

Tourism as a factor of the activation the rural areas in Poland

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Abstract

Economic situation of rural areas in Poland. The need for functional transformation. The role of tourism as a stimulation factor for rural areas. The development of agritourism and its significance. Spatial differentiation of the development of the tourist function in rural areas.

Key words: rural tourism, agritourism

Rural areas constitute a major part of Poland's territory; they occupy an area of 291.9 thousand square kilometres, i.e. 95.5% of the country's total surface area, and are inhabited by 14.7 million people, i.e. 38.1% of Poland's overall population. In economic terms, they are predominantly farming areas, which is corroborated by the number of rural residents having connection with farming. It is estimated that 4.5 million of economically active population (26%) work in agriculture, while the real demand for labour in this sector of the economy is 2.5 million. It means that about two million economically active people have no prospects for performing effective work in agriculture (Krzyżanowska 2002).

However, agriculture in Poland does not only suffer from excessive labour factor, but also from excessive land factor (Rosner 2000). Surplus in the labour force leads to the emergence of hidden unemployment, currently estimated at 900 thousand. On the other hand, surplus in the farming land produces fallow land, i.e. areas where farming production has been discontinued.

Another problem of rural areas in Poland is the low market-orientedness of farms. Market-oriented farms account for only 25% of the total number of farms in Poland; they employ less than half of the population working in agriculture and provide 75% of agricultural production. The remaining 75% of farms produce little and generate surplus labour force in agriculture. The main source of subsistence for the owners of such farms include social welfare benefits, as well as disability pensions and old age pensions of the elderly family members (Krzyżanowska 2002).

Even though the agricultural function still plays a dominant role in Poland's rural areas, a gradual process of transformation of the monofunctional into the modern, multifunctional rural areas can be observed (Durydiwka 2001). The concept of de-

veloping other than agricultural functions in the rural areas envisages the creation of new jobs outside agriculture (Przygodzka 1997, after Czapiewski 2003). Also, among the priorities of state rural policies, in addition to issues directly related to agricultural production, issues related to the stimulation of the indigenous potential of rural areas in other sectors than agriculture are listed. Such stimulation can take various forms of the so-called small business activity, more or less connected with agriculture.

It seems that among various types of activity outside agriculture, tourism is one that is developing the most quickly. Tourism does not require extensive capital expenditure and allows to make use of the existing accommodation facilities in farm buildings. The growing significance of rural tourism is proved both by the increasing number of farms offering such services and that of tourists using such services. In the years 1998–2000, the number of farms providing tourist services increased by over 3,000, while the number of visitors increased by over 400,000 (Tab. 1).

Tab. 1 Tourist services in rural areas in Poland in the years 1998–2000

	Number of farms		Number of beds		Number of guests	
	<i>total</i>	<i>in agritourism</i>	<i>total</i>	<i>in agritourism</i>	<i>total</i>	<i>in agritourism</i>
1998	7 993	3 959	91 594	32 550	525 191	219 935
1999	9 159	4 693	105 109	40 123	849 332	286 484
2000	11 260	5 789	126 389	51 589	940 390	342 035

Source: Herbst 2002, p.16

Taking into account the administrative division of Poland, tourist services in rural areas – measured by the number of farms providing such services and the number of tourists – are best developed in the Małopolskie, Pomorskie and Warmińsko-Mazurskie voivodships (Tab. 2).

Rural tourism can be divided into two basic categories:

1. country tourism (countryside tourism), embracing various forms of active leisure and passive leisure, provided it takes place in rural areas;
2. agritourism, which by definition is connected with an operational agricultural farm, since it consists in letting out (with or without board) to holiday-makers no more than 5 guest rooms in residential buildings situated in farms in rural areas (www.agro-net.com.pl/agrotur.php3).

In view of the above, agritourism can be described as a form of rural tourism directly connected with agriculture (Dębniowska, Tkaczuk 1997). Agritourism is regarded as a leading factor in the economic stimulation of rural areas, since on the one hand it is treated as an additional source of income for farmers and on the other – as a factor preventing further social and economic degradation of rural areas. Therefore, it could play a major role in areas with a prevalence of subsistence farms and a high rate of unemployment (Kowalczyk 1995).

Tab. 2 Tourist services in rural areas in 2000 (by voivodships)

	Number of farms		Number of classified farms*		Number of guests	
	total	in agritourism	total	in agritourism	total	in agritourism
Dolnośląskie	328	250	62	47	107 120	62 320
Kujawsko- Pomorskie	232	195	28	28	15 854	14 842
Lubelskie	365	256	35	31	26 809	7 275
Lubuskie	179	74	41	29	8 728	4 163
Łódzkie	161	154	1	1	3 445	2 945
Małopolskie	2 400	1 227	116	98	73 225	41 904
Mazowieckie	266	214	26	15	16 472	6 432
Opolskie	93	68	40	27	3 950	1 850
Podkarpackie	574	429	97	97	44 377	6 570
Podlaskie	702	543	126	86	27 160	13 684
Pomorskie	1 978	617	127	105	87 987	14 089
Śląskie	265	167	2	0	5 379	3 037
Świętokrzyskie	441	206	69	69	34 600	16 480
Warmińsko-Mazurskie	2 500	1 000	150	100	455 500	125 000
Wielkopolskie	461	249	31	22	24 313	18 630
Zachodniopo-morskie	314	149	15	15	5 471	2 814
TOTAL	11 260	5 789	966	770	940 390	342 035

* Farms classified under a voluntary evaluation system of the rural accommodation base of the Polish Federation of Rural Tourism "Friendly Farms"

Source: Herbst 2002, p. 16

Tab. 3 Motives encouraging farmers to undertake agritourism activity

According to Dębniwska and Tkaczuk (1997) (the area of former Olsztyn and Suwałki voivodships)		According to Drutowski (2003) (three municipalities in the Beskid Niski [Low Beskidy] mountains – Małopolskie voivodship)	
▪ wish to gain additional income	55.8%	▪ financial (additional income)	78%
▪ utilisation of the existing accommodation facilities	20.9%	▪ unprofitability of agricultural production	29%
▪ attractive location	9.3%	▪ spare housing resources	10%
▪ opportunity to sell agricultural produce	4.7%	▪ interest in holidays in rural areas	7%
▪ extended contacts with people	4.7%	▪ extended contacts with people	5%
▪ interest in holidays in rural areas	2.3%	▪ sentiment to rural areas	2%

Source: Dębniwska, Tkaczuk 1997, 22; Drutowski 2003, 67

The steadily growing interest in agritourism is manifest in the number of farms offering agritourist services, number of beds in such farms and the number of tourists (Tab. 1). According to the data of agriculture advisory centres, in the years 1998–2000 the number of agritourism farms grew from 3.9 thousand to 5.8 thousand, and the number of beds – from 32.5 thousand to 51.6 thousand.

Research conducted among the farm owners indicates that economic considerations and the wish to utilise the accommodation facilities existing in the farms are the main reasons behind the decision to start agritourism activity (Dębiewska, Tkaczuk 1997, Drutowski 2003).

An additional incentive to develop agritourism is the fact that in the event of letting not more than 5 rooms in a farm, this activity (along with supporting services) is not subject to registration in the records of economic activity kept by local authorities (*Act of 19 November 1999 Law on Economic Activity*, Dz. U. 115/2000 item 995 and 130/2000 item 1112). Furthermore – in keeping with the *Act of 26 July 1991 on Personal Income Tax* (Dz. U. 90/1993 item 16), revenues obtained from the letting of guest rooms are exempted from personal income tax, provided the following conditions are fulfilled:

- 1 the rooms to let are situated in residential buildings;
- 2 such buildings are located in rural areas;
- 3 the letting party runs a farm, while the buildings with guest rooms are part of the farm;
- 4 the number of rooms to let is not higher than 5;
- 5 the rooms are let to holiday-makers, i.e. people on a temporary stay for leisure.

It should be borne in mind, however, that agritourism – similarly to other forms of rural tourism – can be advantageous not only to the owners but also to the entire local community. The benefits include, in the first place, new jobs, which are created directly on farms, which need additional personnel to service the guests during the tourist season. However, if agritourism is to bring profits, it requires some effort on the part of the owners, the local community and the local authorities. The expectations of tourists are growing, which necessitates the emergence of new, para-tourist services (such as trade, food outlets, parking areas, tourist equipment rental), aimed to satisfy tourists' requirements. Also, the demand for various types of indigenous services, which are major attractions for tourists, is growing in many regions (e.g. artistic crafts, handicraft, smithery). The development of tourism means the need to ensure suitable living and sanitary conditions for tourists, which, in turn, is connected with the redecoration of facilities that are not in use (attics, lofts, rooms in old mills or granaries), which, after renovation, frequently have a considerable historic value (Młynarczyk 2002). Thus, agritourism drives the development of building services.

The local authorities also make efforts to improve the level of technical infrastructure in localities visited by tourists. In a sense, tourists “drive” the construction of repairs of access roads, sewerage, water or telephone networks, which in turn enhances the quality of life of the local residents.

Rural tourism can therefore be seen as an opportunity for a part of Polish agriculture to overcome the crisis, since it generates new jobs outside the sector. However, if its role in the stimulation of rural areas is to be in any way significant, the direct involvement on the part of potential service-providers is required. This, in turn, is related to the acquisition of new skills (such as marketing, small business, interpersonal skills). *“There are certainly many farmers who would like to earn some money on townsfolk seeking rural idylls. However, only a few of them take this opportunity seriously and are willing to convert their household into a truly tourist facility, to invest in the rooms' furnishings*

and interiors, in the overall impression of the farm, and think about the necessary promotion of their agritourist business” (Maciejewicz 2002, 1). Furthermore, for very many farmers, an agritourist facility is tantamount to cheap accommodation, which is to a large extent due to ignorance concerning the organisation of tourist services. In fact, in order to attract tourists, it is absolutely necessary to develop an extensive offer of supplementary services, which requires a thorough knowledge of the segment of the tourist market to which the offer is addressed, of the natural environment and the historic assets of a given region. Unfortunately, agritourist farms, which usually operate single-handedly, are not able to fulfill those requirements and face competition. In consequence, their operation does not bring the expected profits.

At the same time, farms associated in local and regional agritourist associations stand a much better chance of performing well in the agritourist services market (Drzewiecki 2001). They are also liaison agents in cooperation with local authorities, which aims to prepare a given village – in infrastructure and aesthetic terms – to receive tourists. The farmer on his own cannot effectively call for the construction or repair of a road, while an association could be more effective as a lobby (Maciejewicz 2002). Nonetheless, the most substantial role the agritourist associations can play is the popularisation of such a type of leisure and the promotion of agritourist services at the regional, national and international level. In this respect, national agritourist associations have the greatest impact. For instance, the Polish Rural Tourism Association “Friendly Farms”, bringing together 37 regional agritourist farms and organising altogether 2,195 farms, using the co-financing provided by the Cooperation Fund (Agrolinia 2000) and the Office for Physical Culture and Tourism, issued a national catalogue entitled *The Atlas of Agritourism*, presenting offers of all the classified facilities. The *Atlas*, which was one of the materials promoting Poland at the EXPO 2000 exhibition (Drzewiecki 2001), is also available on the World Wide Web (www.agritourism.pl).

Unfortunately, the problem is that agritourism – similarly to other forms of rural tourism – is developing mainly in areas where the tourist function is already developed. Most agritourist farms operate in Małopolskie, Warmińsko-Mazurskie and Pomorskie voivodships (Tab. 2). Thus, agritourism, which was intended to act as a driver of economic development of rural areas, has not brought the anticipated results. Years 1988-2000 did not see any significant changes in the distribution of rural gminas with a prevalence of the tourist function, even though the number of agritourist farms is growing systematically (Bański, Stola 2002). However, they are located mainly in traditional tourist regions: Masurian Lakes District (Warmia and Mazury), Pomerania, the Carpathians and Podkarpacie, strengthening in this way the tourist function of rural areas in those regions. In the remaining regions, agritourist farms are more scattered, and their number is not increasing at a pace that would be reflected in the functional structure of the municipalities.

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