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## WHAT IS NATURE TOURISM? CASE STUDY: UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

**Abstract:** On the one hand in recent years *nature tourism* (*turystyka przyrodnicza*) has constituted a significant part of the tourism industry, on the other it has caused many problems for researchers attempting to define the phenomenon. Should the tourism destination or its primary motivation determine its categorisation? Is there indeed a need when considering practice as well as theory? The authors of the article have attempted a discourse with both foreign and domestic literature and subsequently sought to find the perceived meaning of *turystyka przyrodnicza* (*nature tourism*) amongst students of Poznań University particularly those associated with the natural environment on their degree courses. The present article should be considered as a contribution to further work in this field theoretically as well as practically.

**Keywords:** nature tourism, nature-based tourism, nature-oriented tourism, ecotourism.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Nature tourism is an important part of the world tourism industry (LINDBERG 1991, p. 5, *TIES* 2003) – and importantly – one which is gaining in prominence (CAMPBELL 1999, p. 534). LINDBERG, FURZE, STAFF & BLACK (1997, p. 1) report that the nature tourism sector accounts for circa 7% of all international travel, but varies significantly with respect to given world regions. It should be pointed out that the annual global nature tourism growth rate is estimated at 10-30% (*TIES* 2003). It is this region, and more precisely the concentration of natural assets (as well as the tourism image) of a given destination, which determines such large differences. And so, as an example, in Australia the nature tourism sector accounts for as many as 62% of foreign and 16% of domestic tourists. This group is distinguished by its profitability: in 2008, foreign ‘nature tourism’ tourists averaged spending of \$6009 per trip, while ‘classical’ tourists just \$3747<sup>1</sup>.

Nature tourism is considered to be one of the more important factors attracting foreign tourists in many African countries. However it should be pointed out that this form of travel is not always a reflection of positive change. In the opinion of AKAMA (1996), nature tourism in Kenya, stereotypically created by western organisations, is contrary to the needs and expectations of the local population (p. 572). This is

because it only focuses on selected natural assets known and promoted for centuries (to a large extent due to colonial transformations and subsequent generations of Europeans and North Americans).

In Poland nature tourism is the subject of numerous academic works, as compared to other European countries many destinations of high natural value (relatively speaking) are to be found here, and the number of foreign tourists is continually growing (reflected for example in the services offered by the *Eco-Frontiers Ranch*). However the fundamental issue seems to lie with a precise definition of what nature tourism really is both in Poland as well as in the global context. This is significant not only for academic research but also (and perhaps even more importantly) for accurate market analyses in the tourism industry.

### 2. NATURE TOURISM: CONCEPTS AND DEFINITIONS

The very concept of nature tourism, whose beginnings date back to the 18<sup>th</sup> c. fascination with the elemental nature of Romanticism as being opposed to the ever more civilized urban and industrialized world, has

produced issues and discussion in Polish as well as foreign literature. The term *nature tourism* is often used interchangeably with *green*, *alternative*, *soft*, *sustainable*, *responsible* or *ecotourism* (KRIPPENDORF 1996, pp. 517-532, PRISKIN 2001, p. 637, DUDEK & KOWALCZYK 2003, pp. 117-118, NIEZGODA 2008, p. 79); KRZYMOWSKA-KOSTROWICKA (1995, p. 25) as well as KOWALCZYK & KULCZYK (2010, p. 127) also use the concept of *eco-friendly tourism* whereas KAMIENIECKA – *pro-ecological tourism* (1995 p. 11). Additionally, there are forms of tourism directly associated with the natural environment. However, their nomenclature refers to a given ecosystem, for example forest tourism, lake tourism, polar tourism etc., or others such as canoe, adventure, bird watching or survival tourism, at the heart of nature but terminologically associated with types of activity (PRISKIN 2001, p. 639).

In the context of conceptual differences it is particularly important to present the different perspectives of the various researchers. Primarily it should be pointed out that all forms of nature tourism, despite their differences, are able to resist mass tourism (although DUDEK & KOWALCZYK, 2003 p. 120 believe that nature tourism can itself be a mass form). Secondly, most researchers agree that nature tourism is in fact any kind of tourism taking place in the natural environment, on the proviso that the nature tourist's source of satisfaction predominantly stems from being in touch with the natural environment (e.g. CEBALLOS-LASCURAIN 1996, pp. 19-20, GOODWIN 1996, p. 287, BLAMEY 2001, pp. 5-22, SHAFER & CHOI 2006, pp. 625-626).

Similar opinions are voiced by organisations involved with tourism management who consider it to be a form of leisure taking advantage of natural assets in a particular manner (e.g. *Western Australian Tourism Commission and Department of Conservation and Land Management*, 1997, p. 4). On the other hand some researchers point out that nature tourism should be associated with activities taking place in a relatively untransformed natural environment (VALENTINE 1992, p. 108, GOODWIN 1996, p. 287, WANG 2000, p. 87). However, rightly or not, at this point the implication is that nature tourism in urban areas, but based on visiting zoos, arboreta, natural history museums or the like, is excluded. It is also clear that not all activities undertaken in a natural environment, untransformed by human activity, are undertaken with the intention of being close to nature. For example, in order to go climbing, both an artificial climbing wall in a city as well as rock faces in Jura Krakowsko-Częstochowska may be used, and the main purpose for such a trip is not contemplation of nature but a well-defined physical activity. In such a situation the best solution seems to be provided by GRENIER (2004, p. 66) who subdivided nature tourism into:

- **nature-based tourism** – where the natural environment is the background for the performance of various activities; they are also possible in an urban setting;
- **nature-oriented tourism** – in order to contemplate the essence of nature, closely associated with it and as a rule it should be in a practically untouched natural environment; nature tourism understood in such a way has also been referred to in the English language literature as *environmental tourism* (GOELDNER & RITCHIE 2009, pp. 227-229).

However, attention should be drawn to the fact that the use of *nature-based tourism* in this literature may lead to confusion, as some researchers consider it to be synonymous with tourism taking place solely in the natural environment (e.g. JAMROZY, BACKMAN & BACKMAN 1996, p. 913, ALAEDDINOGLU & CAN 2011, p. 199), and even as a phrase meaning exactly the same as *nature-oriented tourism* (NEWSOME, MOORE & DOWLING 2002, p. 13).

On the other hand some researchers consider nature tourism to be only that found in legally protected areas (DENG, KING & BAUER 2002, p. 424, DUDEK & KOWALCZYK 2003, p. 122).

The confusion in the nomenclature on nature tourism is furthered by the use of the phrase *ecotourism*, which is held to be synonymous with nature tourism by many researchers (e.g. CORBETT 2006, p. 144, Luzar *et al.* 1998, p. 48); according to DUDEK & KOWALCZYK most Polish researchers are also of that opinion (2003, p. 120). It seems that this form of tourism may be categorised as 'nature-based', as it does not necessarily have to take place in a natural setting (even if in most cases it does) (DOWLING & WEILER 1997, p. 51, GRENIER 2004, pp. 63-64, MASON 2000, p. 336, LEUNG *et al.* 2001, p. 21). Fennell is of a similar opinion, who in comparing as many as 85 ecotourism definitions considered the following to be its primary premises:

- usually practiced in a natural setting;
- the study of and getting to know the natural and cultural aspects of a given area (ecological education);
- limited impact of tourists on the visited environment;
- benefits for local communities;
- the tourists' involvement in the protection of the given environment (2001, p. 24).

Similar components are mentioned by VARLEY & MEDWAY (2011, p. 903). From the point of view of ecotourism specialists, all those conditions can be fulfilled if tourists visit zoos and if they are impressed by the fauna, for example, of the African savannah found there, they can then search for additional information about the life of cheetahs; or perhaps if they

help Sukuma people financially, they could be contributing to their protection, all while being in Poland, and not by exploring the Serengeti National Park.

HIGHMAN & LÚCK (2002, pp. 36-51), WU, WANG & HO (2010, p. 739) as well as KULCZYK (2008, pp. 150-151) amongst others emphasise the possibility of ecotourism in urban areas, where individuals interested in the urban natural environment practise urban ecotourism.

On the other hand visits to natural areas, as an indispensable element of ecotourism and its differentiation from nature tourism, are highlighted by ZARĘBA (2010, p. 50) and KOŻUCHOWSKI (2005, p. 170).

To sum up – ecotourism is a type of nature tourism which may, but need not be, practiced in the natural environment, but nevertheless pertains predominantly to natural themes. The primary activity of the tourist is getting to know the environment in a broad sense (also cultural aspects) associated with the given location as well as its protection and care. Thus, according to the authors, ecotourism may be regarded as a form of nature-based tourism.

Apart from ecotourism, which connects natural elements with cultural ones, we can find one more term that refers to those two kinds of heritage: *nature-culture tourism* (MIKOS VON ROHRSCHEIDT 2008, pp. 134-135) which involves visiting natural sites created by human activity, for example parks, gardens, nature exhibitions etc. Specific examples are the 29 items (2012) from the UNESCO *World Cultural and Natural Heritage of Humanity* (so-called mixed) list, including Mount Athos, the Pyrenees, Mużakowski Park, Machu Picchu, Cappadocia etc.

Another term which appears in the English language literature connected with nature tourism, fuelling the confusion, is the term *wildlife tourism*, which, however, does not refer to the study of 'wild nature' but only includes some types of non-domestic animals in their natural habitats or in captivity (HIGGINBOTTOM 2004, p. 2). Reynolds & Braithwaite (2001, pp. 33-34) have defined seven main forms of this kind of tourism (the authors named it *fauna tourism*):

- nature tourism, where the animal is the over-riding element and the other components of a given tourism product are marginal;
- visiting a given natural habitat, rich in species variety, often for the purpose of feeding the animals;
- visiting man made sites where animals live in captivity;
- watching a given species;
- hiking in defined habitats;
- watching dangerous, spectacular animal behaviour, arranged by man;

- hunts, where animals are usually culled for consumption, both in their natural as well as artificial ecosystems.

Sometimes the concept of nature tourism involves or is even treated as a synonym for sustainable tourism (DUDEK & KOWALCZYK 2003, p. 117), but to the authors it seems this latter type can be spoken of in any context, and both in natural or urban environments, as long as it complies with the principles of sustainability (PROSSER 1994, pp. 31-32, KAMIENIECKA 1995, pp. 10-11, NIEZGODA 2008, p. 85).

The particular individuals choosing to participate in these leisure activities were also a subject of interest. Here, an interesting classification was suggested by LINDBERG (1991) who divided them into four categories:

- scientists, researchers and tourists, who are oriented to active education and action to improve the state of the environment, are often the core of nature tourism;
- tourists taking a special trip to see protected areas in order to understand the natural and local cultural history;
- tourists whose primary aim is to learn about a specific, well-known natural attraction;
- casual tourists who discover nature by coincidence, as part of a wider trip.

Each can be categorised according to time spent in a natural environment, type of nature experience and significance for the destination itself (1991, p. 11).

To conclude, the authors consider the most effective definition of *nature tourism* – as understood in the broader sense including all forms, types and kinds – will be the following: 'that which in any way and even to a minimal degree involves elements of the natural environment'; and as such allow for the possibility that nature tourism can be undertaken in a urban area. Thus *nature tourism* understood in such a multi-faceted manner, depends on the purpose the participant – even if it is of an indirect character (the natural environment is only background, as if expendable) – the authors suggest that it should be labelled *nature-based tourism*; whereas when nature is the determining factor for tourism that involves direct contact with environment - they prefer *nature-oriented tourism*.

### 3. PERCEPTIONS OF *NATURE TOURISM*: A CASE STUDY

In seeing the many differences in the interpretation of the term *turystyka przyrodnicza* (*nature tourism*) in the literature, the authors decided to take a closer look at how this term is understood in practice.

Empirical research, through the use of questionnaires, was carried out using the website, *ankieta.pl*, amongst Poznań University of Life Sciences students, as those who, at least in principle, have particular contact with the natural environment.

The questionnaire contained 18 questions, five of which were multiple choice and included questions on the characteristics of the respondents. The key to the questionnaire was sent to students, so only they were able to take part in the investigation.

### 3.1. RESPONDENT CHARACTERISTICS AND TEST METHODOLOGY

The research was conducted between March and May 2013 on a sample of 370 individuals (approx. 4.5% of all full-time students<sup>2</sup>), representing different subjects across eight different departments. Forestry (28.83% of total students surveyed), tourism and recreation (16.28%), biology (11.19%) and human nutrition (9.52%) were the most important. This stems from the fact that in general such students are somewhat connected professionally with the environment, wild-life or travel, and are interested and take part in nature tourism. Second and third year students were the most frequent and constituted 53.56% of those surveyed. First year students (19.32%) and postgraduate students (27.12%) were not far behind.

In terms of permanent residence the home location of the students is interesting – 40% in the countryside, 23.39% in towns of 30 000 residents and less, while only 11.19% live in urban areas of 30-100 000 residents and 25.42% in bigger cities. We can conclude that residents of less urbanized areas, who are in contact with nature on a daily basis, are more interested in nature tourism. On the other hand, a lot of those students have temporarily moved to the city of Poznań, which has significantly limited that co-existence.

In terms of voivodeship, those from Wielkopolska dominate (72.88%), followed by Zachodniopomorskie, Lubuskie, Pomorskie and Kujawsko-Pomorskie voivodeships (together 18.98%).

The gender structure of the respondents was typical of the current status of students with women dominating (70.17%).

The questionnaire contained both closed and open questions providing the respondents with an opportunity to express themselves freely.

### 3.2. RESEARCH RESULTS

One of the most significant issues of the analysis was that of familiarity with, and comprehension of, the term *turystyka przyrodnicza* (*nature tourism*).

53.32% respondents stated they understood, but 31.53% were unable to unambiguously state their position on the issue. Only 15.25% of the respondents were totally ignorant of the term. Those who showed they understood were asked to indicate exactly *what* they understood it to mean. It should be pointed out that more than half took the broad interpretation of *nature tourism* (51.86% of all responses) (Fig. 1).

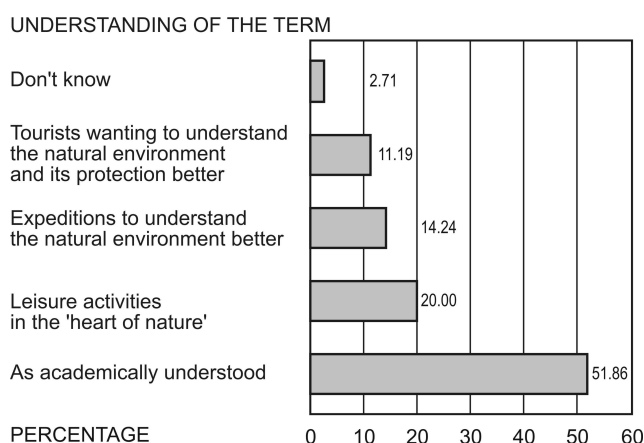


Fig. 1. Understanding of the term *turystyka przyrodnicza* (*nature tourism*) by respondents

Source: own materials based on research (2013)

For this dominant group, *turystyka przyrodnicza* (*nature tourism*) includes a variety of trips undertaken in the natural environment, with emphasis on the cognitive aspects as well as the protection of natural assets. A broad understanding of *nature tourism* is also highlighted by the next most frequent option (leisure activities in the 'heart of nature'). Such a distribution of answers confirms the doubts of the authors and other researchers on the understanding of this concept.

In the subsequent stages of the research it was important to establish whether respondents undertook nature tourism in its academically-understood form, and what the role of the natural environment in the tourism activities of those students was. As many as 68.47% stated they undertook nature tourism; for getting to know the natural environment constituted the primary purpose of at least some trips (63.73% of all answers). Nearly 18% expressed specific opinions on this issue. Here it was emphasised that getting to know the environment includes: as a way of life, whose main purpose is leisure, interesting experiences, as a passion. However for 18.31% learning about the natural environment was an insignificant element of a trip. In interpreting the responses to this question the motivation hierarchy for many young people should be borne in mind [social and entertainment factors occur frequently in tourism

activity research on students (PRZECLAWSKI 1996, p. 42)]. A not insignificant role here is played by earlier experiences within in eco education: participation in interesting field activities, student engagement with nature, as a stimulus of future decisions on expeditions.

In order to develop and popularise nature tourism, it is important to find out the degree to which specialised tourism services are taken advantage of. The respondents' answers, when asked if they have already come across tourism services geared towards discovering the environment, were mostly negative, but they also pointed out that they had not sought these types of services (48.14%) (Fig. 2). Just 20.34% had experience in using them. Here it is worth considering why young people who willingly spend their leisure time in a natural setting, do not take advantage of opportunities to understand it better. Is this the result of insufficient supply, bad experience with organised outdoor activities of this type, or restricted access to this type of service (e.g. due to finances)?

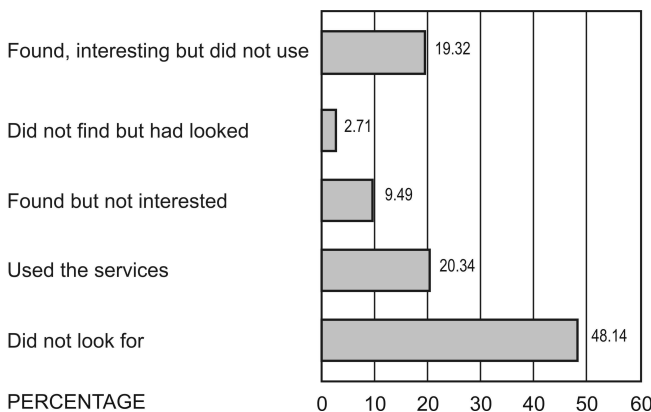


Fig. 2. Tourism services and the environment  
Source: own materials based on research (2013)

In attempting to precisely define the term *nature tourism* as well as its appropriate presentation in practice, it is significant to determine which forms of activity are most popular. As is evident from Fig. 3 those undertaken independently or run by specialist organisations and associations were dominant (such as looking after sick wild animals, animal watching). The fact that most methods for organising activities during these trips are associated with animals should be highlighted, plants being of less interest.

Interestingly, the respondents also eagerly sought contact with the natural environment in an urban setting, through visiting zoos or spending their leisure time in urban open areas (communal parks and forests). Once again this demonstrates the necessity to include this form of tourism in the term *nature tourism*.

And thus it is not the type of area visited but the theme and purpose that seem more significant.

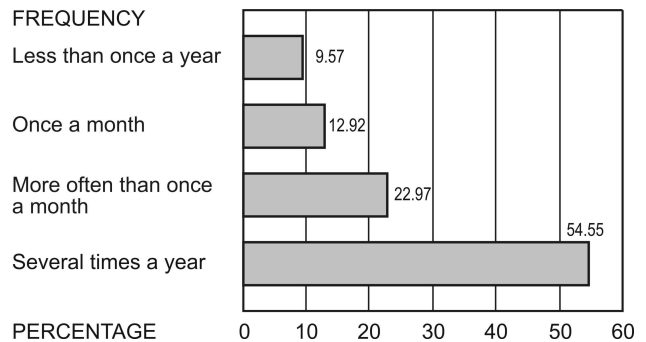


Fig. 3. Forms of nature tourism (more than one answer could be chosen)  
Source: own materials based on research (2013)

As shown by the answers to the next question (Fig. 4), respondents spend their leisure time in the natural environment. Nearly 55% stated a willingness to undertake nature tourism several times per year, whereas 36% indicated an even higher frequency. Such a high frequency is justified by motivation (Fig. 5). For many, trips of this type are an opportunity to follow their interests (34.13% of all answers), spend free time (25%), but also present an opportunity to relax and regain their inner balance (21.15%).

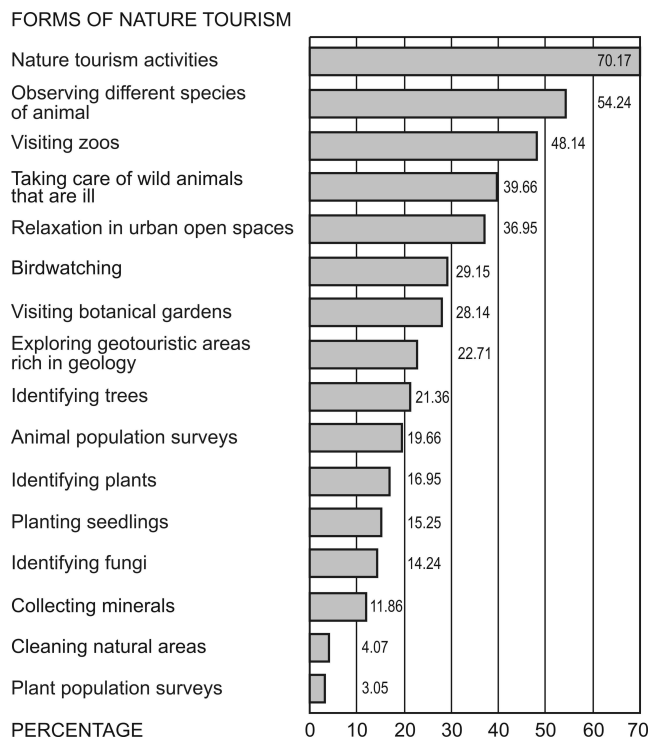


Fig. 4. Frequency of nature tourism trips  
Source: own materials based on research (2013)

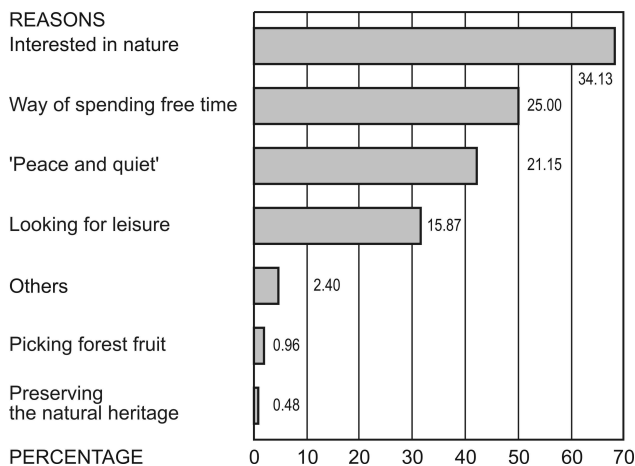


Fig. 5. Reasons for nature tourism  
Source: own materials based on research (2013)

For the respondents, nature tourism also presents an opportunity to achieve other goals associated, for example, with spending time with close friends (Fig. 6). Such trips are organised together – as a group (42.37%) or with a spouse/boy- and girlfriend (33.56%). 20.34% stated they organise such trips on their own. Less than 4% used the services of travel agents or specialist organisations. It should be pointed out that such a distribution of answers is typical for university students for many types of tourism activity.

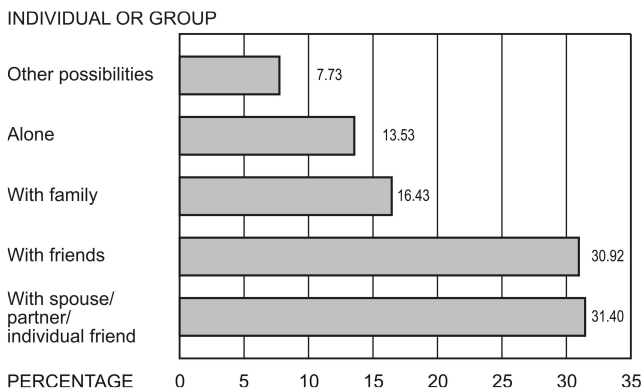


Fig. 6. Individuals vs groups in nature tourism  
Source: own materials based on research (2013)

To a large extent, the image of nature tourism depends on the eco-sensitivity of the individuals participating in it. A significant element is awareness of the impact of tourism on the natural environment. It is worth noting that the students surveyed assessed tourists in a natural environment as 'strangers' who are violating a fixed order (54.24%); on the other hand, 20.68% felt themselves to be guests, while 10.51% felt indifferent to the host environment. The surveyed students often selected 'others' as their answer

(14.58%) which afforded an opportunity to make a free statement on tourists or their environmental impact; it was often recorded that negative changes to a visited destination were caused by tourists, their lack of knowledge or sense of responsibility.

The most frequently recognised positive aspects included (Fig. 7) eco-education (77.60%), the promotion of specific natural areas (65.10%) and protection of the environment as a tourism activity (50.52%).

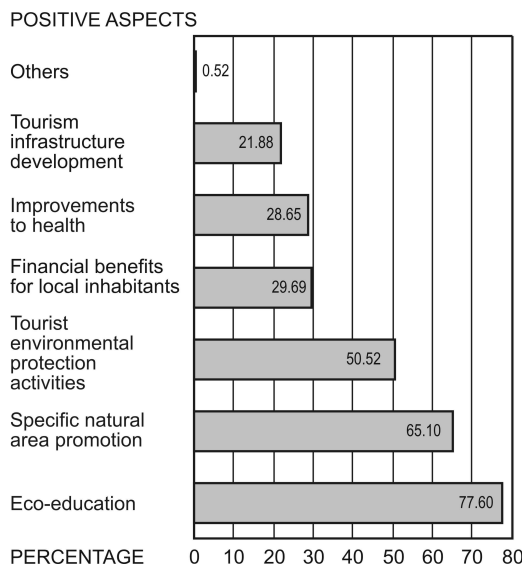


Fig. 7. Positive aspects of nature tourism development (more than one answer could be chosen)  
Source: own materials based on research (2013)

Amongst the problems students pointed to most (Fig. 8) were litter (83.40%), damage to plant life (73.03%), disturbance to animals (70.95%) and noise pollution (42.32%). It should be pointed out that all these are a consequence of a lack of appropriate knowledge and eco-sensitivity.

The development of nature tourism should be associated with appropriate infrastructure, which on the one hand facilitates the discovery of natural assets and on the other protects the environment against adverse transformations. In the opinion of the surveyed university students the most significant elements improving the attractiveness of tourism areas are (Fig. 9) recreational facilities (benches, lookouts, designated fire hearths etc.) 62.37%, marked trails (55.93%) and educational paths (50.51%). These elements illustrate the tourism penetration space of destinations. The students considered those developments which permanently transform the space (such as accommodation, catering or availability of external transport), perhaps making it more convenient for people but radically changing the ecological balance of eco-systems, as being less significant. The low rating of the

services of guides in improving the tourism attractiveness of natural areas is worth noting.

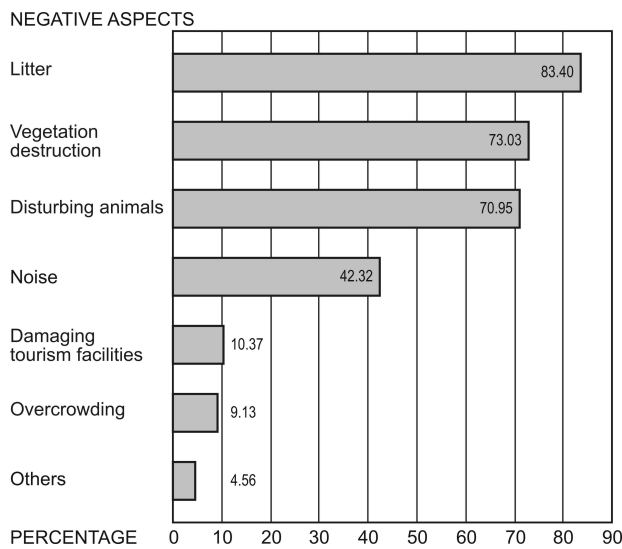


Fig. 8. Negative aspects of nature tourism development (more than one answer could be chosen)  
Source: own materials based on research (2013)

In the opinion of the authors, this stems, to a large extent, from the bad experiences of university students with activities which involve a guide (the most common weak points are not matching information to needs, use of a single method by guides or inability to use activities involving the whole group) as well as a lack of use of these services by groups (friends or family).

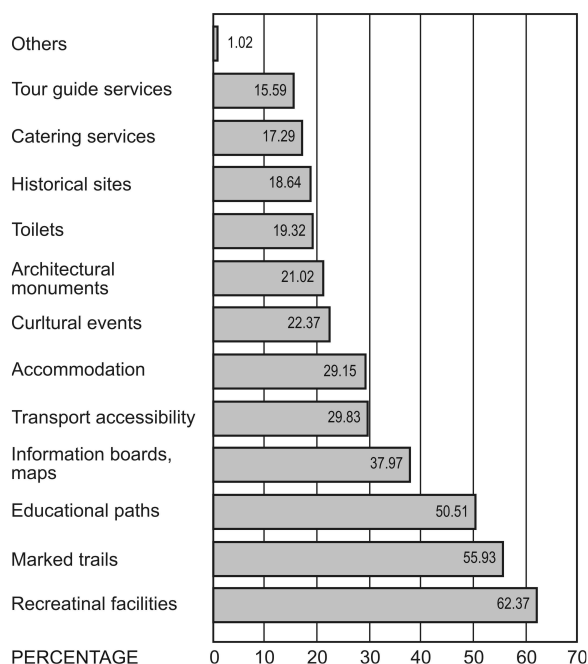


Fig. 9. Elements enhancing the natural environment (more than one answer could be chosen)  
Source: own materials based on research (2013)

### 3.3. RESEARCH CONCLUSIONS

The research conducted amongst students of Poznań University of Life Sciences yielded many interesting insights and observations of which the most important seem to be:

1. The concept of *nature tourism* is understood as various forms of tourism activity not only carried out in the natural environment, but also in urban space; however, focused on exploring nature and on the need to protect it.

2. Nature trips are organized relatively frequently, however, without the help of professional entities (travel agencies or other organizations).

3. Contact with nature is one of the most popular forms of leisure activity for the young.

4. University students see changes which may be occurring to the environment due to the impact of nature tourism developments (both negative and positive).

5. Tourism penetration space is the most significant type in nature tourism and a significant number of students surveyed, adopting the Lindberg classification mentioned above, are those who visit particular nature destinations or who are interested in environmental protection issues.

These insights confirm the necessity to undertake work to define the terms appearing under the umbrella of *nature tourism*. This will not only allow for a discussion in the literature but also, more importantly for practitioners, will facilitate appropriate market research and its interpretation.

## 4. CONCLUSIONS SUMMING UP DISCUSSION OF *NATURE TOURISM* AS A TERM

The authors of this article have proposed a very broad definition for the term *nature tourism*, recognising and analysing the various ideas, both in Poland and abroad. It has to be remembered that even urban space includes natural elements, most probably shaped by human activity, but still natural: city parks, municipal forests, zoos, arboreta and the like. This is why an important factor in defining the essence of nature tourism is not space, but the purpose of the trip being undertaken – if the purpose happens to be the desire to be in touch with nature and learn about the natural environment, we can talk about nature tourism, even if it takes place in a city.

To conclude their discussion the authors wish to stress that every type of nature-based tourism may assume one of three relations: conflict, coexistence or

symbiosis (BUDOWSKI 1976, p. 27-31). Certainly, we must strive for such a relationship in which both parties benefit; the natural environment because it can be effectively protected by tourists who raise environmental awareness, and also the tourists themselves who relax, learn, develop their sense of aesthetic sensitivity and responsibility, and so forth, in a natural setting.

In emphasising the significance of nature tourism as a part of global tourism, it is impossible to avoid the issue of valuing and assessing natural assets: in terms of their use and in the form of recreation being discussed. LEE (1997, p. 587) points out that most individuals (theoreticians as well as practitioners) ignore the economic value of natural assets for tourism. Whereas according to these authors, services in nature tourism should not only protect the natural environment but also safeguard local community income from loss outside of the region. The residents, being aware of the economic value of their natural assets will be best suited to safeguard them.

This article, even during its preparation, caused many questions to be raised and highlighted doubts as to the various forms of nature tourism – as well as in their nomenclature. Thus it seems vital to do similar research on geotourism, lake or forest tourism, and so on.

## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.sustainabletourisonline.com/parks-and-culture/nature-based-tourism/forms-of-nature-based-tourism/nature-based-tourism>, 26.05.2013.

<sup>2</sup> A sample of 370 can be considered as representative at a confidence level of 0.95 and an error of 0.05.

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