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Sustainable tourism development in Neringa region

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Abstract

Tourism industry is one of the most important parts of the service sector. However, the expansion of tourism industry might also harm the environment. Therefore, the development of sustainable tourism is getting crucial in such environmentally sensitive places as Neringa region in Lithuania which is also protected by UNESCO. The qualitative research was carried out with tourism experts in Neringa region to determine current situation and possibilities of sustainable tourism development in Neringa region.

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1. Introduction

Tourism is one of the most important aspects for the development of service sector and today is indeed an activity of considerable global economic importance. However, the problem analyzed in this paper is that tourism industry especially in Lithuania now demands more meaningful involvement and more responsible and sustainable tourism practices. It is very important to develop the tourism sector, because there are a lot of beautiful touristic places and attractions, which are authentic and worth to visit in Lithuania. The object of this research is Neringa region located in Curonian spit, with its spectacular UNESCO-inscribed scenery and which is the elite seaside resort of Lithuania. It is very important to maintain this unique area, that future generations would have the opportunity to visit it. Therefore, the aim of this research is to determine the current situation and to find out the stage of sustainable tourism development process in Neringa region.

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Over the past 20 years tourism has become a major part of the discourse in sustainable development. There are many tourism types, which are divided by tourists travel goals, for example: business tourism, eco-tourism, health tourism, nature or history tourism, rural tourism, conference tourism, cultural tourism and others, however, sustainable tourism development guidelines and management practices, are applied to all types of tourism and to all kinds of tourist areas (Darnaus vystymo iniciatyvos, 2010). Some of these tourism types like eco-tourism were the origin of sustainable tourism (Reiter, 2011) which finally developed to a global, more holistic approach (Sharpley and Telfer, 2002). Key elements of tourism sustainability include meeting the needs of both visitors and host communities and protecting and enhancing the tourism attraction for the future as a part of a national economic resource, as one of the opinion is that the concept of sustainable tourism emerged from recognition of the negative impacts of mass tourism (Swarbrooke, 1999).

According to Hall (2008) sustainable tourism policies need to be integrated with wider economic, social and environmental policy considerations within an overall sustainable development framework. This integration is long and complicated process, but later it can bring the advantage to tourism destination by maximizing the economic, social and cultural environments benefit, like for example Costa Rica did during 12 years period (Kahle-Piasecki, 2013). The relationship between tourists, host communities, businesses, attractions, and environment is complex, interactive, and symbiotic (Edgell, 2006), but the involvement of stakeholders in development and promotion of sustainable tourism is crucial (Vesna et al, 2012). According to Fragozo Neves (2007) it is important for every tourist and tourism providers to know sustainable tourism principles and follow them, because it helps to save authentic tourism destinations for future generations. Sustainable tourism development may require some changes in existing policies and practices depending on each location. Therefore, local participation and control is the key to the success of sustainable tourism development because sustainable tourism, properly managed, will add to the quality of life of the residents, visitors, and tourism employees alike (Edgell, 2006).

In Lithuania the concept of sustainable tourism is quite new and the principles of sustainable tourism development were applied only few years ago. However, green thinking and sustainable tourism principles are being introduced to the tourism sector of Lithuania. Furthermore, in European context it can be seen that Lithuania has retained its traditional landscapes, biological diversity and cultural history because protected areas have been established. Lithuania has four beautiful resorts, five national parks and 30 regional parks that include possibilities for tourism activities that can be characterized as sustainable tourism. The sustainability of the areas is mainly maintained through protection and restrictions, and development of sustainable tourism infrastructure. Also, Lithuania has an active countryside tourism association, which promotes rural tourism that is considered to be a form of sustainable tourism. Moreover, the Blue Flag Programme is applied to the Lithuanian beaches and marinas (Lithuanian Tourism Statistics, 2008). However, according to Grundey (2008) the development of sustainable tourism is not competitive enough in Lithuania. It is necessary to discuss the issues of region individuality, control of cultural identity and the most important is to avoid losing unique Lithuanian landscape and exclusion from other regions.

Nowadays Neringa resort is one of the most prestigious resorts in Lithuania, with well-developed business and cultural educational tourism, rational use of natural resources and a wide selection of tourism services for Lithuanian and foreign tourists. More than 800 thousands guests visit it every year. Neringa municipality has prepared a strategic development plan for 2014-2020 years, which states that tourism development in Neringa is oriented to ecological and cognitive tourism, active recreational tourism development, cultural tourism and other complex tourism types. Although term “sustainable tourism” was not mentioned in strategic plan, but the main principles of the sustainable tourism concept were introduced. However, there is no particular information what should be done in order to develop sustainable tourism in Neringa. If the main principles of sustainable tourism development and the right politics in Neringa are not applied, tourism might have a negative impact to the destination and damage the environment (Kahle-Piasecki, 2013). To conclude, Curonian spit is very sensitive and vulnerable place, so in order to maintain this unique resort it is important to use sustainable tourism development principles and improve the whole sphere of tourism in Neringa.

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