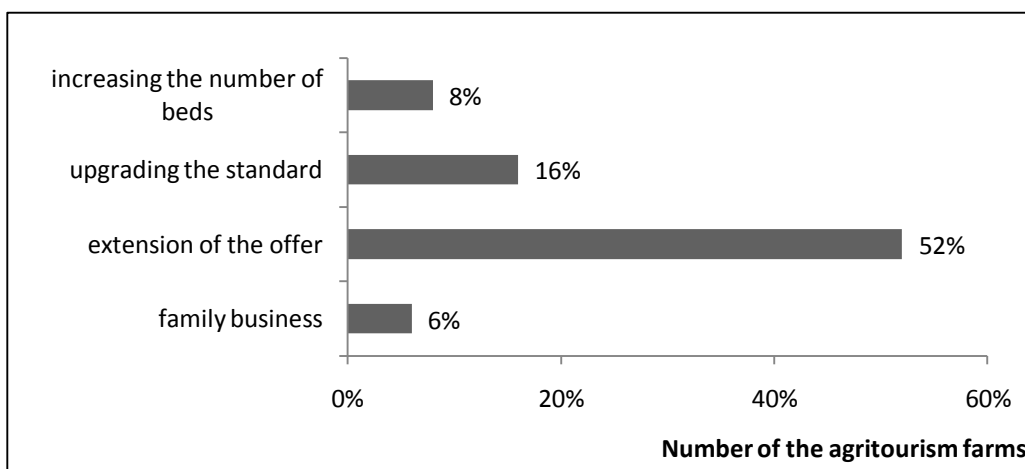


Figure 2. Recent trends in the analyzed agri-tourism of Opole Province

Source: Authors' calculations

Particular specialization in offers was noticed during field studies. This specialization involves preparation and development of an offer for selected group of recipients. Such specialization can be recognized in case of agri-tourism farms which provide a recreational offer connected with horse riding. This dominant kind of activity implies a range of additional services (cart rides, hippo therapy, endurance and horse camps, and hotels for horses). A lot of farms prepare an extended offer for children of various ages (educational classes, handicraft workshops, tours around the farm, well-developed playgrounds, childcare, entertainment classes), looking forward mainly to hosting families with children.

Sometimes, agri-tourism farms become a family business (6 % of analyzed farms), where the oldest generations – most frequently the founders of a farm - are responsible for basic services (accommodation and catering), while the younger generations develop additional services (educational and recreational), making use of acquired education and their own creativity. Year after year, there has been a growing number of agri-tourism farms operating in this way. It is a positive

phenomenon in rural areas, because it enables to create new jobs for young people who, instead of leaving, stay in home villages and create an interesting and innovative tourist offer (Koc, 2008; Choo and Petrick, 2014).

When preparing an offer the most important thing is the experience the tourists gain and their impressions after a stay on a farm which remains in their consciousness (experiential marketing). Hence noticeable attention to details affecting guests can be seen, meaning: tastes, smells, custom interior design, small gifts connected with the specificity of a farm, personalization of an offer. Another evident trend is also the increase in the standards of an offer which was noted in 16% of analyzed farms. Great number of agri-tourism farms in the Opole Province provide accommodation, catering and recreational services at the level of three-star hotels with much lower prices - thus available to most tourists.

The Polish law allows the owners of agricultural farms to rent no more than 5 rooms without taxpaying. In 8% of the analyzed farms a great interest in their offer resulted in the increase of the number of beds to the detriment of additional taxation what undoubtedly shows good economic situation of these farms and profitability of this business. Because of extended tourist services some of the agri-tourism farm owners resign from agricultural activities, focus on hospitality and transform their agri-tourism farms in rural tourism farms. This phenomenon is another noticeable tendency, negative from the point of view of agricultural tradition, but driven by economic efficiency. The opposite of this phenomenon are ecological or ecotourism farms. These farms' greatest value is education of children, young people and adults. In the case of these farms the standard of services is often slightly lower, however the offer, which involves ecology, history, the region's tradition and culture as well as promotion of a healthy lifestyle is definitely enriched. This kind of offer is very interesting both for domestic and foreign tourists.

5. Conclusions

The study allowed identifying the developmental stages of agri-tourism in the Opole Province. The research perspective of over 10 years enabled to identify basic tendencies of changes in offers of agri-tourism farms and in the agri-tourism market. During the study some basic trends were observed.

Firstly, the departure from agri-tourism towards rural tourism has been noticed. Secondly, the increase of the number of beds and the enrichment of the agri-tourism farm offers. Initially, the main task for agri-tourism farms in the Opole Province was to serve cheap holidays in rural areas and to provide an additional source of income for the local population. In the following years the increasing standard and the variety of services offered in the agri-tourism farms in the Opole Province has been observed.

The agri-tourism, primarily being an additional source of income, now becomes the primary one and agri-tourism farms transform into small family tourist companies.

The growing interest in recreation in rural areas results not only from the attractiveness of price but also from the diversity of agri-tourism farm offers. Nowadays, the agri-tourism in the Opole Province is characterized by extensive range of recreational and educational services and creation of tourism products based on opportunities to gain new positive experiences. Therefore, the following trends can be observed: the creation of a specific offer for a specific recipient (experiential marketing), the increase of standard of services with the development of active recreation and the development of eco-tourism enriched with educational activities.

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