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TWENTY YEARS OF POLISH AGRITOURISM: THE PAST AND THE FUTURE

1. INTRODUCTION

In April 2011, an international conference entitled 'Rural tourist product – experiences and challenges', organized in Kielce part of the 3rd *Agrotravel* Rural and Agritourism International Fair, celebrated the twentieth anniversary of agritourism in Poland¹. The event which symbolically marked the beginning of agritourism in our country was the founding of Chamber of Agritourism and Tourism in 1991 which started the tradition of Polish agritourism symposia and became one of the first agritourism local authorities². The speakers (officials, practitioners and researchers) looked back at 20 years of agritourism development and presented challenges for the future, concerning especially agritourism consultancy and the idea of rural area tourism product development. The conclusions of the presentations and discussions encouraged the author of this article to look closer at the problem of agritourism in Poland.

In her book *Procesy i uwarunkowania rozwoju agroturystyki w Polsce (The Processes and Conditions of Agritourism Development in Poland)* (WOJCIECHOWSKA 2009), the author organizes and defines the phenomena, transformation and patterns in Polish agritourism from a supply perspective. It was found that until now development has been following two patterns³. The first dominated in the 1990's and is referred to as exogenic, while the other appeared in the second half of the 2000's and is referred to as endogenic. The discussion held during the jubilee conference confirmed that there is no other way for agritourism but to seek new development patterns.

The aim of the article is to discuss the most important practical and theoretical achievements and the problems of agritourism development in Poland, as well as to present the new challenges.

2. MAJOR ACHIEVEMENTS

The analysis will be conducted on practical and theoretical planes and based on the assumption that one serves the other, taking into account the institutional⁴ birth of agritourism in Poland. Certain institutions (e.g. agricultural consultancy centres, *gmina* offices) initiated the development of agritourism in their areas and soon researchers took an interest in it which shows how practice may inspire theory and create research areas. Practical requirements and procedures, however, are usually different from theoretical ones. Practitioners are mainly interested in finding effective methods which would be easy to apply. Researchers, on the other hand, look for an objective truth, study the causes and results of various phenomena and discover patterns⁵.

There has been a wide range of practical achievements in agritourism. However, our intention is not to list them in detail, but to look at them as a whole (Table 1).

Generally, they can be analysed from a supply and demand perspective. As regards demand, one achievement is the creation of a new form of recreation for tourists through the offer of accommodation at a farming homestead and a programme based on the agricultural assets, natural and anthropogenic resources nearby, as well as on the cultural capital of a rural family. However, in order to achieve this success, it was necessary to encourage the villagers to gain a new source of income and, with time, become involved in a new occupation in a situation when farming had been marginalized. It was not easy, either for those activating or for the activated. The basic success factor was innovativeness which, however, came from the outside⁶. In order to meet the challenge, both parties had to become familiar with the rules of agritourism.

The acceptance of innovation made agritourism a professional alternative for some inhabitants, especially those who possessed human capital, i.e. the cultural, psychological and social foundation (knowledge, skills, competence, innovative skills), in addition to material resources (a farm, available free rooms).

T a b l e 1. Major achievements in Polish agritourism

Achievements	
practice	theory
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - encouraging inhabitants of rural areas to obtain a new source of income, as well as occupation; - creating a new form of tourism; - creating development generating organisations; - creating legal, administrative and organizational mechanisms which support development; - defining the clearly positive role of the multifunctional development of the countryside and farming homesteads. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - conducting numerous studies and analyses, the quantity is hard to define; - creating a vast research area which refers to different disciplines (e.g. agriculture, economy, sociology, geography and pedagogy); - establishing patterns of cognitive processes and creating theoretical models within different disciplines.

Source: author.

The primary achievement of Polish agritourism is then the creation of organisations which generate and have an effect on its development. They include not only the owners of agritourism homesteads, but also associations, organizations and institutions promoting development, such as agricultural consultancy centres, *gmina* offices or *starostwos*. Tourists are also included in this group, because their interest in a given agritourism product determines the direction of development.

As regards supply, significant achievements include the creation of the self-government of agritourism branch (*samorząd branżowy*), categorization of rural accommodation facilities, promotion on the www.agroturystyka.pl social network, as well as the regulation of some legal matters, like the right to tax exemption when the number of rented rooms does not exceed five. The quantitative effects may be expressed in the size of the existing tourism accommodation. Over 80,000 beds in agritourism homesteads ensure tourism for about five million overnight stays during the summer holidays and provide direct income for about 9,000 families (8,900 accommodation facilities)⁷. These figures are not too impressive on a national scale; quite the contrary – they show that during the 20 years of agritourism development in Poland only a few homesteads have brought in noticeable

profits. In the author's opinion, this does not diminish the significance of agritourism in the multifunctional development of individual villages and farming homesteads⁸. On the contrary, a moderate increase in the number of agritourism homesteads is conducive to the urbanization of the countryside which is treated as a positive phenomenon. Sensible infiltration of agritourism into the rural space causes many positive changes both in its appearance and in the mentality of the local community.

The theoretical achievements in agritourism are also both quantitative and qualitative. Quantitative achievements show in the continuously growing number of academic publications, conferences, seminars, research programmes, and centres or institutions with the word 'agritourism' in their name⁹. This certainly reflects the broad research area of agritourism where researchers representing different academic disciplines look for answers to questions regarding agritourism from the point of view of the science which they represent. As a result, agritourism problems are viewed from the perspective of different sciences, such as agriculture, economy, sociology or tourism geography.

As for the research activity, a quantitative effect in agritourism is the growing number of publications, where the authors point to the mechanisms of its development and a detailed methodology of agritourism studies. This process, however, occurs in different sciences. It should be stressed that for many years academic circles have been involved in a discussion on the autonomy of tourism as a science (e.g. TRAVIS 1983, PRZECŁAWSKI 1984, LISZEWSKI 1994, ALEJZIAK 1998, 2003, WINIARSKI 2008, 5th Tourism Experts Committee 2010¹⁰).

Ideas on agritourism and its theoretical models created in different academic disciplines include the following:

- a model of the rural tourism market – example of the Zachodnio-Pomorskie (West Pomeranian) *Województwo* – developed by BOTT-ALAMA (2004), an economist;
- a model of the effects of agritourism development, devised by WOJCIECHOWSKA (2006), a geographer;
- an idea for agritourism homestead economics and the relations between agricultural production and agritourism, SZNAJDER & PRZEBÓRSKA (2006), agriculturalists.

It must be stressed that in both practice and in theory, agritourism has appeared as a new phenomenon. Therefore, after twenty years it is extremely difficult to assess the effects of its development objectively. It is a relatively new phenomenon for research, but in practice we already have the next generation interested in its further development.

3. THE MAIN DEVELOPMENT PROBLEMS

Development problems may be divided into different categories. For instance, in terms of time, we may talk about continuous problems, current or new. Following this way of thinking, the author has presented them in Table 2 on both practical and theoretical planes as before. Let us first discuss problems on the theoretical plane.

Table 2. The main issues in Polish agritourism development

Problems	
practice	theory
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - briefness or vagueness of activity among organisations generating and shaping the development, insufficient understanding of innovativeness as a continuous challenge; - overlapping activities and competences of institutions supporting the development; disintegration and weakening of the self-government of agritourism branch (<i>samorząd branżowy</i>); - weakness and inconsequence in the legal, administrative and organizational mechanisms, supporting the development. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - poor methodological integration; - progress in research is mostly quantitative; - difficulties in comparing the study results and repeating the research; - continuous terminological discussion, which works against theoretical integration; - ineffective integration of theory and practice.

Source: author.

The study of literature shows that researchers representing different academic disciplines conduct agritourism research independently of one another, using the language of their own individual disciplines. As a result, knowledge about agritourism collected in different disciplines is presently poorly integrated. Some conferences devoted to agritourism gather representatives of different disciplines in order to work out an interdisciplinary approach and Polish agritourism symposia invite practitioners to join the discussion. Despite this, such an approach is still rare. There is a shortage of publications in which specialists in different fields are jointly trying to provide answers to the same research problems. An interdisciplinary approach makes it possible to obtain a common platform for discussion among representatives of different disciplines involved in the study of agritourism (PRZECLAWSKI 1984, p. 57). It must be admitted that over the twenty years of agritourism development such a platform has not been built.

The next theoretical issue is the fact that progress in agritourism research is clearly quantitative. There are

many studies and expert evaluations but the studies have a limited scope, are often not representative, and very rarely conducted on a national scale (also due to the lack of regular statistical data). This leads to another problem, i.e. the difficulty in comparing research results both in time and space. On top of that, the continuous terminological discussion regarding the notion of agritourism works against theoretical integration and, consequently, effective integration of theory and practice. Seemingly the integration is large, if we consider the scale of activities, but it seems small in terms of effects. This is confirmed by the fact that science has poor recognition of the differences in demand in different parts of Poland, as regards the quantity demanded, structure, features and trends – information which is crucial for practitioners.

Practical issues may be put into three categories: the involvement of organisations; the activity of the self-government of agritourism branch (*samorząd branżowy*); and the structure of agritourism development mechanisms (Table 2). In the first category, a very important issue is the ephemeral character of the activities (on the part of both the owners of agritourism homesteads and the associations), their vagueness on the tourism market, and insufficient understanding of innovativeness as a continuous challenge. The author confirms her own statement, contained in the publication from 2009, regarding the high quantitative fluctuations among agritourism homesteads (WOJCIECHOWSKA 2009). Officially, their number is worryingly decreasing, but at the same time there are also a lot of new ones which have not been registered or are advertised only on the Internet.

Another issue is the overlapping of activities and competences of the organisations directly involved or supporting agritourism development. The first symptoms of this phenomenon occurred after 2000 as a result of the reorganization of the tourism system in Poland¹¹. The Regional and Local Tourist Organizations founded at that time were glad to take advantage of the popularity of agritourism homesteads in their own promotion, offering very little in return. After 2004, Local Activity Groups (LAG) appeared, competing with the self-government of agritourism branch (*samorząd branżowy*) at local, regional and national levels, but the competition was hardly ever positive; the LAG's are rather a threat to the these branches¹². The weakness and inconsequence of legal, administrative and organizational mechanisms is conducive to an unnecessary division of activity among different organisations, especially outside the tourism business¹³.

The issues discussed above are clearly interdependent; each enhances another. Solving them requires a wide-ranging approach, i.e. first of all

the strengthening of the central organisation¹⁴ in order for it to coordinate agritourism development in a planned way, and not 'from project to project'. Its most important role should be changing the image of Polish agritourism, deciding how to diversify the agritourism offer – strategically or spontaneously – as well as establishing clear rules for agritourism activity as an additional source of income for a farming family and the main source of income (business) for those living in a rural area. It is time we loosened the legal-organizational straightjacket to allow development in Polish agritourism.

4. PRO FUTURO

The problems discussed above should be treated as a challenge for the immediate future because the quality of ideas will determine the potential of agritourism in Poland. It is also worth mentioning those problems which may result from social trends, especially those connected with the economic, social and spatial reconstruction of rural areas.

In the light of various forecasts for the Polish countryside for the next twenty years, it appears that we may expect deep changes affecting all the basic areas in which it functions: agriculture, population, sources of farmers' income, rural culture, social life, as well as the state and European rural policy (KUPIDURA *et al.* 2011). Many of these changes will have a direct effect on future agritourism, so some are worth taking a closer look at.

It is expected that the rural population will increase, especially in the villages situated within 50 km of larger towns, more people not involved in farming will move to the countryside, housing enclaves will be built for them and as a result the rural landscape will change (KUPIDURA *et al.* 2011). These predictions raise the following questions: what should the agritourism offer include, what should it offer on the outskirts of large cities, and what 'deep in the country' or in the tourism zones of rural areas?

The agritourism offer may include different types of homesteads in the future. Perhaps initially this diversification will be oriented towards the functionality of a farming homestead for tourists, as is the case in agritourism in Western European countries today¹⁵.

Implementing the idea of the multifunctional development of rural areas is related to the introduction of new non-farming functions, including tourism-recreational ones. This may aggravate spatial, environmentally-related and social conflicts in the future, even more so in that one suggestion for development is that spatial planning should include taking responsibility

for planning and administering the space inhabited by local communities (KUPIDURA *et al.* 2011). Another question comes to mind: what should be taken into account in spatial planning as regards agritourism development?

Going deeper into this problem, we should also ask the following:

1. To what extent can the local community decide the scale of agritourism development in individual farming homesteads, or tourism facilities in their village, so that its homesteads, spatial layout, architectural landscape, etc are not deformed?

2. How can this community prevent the danger of 'becoming a part of the tourism attraction on offer'¹⁶, the source of many internal and external conflicts?

3. Are agritourism homesteads an element of public space and how should their functioning be inscribed in the vision of the development of this space?

4. Can the local community itself set limitations on the spatial and social development of agritourism?

In the face of the above questions it seems important to provide local communities¹⁷ with knowledge of the optimum and incontrovertible indicators of agritourism development, possibly in many aspects. The suggestion seems reasonable in the context of the spatial development of every village in a given region. Such an idea was put forward by KOWICKI (2005) under the slogan 'the countryside for the farmers'.

Giving agritourism its place in the postulated vision of spatial rural development, including an element of socio-economic development, makes sense. The possibility of presenting the scale of agritourism development effects (its benefits and costs) should be very important for local communities. They will be able to avoid disappointment caused by excessive hopes connected with the development of tourist services in their area. It also becomes possible to define the optimum number of agritourism homesteads for a given locality which will enable the community to choose the form of development, e.g. as an agritourism village or individual homesteads belonging to a national network. By defining the limits of agritourism development, it will be possible to prevent its excessive growth in a given village. Uncontrolled and spontaneous development over a period of time is not favourable from the perspective of tourists or inhabitants. Geographical space is a strictly limited resource, in agritourism as well¹⁸.

The theoretical task is to define the rules of measuring and evaluating the effects of agritourism activity in order to recommend its optimum development and to be able to manage rural space. Other theoretical aspects include choice of evaluation criteria, the indicators and the evaluation itself. Therefore, it is worth discussing the method of evaluating the

effectiveness of agritourism and establishing its physical absorbency and capacity in given areas, as well as the perception capacity (URRY 2007), i.e. the subjective quality of tourist experience. There are many examples of such studies in Western Europe, for instance in Great Britain and France¹⁹.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Over the period of the past 20 years, both in practice and theory, the main focus has been the promotion of agritourism. The next period should be techniques of planned development. The task of research is to assist in planning it so that it responds to the symptoms and forecasts of the tourism market and the socio-economic development of the rural areas.

FOOTNOTES

¹ The conference was organized on 15-16th April 2001 by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, the Ministry of Sport and Tourism, the provincial council of the Świętokrzyskie Województwo and the Regional Tourism Organization of the Świętokrzyskie Województwo.

² The earliest included the Tourism Union of Świętokrzyskie Rural District Councils (founded in 1991), the Gdansk Agritourism Association (1993) and the Warminsko-Mazurskie Agritourism Association (1993) (WOJCIECHOWSKA 2010).

³ This book contains the expression 'agritourism development paradigms'. It must be explained that 'paradigm' was not used as a theoretical category (formulated by the philosopher and academic historian KUHN, 2001), but to represent different ways of organizing agritourism.

⁴ More information about the institutional origins of Polish agritourism can be found in the book by WOJCIECHOWSKA (2009).

⁵ The difference between theory and practice is captured in a statement on medicine which states that the aim of medicine is to deal with the illness while the aim of medical practice is to take care of the sick (after: ALEJZIAK 2003, p. 240). In Polish agritourism terminology we find two works: *agroturystyka* and *agrotourism*, it can be said that *agroturystyka* is a term closer to practice, and *agrotourizm* to theory (more about the definitions of terms in the book by WOJCIECHOWSKA 2009).

⁶ More about the exogenic development of Polish agritourism in WOJCIECHOWSKA (2009).

⁷ Statistical data presented at the conference in Kielce.

⁸ In the literature devoted to Polish rural areas, we find three categories of multi-functionality: agriculture, the village and the farming homestead (e.g. ZEGAR 2008, WILKIN 2009). In the first category, agritourism plays the least important role.

⁹ For example, the bibliographic list of works on agritourism compiled by Kożuchowska, published in 2000, included 224 entries, and that by Drzewiecki from 2001 – 258 entries. In 2009, for the purpose of writing her book, the author studied a collection of over 400 publications (WOJCIECHOWSKA 2009).

¹⁰ This suggestion was officially submitted at the round-up session of the 5th Tourism Specialists Commission, held on 23-25th November 2010 in Warsaw, and formulated in the resolutions to the conference.

¹¹ The author pointed to this issue in 2005 (WOJCIECHOWSKA 2005).

¹² More and more often at different conferences (also that at Kielce) the following question is raised: what is (if it exists at all) the future of Local Activity Groups after the termination of the EU programme 'Leader +', supervised by the provincial councils? It is commonly known that advisory and financial support triggers inventiveness, and is a promising tool, but it does not guarantee success. Without subsidies, the success of an idea may be threatened, which has often been the case in agritourism. If there is no direction for Local Activity Groups, tourism may be in a double danger – not only because it will be weaker, but above all because the activity of agritourist associations (local and regional) will end, thus disorganizing the functioning of the Polish Federation for Rural Tourism „Hospitable Farms” (*Gospodarstwa Gościnne*).

¹³ In his works, Raciborski (since the 1990's) has pointed to the formal forms of relief for agritourism, guaranteed by current legal regulations. He also draws attention to the weakness of these regulations, and even their limiting nature (RACIBORSKI 2011). It must be stressed that these are even greater due to the changes in administration and law, ordered by the EU and interpreted differently in different regions.

¹⁴ The author believes that the central organisation is the Polish Federation for Rural Tourism „Hospitable Farms” (*Gospodarstwa Gościnne*) founded in 1996. In order for the Federation to perform the function of autonomous coordinator of agritourism in Poland, it should have an office with fully employed professional personnel. The office should be controlled by the Federation board of directors. Unfortunately, the Federation is unable to cope with such a task alone. This is why, among other reasons, its position is gradually weakening. In other countries, e.g. Austria, continuous and visible financial support, for instance by appropriate ministries, enables such an organization to function in a stable way (www.farmholidays.com). The lack of a proper office and other problems of the Federation were described by the author in 2005 (WOJCIECHOWSKA 2005).

¹⁵ The typology of agritourism based on this criterion was presented in 2010 by the British researchers PHILLIP, HUNTER & BLACKSTOCK (2010). They identified six types of agritourism based on a farm and having tourist contact with agriculture: 1) non working farm agritourism – e.g. accommodation in ex-farmhouse property; 2) working farm, passive contact agritourism – e.g. accommodation in farmhouse; 3) working farm, indirect contact agritourism – e.g. farm produce served in tourist meals; 4) working farm, direct contact, staged agritourism – e.g. farming demonstrations; 5) working farm, direct contact, authentic agritourism – e.g. participation in farm tasks. Perhaps Polish agriculture will pursue this direction.

¹⁶ Many examples of such phenomena can be found in foreign (e.g. DIELEMANS 2011) and the Polish literature e.g. POŁOMSKI (2010) who describes the life of the inhabitants of the Bieszczady National Park area. In order to present the results of the sociological research conducted there, he uses the metaphor of 'the monkey and the open-air museum'. The two elements of this metaphor refer to the inhabitants of the villages situated in protected areas and which are advertised among tourists. According to the author, this metaphor shows that such villages lose their importance as places where food is produced and also their agricultural function, for the benefit of the entertainment services. This makes the local community a part of the tourism attraction (tourists look at the locals as if they were monkeys in an open-air museum, p. 129). Not all inhabitants want that or think that such activity is suitable for them. The lack of other activities forces them to migrate, while staying in the village and not getting involved in tourism services often results in being pushed to the brink of social life. The author explicitly presents a conflict within a local community, but we must not forget the conflicts resulting from how such communities are perceived by others, especially those neighbouring. At the 14th Polish Agritourist Symposium (13-15th September 2011), during a workshop session entitled 'Social management of the rural tourist product', Maria Idziak discussed the phenomenon of neighbouring villages ridiculing the way the inhabitants of Sieraków Sławieński in Zachodnio-

pomorskie Województwo earn money (their tourism product is the 'Hobbits' Village').

¹⁷ The local community was defined by WACIEGA (2011) as a space where citizens, non-governmental organizations, public institutions and enterprises pursue common values and interests.

¹⁸ This statement may be confirmed by the case of Śladków Mały near Kielce, announced as an 'agritourism village' in the 1990's. In 1999 it had 25 agritourism homesteads, while in 2010 – only 10 (based on Beata Szwaczko's research for her MA thesis, entitled 'Opportunities and obstacles in the development of agritourism in the agritourism village of Śladków Mały', written under the supervision of Wojciechowska at the Institute of Urban Geography and Tourism, University of Łódź, in 2011). The large number of agritourism homesteads in a village devoid of any significant tourism assets was shown as a cause of social conflict.

¹⁹ One of the many researchers is Claire Delfose, who discussed raising the value of rural area assets and their significance for local development during her lectures given in April 2010 at the University of Łódź, as part of the ERASMUS program. Her works are published in the journal *Ruralia. Sciences sociales & mondes ruraux contemporains*, published by Institut des Sciences de l'Homme in Lyon.

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