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ANALYSIS OF THE ACTIVITIES OF AGRITOURISM FARMS IN THE AREA OF NAREW NATIONAL PARK

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ABSTRACT: It was assessed the possibility of developing agritourism in the Narew National Park. The assessment is based on the survey conducted in the months of May and June 2015 with the participation of 96 owners of agritourism farms from this area. Most of the respondents started their own agritourism business using foreign funding sources, such as European funds and bank loans rather than their own means. Financial resources were mainly spent on the development of investments connected with new agritourist undertakings or the extension of existing facilities or their modernization and adaptation, mainly concerning accommodation.

Farmers see the biggest limitations in the development of agritourism in the underdevelopment of its infrastructure, the lack of own capital as well as incomplete knowledge in the field of catering, promotion and marketing as well as the principles of keeping the accounts.

KEY WORDS: the Narew National Park, agritourism farms, tourist activity

Introduction

Agritourism as a form of spending free time on a farm enjoys a growing popularity among tourists (Jalinik, 2016, p. 64; Sikora, 2016, p. 9; Zawadka, 2015, p. 279). It offers individualized forms of rest, primarily for individual tourists, families or small tourist groups. It does not require extensive accommodation or food facilities as it can successfully develop based on existing housing stock of agricultural farms, unutilized livestock facilities or recreational space within the farm (Sokół, 2012, p. 127).

The purpose of the study is to evaluate the possibilities of agritourism development in one of the most attractive places in the country, that is in the Narew National Park. The assessment was made based on the opinions obtained from the owners of agritourism farms in Podlasie Voivodship.

An overview of literature

The Narew National Park is in the sub-region of the Upper Narew Valley. The landscape of the Narew National Park was created by the cooperation of the forces of nature and human activity. Extensive agricultural use of the land in this part of the region contributed to the creation of immense biodiversity (Nietupska, 2010, p. 12). The results of research work carried out in 1979-1981 were the basis for the protection of the fragment of the Narew River Valley between Suraż and Żółtki. They have documented the state of the nature in the valley and have shown its outstanding natural values, including its natural state, the uniqueness of its habitat systems and the richness of fauna and flora associated with it (Banaszuk, 2000, p. 4). On September 30, 1985, the Voivodship National Council in Białystok, and on March 31, 1989 the Voivodship National Council in Łomża set up the Narew Landscape Park. The Narew National Park was established on July 21, 1996 (Adamski, 2000, p. 12). The park is situated in Podlasie Voivodship, in the following districts: Tykocin, Choroszcz, Turośń Kościelna, Suraż, Łapy, Sokoły and Kobylin Borzymy (map 1). It covers the wetlands of the Narew Valley between Suraż and Rzędzian with an area of 7350ha (Suchocka, 2006, p. 11). Across the park, most of its area of about 5500ha is wasteland, while the remaining land is water, meadows and pastures. The area of forests in the park is of about 1000 ha, so afforestation rate is insignificant (Bielonko, Laskowska, 2002, p. 8).



Map 1. The area of the Narew National Park

Source: (Gierasimiuk, Karczewski, 2009, p.10).

Just a few years ago the whole area of the park was privately owned. State Treasury land was created because of farmers passing their farms for agricultural pensions. After the park was established its land became lawfully owned by the State Treasury. The distinctive feature of the park property is its fragmentation. The park owns about 1500 plots, including state waters. There are about 12,000 plots within the park boundaries and they belong to about 2,500 owners. Park ownership, that is state ownership, accounts for 20,5% of its total area (Deptuła, 2004, p. 17).

In the past, almost all the valley in today's borders of the National Park was used in agriculture. Mowing and grazing prevailed. Today mowing has almost been abandoned, and grazing is done in the south part of the Park having the character of gregarious pasturage. The loss of mowing and changes in water relations are likely to cause the spread of reeds. This leads to impoverishing the biodiversity in the world of animals and plants.

The seat of the Narew National Park is in the historical manor house in Kurow. It was built in the late nineteenth century as a one-storey building. In 1920, it was extended with one more wing and one-storey section with a terrace and tower topped with a crenellation. Next to the manor house there is a historic park, where 51 trees are monuments of nature. The most valuable specimens include a sessile oak, a California fir, red maple, a lime alley and a spruce alley leading to the marina. The manor house is separated by a

stone wall from the rest of the village. The building has a small natural exposition depicting the values of the river valley and showing traditional fishing tools used by the villagers of the area (Bielonko, 2010, p. 12).

Research methods

The study included agritourism farms located in the Narew National Park and its buffer zone. It was carried out in May and June 2015. 96 agritourism farm owners took part in the research. A diagnostic survey was used as a method to collect information using a properly prepared questionnaire consisting of a relevant section and a metric. The relevant section contains both closed and open questions concerning agritourism, its profitability and its potential for further development. In turn, in a metric section the respondents are asked about their gender, age, education and language skills.

Some of the surveys provided for the owners of agritourism farms were delivered personally, while the rest of the were sent by e-mail.

The results are presented in a descriptive form and in graphs.

Results of the research

Most of the owners of agritourism farms were people aged 30-45 (50%) and 46-55 (25%). They were mostly females (66.7%), with upper secondary education (58%) and higher (33%). More than 40% of respondents could communicate in Russian, and nearly 30% in English. Few of them (less than 10%) confirmed their knowledge of German or French.

The clear majority of agritourism farms has an area of no more than 20ha (50%) and less than 10ha (25%). There is a dozen or so percent of farms with an area between 20 and 50ha, and those above 50 ha only 8%.

Agricultural production of the analyzed farms is two thirds used for agritourism and one third for their own needs and the market.

Arable land dominates in the farms constituting over 50% of all land, as well as meadows and pastures – nearly 30%.

The basic service of agritourism farms is the provision of accommodation and food. The largest number of farms have between 2 and 4 rooms at their disposal, formed mainly after the reconstruction of a house. Some of them offer rooms after the reconstruction of outbuildings, and still others provide their guests with tourist cabins.

Food is offered to tourists in over 90% of the farms. However, it is important to note that not all tourists are ready to use this service, as some of them prefer preparing their own meals in a kitchen provided by the farm owner.

In addition to basic services, that is accommodation and catering, the several types of recreational activities also play a key role in the agritourism activities of the discussed farms (figure 1).

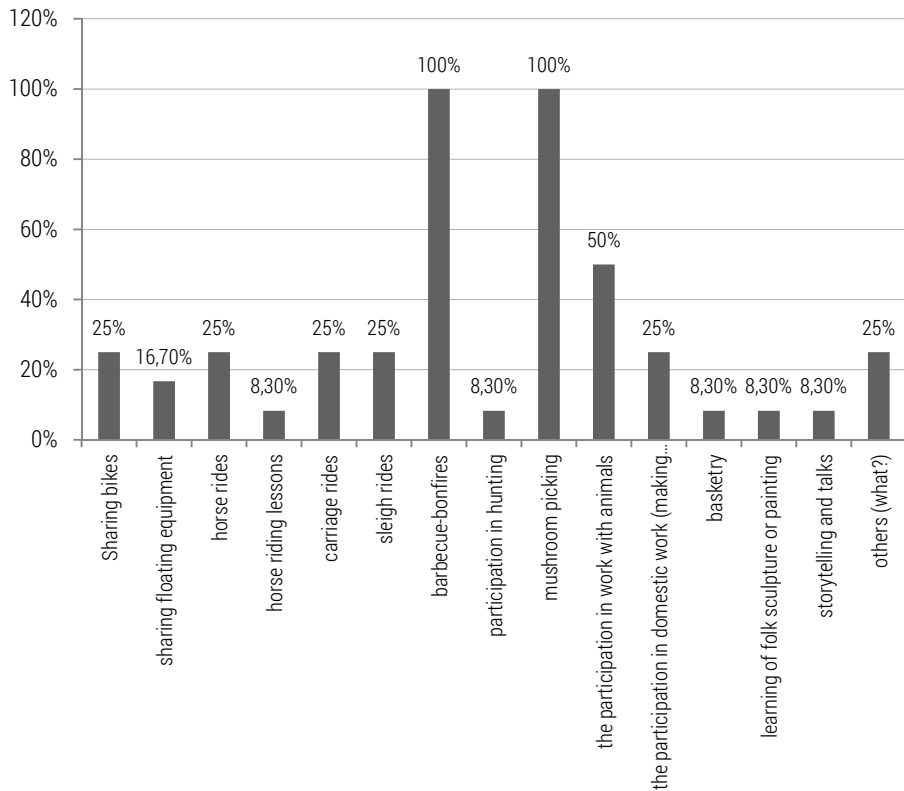


Figure 1. Attractions offered tourists on a farm

Source: authors' own work.

All the farms provide their guests with a barbecue/bonfire and the possibility of mushroom picking. The possibility to participate in work with animals is available in half of the surveyed farms. Quite popular services provided on farms are also horse riding, cycling, sleigh rides and the participation in domestic work.

The great advantage of the agritourism farms is their location in the Narew National Park buffer zone, which makes it possible for tourists to have

additional natural attractions such as hiking and biking trails and an access to bathing rivers.

The sale on site of their own food is also a promising idea to diversify the offer of agritourism farms. The data is shown in figure 2.

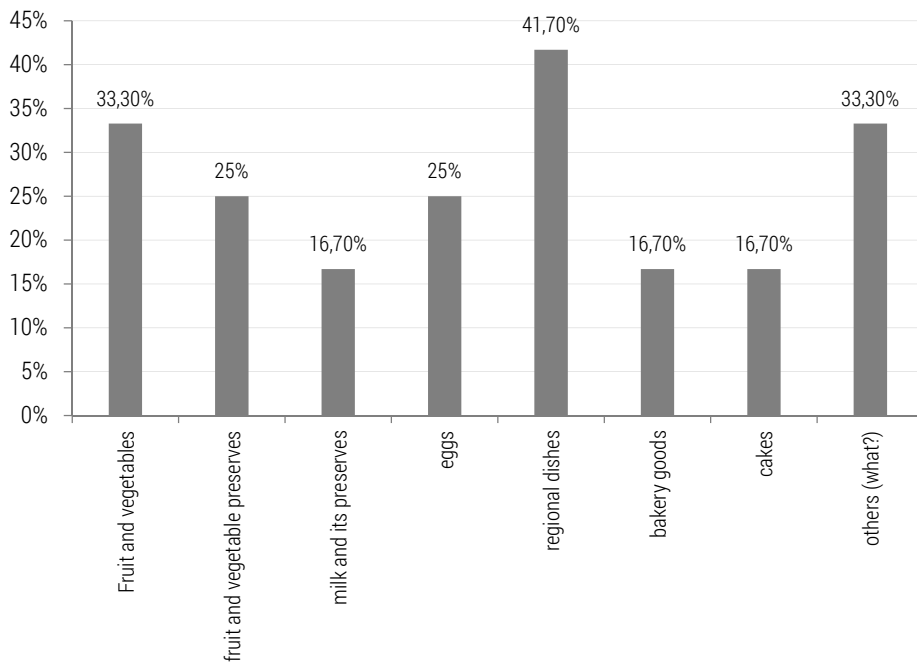


Figure 2. The possibility to buy food products produced on the farm

Source: authors' own work.

It turned out that more than 40% of the surveyed farms offer tourists regional dishes. In addition, in more than 30% of the farms it was possible to purchase domestically grown fruit and vegetables as well as other products such as honey or handicrafts. In every fourth farm fruit and vegetable preserves and eggs were offered.

It is well known that the development of agritourism may be an opportunity for the growth of farm incomes. This especially applies to farms located in areas of high natural value. The farms analyzed in the research are in such areas. In this work, therefore, an attempt was made to carry out an overall analysis of them in terms of the functioning and profitability of their agritourism activities. Starting each activity involves a certain amount of effort.

In the case of the analyzed farms, these very mostly expenditures on fitting and equipping buildings to receive guests.

Nearly all farms needed to buy modern furniture (cabinets, beds, etc.). More than 90% of them had to invest in household appliances and electronics, and 80% of their owners had to make major repairs to their buildings, which required substantial financial resources. These funds came mostly from foreign sources, mainly they were European funds (41.7%) and bank loans (33.3%), and only 25.0% came from their own resources.

Most farms, almost 70% of them provided year-round services, and only slightly more than 30% rented rooms for tourists only in the summer. The share of annual income generated from agricultural activity for almost 60% of farms was between 50 and 75% and only for less than 10% of the farms this activity did not exceed 25% of their total income. These results show that agritourism plays a significant role in the functioning of the examined farms.

In the analysis of the prospects for the development of agritourism within the Narew National Park and its surrounding area, it was also important to draw attention to its limitations or barriers identified the people conducting this activity (figure 3).

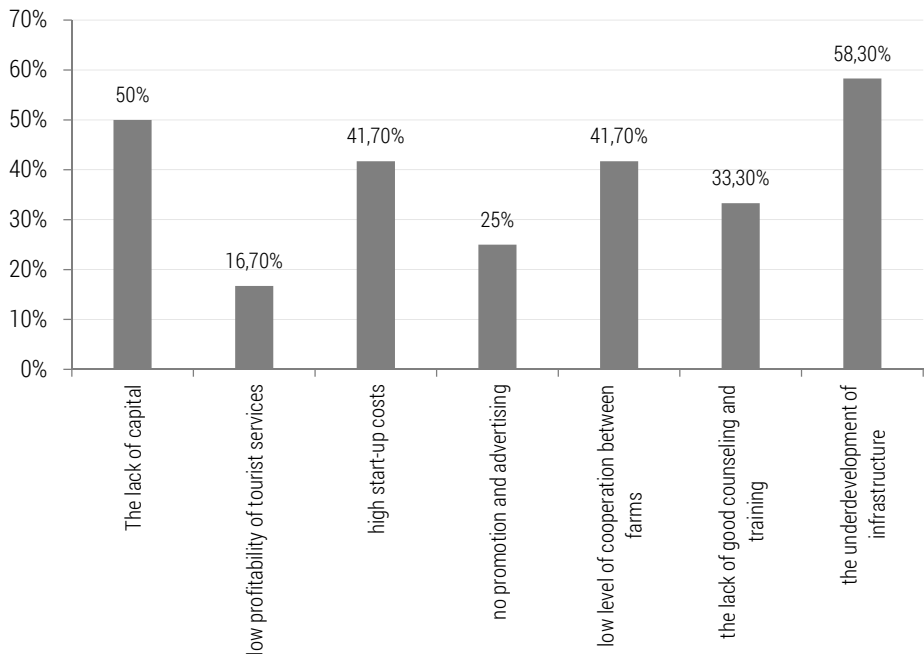


Figure 3. The limitations in running the agritourism business

Source: authors' own work.

It turned out that almost 60% of agritourists face the biggest restrains in the underdevelopment of infrastructure and the lack of their own capital (50%). In addition, the respondents pointed to the low level of cooperation between farms, high start-up costs and the lack of counselling and training. It can therefore be assumed that some of the farm owners would see better prospects for the development of agritourism if they had fuller knowledge of agritourism. Hence, they were asked what kind of knowledge they would expect mainly from advisory and educational institutions. It turned out that first they need knowledge related to catering, marketing and promotion as well as the knowledge of the principles of accounting (figure 4).

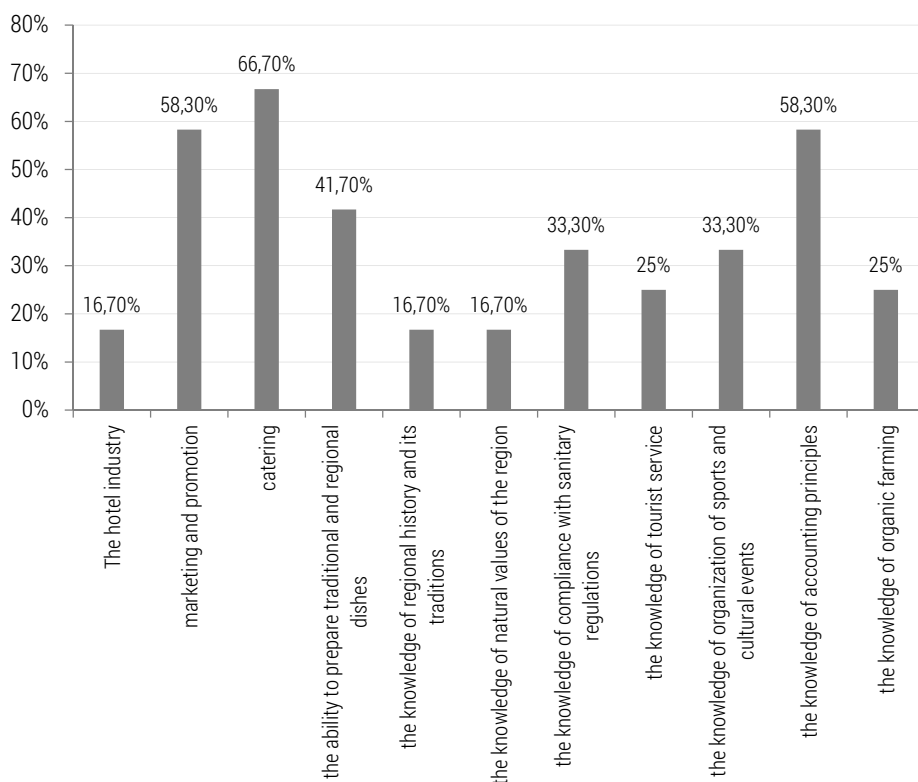


Figure 4. The range of knowledge needed to run agritourism business

Source: authors' own work.

Conclusions

The area of the Narew National Park is one of the most attractive tourist areas in Poland and even in Europe. Its landscape values (unique water areas), the occurrence of rare bird species, numerous tourist routes and many forms of proposed tourism, such as hiking, biking, horseback riding, and water and culture tourism, are the reasons behind this. Agritourism is also becoming more and more popular here.

In the work, it was assessed the possibilities of agritourism development in the Narew National Park based on the opinions obtained from the owners of agritourism farms. Most of the respondents, when deciding to start their agritourism business used foreign sources of funding, such as European funds and bank loans, and to a lesser extent, they also used their own capital. Financial resources were mainly spent on the development of investments connected with new agritourism undertakings or the extension of existing facilities, their modernization and adaptation, mainly concerning accommodation.

Farmers see the biggest limitations in the development of agritourism in the underdevelopment of infrastructure, the lack of their own capital and incomplete knowledge in the fields of catering, promotion and marketing as well as accounting principles.

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