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STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT OF THE USE OF NATURAL VALUES FOR TOURISM DEVELOPMENT ON THE EXAMPLE OF PODLASKIE REGION

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ABSTRACT: The first part of the study presents the results of research in the natural values of Podlaskie region. It shows the characteristics of tourism and recreation forms, which are preferred on environmentally valuable areas. In the second part of the article the author proposes a strategy model for the development of nature tourism, ecotourism, green therapy and recreation. The model describes the strategy steps, stating proposals for specific provisions that take into account the specificity of these forms of tourism and recreation. The final part indicates major benefits that come from the creation and implementation of strategies aimed at exploiting the potential of the natural region.

KEY WORDS: the natural values, strategic management, region

Introduction

The tourist potential of Podlaskie region is very high and indisputable by many tourism researchers in recent decades (Business Mobility International, 2009, Borkowska-Niszczoła, 2014, Panfiluk, 2015). The problem discussed among others at the individual meetings and scientific conferences is the following question: how to use this potential in the economic development of the region for tourists and for the development of the region and improve the quality of life in Podlaskie region?

The aim of the study is to present a synthetic diagnosis concerning the most important natural values of Podlaskie region on the basis of performed research. The author presented the concept of strategic approach to the development of nature tourism, health tourism and green therapy and recreation in the region based on the experience gained in the work of regional self-government (including the construction of several development strategies), his own research in the field of tourism in the years 2002-2015 and analysis of tourism development in Polish regions.

The natural values of Podlaskie region

In today's world, more and more people are concerned about improving the quality of their lives (Trzebiatowski, 2011). The author's research has shown, that an important indicator affecting the quality of life is clean natural environment. This environment is characterized by a certain natural values that determine the tourist attractiveness of the region. Natural values should be understood as goods given to us by the Creator, goods that arose independently of human activity. These are: climate, terrain and rich biodiversity. They represent one of the most important factors for tourist trips. Clean uncontaminated fauna and flora with a lovely landscape attract tourists, who are willing to overcome hundreds and even thousands of kilometres to rest, heal and experience unusual contact with nature, especially the kind that is unique in the world.

The most valued natural assets are located on environmentally valuable areas such as national parks, landscape parks, nature reserves, areas of protected landscape, monuments of nature, which are usually subject to different forms of protection (Iddle, Bines, 2004, p. 34). Among the natural areas there are also valuable natural sites that are not under protection, eg. unique forest areas rich in flora and fauna, geological outcrops, park complexes, etc.

The greatest natural values of Podlaskie region are large forest complexes of Białowieża Forest, Knyszyn Forest and Augustów Forest, Narew valley

with a highly developed system of riverbeds, picturesque valley of River Bug with high landscape values, Biebrza Marshes which are the most natural in Central Europe, the glacial landscape of North Suwałki region with many lakes. These are areas of rich biodiversity in terms of flora and fauna (Matwiejuk, 2004, p. 83-84). Natural and environmental assets of Podlaskie region present a number of opportunities for the development of tourism, because many areas of the region were preserved in almost natural (primary) state due to the lack of human interference.

In order to recognize the most important natural values in Podlaskie region a research was carried out in 2008-2010 (Szczepanowski, 2011, p. 73-78), and was still continued in 2011-2013. The study was conducted among residents of Podlaskie region, Suwałki, Łomża and Northern Kurpie, who have the greatest knowledge and experience in the development of tourism in Podlaskie province. Therefore, questionnaires were sent to the owners of the largest hotels, motels, inns, chairmen of PTTK branches, travel agencies, Podlaskie Regional Tourist Organization and local tourism organizations in Podlaskie region. In this group, the questions in a questionnaire were answered by 34 entities, which accounted for 75% of all major companies and organizations of tourist region studied. The second group were owners of farms engaged in tourism activities in rural areas (including tourist farms). Survey responses were obtained from 84 farms located in all municipalities of Podlaskie region (surveys return was at the level of 64%).

The multitude of pre-determined factors that make up the tourist attractions forced the author to make a choice by the method of diagnostic survey. As a result of in-depth interviews and consultations with experts in the field of tourism, with universities of Białystok, and the most experienced practitioners of the tourism industry, 6 factors were selected for further study that characterize the most important tourist natural values of Podlaskie region. Diagnostic surveys and expert interviews allowed for the preparation of the questionnaire and conducting surveys. In the questionnaire the indicator concept was used. The respondents were asked the extent to which selected natural values are important to them and affect or may affect the development of tourism in Podlaskie. The scale of 0-5 was adopted, where 0 indicates that the value does not affect the development of tourism, 5 means that the value affects it in the highest degree. The comparison of the level of importance of natural assets in the opinion of representatives of tourism organizations, hotels and owners of tourist farms is shown in figure 1.

The highest average rating in entire comparison of 118 subjects who participated in the research, was received by clean natural environment value with an average of 4.83. As many as 98 respondents rated it at the highest value – 5.

The next positions were taken by the following values:

- large number of forest areas – average 4.34;
- good landscape values – average 4.25;
- high biodiversity – average 4.12;
- national and landscape parks – average 4.11;
- presence of rivers (Narew, Biebrza, Czarna Hańcza, Rospuda and others) and the Augustow Lake District – average 3.99.

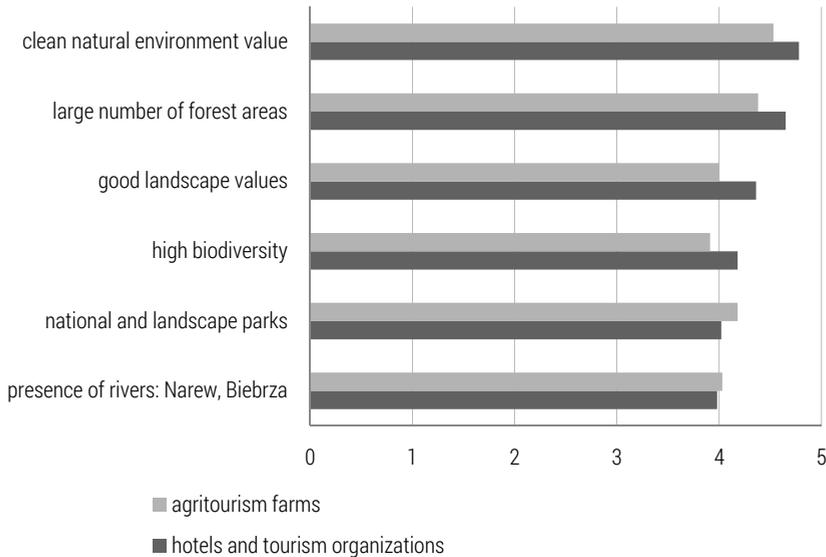


Figure 1. Natural values of the Podlaskie region in the opinion of representatives of tourism organizations, hotels and owners of tourist farms

Source: author's own research.

The most valuable natural values of the region of Podlaskie were also evaluated by both owners of agritourism farms, as well as representatives of tourism organizations, owners of hotels, motels, and inns. Clean natural environment value has been assessed by the owners of agritourism farms with an average of 4.78, and by the tourism organizers at the level of 4.53. In contrast, presence of a large number of forest areas value was evaluated at respectively 4.65 and 4.38. The representatives of tourist organizations and hoteliers assessed these values slightly higher than other respondents. This is probably due to the fact that the owners of agritourism farms, who experience clean environment, are more used to it and are less exposed to the pollution, which increasingly occur in cities. Representatives of tourism organizations and tourism organizers offering accommodation on a higher level,

put the good landscape values on position 3, and the high biodiversity on position 4. The owners of agritourism farms put national parks, landscape and nature reserves as third most important environmental value, while at fourth they put presence of rivers, such as Narew, Biebrza, Czarna Hańcza and others. At the same time it should be mentioned that the differences in individual values assessment are very low and are within tenths of a percentage point. A surprise in the comparison of 118 entities is merely the fifth position of national parks and landscapes, which in the circulation reviews were rated the highest, also by many experts in the field of tourism in Podlaskie.

Nature tourism, ecotourism, green therapy and recreation in the development of the region

High, above-average natural values of the region of Podlaskie province constitute an excellent opportunity to practice nature tourism and ecotourism. The definitions of these terms in the subject bibliography are varied. However, they are always related to learning and direct experience of a natural, pure, untransformed or slightly transformed natural environment. Nature tourism and ecotourism initially were not commercial in nature and were referred to as alternative tourism, the aim of which was to be in the natural environment, usually combined with learning about it. This kind of tourism was generally practiced by educated people, characterized by a high level of environmental awareness. Over time, nature tourism began to take the form of commercial and even mass tourism (Page, Dowling, 2002, p. 48). Ecotourism in the 80's of the twentieth century was enriched by the social and cultural content (Cabellos-Lascurian, 2002, p. 48).

Nowadays the term nature tourism defines all journeys aimed at studying, observing and enjoying the nature (Mika, 2007, p. 207). In defining the nature tourism, the aspect of non-infringement of biodiversity of visited natural systems is noted in addition to cognitive elements (Krzyszowska-Kostrowicka, 1995, 5.2).

Ecotourism covers only traveling individually or in small groups, which in addition to the natural environment can be focused on direct contact with the culture. It is assumed that eco-tourism should not only harm but help protect wildlife and indigenous culture, but also bring economic benefits to local communities. It can take commercial forms, provided that the income goes to the people and constitutes a factor in the economic recovery of the area (Cabellos-Lascurian, 1996, p. 301).

Analysis of global trends in tourism clearly shows an increase in the number of arrivals to areas of high natural values and the rise in popularity of

forms of tourism related to the learning about the environment. In the 90's, the average growth rate of tourist arrivals in the world was estimated at 7%, and ecotourism at 20-34%. In 2004 in the field of ecotourism and nature tourism, its growth was three times higher than the total growth in the world tourism market (TIES, 2005). This trend is beneficial, especially from an economic point of view, because tourism is a chance for economic recovery of poorly developed areas with high, extraordinary natural values. Thanks to the development of tourism, including natural and eco-tourism, municipalities' and region's tax revenues increase. Local governments have larger budgets to realize the necessary investments, which lead to a reduction of unemployment, creation of new jobs, which allows suppression of the processes of migration from rural areas and small towns to large urban centres.

Civilization changes of XX and XXI century, related to among others the competitiveness, staying on the market, increasing the pace of life cause stress and all kinds of mental and physical problems in many people. Therefore, resting and recreation becomes increasingly important for the discharge of nervous tension. Measure that prevents civilization diseases in the modern dawn is recreation, which also contributes to the development of interests and personality and increase physical activity of the society. It seems that a very effective and friendly way to combat stress is green therapy and recreation.

The green therapy concept was introduced by B. Poskrobko. It is understood as a treatment for light mental and emotional disorders without the use of drugs through direct contact with nature, experiencing natural landscapes, colors, smells and sound of nature through its impact on the psyche. It is supposed mainly to treat disorders caused by overwork, or too long, constant working using the computer. Green recreation means activities performed in order to strengthen physical, mental and creative forces of the man. It is assumed, that it should take place mainly in the open air in different ecosystems – forests, fields, meadow or water, as well as in parks, groves, gardens, herb gardens or flower gardens. Places of recreation should arouse the interest of the participants; therefore, they should be enriched with different information and educational devices, for example technical and cultural in order to strengthen the physical and mental relaxation (Poskrobko, 2013, p. 5-6).

Green and leisure treatment may be carried out in different organization forms. For example, by multilateral organizations operating in large forest areas, swamp-meadows and the field. Polish forests, characterized by, inter alia, very clean air, high biodiversity, sparsely populated and poorly developed economy are predestined in this respect.

The development of nature tourism, eco-tourism and green therapy and recreation is also supported by the profile of practicing tourists which is dominated by people in middle-age groups, higher education and high and medium income (Zaręba, 2006, p. 84). Participants of nature tourism, for example birdwatchers, usually spend more money per day of travel than an average tourist (Wight, 1996, p. 24). A chance in the development of nature tourism is rich wallets of tourists from Belarus and Ukraine, who among foreign visitors in Poland spend the most on tourist destinations. Those tourists after deducing declared spending on shopping dedicated \$ 94 for one day of their stay in 2012, and tourists from Ukraine \$ 84, with an average of \$ 78 USD from overseas and European Union in 2012 (Polish Tourist Organisation, 2013, p. 10).

The specific character of nature tourism, ecotourism (Page, Dowling, 2002, p. 51) and green therapy and recreation makes its development more difficult than other forms of tourism. It requires long-term planned activities, extensive cooperation of regional authorities, management of protected areas, local tourist organizations, owners of travel agencies, tourist facilities, and inhabitants of the region.

Author's research regarding natural values of Podlaskie region proved high potential for nature tourism and ecotourism development. Unfortunately, over the last 15 years, the number of tourists visiting Podlaskie region does not increase, including provided accommodation. Similar situation is observed in regions with equally high natural potential, such as: Warmia-Masuria, Lublin, Rzeszów, Lubin (Szczepanowski 2009 and further research according to GUS). However, world market (*Fact Sheet: Global Ecotourism, The International Ecotourism Society*, Washington, 2005; UNWTO World Tourism Barometer 2017) presents constant growth of number of tourists interested in nature tourism. Thus, potential itself is not sufficient. In order to accelerate the development of tourism, especially nature tourism, it is necessary to efficiently manage touristic potential.

Strategic management in tourism development in the region

Perspective and a more durable direction of development of tourism is provided by strategic management which is defined as an approach to economic and social opportunities and challenges in a comprehensive management process, focused on the formulation and implementation of effective strategies (Gryffin, 2005, p. 224). In tourism, management process based on the formulation and implementation of a strategy that promotes, among others, higher degree of compliance of organizations and institutions of different

stakeholders in tourism with their surroundings and the achievement of strategic objectives (Michałowski, 2008, p. 168). The objectives of the development of tourism, which are the objectives of tourism policy, usually come down to:

- rational use of production factors involved in the tourism economy,
- the adaptation of tourist and travel services for possessed tourist attractions,
- coordinating the development of tourism and its relationship with other spheres of life,
- the search for the optimum response to the tourist needs,
- the application of the measures necessary to achieve these objectives.

To achieve these goals, tourism development strategies should be prepared based on knowledge and knowledge of the factors of its development and possibilities in given socio-economic circumstances, taking into account the expectations of all stakeholders.

In Poland, there have been attempts for strategic approach to the development of nature tourism, mainly in the development strategies of the provinces. Research by (Rochmińska and Stasiak, 2004) suggest that strategies for regional tourism are very often ones of the strategic areas. As many as 11 Polish provinces considered it to be one of the main elements of its socio-economic development. The analysis of the development strategies of all Polish provinces conducted by B. Zawilińska indicates, that issues concerning environmental protection, in particular the conservation of biodiversity, as well as the empowerment of protected areas in parts of the strategy were not taken into account at all. As part of the strategy, in which tourism is important, trends and preferred forms are discussed in detail. Unfortunately, nature tourism, even in the provinces, which strongly accentuate the natural wealth of the land, does not appear, or is merely mentioned. Records of nature tourism or ecotourism can be found only in the development strategies of Podkarpackie (where tourism development is seen as one of the directions of actions to ensure the income of the population living in environmentally valuable areas), Podlaskie (where support for the development of tourism, including eco-tourism, is to serve the development of the economic base) and the Warmia-Mazury (where attention is paid to the development of the concept and promoting tourism products, among others, in the field of eco-tourism) (Zawilińska, p. 129).

Unfortunately, from the perspective of almost 15 years from the date of approval of the development strategy of provinces, as well as tourism development programs (including the region of Podlaskie) it is clear that little or even almost nothing of the assumptions were realized. Only the educational paths in forests, national and landscape parks were extended, which is mainly

thanks to the management and employees of the State Forests and some national parks and landscapes. Thus, it can be said that many benefits that could have been provided by the preparation and implementation of strategies (plans) of development, and thus a systemic approach covering all areas related to the tourist economy have been lost. This condition may be due to the lack of choice of strategic areas (called engines of development of the region) (Polski, 2004, p. 35).

Preparation of tourism development strategy should be accompanied by measures in the form of creating the instruments of its implementation by public organizations and businesses, and then the implementation of specific tourist projects. All these activities make up the tourism management, which in turn has a direct impact on the management of tourism, implemented by the various operators involved in tourism (Wiatrak, 2010, vol. 8, No. 3 (29)). It should be emphasized that the management of tourism is not only the organization of tourism in the area, but also its collision-free operation of the system, the economy and society.

The attempts of forming the methodology of tourism strategy may be found in literature. The stages of strategy construction are presented, among others, by A. Rochmicka. (Rochmińska, Stasiak 2004), however, without such aspects as monitoring and location of strategic products. Rather complete procedure of tourism development strategy construction is presented by D. Milewski (Meyer, Milewski, 2009). However, in author's opinion, it lacks the indication to the mission of the strategy. Interesting methodology of regional strategies construction is prepared for many regions by Polish Tourism Development Agency. In those materials, for instance, for Świętokrzyskie region (Polish Tourism Development Agency 2005), authors take notice on the creation of region identity and creation of region brand. Analyzed strategies are often incomplete and do not refer to regions naturally valuable.

In regions with large amounts of valuable natural areas it is necessary to take sectoral strategies for tourism development (figure 2) which takes into account the development of nature tourism, eco-tourism, green therapy and recreation.

The basis (foundation) is constituted by prospective diagnosis, endearing future, anticipated, internal and external conditions for the development of tourism in the region. The purpose of this diagnosis is to present balance of favorable and unfavorable features of the terrain and space and to identify the competitive advantages and barriers to growth on this background. Elements of benefit resulting from the prospective diagnosis for the development strategy of nature tourism, eco-tourism and green therapy include: "unique natural, scenic medicines which are an opportunity for the develop-

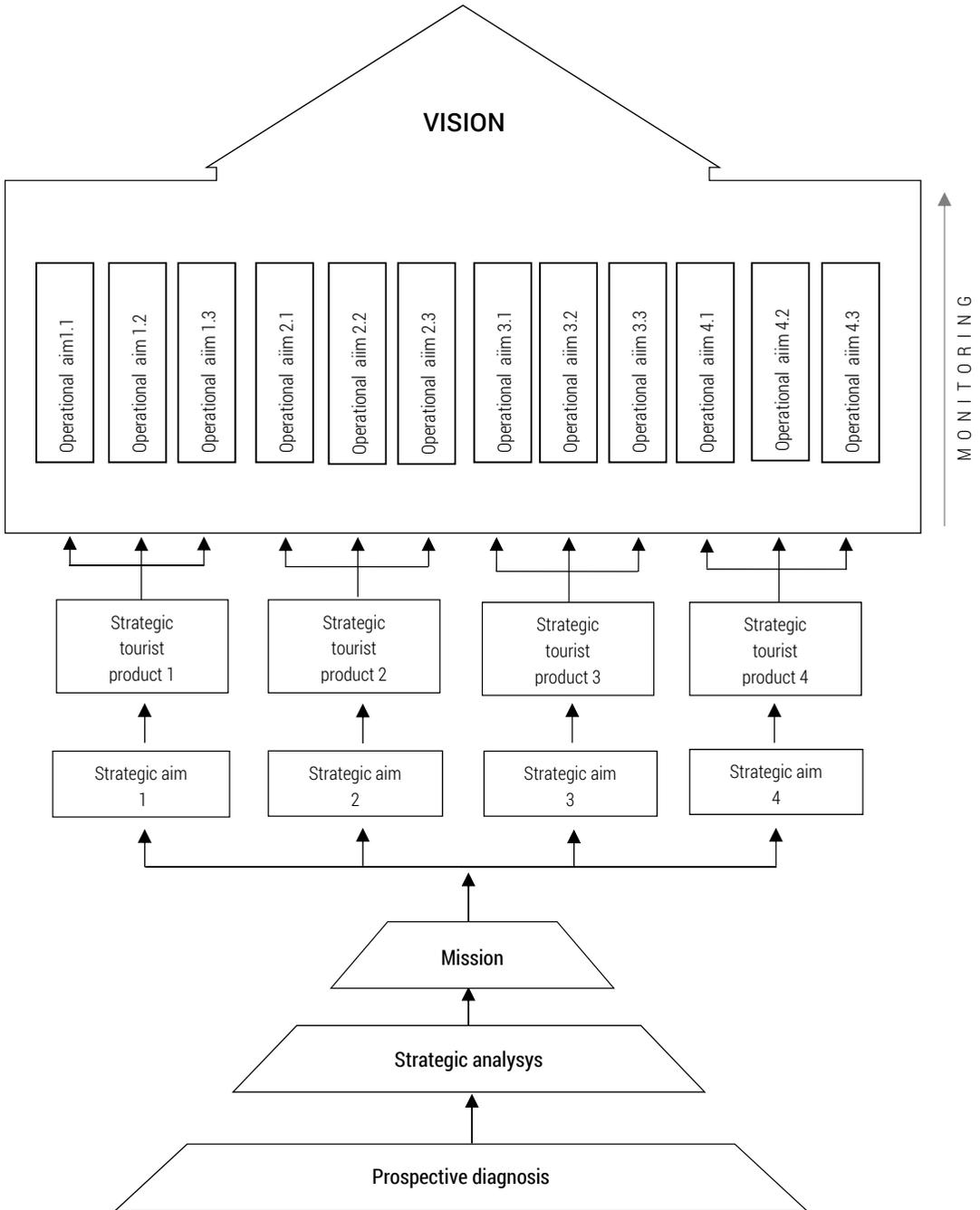


Figure 2. Sectoral model of strategy for tourism development

Source: author's own research.

ment of regions due to global trends aimed at a healthy lifestyle. Barriers include: poor accessibility, lack of accommodation infrastructure”.

The next step in creating a tourism development strategy should be strategic analysis. A common form of analysis in development strategies is a SWOT analysis. It analyses the strengths and weaknesses in forces in the region in the field of nature tourism, ecotourism, green therapy and recreation and environment analysis of the region in terms of the potential opportunities and threats to the processes of tourism development.

Tourism development strategy should outline a long-term vision of development (10-20 years). A **vision** is desired, an ideal target state of tourism in the region. It allows to assess the level of tourism development e.g. every 5 years, checking whether the mission, strategic objectives are being carried out, operational and strategic products are being created. Therefore a concise and clear-cut vision, which constitutes the desired end state of tourism development in the region all over the stage of implementation of the development strategy, should be founded. Sample content of the determined vision is: “Podlaskie region in 20 years will be ecologically pure and welcoming to all tourists and inhabitants of the region”.

Mission is an overarching goal, which is stated in a high level of generality (Kot, 2003, p. 23). It is the leading goal, to which (like vision) all activities related to the strategy should apply. For the described strategy it may sound as follows: *Podlaskie is a region using biodiversity with its richness of culture and respect to make the quality of life for residents and tourists better, opened especially for investors with environmentally friendly solutions.*

Strategic objectives for the development of tourism in the region require a hierarchical order and to identify the measures needed to achieve these objectives, taking advantage of the region’s strengths. Examples of strategic objectives are: “development of health tourism based on forest areas and peat deposits, expansion of environmentally conscious development of hiking trails in national parks and landscape of the region, creation of nature tourism centres and green recreation and therapy”.

The strategic goals should point to the creation of specific strategic tourism products which are to become leading products in the area. Focusing on the development of a number of selected products is much better than the dissipation of forces and resources over multiple products. An example of a product can be The European Centre for Green Therapy and Recreation. The concept of the Centre presents the objectives of the research and implementation project, located on the Polish-Lithuanian-Belarusian borderland. It is a specific corner of Europe characterized by the highest biodiversity, sparsely populated and with poorly developed economy. In this area such specialties as therapy and recreation in ecosystems, and flower and herbal

therapy in special gardens, smell therapy, music therapy, or hippotherapy in tourist facilities can be developed in parallel. The basis of the concept are the new expectations of the growing number of tourists who wish to find mental relaxation, rest their eyes tired with working using the computer while looking for new attractions and experiences (Poskrobko, 2014, p.131-148).

A desirable activity, therefore, is to create tourism products which enable achieving market success and a significantly increase in competitiveness of the area. This creates the possibility of building a high-quality products that in the future will become branded products, which means being recognizable, having its own name and logo as well as ensuring high satisfaction for tourists.

The final part of the strategy is to develop concrete operational objectives describing practical actions that will be taken by the competent institutions and organizations involved in tourism in the region. Examples of operational objectives for implementation of European Centre for Green Therapy and Recreation are: developing of the concept of tourism development and recreational centers, appointing of green therapy and recreation, public consultation in relation to the design and location of facilities, development programs, tours, sightseeing and recreation.

A well-prepared strategy also gives an answer to the question: how to achieve the desired state of development of nature tourism, ecotourism, green therapy and recreation? It is important to remember to appoint a special team that will monitor implementation of the strategy that will be implemented in life, not only adorn the shelves of local government office or regional government office.

Author's research conducted in 2016-2017 in all marshal offices in Poland prove that there is a lack of current tourism development strategy in regions of high natural values (such as Podlasie). Whereas, in regions with current strategy there is lack of monitoring. It is, thus, recommended to create the team responsible for monitoring and efficient control of the process of particular parts of the strategy implementation; those regarding mission, vision, strategic goals and, of course, operative goals for realization of natural potential of the region exploration.

Conclusions

Podlaskie region has special, outstanding and often unique natural values, which were examined, systematized and partially described in this report, and constitute an excellent development potential of the region. These values are mainly clean environment, biodiversity and a large number

of forest areas. They allow a good rest, the regeneration of physical and mental forces, and also help in the treatment of various diseases. Natural values of the Podlaskie region thus constitute an essential factor in the development of a higher quality of life for local residents as well as visitors (tourists) visiting this area. At the same time they are the basis for the development of nature tourism, ecotourism, green therapy and recreation. Taking into account the natural conditions of Podlaskie region, a holistic, long-term approach is needed which will be based on the construction of the development strategy for the successive stages proposed in this paper. The benefits that will be streamed from well-prepared and implemented development strategies, especially in regions with extensive amounts of valuable natural areas are among others:

- increased interest of local communities in acquiring closer knowledge of the natural values of the area,
- regional society participation in the in the construction of strategy through consultations,
- the creation of new jobs and sources of income for the local community,
- enabling the pursuit of a stable business in the field of tourism (including farming and forestry)
- the possibility of greater respect for the protection of nature sites,
- increasing opportunities for the conservation of biodiversity,
- construction and modernization of transport, catering and accommodation infrastructure.

Harmonious cooperation between tourism entrepreneurs, regional authorities, municipalities, local and regional tourism organizations, travel offices and other entities associated with the tourist industry is needed in order to obtain these benefits, or at least a part of them.

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