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Agroecotourism development in the Republic of Belarus

Abstract. Agroecotourism is becoming the most dynamical branch of the world tourist industry. The Republic of Belarus has inexhaustible potential for the development of agroecotourism. It promotes a steady development of rural regions, raises well-being of its inhabitants by attracting investments, creates modern social infrastructure and new work places, contributes to the achievement of social and cultural purposes. Agroecotourism is considered to be an important component of a successful realization of the 'State Program for the Revival and Development of the Countryside in the Republic of Belarus for 2005-2010'. The problem is that the agrotouristic enterprises have not enough money to increase the scale of realization of basic concepts and models stipulated by the National Program. Maintaining and developing the natural and human potential of Belarus will require making the agroecotourism a profitable branch of the agrarian sector of economy.

Key words: agroecotourism, development, international tourist trips, Neman region, Augustov canal

Introduction

Tourism has become one of the most profitable and intensively developing branches of the world economy. Tourism expenses make up 12% of the world GDP, 8% of the world export and 30-35% of the world trade in services. For the last 20 years the annual average rates of growth of the international tourism have been up to 5,1%, currency receipts 14%. Experts forecast that this branch of economy will develop at high rates further on. Tourist business incomes are expected to increase up to \$ 1,248 billion by 2020 while in 1998 they made up \$ 444,7 billion [When ... 2004].

According to data of the World Tourist Organization (WTourO) the development of world tourism shows a growing competition among the countries and regions wishing to receive tourists. However, undeveloped material resources of tourism and its infrastructure, information vacuum, absence of objects ready to hold excursions disadvantage the countries wishing to receive tourists.

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Problems of agroecotourism development

The problem of development of tourism in the Republic of Belarus is paid attention to by the government of the country. To turn tourism into a profitable branch of economy is the task the president of the country put to various governing bodies. All ministries and departments involved in tourist activity are working to achieve the goal. The new situation in the development of Belarussian tourism is reflected in the projects of the decree of the president 'On the state support of tourism in the Republic of Belarus'. This is also reflected in the national program for development of tourism in 2006-2010, in a new edition of the law 'About tourism', in decisions and resolutions of local authorities.

It is important to note that tourism is not only companies, tourist agencies but it also comprises a whole sector of economy: hotel business, public catering, industry of entertainments, transportation, household service and many others. The product made by each sphere should meet the world standards developed by WTourO. An essential contribution to the creation of tourist competitive product and to the transformation of tourism into a profitable branch of economy should be made by the state. The national program for the development of tourism in 2006-2010 will be fulfilled if the economic mechanisms stated in the project of the Decree of the President 'On the state support of development of tourism in the Republic of Belarus' are implemented and will work efficiently. Adopted at the end of 2000 the national program for development of tourism in 2001-2005 assumed that about 159 billion roubles will be spent for its realization. It was planned that in 2004 tourism incomes would make up to \$ 4.637 million; the number of employees in this sphere would increase up to 5889,8; the total tourism revenue would reach \$ 36.943 million. Unfortunately, the program was not successful as only 6 billion roubles were awarded from the budget sources and 2 billion roubles from nonbudget sources. At the same time in 2004 the rates of injection of money in development of the infrastructure made 70 % of the 2003 level. In 2005 the volume of investments in the branch increased almost twice and by the end of 2005 the program was executed in almost 70 % [Radiuk 2007].

According to data obtained by WTourO the number of the international tourist trips is growing. Only in 2008 they increased by 20 % in comparison with 2007. Human and natural resources, sights attract foreign tourists. In 2005-2008 the volume of tourist services has grown half as much; the profit growth made up 133.6%. More tourists visit the country. But the problem is that tourists do not hurry to spend their money coming into the Republic of Belarus. In Lithuania the average tourist spends \$ 400-500, in Poland \$ 700-800. Though on the territory of Belarus there are 15 000 objects of natural, cultural and historical heritage, only 5% of them are used for tourist purposes. But the quality of the tourist product is low, thus it does not meet the requirements of WTourO. So, foreign tourists travelling via Belarus do not stop for a night even in such tourist centres as Myr, Nesvizh, Novogrudok, Turov, Polotsk.

A new edition of the law 'About tourism' obliges touristic companies to improve the quality of their touristic products and offers, to improve the obligatory professional certification of guides and guides-interpreters, to enter the names of certificated experts into the appropriate National Register and to refer to tourism as the only business activity of travel agencies and tourist operators, the latter should be only legal persons. The results of a research testify that, in order to organize the work of operators effectively, the staff should comprise not less than 5-6 men. According to the Belarussian legislation a businessman can

have no more than 3 employees being his relatives. The law 'About tourism' regulates the activity of touristic enterprises more rigidly and determines their duties, registers the mechanism of rendering tourist services, contains paragraphs about the requirements in the quality of services, safety and insurance in the sphere of tourism, imposes the responsibility for defaults or inadequate execution of functions, which under a contract are carried out by a third person, on the touristic service contractor.

To stimulate development of tourism in the near future it is necessary to solve a number of problems:

- to improve an entrance and internal visa customs regulations;
- to eliminate price discrimination in hotels;
- to certify the quality of hotel services;
- to develop and to fulfil a marketing program for development of tourism;
- to accomplish the improvement of 26 tourist zones;
- to maintain the state financial support for development of tourism in the initial period as a sector of national economy;
- to distribute high quality booklets with the description of Belarusian tourist products through international tourist firms and operators;
- to buy space in the international foreign exhibitions for accommodation of Belarusian tourist advertisements, as the lack of information is an obstacle for those who want to have a rest in Belarus.

Some of the factors restraining development of this branch has already been eliminated. Visa prices for the US citizens are reduced, the procedure of reception of two and three-term visas is simplified, the principle of "one window " at the border is put into force ,etc. In order to assist in formation of the Belarussian image as a region attractive for development of tourism and in promotion of the national touristic product in the external market the Chamber of Representatives of the country ratified the Charter of WTourO. Being a member of this organization, Belarus will take advantage of the valuable experience of WTourO experts in conducting statistical accounting. Besides, the republic will receive access to the expert estimation of the projects directed to creation of a competitive tourist brand of the Republic of Belarus. And finally, there are chances to receive significant financial support which is awarded by international organizations for the reconstruction and restoration of the touristic centres.

The strategy of tourist business in our country should have more definite features. The president's decree which provides tax privileges for tourist companies contributes much to the development of tourism in the republic. In particular, a touristic concern "Belinturist" plans to construct guest houses in locations endowed with historical and natural sights. Certainly, it will not solve all problems concerning the infrastructure but the business will be set in motion. It is time to create a special fund to which travel companies (652 organizations, 655 tourist operators and 652 tourist agents are engaged in this sphere of activity) would make contributions . For example, in Cyprus tourist operators deduct up to 5 % from their profit and remit it into a special fund. Then the fund council decides how these means should be spent. It had a positive influence on the tourist influx. But it is necessary to lower the level of taxation for this purpose. The decree of the chief of the state provides support for enterprises investing resources in the development of touristic infrastructure, for tax credits, for VAT on building and assembly works which are carried out by contracted and subcontracted organizations during the normal term of construction

and reconstruction of objects in the tourist industry. The document stipulates that these privileges concern only those objects which are located along the highways included into the international transportation corridors. Beside the above-stated privileges concern those who erect tourist objects on the territory of such national parks as "Belovezhskaya Preserve", "Braslav Lakes", "Naroch", "Pripyat- "Beresina State Biosphere Reserve", and also in vicinity of the Belarussian part of the Augustov canal and the cities of Nesvizh, Polotsk, Turov. It is proposed that the document should concern the territory in 26 tourist zones created in Belarus.

In the near future the reconstruction of the Belarussian part of the Augustov canal will be completed which will increase the afflux of foreign tourists in this region. The region is famous for its rich cultural heritage which is located in very picturesque places. The network of village roads provides communication between village settlements with the administrative centre in Sopotskin and other settlements. It creates a certain base for planning the reconstruction of roads to provide service to the flow of tourists connected with the canal and it helps solving the problem of village revival. 2946 men live in the region. To be ready to receive tourists in this country it is necessary to take some actions.

1. To use local mass media in order to involve the village population in touristic services as a source of income and a rise of their standard of living; to involve public organizations, Sopotskin local council, local authorities of Grodno region, tourist and sport organizations of the region in this activity.

2. To complete the construction of village houses whose owners would like to receive tourists. For this purpose it is necessary for the village population to use not only their own monetary resources, but also soft loans.

3. To reduce the requirements for allocation of construction rights to the investors in cafes, bars, restaurants, camping sites, rental and household services, new village houses established at their expense. A reliable legislative base will stimulate an investment activity directed to creation of the tourist product.

4. To revive musical traditions and family folklore, to organize national festivals with tourist participation.

5. To revive activity of the local handicraftsmen: weavers, smiths, potters, embroiderers, artists, and those making things from straw, wicker, wood and to sell the produce in shops, booths, minimarkets located along the Augustov canal by salesmen dressed in national costumes;

6. Special attention should be given to high quality and variety of dishes of the Belarussian cuisine for tourists, to creation of comfortable village houses. To solve this problem it is necessary to employ experts in cooking and housekeeping which are trained in Belarussian colleges.

The practical importance of development of rural tourism in the Neman region is that this branch may become a part of investment sources for reviving the country, an important factor of employment and earnings for village population. It is confirmed by the experience of foreign countries that are not rich in mineral resources but enjoy a high level of social and economic standards thanks to the service industry and first of all to the tourist business. Accommodation of tourists was expected to become a secondary economic activity in Italy, which was a recognized leader in the sphere of tourism, with regard to rising the Italian standard of living. However, today's demand has changed the concept of this activity which became the major one for many rural people [Klitsunova 2008].

In the Republic of Belarus there are already more than 500 country houses and manors receiving tourists. Here various services, traditional countryside lifestyle, cultural and material heritage of the Belarussian village and the beauty of rural nature is offered to visitors. It is necessary to mobilize and to use a favourable geographical position of the Neman region, its historical sights and monuments, national parks, reserves, hunting areas, hospitality of the local population, traditions and customs, the national cuisine, Belovezhskaya preserve, the reconstruction of the Augustov canal which are the components of the tourist potential of Grodno region. It will help to create a competitive tourist product supported financially by the state.

Summary

In order to make the agroecotourism a dynamically developing branch it is important to solve such problems as a lack of traditions and experience in receiving tourists, ignorance of foreign languages, weakness and isolation of providers of village tourism services, low level of the tourist staff preparation and of excursion programs, insufficient promotion of the tourist product. For the solution of these problems it is necessary that 30-40% of the investment funds should come from return of taxes to the local budgets paid by the tourists. Companies which are engaged in tourist business, travel companies should be granted tax privileges. It is necessary to use these funds for keeping the traditional workshops with the local owners, for editing high quality promotion materials of tourist products, for training experts in rowing, water cycling, swimming, fishing, hunting, horse riding, foreign languages.

Thus, only an active position of the communes interested in development of tourism will allow to fulfil the task put forward by the chief of state in the Republic of Belarus, to make tourism a profitable branch of the national economy.

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