



# Wolin Island, tourism and conceptions of identity

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**Abstract** The study focuses on conceptions of the identity of Wolin Island, the area located in the southern part of the Baltic Sea. Identity is regarded as a complex phenomenon, and the research incorporates two primary perspectives: socio-cultural and spatial. Investigations reveal that key factors affecting the identity of the island include tourism development and a post-war history connected with significant migration processes. In consequence, the relationships between tourism and identity have been emphasised.

Investigation of the theme is accompanied by an analysis of the role of external elements posing a threat to Wolin's identity. They include worldwide factors, which embrace a cultural shift, devaluation of landscape or place meaning, and more site-specific processes, such as the local growth of the heritage industry. The discussion is followed by reflections on intrinsic features of identity and its evolution. In conclusion, main elements for construction of Wolin Island's identity are distinguished, and the lack of dependence on 'islandness' is noted.

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## Introduction

Narratives of identities usually reveal many layers of meaning. Islands constitute especially valuable fields of inquiry, they demonstrate tremendous diversity with landscapes ranging from arctic deserts or tropical forests to compact urbanised areas, and simultaneously exhibit great cultural differences. Connected with remoteness, isolation and to a large degree with uniqueness, islands form the basis of manifold captivating images. However, there can be a sharp contradiction between

reality and external associations. It is intriguing that questions regarding islands' identities frequently focus attention on their perception by 'outsiders'. Though offering considerable advantages, such an approach cannot reveal internal notions of identity, which are inseparable from inherent features of an island, including its socio-cultural disposition.

The study presented here investigates the identity of Wolin, an island situated in the southern part of the Baltic Sea. The work concentrates on Wolin's distinctiveness and stresses an 'insider view'. Great touristic attractiveness, a complicated history and the fact of being an island (one of a few in Poland) are among the most important reasons for focusing on this area. Owing to close connections of Wolin with tourism functions, tourism must receive special attention in the study. The author treats identity as a complex phenomenon, referring both to its spatial and cultural meanings; however, the socio-cultural dimension is regarded as an overriding concern, which has been complemented by spatial characteristics.

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The multidimensional character of the study required the application of a combined method of research. It included analyses of relevant scientific literature, spatial policy of the region, press materials and tourist information. Conclusions were also drawn from interviews conducted in 2011 and earlier (e.g. in 2001 and 2005). The most recent interviews with members of local communities, which provided output of close relevance to the theme explored in the current study, were focused on tourism and perception of the area. They consisted mostly of open-ended questions and embraced a group of 52 respondents. Regarding respondents' structure, a slight predominance of women (28) occurred; age distribution shows a larger share of mature people (especially those between 21–30 and 41–50 years old) and having secondary education. These interviews were augmented in 2011 by meetings with several authorities engaged in tourism development of the Wolin Island (Bożetka, 2011). The analysis has also integrated the results of two other surveys. The first examined regional identity of inhabitants and was provided by the Western Pomerania Province (Tożsamość regionalna..., 2011), the second investigated perception and attitudes to the Wolin National Park and was conducted by the Park in 2010 (Woliński Park Narodowy..., 2010). A set of observations carried out by the author in the period 1993–2011 supplements an empirical part of the research.

Since conceptions of identity play a principal role in the work, a review of the evolution of theories of identity became a significant part of the study.

### Identity and regional identity-theoretical foundations

Given the focus on the issue of island identity, in this case on Wolin, insight into the term “identity” is necessary. Identity can be explained from a psycho-cultural perspective that emphasises the individual, the group or even a culture, but it can also be regarded using a chorological approach, which is characteristic of sciences engaged in examination of spatial phenomena. The latter perspective is shared by geography; in this field of knowledge, identity is usually closely connected with a given level of a spatial scale, and as a result, concepts of local identity and regional identity have emerged. However, investigation into such a complex issue as identity requires a deeper understanding than a single discipline can provide. The author thus combines the two aforementioned positions.

Although many different definitions can be found, both sociology and psychology regard identity as the sense of self (Dictionary of Sociology, 2001; The Corsini Encyclopedia of Psychology, 2010). Barney Warf in Encyclopedia of Human Geography (2006: 239) links both approaches, stating that “identity is simultaneously a deeply personal phenomenon and a social phenomenon that reflects, and in turn shapes, individual and collective behaviour”. According to him, there are specific characteristics of the phenomenon. Firstly, identities both constitute and are constituted by the social world. Secondly, they are always historically specific and thirdly, they are simultaneously space forming and space formed (“Space affects not only what we see in the world, but also how we see it”, Warf, 2006: 240). These preconditions play a significant role in the present study. Interestingly, human sciences usually link identity with man, treated individually or as a group, but geography, architecture and other space-related disciplines

show that identity may also accompany any spatial unit, e.g. place, region or landscape.

Though being one of the most common forms of identity, regional identity is a very problematic construction and quite a difficult term to define. An important conceptual distinction lies between “identity of the region” and “regional identity of its inhabitants”. Identity of a region can be divided into two categories: Images, which can also be conceived as parts of regional consciousness and which have a rather subjective character, and more “objective” classifications based on physical environment, culture, landscape, etc. (Paasi, 1986, 2003; Knapp, 2003). Ipsen (1997) identifies regional phenomena processed by individual perception, which are of considerable importance for forming a feeling of belonging. These qualities originate from place properties and comprise the contour, complexity, and coherence.

As far as regional identity is concerned, notions that traditionally accompany the idea of place – such as a sense of belonging to and an attachment to a given area – play a crucial role. The relationship between identity and bonds between people and places (areas) constitute a significant theoretical issue. It seems that identity can exist even without considerable links between people and a given piece of land. Nevertheless, their presence and their strength contribute greatly to the content and values of identity. Norberg-Schulz (2000) when highlighting connections between place and region stated that identifying with a place or an area largely contributes to regional identity, since identity is closely related to the feeling of place.

Taking the above into account, two principal aspects of regional identity can be distinguished:

1. Socio-cultural, focusing on people, especially inhabitants, their feelings and perceptions as related to social and cultural systems, and adequate elements of these systems
2. Spatial, centred on characteristics of a given area, sometimes close to the concept of “landscape identity”.

Perhaps it is worth noting that the latter aspect cannot omit human activity and that the two perspectives co-exist, demonstrating important interrelationships.

### Tourism and identity

Looking at identity through the lens of tourism, positive and negative influences of tourism can be found, both of which are intimately connected with cultural effects. Tourism can bring considerable benefits by enriching local or regional culture with new modes of behaviour, habits, and customs. It usually introduces (and simultaneously requires) an attitude of tolerance, broadens horizons of inhabitants (Przeclawski, 1994), and intensifies cultural exchange. Furthermore, tourism in many ways emphasises the idea of culture as a negotiated and mutable phenomenon.

However, the growing impact of tourism may constitute a serious threat to local societies. This increasing pressure is widely explored in the literature. Tourism can be seen as an economic opportunity and a tool for local development as reported by many case studies (e.g. Marjavaara, 2007), but apart from this, it may lead to social exclusion and even contribute to decline of many destinations (see Agarwal and Brunt

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