

A PROPOSAL TO IMPROVE THE EFFICIENCY OF MANAGING AND FUNCTIONING OF A TOURIST PRODUCT AS EXEMPLIFIED BY A TOURIST TRAIL

Anna NIZIOŁ

Faculty of Physical Education, University of Rzeszów

Keywords:

- tourist destination,
- tourist product,
- trail,
- management,
- efficiency.

Abstract:

The development of tourism, within a defined area, is conditioned by having a proper tourist potential. Everything that can be used for practicing or dealing with tourism (environment, people, infrastructure) determines its tourist potential and creates tourist destinations.

In order to increase the profitability of these areas, it is necessary to improve their attractiveness and to adjust them to actual trends in the tourist market. Future activities should be aimed at the protection of natural and cultural environment in order to offer a comprehensive and competitive tourist product. One of the popular forms of organizing tourism in destination places is a tourist trail. A trail, as a place, is a special kind of a tourist product. It consists of a number of "places" or "objects" associated with a thematic idea, which are connected with a route (walking, cycling, water, etc.), usually marked, and with various tourist facilities, located along the trail .

Within this context the paper attempts to provide a better understanding of the role of successful management based on specific tasks and the process of building relationships between the local administration with the external environment including local tour operators, non-governmental organizations, academic institutions, promotion organizations, conservators and similar entities.

TRAIL AS A TOURIST PRODUCT OF A TOURIST DESTINATION

According to the definition of UNWTO [UNWTO 2007], a tourist destination is an important place visited by tourists which represents the basic unit of analysis in tourism. Three perspectives can be recognized:

- the geographical (a distinctly recognizable area with geographic and administrative boundaries that tourists visit and where they stay during their trip),
- the economic (the place where they stay the longest and spend money),
- psychographical (the one which constitutes the main reason for the journey).

Furthermore, the destination is serviced by both private and public sector and can be performed by a whole country, a region, a town or city or a self-contained centre of attraction. This leads to the conclusion that the tourist destination can be defined according to two different perspectives [Manente, Minghetti 2006]:

1. As a tourist place where tourist activities have been developed and then tourist products are produced and consumed.
2. As a tourist product and then as a specific supply involving a set of resources, activities and actors within a given territory as well as the local community.

In order to increase the profitability of these areas, it is necessary to improve their attractiveness and to adjust them to the trends in the tourist market. Potential activities should be aimed at the protection of natural and cultural environment in order to offer a comprehensive and competitive tourist product. One of the popular forms of organizing tourism in the destination places is a tourist trail [Krupa 2014].

The trail, as a place (linear, zonal), is a special kind of a tourist product. It consists of a number of "places" or "objects" associated with a thematic idea and connected by a route (walking, water, car, etc.), usually marked, with various tourist facilities, located along the trail [Kaczmarek, Stasiak, Włodarczyk 2010].

The trail, as defined by PTTK, is "a route marked out with unified symbols and signs in the area, which is used to conduct tours, equipped with information devices that provide safe and peaceful travelling (movement) regardless of tourists' skills level and experience, at any time of the year, in all weather conditions, unless the regulations do not state otherwise (...)" [PTTK 2007:4, own translation].

Although trails are classified rather as complementary tourist infrastructure, their role in increasing the attractiveness of a region is important because they are an indicator of development of its tourist function. The higher the number of tourist trails (measured e.g. by the number of kilometres per one unit area), probably the more tourist traffic and better developed tourist function.

A competent use of tourism and the ecological function of tourist trails can become an effective tool for spatial planning. It allows the reduction of an excessive concentration of tourist traffic in the most endangered areas through the dispersion of visitors over a larger area, and vice versa, gathering tourists on area by channelling tourist traffic along the selected trails.

A trail may also be an element of a balanced economic development, area management and tourism marketing. By setting new trails, extending existing ones or connecting other objects to them, it is possible to effectively widen the scope of the expansion of tourism. Many areas, not yet enjoying popularity among tourists, have been promoted in such a way, and in some cases, tourism has become a major factor in their development.

As a tourist product, a trail is complex and multi-produced. It is a conglomerate of many individual goods and services, which are enjoyed by tourists during their journey. It may consist of six other categories of a tourist product [Kaczmarek, Stasiak, Włodarczyk 2010]:

- a) services - accommodation, catering, guiding, tourist information,
- b) things – guide books, tourist maps, souvenirs, postcards, multimedia presentations,
- c) objects - monuments of architecture, museums, natural sites,
- d) events - presentations, cultural events, recreational events, exhibitions, travel trade fairs,
- e) travel packages - city tours, excursions,
- f) area - a city, village, district, national park.

Links and relationships between the components are complex and multi-faceted, which results from the fact that each of them has a different manufacturer. To produce a complete (coherent) product, consisting of so many elements it is necessary to establish an entity which will manage the creation and operation of a trail and will be able to coordinate the activities of all involved manufacturers. In Polish conditions, it may be the local government, regional and local tourist organizations, tourist organizations and associations (sometimes even specially founded for this purpose).

PROPOSALS OF IMPROVING ORGANISATION AND MANAGEMENT

Today, successful management which has to carry tourism destinations needs to be based on a few factors [Manete 2007]:

- organisation of local resources,
- co-ordination and management of local tourist production,
- management and control of the relations among the stakeholders,
- market segmentation and product lines,
- creation and management of the value produced by the tourism system for all the actors involved in the public and private sector, tourists and the host community.

Efficient and effective management will depend on the precise knowledge of actual and potential demand, on actors involved in tourist supply and on the economic relations that exist among the stakeholders.

Furthermore, a common misconception is that the tourist trail will function efficiently if each object co-creating the trail is managed by a specified manager. The same engagement of all entities in "supporting" a trail does not occur in practice. Therefore, it seems necessary to define the requirements to be met by the organizational structure of a trail, to ensure not only the management of the operational phase (creation, organization), but also afterwards.

First of all, it is vital to implement mechanisms for building a hierarchically structured organizational system. Often, in case of trails, this structure usually consists of public administration whose managing competences are not always effectively fulfilled (the autonomy of activity is limited, e.g. financial dependence on marshal's offices).

The process of managing a cultural trail based on e.g. the institutional structure of local administration should involve the following distribution of competences proposed by Gawel [Gawel www.turystykakulturowa.org, Nr 1/2011]:

Table 1. Tasks of local administration in the process of tourist trail management

province marshal's office	district governor's office (powiat)	commune office (gmina)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • know-how (to establish and mark the trail; necessary cooperation with external experts on the stage of selecting objects, attractions) • brand owner (trail treated as a brand in the market of tourist services, it requires e.g. promotion, image creation and animation) • the development of visual identification of the trail • coordinator of the activities undertaken by other entities (including cooperation with non-governmental organizations) • evaluation, verification of objects • support in gaining funds from external sources • training for owners / managers of facilities, tourist attractions • supervision over the content of promotional publications 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • creation of tourist information points, centers • distribution of information, promotional materials in the district • coordinating activities undertaken by communes • cooperation with associations, non-governmental organizations, including private companies, attempting to develop the market of tourist services related to servicing the trail route (e.g. organizing seasonal study-tours) • development of small tourist infrastructure, facilities along the trail 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • including the objects in the program of regional events • cooperation with communal schools in order to develop educational programs for children and adolescents concerning the local cultural heritage, cultural identity, etc. • working with object owners to improve the quality of services (e.g. the employment of assistance of seasonal guides being recruited from communal cultural centers, libraries, schools) • creating programs activating communes' life with the use of objects included in the structure of the trail <p>If the local authority is the owner of the object, its competence will also include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • care for the object's immediate surroundings • conservation of information boards • ensuring permanent seasonal availability of the object

Source: Gawel Ł. Zarządzanie Szlakiem Architektury Drewnianej w kontekście procesu profesjonalizacji szlaków kulturowych, *Turystyka Kulturowa*, www.turystykakulturowa.org, Nr 1/2011

Another option would be to entrust the trail's management to e.g. a NGO or to establish a local tour operator. In short, it would be a commercial company, dealing with local inbound tourism, specialized in:

- creating,
- managing and promoting,
- selling the packages (for tourist), specific and characteristic for the region, including objects belonging to a trail.

As a consequence, this is a proposal to create a local travel agent with the function of a tour operator, specialized in incoming tourism to its area. Accordingly, the objectives of the company can be formulated as follows [www.forumlot.pl]:

- packaging of products - the preparation of the local offer in the commercialized form - ready for direct sale,
- rationalization of cooperation with intermediaries - adapting the sales network for the expected customer segment,
- adapting to new trends in demand - the creation of new offers,
- increasing customer satisfaction - improving the quality and range of services.

Another proposal is the creation of a separate coordinator for the trail. Its tasks could relate to:

- organizing activity on a trail.
- service of tourists, creation or help in the development of specific proposals (resulting in the improved quality of tour operators' and tourists' service in terms of the information they need),
- modifying required services and faster response to problems that arise in daily tourist servicing.

The efficient functioning of the trail will primarily depend on ensuring adequate financial resources. It should be emphasized that the effectiveness of trails cannot be assessed in the same way as commercial tourist products. For example, cultural trails are primarily the area of culture and culture market, and, therefore, the same criteria should be applied in relation to such a trail as for museums, theatres and cultural centers, which means that the trail will not generate high-level profits and will not rather be able to self-finance [Gawel 2011:88].

The issue of determining the factor of costs standardization for individual actions also seems to be problematic. It is difficult to determine the financial categories e.g. in relation to a developed and restored historic mansion which functions as a library and cultural center, and, included as an object to the structure of the cultural trail, is promoted and visited by tourists and school groups within history lessons [Gawel 2011:89].

Therefore, a cultural trail seems to be a product that cannot be calculated. However, in order to assess its effectiveness, the obtained results should be compared with established aims, which requires efficient and effective management.

The entity managing the trail should assume that a route should be animated and organized in order to have an optimal use of all area resources (cultural, recreational, gastronomy and others). This requires an extremely precise development of spatial and topographic aspects of the trail.

In addition, an environment assessment should take into account the local interests and give opportunity to achieve the maximum profit from the functioning of a trail (certain added value will be obtained). The main trail might also be supplemented by smaller tourist routes (cycling, walking, horse-riding, motorcycle etc.). Such an idea would also open new promotional channels among the enthusiasts of other forms of travelling.

Local initiatives not related directly to the trail should also be considered since they may be complementary to the main trail (including programs and projects of EU support

implementation in the area). A cultural trail may be the core of cultural activity and other forms of tourism for a given area and could be, in this respect, used to promote other sites, outside the main trail. In all probability, the visitors of a given object on the trail will also focus on other attractions located nearby.

An important recommendation would be to place information about all the local attractions in the so-called "trail anchor points" (and, in high season, to temporarily run tourist information points). Tourists are often disappointed by the fact that upon coming to a popular site they cannot find information of other interesting objects nearby.

Trial anchor points should refer to facilities and objects unique in terms of their artistic or historical value (e.g. at communication hubs, organized e.g. as a tourist information point on the trail, a place of distribution of promotional materials).

SUMMARY

A trail, as a tourist product, should not be just a collection of marked objects. Managing entities and co-creators of a trail should take care of its activity, animation, recovery, popularization and development. These entities should follow a jointly established direction, reach their goals, keep direct contact, building and strengthening mutual relationships. They should organize regular meetings, participate in training courses and seminars where participants will have the opportunity to share their experiences, problems, but also initiatives and innovative ideas.

It is also important to build relationships with the external environment including non-governmental organizations, academic institutions, promotional organizations, conservators, etc. It is necessary to have contact with both present and potential tourists, which indicates the necessity to conduct studies in terms of their needs, expectations, assessing the quality of service etc. Such knowledge will help to better manage the trail and to increase and improve its offer.

It should be emphasized that when creating a professional trail, we must not forget that it includes places associated with the past and having impact on human memory, imagination and feelings and therefore it should be competently managed and protected at the same time.

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