

Joanna Angiel

University of Warsaw
Faculty of Geography and Regional Studies
Department of Geographical Education
e-mail: j.angiel@uw.edu.pl

RESTORING THE SOCIAL VALUE OF RIVERS THROUGH EDUCATION: THE CASE OF THE VISTULA RIVER IN WARSAW

Abstract: The article discusses the values of the Vistula River in Poland's capital city, Warsaw. The author presents the results of studies identifying residents' perceptions of the river and outlines local community processes that aim to restore the river's social value, notably through education.

Key words: public awareness, Vistula River, river value, perception, geography education.

INTRODUCTION

People's relationship with rivers, and more broadly speaking with nature, has changed over time. That relationship is dependent on attitudes towards the natural environment, the cultural sphere in which an individual grows up and develops, as well as individuals' worldviews, social awareness, and the system of received values, among other factors. (Ostrowska, 1994; Pulinowa, 1996). For many pre-agrarian societies rivers held religious, or spiritual values. They provided water, food, and protection. With the rise of agrarian societies, people remained closely tied to rivers, but the relation began to include the intensified use of waterways, chiefly for agriculture. The industrial period saw the beginnings of large-scale "industrial transformations of nature," including rivers. Deprived of their sacred status and, even, of common respect, rivers often served as channels of industrial waste disposal and recipients of urban sewage. In the present period of socio-economic development, increasingly more attention is given to the state of the environment, including rivers. There is a growing emphasis on sustainable development, on water conservation, and on improving the general quality of life by, among other methods, improving the level of water quality. Social

perceptions of rivers are slowly changing. Local communities “their river” is clean, and that it provides amenable conditions for recreation, tourism, and the practice of various water sports. Since 1990, such changes in social attitudes have been notably evident in Poland.

The Vistula is Poland’s longest (1047 km) and most important river. It spans the length of the country, from the Carpathian Mountains in the south, to the Baltic Sea in the north. Both the historic (Cracow) and present (Warsaw) capitals of Poland are situated on the river, and it is often cited as a symbol of the Polish nation and its history (e.g. in the words of the national anthem.)

THE VISTULA RIVER – ITS ROLE AND SIGNIFICANCE IN POLAND’S HISTORY

In discussing the Vistula’s human history, we may delineate several periods, each defined by one of the varying roles that the Vistula has played over time, but also by changes in the significance and values attached to the river.

The Vistula formed an axis of settlement. The river was, thus, an important factor in the development of the Polish state. Until the end of the 13th century, the river provided an important means of settlement expansion and many towns were founded along its length.

Beginning in the 14th century, The Vistula functioned as an important trade and transport route, thanks to which the Polish state experienced dynamic economic growth. The Vistula and its tributaries, the Narew and the Bug, constituted one of the country’s main trade axes. The waterway carried agricultural crops (predominantly wheat), as well as raw materials to the Baltic port at Gdańsk. Driven by trade on the Vistula, the economic development of Poland reached its apogee in the 16th century, and continued through the first half of the 1600s. The period saw the emergence of the river’s cultural value as the “maker” of that success. In this period, there also emerged an original rafting culture associated with the transport of various goods by raft. Rafting folklore inspired music compositions, including operas, as well as paintings and literature that depicted the raftsmen’s life.

In the 18th century Poland lost its independence when its territory was partitioned by the three surrounding empires of Russia, Prussia, and Austria. Successive borders sectioned the Vistula. Conceptions of river usage varied; in the case of Russia, the Vistula’s river economy fell into disuse. The river lost its importance and was reduced to service as a local waterway. The **first water intake installations** of Vistula water for communal sewage were installed in the middle of the 19th century. By the end of the century further developments were made by W. Lindley and his son, who designed and built additional intake facilities and filters. At the same time, new river ports and shipyards arose (e.g. in Warsaw and Płock.)

In 1918 Poland regained its independence and the 're-united' Vistula could once again function as an economic axis. In an atmosphere of national reconstruction, and given its 19th century industrialization, the river was assigned **transport functions**, mainly for **raw materials and industrial products**, but also for agricultural products. **Passenger sailing** existed in and between cities. The river was a space of social activity. This is evident in pre-war photographs that depict Warsaw residents strolling down boulevards along the Vistula and numerous ships moored along the banks of the capital. In the cities, the Vistula became a receptacle of communal and industrial sewage. Plans were adopted to clean up the riverbanks in the capital and to put the city "face to face with the Vistula". Unfortunately, the program could only be realized to a very limited extent before being stopped short by the Second World War.

The post-war period in Poland was marked by political dependence on the USSR and a socialist economic system. Through the 1960s and 1970s, beaches and swimming pools were maintained along the Vistula's Warsaw shores. The river was also a space where various sporting events and social festivities were organized, and was lined with numerous sailing and rowing marinas. During the 1970s, in the capital the river still served a recreational and sporting function. During the same period, however, passenger sailing on the Vistula disappeared, both in city areas and on inter-city routes. People tied to water tourism and water sport relocated to the nearby Zegrzyński Lake on the Narew River, but also to the more distant Mazurian Lake District. Beginning in 1964, Warsaw began to exploit the Vistula as a source of potable water (original intake of alluvial water from beneath the river). The river's important role and its connection to the city became etched in the public consciousness.

Vistula water was also used by the heavy, chemical, and energy industries. The river once again became a receptacle for city and industrial sewage, and on a scale higher than in the pre-war period. The (unrealized) national "Vistula Program" was aimed at "cleaning up the water cycle," through canalization and the Lower Vistula Cascade, on the 950 km navigable section of the river going up to its estuary (Tuszko, 1977). After 1970, passenger sailing was eliminated from the Vistula along urban areas. In Warsaw, a motorway built along the length of the Vistula shore (popularly known as the Vistularoute) further cut the city away from the river. Over the following years, the city and its citizens increasingly "turned away" from the Vistula, largely because of water pollution.

After 1990 (the fall of the socialist regime and ensuing political transformations) the capital nevertheless continued to "turn its back" on the Vistula. There was no coordinated conception of shore cleanup, or of recreational tourism development. The heavily polluted river and its neglected shores were not attractive for the city's residents. At the same time, there developed a trend for "second homes" (cottages) outside Warsaw, where people go for weekends and long periods during the summer season.

The abandoned Vistula becomes a “swath of emptiness” cutting through the city.

In recent years there has been a slow, but noticeable, social “turn towards the river,” which has resulted in positive action and its effects. Of key importance in this process have been improvements in water quality following the construction of sewage treatment plants in the river basin. Various non-governmental organizations direct their efforts toward the Vistula environment, supported by Vistula foundations (e.g. WWF Poland, *Fundacja Ja Wisła* [I, Vistula Foundation]). These organizations are making contact with foundations outside Poland, such as those concerned with the Loire River in France (Gašowski, 2005). Consequently, Polish organizations are benefitting from western-European experience and entirely new, common projects are developed. For the past several years, Warsaw’s city authorities have designated a Vistula Commissioner. The various values of the river are increasingly recognised as factors in the development water tourism and recreation on the Vistula. There are also plans for the development of Vistula’s shores in Warsaw, which are the object of public debate. Since 2006 designs for a Vistula Nature Park have been readied (Damięcki, 2006). For the past two years, a “Vistula Day” has been organized by city authorities in the form of a picnic attended by city residents. Various media pay increasingly more attention to the river and to various events along its Warsaw shores.

THE VISTULA IN WARSAW

The Vistula passes through Warsaw over a 30 km sector, where it forms a picturesque, asymmetrical valley. In terms of terrain relief and hypsometry, the river’s left bank is dominated by a high (approx. 20 m) valley slope. Its upper level is formed by a morainic plateau. The presence of the river itself and the possibility of a river crossing were among the factors that led medieval builders to erect a castle and fortifications in this location. Between the base of the Warsaw escarpment and the shore of the Vistula stretch Śródmieście-area (City-centre) neighbourhoods, once intimately connected with the river (Powiśle, Czerniaków and its Solec street¹). These were once poor, fishing neighbourhoods – today they are prime terrain for developers of high-end residential building projects.

The river’s low right-hand bank is formed by accumulation terraces. Inside the city, the Vistula is regulated; in the city centre, along the left bank, it is lined by a concrete belt (forming a walkway stepped towards the river and separated from the street by retaining wall). On the right bank, along the city’s downtown, the riverbed has been fitted with spurs that direct the

¹ The street name Solec is a derivation of the Polish word for salt – *sól*. The street once was home to a salt warehouse serving river transport.

current toward the left bank. Erosion processes have intensified as a result of the artificial narrowing of the Vistula riverbed in Warsaw (bridge construction) and the extraction of sand from the river bottom. The riverbed has deepened by some 3 m in the last 50 years.

The Vistula represents an important natural space in Warsaw. Its right bank is host to environmentally valuable stretches of marsh vegetation. The Vistula forms an important ecological corridor for local and migrating animal species, chiefly birds. The river is part of the European NATURA 2000 network (Gacka – Grzesikiewicz, Cichocki, 2001; Chylarecki, Sawicki, 2003; www.mos.gov.pl/natura2000). The Vistula valley is also a natural conduit channelling fresh air from surrounding areas towards the city centre. The valley slope and the built-up upper edge of the escarpment² are among Warsaw's most characteristic urban design and compositional elements (Kicińska, 1993; Kurowski 1993). The escarpment offers views of the city with the Vistula and its bridges as a backdrop, while the river itself opens on wide panoramas of the capital.

Despite marked improvements to the Vistula's cleanliness (presently hundreds of sewage treatment facilities operate in the river basin), the Vistula in Warsaw is still a polluted river. The river still receives communal sewage from approx. ¼ of the city area. The situation is set to change only in 2011 when the old sewage treatment plant will be modernized.

PERCEPTIONS OF THE VISTULA

Taking into account studies of the perceptions of rivers conducted outside Poland (Bosi, Ronconi, 2006), the author of the present article carried out similar studies among Warsaw residents. The results highlight generational differences in attitudes towards the Vistula.

During "Vistula Day" festivities (June 2009) interviews were carried out with 52 Warsaw residents; the present author does not claim this to be a representative study. The sampling was purposive, dictated by the identification of two age groups. The interview concerned individuals ties to the Vistula, their perceptions of the river's value, "river experiences", and "river memories".

Older people (60 – 80 years old) remember well the Vistula in Warsaw as it was 40-50 years ago. It has remained in their consciousness as an important, "socially vibrant", and often-frequented space. Approximately half of the respondents did not leave Warsaw during the summer (vacations, holidays). The Vistula was accessible to them, as well as attractive as a place of rest and recreation. By boat, one could go to Bielany, or Młociny (Warsaw neighbourhoods), where, on the shores of the river or in nearby woods,

² During the 17th and 18th centuries the edge of the Warsaw escarpment was built-up with the opulent residences of magnates and bishops, and with churches and monasteries.

traditional folk festivities took place (Zieliński, 2009). These respondents remembered also that twice a week it was possible to travel by boat from Warsaw to Włocławek, Ciechocinek, Toruń, or Gdańsk. Respondents pointed to the Vistula's environmental value in Warsaw. The majority of older respondents evoked sentimental images of their youth: bathing in the river, lounging on the river's natural sandbanks, kayaking, and sailing. In comparison with "that Vistula" its present condition appears to this group of people as a desolate space of unfulfilled recreational potential. Several of the oldest respondents remembered the Vistula as the site of tragic events during the Second World War (1944 Warsaw Uprising).

The question of what does the Vistula and its shores mean to Warsaw's younger residents yields answers that are important for the river's future. Young respondents (20 – 30 years old) most often mentioned the possibility of bicycle rides along the shores. They make use of the bike path along the left bank of the river, mainly along boulevards and their extensions and on paths that line the top of the embankment on the river's right bank (Wał Miedzeszyński [Miedzeszyński Embankment]). They stated, as well, that at present there is a lack of cafés, restaurants, or marinas where one could rent out kayaks, boats, or other craft.

Their connection to the river is less sentimental than that of older respondents, and usually contains a pragmatic dimension. The Vistula figures as a backdrop for rest, recreation, and sport, but, for example, is not seen as holding environmental value. Asked about difficulties associated with the river, both the older and younger respondents mentioned water and shore pollution as the most important.

It is worthwhile to compare the answers provided by the younger respondents interviewed during "Vistula Day", with those collected from high-school students during previous studies of their perceptions of the Vistula. During 2006-2008, the author conducted polling studies among the students of three Warsaw high schools located near the river (Angiel, 2007a). Approximately 400 students participated in these studies, the results of which are described below:

- approx. 35% of study participants considered the Vistula to have historical and symbolic values (Angiel, 2008); for the majority (65%) the Vistula is an important element of Warsaw's landscape, however 20% do not share that opinion, while the remainder registered no opinion on the subject,
- according to the students, the river's most important value (function) was supplying the city with water (more than 25% of responses); e.g.: "It supplies my home with water. I 'drink the Vistula', therefore it is part of my life",
- according to 41% of respondents the shores of the Vistula are a good place to take a stroll or other forms of recreation, but fully another 41% of students felt that the shores are not fit for such activities, while the remainder registered no opinion,

- approx. 77% of respondents were unfamiliar with any cultural traditions associated with the Vistula. Awareness of the river's ecological importance was also poor (Angiel, 2008),
- as the most important difficulty facing the river, students identified water and shore pollution. According to 90% of respondents, the Vistula in Warsaw is dirty,
- approx. 30% of students identified the river as a communications obstacle, for example: on their daily commute between home and school (traffic jams, chiefly on the bridges).

Of particular interest were responses describing the connection between the river and the respondents' lives, or the lack such a connection, and the attendant causes. These responses may be grouped in three sets:

- positive (47% of answers); e.g.: "The Vistula adds colour to Warsaw's landscape. It's a place to stroll and pleasantly pass the time. Although it does make moving through the city more difficult. But I think that without the Vistula Warsaw would lose its charm." "The Vistula in Warsaw is important to me. The most important thing about it is its undeveloped right bank, which is unique in Europe." "The Vistula has a very important role in my life. As a boy I used to go fishing there with my dad. In the winter we used to go skating on small ponds along the Vistula. Now, I go there for walks with my girlfriend."
- indifferent (35%); e.g.: "I drink Vistula water and that is my only connection to the river. Besides that it has no meaning for me."
- negative (18%); e.g.: "It's dirty, its shores are polluted." "Since I live close to the Vistula it played a large role in my childhood. Now it does not mean anything to me, because it isn't worthwhile to look at something so dirty and ugly."

Among the young people who participated in the study, the proportion of those who reported, for various reasons, indifferent or negative attitudes towards the Vistula in Warsaw, exceeds 50 %. Among the young people interviewed by the author during the "Vistula Day" picnic, only three respondents registered similar attitudes.

EXAMPLES OF EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITIES

The study results cited above, served as a starting point for educational activities conducted in several Warsaw schools. Having taken note of the fact that half of the students who participated in the study were indifferent towards or had negative opinions of the Vistula – education activities are specifically aimed at highlighting its values. The study results were presented to educational consultants and teachers of geography, biology, and nature studies. They also serve as a source of pedagogic inspiration for professors.

Further educational activities should, in the present author's opinion, aim to:

1. restore public awareness of the Vistula's value to Warsaw:
 - historical, as well as symbolic, values,
 - other values of the Vistula that were omitted by respondents, that is, principally, environmental and cultural;
2. highlight the fact that select stretches of the Vistula's Warsaw shores are well suited to leisurely walks, walking and cycling excursions, as well as other forms of recreation,
3. make personal, positive Vistula experiences accessible to students through participation in on-site fieldwork in the vicinity of the river,
4. educate on safe, cultural, and ecologically sound behaviour in the river environment.

The awakening of public opinion to the value of the geographic environment, of which rivers are a part, is a challenging pedagogical mission. Professors are providing assistance to geography teachers. Various foundations are offering not only concrete help, but also inspiration to action on behalf of the Vistula (e.g. WWF Poland,³ as well as the foundation set up by Marek Kamiński – who has explored both the Arctic and Antarctic poles⁴). There are also preliminary plans for an open air Warsaw Vistula Museum, at Czerniakowski Port (in France, no fewer than five cities are home to *Maisons de Loire*).⁵ Reproductions of boats and scows particular to the Vistula are increasingly popular (slowly, yet certainly, Vistula boatbuilding is being revived). Educational boating excursions along the Vistula are operating. The capital's residents can join an organized walking circuit along the Vistula to explore the river with educators who provide multi-faceted information on its environment. Internet users can now take a virtual educational walking tour of the Vistula in Warsaw. The information available on the website is particularly useful for students (especially on field-trips), but also for families (during walks along the river).⁶ Additionally, various Warsaw schools are coordinating their educational activities related to the Vistula, including on-site river activities. Yearly Vistula quiz competitions are organized, as are photography and arts competitions, such as *My znad Wisły* [We come from the Vistula shores]; increasingly more teachers' lesson plans are designed around Vistula themes (e.g. Angiel 2007, 2009 a, b; Sienkiewicz 2009). The river is increasingly visible as the backdrop to numerous interesting artistic and educational events.⁷

³ Educational project: „By do Wisły powróciły lososie” [So that salmon can swim the Vistula].

⁴ Educational project: „Szkoła nad Wisłą” [School on the Vistula].

⁵ The Vistula River Museum, a division of the Polish Maritime Museum in Gdańsk, is located in Tczew, on the lower section of the river.

⁶ Initiatives implemented by Fundacja Ja Wisła (www.jawisla.pl)

⁷ For example: the artistic and educational activities of the TRANSFORMATIONS Art Festival by the Vistula (<http://www.przemianywisly.pl/en>). One of the workshop assignments was for participants to contribute photographs of the Vistula representing their personal views of the river.

For educational activities focussed on the river and its values, the first mandate is to bring the population closer to the river, not through photographs or film, but in personally, tangibly, and in all its forms. The Vistula in Warsaw offers many surprising facets, and is not limited to the stereotypes so easily found on Warsaw postcards. Warsaw residents, especially the younger among them, need to discover those facets. That process of discovery must start with a “face to face” encounter with the Vistula, as a means to spark reflection and open a personal connection with the river.

REFERENCES

- Angiel J., 2007 a, Postrzeżenie rzeki Wisły przez młodzież licealną z obu warszawskich brzegów [High school students' perceptions of the Vistula River, on both Warsaw shores] [in:] Stawarz A. (ed.) *Miasto po obu brzegach rzeki – różne oblicza kultury* [The city on both sides of the river – many faces culture], Warszawa.
- Angiel J., 2007 b, Wisła i jej brzegi – skarb czy problem? Zajęcia geograficzne nad rzeką [The vistula and its shores – treasure, or problem? Vistula geography lessons], *Geografia w Szkole*, no 4, Warszawa.
- Angiel J., 2008, The Vistula River as one of Poland's symbols and its perception by high school students from Vistula towns, *Miscellanea Geographica*, N° 13, 299-308.
- Angiel J., 2009 a, “Czytanie rzeki” – warszawska Wisła i jej dolina [“Reading the river” – the Warsaw Vistula and its valley], [in:] Ostrowski M. (ed.) *Tryptyk edukacyjny*, vol. 1, Warszawa.
- Angiel J., 2009 b, Wisła w środowisku geograficznym oraz krajobrazie miasta [The Vistula as part of the geographic environment and city landscape], [in:] Ostrowski M. (ed.) *Tryptyk edukacyjny*, [Educational triptych] vol.1, Warszawa.
- Bosi G., Ronconi M., 2006, Il fiume Volano. Un padre dimenticato, [in:] Farinella R. (ed.), *I fiumi come infrastrutture culturali*, Bologna.
- Chylarecki P., Sawicki G., 2003, *Ostoja ptaków – Dolina Środkowej Wisły* [Bird sanctuary – the Middle Vistula Valley]. Obszary Specjalnej Ochrony, Askon, Warszawa.
- Damięcki J., 2006, Wisła jako infrastruktura kulturowa [Vistula as cultural infrastructure], [in:] Farinella R. (ed.), *I fiumi come infrastrutture culturali*, Bologna.
- Dobrowolska M., 1961, *Przemiany środowiska geograficznego Polski do końca XV w.* [Changes in Poland's geographic environment, to the end of the 15th century], PWN, Warszawa.
- Gacka – Grzesikiewicz E., Cichocki Z., 2001, *Program ochrony dolin rzecznych w Polsce* [Poland's river valley protection program], IOŚ, Warszawa.
- Giełżyński W., 1983, *Moja prywatna vistuliada* [My private Vistuliada], Iskry, Warszawa.
- Gierszewski S., 1982, *Wisła w dziejach Polski* [The Vistula river in Poland's history] Wyd. Morskie, Gdańsk.
- Górski T., (ed.), 1997, *Księga Wiślanego Flisu* [The book of Vistula rafting], Wyd.”44”, Gdynia.
- Kicińska E., 1993, Krajobraz kulturowy Skarpy Warszawskiej [The Warsaw Escarpment's cultural landscape], [in:] Wierzbicka B. (ed.), *Skarpa Warszawska* (The Warsaw Escarpment), Warszawa.
- Kurowski S., 1993, Skarpa Warszawska – ograniczenia i możliwości urbanistyczne i architektoniczne [The Warsaw Escarpment – the possibilities and limitations of urban design and architecture], [in:] Wierzbicka B. (ed.), *Skarpa Warszawska* (The Warsaw Escarpment), Warszawa.
- Ostrowska K., 1994, W poszukiwaniu wartości [In search of value], GWP, Gdańsk.
- Pulinowa M.Z., 1996, *Człowiek bliżej Ziemi* [Man, closer to the Earth], WSiP, Warszawa.
- Sienkiewicz B., 2009, Jezioro Czerniakowskie, [in:] Ostrowski M. (ed.) *Tryptyk edukacyjny* [Educational triptych], vol. 1, Warszawa.

Tuszko A., 1977, *Wisła przyszłości* [The future of Vistula], Książka i Wiedza, Warszawa.
Zieliński J., Statkiem do Młocin [To Młociny, by boat], *Stolica*, no 7, July, 2009.

www.vistulaexpedition.com (accessed: September 2009)

www.jawisla.pl (accessed: September 2009)

www.przemianywisly.pl/en (accessed: September 2009)

English translation: Maciej Janicki