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## AGROECOTOURISM AS A PRIORITY TREND OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF TOURISM IN THE REPUBLIC OF BELARUS

Gajdukiewicz L. **Agroturystyka jako priorytet w rozwoju turystyki w Republice Białoruś.** Agroturystyka na Białorusi stanowi nowy dynamiczny rodzaj turystyki, cieszący się dużym popytem na rynku krajowych i międzynarodowym. Jej dynamiczny rozwój wynika nie tylko ze znaczenia ekonomicznego i społecznego, ale także jest determinowany wielkim wpływem na środowisko naturalne i kulturowe oraz zadaniami w dziedzinie zapewnienia zrównoważonego rozwoju regionów kraju. Artykuł jest poświęcony głównym etapom rozwoju turystyki wiejskiej, analizie potencjalnych i rzeczywistych czynników rozwoju usług agroturystyki wiejskiej na rynku turystycznym, jej wpływowi na poziom rozwoju małych i średnich przedsiębiorstw oraz społeczności lokalnej.

Гайдукевич Л. **Агроэкотуризм как приоритетное направление развития туризма в Республике Беларусь.** Агроэкотуризм представляет в Беларуси новый вид туризма, который пользуется большим спросом на внутреннем и международных рынках. Его динамичное развитие определяется не только экономическим и социальным значением, но также большим экологическим и культурным воздействием на обеспечение задач устойчивого развития регионов страны. Статья посвящена основным этапам становления агроэкотуризма, потенциальным и реальным факторам развития услуг агроэкотуризма на туристском рынке, ее влиянию на уровень малого и среднего бизнеса и местные сообщества.

**Key words:** tourism, agroecotourism, tourism policy, regional development, special public organizations

**Słowa kluczowe:** turystyka, agroturystyka, polityka turystyczna, rozwój regionalny, specjalne organizacje społeczne

**Ключевые слова:** туризм, агроэкотуризм, туристская политика, региональное развитие, специальные общественные организации

### Abstract

Agroecotourism is a new kind of tourism, which is in great demand on domestic and international markets not only because of economic and social influence but also due to ecological and cultural impact, and provides a sustainable development of the regions of the country. The article is devoted to the main stages, potential and specific development of agroecotourism in the Republic of Belarus, its influence on the level of small- and medium-sized business and local community.

### INTRODUCTION

The Republic of Belarus is a small European state, that started its sovereign and independent formation after the collapse of the USSR. Being located in Europe, Belarus borders on Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Ukraine and Russia, that determines the specificity of its tourist policy. The country's territory (a bit more than 200 thousand km<sup>2</sup>) is covered with forests (approximately 30% of the territory), has 15 thousand rivers and lakes and more than 438 nature reserves.

There are 4 national parks, 1 biosphere reserve, more than 400 protected natural areas, four units of the World Cultural Heritage (Belovezhskaya Pushcha, Mir Castle Complex, architectural, residential and cultural complex of the Radziwill family in Nesvizh, the Struve Geodetic Arc), included in more than 15 thousand potential of tourist objects. The favorable geographical location and availability of a largescale tourist potential stimulate the development of ecologically oriented tourist services (GAIDUKEVICH, KHOMICH, 2008; RESHETNIKOV, 2011).

One of the modern tendencies in international tourism is a special interest of citizens to the nature-based recreation in traditional country houses. Three components of mass seaside holidays (from Engl. "Sun-Sea-Sand") in European countries were replaced by "Landscape-Lore-Leisure". The motivation to rural recreation is the desire of tourists to become close to the nature, to get acquainted with other culture and traditions, to participate in different national holidays, to communicate with local population. As a tourist product agroecotourism provides a complex package

of services: from accommodation in a country house, excursions, food and beverages to an active participation in rural life – and is oriented firstly at the domestic market. In European countries the majority of customers of such a product are local habitants. The exceptions are Austria and Slovenia, where 40% of tourists are Germans and Italy, where more than 50% of foreigners have a rest in the rural area (KLITSUNOVA, BORISENKO, ANOSHKO, 2014).

The purpose of the research is the factor analysis of conditions and national specificity of agroecotourism development in the Republic. This issue appeared recently in the research field of the Republic (RESHETNIKOV, 2007; MOZGOVAYA, 2010; KLITSUNOVA, BORISENKO, ANOSHKO, 2014) and is characterized by the first attempts of scientific understanding of the direction development actuality in the Belarus. In the modern scientific practice a lot of the different definitions of this type of tourism are used: agrotourism, agroecotourism, rural tourism, “green” tourism, “soft” tourism, alternative tourism and etc. They all have different meanings depending on the context of its usage, a country and an author’s point of view.

#### THE MAIN FACTORS OF AGROECOTOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN THE BELARUS

Agroecotourism is one of the prior tourism sectors, which is being dramatically developed in the Belarus. We can’t but mention that agroecotourism is an ecologically sustainable kind of tourism, aimed at the usage of natural, culture-historical and other resources of rural areas in order to create a complex tourist product.

In the Republic of Belarus the notion “agroecotourism” was introduced in 2006 and now it is defined as “a temporary stay of the citizens of the Republic of Belarus, foreign citizens and persons without citizenship (agroecotourists for further usage) in the rural areas of the Republic of Belarus on the basis of the treaties, signed by the subjects of agroecotourism for the purposes of recreation, health improvement and studying the natural potential of the country, national cultural traditions without being involved into labor, entrepreneurial and other activities, that pay or/and yield a profit from the source of the location (KLITSUNOVA, BORISENKO, ANOSHKO, 2014; TARASENOK, 2014). As practice of the tourism development shows, agrotourism is coupled with ecotourism. The effective development of agroecotourism is possible only in such cases when there exists the balance of interests of the local population, tourists and the environment. In the Belarus agroecotourism has good prospects, but its development should meet the following requirements:

- - it should be based on the usage of mainly natural resources in order to minimize the amount of harm to the habitat; it means it should be ecologically sustainable;
- - it should be aimed at ecological education of people providing the respectful attitude to nature;
- - it should be concerned about the social, cultural preservation of the local community;
- - it should be cost-beneficial, stimulating the stable development of the regions.

The geographic position of the country (in the middle of the Europe), natural wealth, historical and cultural heritage, modern tendencies on the world tourism market provide the development of agroecotourism in the Belarus (table 1).

Table 1. SWOT-analysis of the Agroecotourism Development in the Belarus  
 Tabela 1. Analiza SWOT czynników rozwoju agroekoturystyki na Białorusi  
 Таблица 1. SWOT-анализ факторов развития агроэкотуризма в Беларуси

Strengths	Weaknesses
The hospitality of Belarusian people	Insufficient development of transport and service infrastructure (the shortage of the road-side service objects)
A large amount of historical, cultural and architectural sights	The insufficient level of infrastructure development in rural area
The peculiarity of local traditions and culture	Insufficient social and cultural activity of the locals in the rural area
The advantageous geographical position of the Republic of Belarus (in the middle of the European part) Uniqueness and savagery of the natural landscapes	The ecological consequences of the Chernobyl catastrophe
A high level of security in the country	The unfavorable visa regime for individual foreign tourists
The membership of Belarus in the WTO; in the European Center of Eco- and Agroecotourism (ECEAT); in The International Ecotourism Society (TIER)	The loss of certain cultural traditions and craft in some rural areas of the country

The recognition of agrotourism as a prior direction of tourism development at the governmental level	The lack of advertising and informational activity in the promotion of tourist product and formation of the attractive tourist image of the country
The increase of Belarusian tourism agencies activities in the field of inbound tourism development	Insufficient exploitation of the Internet opportunities by agro farmsteads
Eager activity of social organizations dealing with the popularization of the rural tourism in Belarus	
Opportunities	Threats
The creation of modern, high-quality infrastructure in rural areas	Unfavorable demographic situation in rural areas (the prevalence of senior population)
The revival of the lost cultural traditions and crafts in rural areas	The lack of financial resources for the creation of high-quality infrastructure in rural areas
Restoration of existing and creation of new excursion objects	The lack of financing for the reconstruction of excursion objects
Education and enlightenment of tourists in the sphere of ecology, ethnography, traditional culture and the way of live of Belarusian people	The caution of the local population in relation to entrepreneurial activity in rural areas
The need in structural transformation in rural areas, the creation of new work places and additional income for the rural population	The local community concerns of the environment condition in the context of the growing amount of tourists
Additional tax revenues in the local budgets	
Local self-administration development and the increase of investment opportunities of regions	

Composed by the author on the basis of the following sources: TARASENOK (2014)

The efficient usage of the strengths and opportunities (shown in table 1) as well as liquidation (minimization) of the factors, which impeding its successful development, are to provide the sustainable development of agroecotourism in the regions of the country.

#### THE MILESTONES OF THE ESTABLISHMENT AND OPERATING MODELS OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF AGROECOTOURISM IN THE BELARUS

Agroecotourism in Belarus has gone through several stages in its formation and further development:

- the first stage (the stage of formation) – 2002–2004 is characterized by the establishment of the Public Association "Agro and Ecotourism"; establishing contacts with our foreign partners (Lithuania, Estonia, Poland) and the creation of first farmsteads;
- the second stage (period of mass development) – 2005–2010. The specificity of this phase is a legislative assistance for the development of rural tourism, the creation of the Public Council on agroecotourism in the regions, the emergence of the Belarusian Public Association "Rural Recreation" in The International Ecotourism Society (TIES);
- the third stage (formation of an effective public-private partnership) from 2010 to the present time is marked by the creation of the Public Advisory Council on agroecotourism in the Department of Tourism,

Ministry of Sports and Tourism of the Republic of Belarus, the development of preferential bank loans program for agroecotourism in "Belagroprombank" PLC... (2013); the creation of 17 tourism clusters of agroecotourism in Brest and Grodno regions.

Today there are three main models of the agroecotourism development in our country (table 2). All of them are legitimized in the National Program for the Tourism Development in Belarus for 2006–2010.

The first model of the agroecotourism development is the most favourable one for our Republic. It does not require a lot of state investment and creates working places, contributes to the development of rural infrastructure and minimizes the migration level from the countryside to the city. However, the experience of Poland and Lithuania shows that in order to transform agroecotourism into a cost-effective tourism destination in Belarus, a critical amount of farmsteads (approximately 1000–1500 items) is necessary.

Some other models of agroecotourism development are effectively used in the Republic of Belarus. Such objects as the Museum of Ancient Technology and The Museum of Craft "Dudutki", the Museum of Belarusian Culture and Lifestyle "Strochichi", the Ethnic Museum "The Belarusian Village" near Mogilev, they all contribute greatly to a consistent and diversified image of agroecotourism. A very interesting example of the development of agroecotourism on the basis of cooperative enterprise is "Pervomayskay

and Co" in the Savolevichi region (60 km away from Minsk). Being well financed this entity can become the most perspective in the third model of the agro-

ecotourism development in the Belarus (KLITSUNOVA, BORISENKO, ANOSHKO, 2014).

Table 2. Models of the Agroecotourism Development in the Belarus

Tabela 2. Modele rozwoju agroekoturystyki wiejskiej na Białorusi

Таблица 2. Модели развития агроэкотуризма в Беларуси

1	Rural tourism DEVELOPMENT based on a small family hotel industry	This model proves its effectiveness in the EU countries. One of the main components of this model is the State support of the private hotels chains based on the existing living fund in the rural area. The model includes the following conditions of its implementation: Availability of free or contractually free living fund in the country A high level of comfort and good condition of the living fund Constant state support of agrotourist households Functioning of specialized social unities in the sphere of agroecotourism (associations, social unities) Financial support of agrotourism sector based on the system of preferential bank loans and grants.
2	CONSTRUCTION of large and medium-sized private agrotourism objects in rural areas	It can be implemented in the form of specialized private hotels, agrotourist villages, cultural-ethnographic centers. This model is widely used in the countries with a low comfort level of the living fund, but with a high tourist potential. The effectiveness of this model depends on a high level of investment (both domestic and foreign) and a vivid interest in such projects at a regional level.
3	CREATION of state (sometimes private) agricultural theme parks	This model is oriented at the propaganda of the agricultural progress results of the country, the maintenance of skills, demonstration of traditional agricultural methods. Being multifunctional agricultural centres, state complexes can also be engaged in scientific and selection work. At the same time they can still perform the functions of entertainment tourist centers and exhibition centers.

Source: KLITSUNOVA, BORISENKO, ANOSHKO, 2014; TARASENOK, 2014

## THE MAIN RESULTS AND PERSPECTIVES OF THE AGROECOTOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN THE BELARUS

271.7 thousand people benefited from services of agroecotourism in 2014 in the country, and the income in the sphere of agroecotourism in 2013 amounted to more than 73 billion belarusian rubles. 82,7% of agroecotourists are the residents of the country.

In 2013 there were 1881 units of agroecotourism operating on the territory of the Republic of Belarus (that is 106 units more than in 2012 – table 3).

The number of farmsteads at the regional level varies according to tourist-recreational potential of the region, demand for the quality service, economic activity of local population, activity of public organizations, support of the local authorities. Minsk, Vitebsk and Gomel regions take the leading positions in the number of farmsteads.

It should be mentioned, that in fact every farmstead specializes on a particular type of services (such

as): family recreation, organization of festivals, fairs, conferences, celebrations, weddings.

Analyzing the last period of the development of agroecotourism in our country, it should be mentioned, that the key value in its development has the decree of the President of The Republic of Belarus № 372 from June 2, 2006. "About arrangements of agroecotourism development in the Republic of Belarus" (The Decree of The President of the Republic of Belarus № 372 from June 2, 2006), which provides the preferred position for the creation of agroecotourism entities. The procedure for legalization of an individual activity in the sphere of agroecotourism, according to this Decree is the following:

- to file a written application for the corresponding Rural Council of Deputies about the intention to operate in the sphere of agroecotourism;
- to register for taxation purposes in a tax office;
- to pay the annual tax, which is equal to 1 basic amount per calendar year at the time of payment (about 20 \$ );

- reception of agroecotourists under signed model contracts and providing them with services of accommodation, food, excursions, transportation and others;
- to provide information on service contracts in the sphere of agroecotourism, concluded in the expired year, on the form approved by the Tax Ministry of

the Republic of Belarus to the local tax office annually until January, 10.

The decree has stimulated the activity of country residents in the sphere of tourism development. However, on the first stage some omissions were elicited and some regulations became obvious that the decree didn't allow implementing. Therefore a new

Table 3. The number of agroecotourism units in the Belarus

Tabela 3. Liczba gospodarstw agroturystycznych według obwodów Białorusi

Таблица 3. Количество агротуристских усадеб в регионах Беларуси

Year / Region	2006	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	Index, 2013/2009
Brest	4	124	151	178	199	253	2,0
Gomel	5	68	131	332	358	289	4,3
Grodno	11	181	180	185	229	246	1,4
Minsk	7	214	255	304	412	482	2,3
Mogilev	2	75	208	218	176	162	2,2
Vitebsk	5	222	332	359	401	449	2,0
Total	34	884	1 247	1 576	1 775	1 881	2,1

Source: *Tourism and tourist...* (2014)

document was prepared signed – the Decree of the President of the Republic of Belarus from November 26, 2010 № 614, which provides some changes and amendments in the Decree “About arrangements of agroecotourism development in the Republic of Belarus” from June 2, 2006 № 372. According to the Decree № 614 the owners of farmsteads can exploit up to 10 rooms for tourist accommodation (KLITSUNOVA, BORISENKO, ANOSHKO, 2014). This step allowed to involve more farmsteads in the turnover and also became an incentive for the development of existing ones. Under the new Decree legal entities (agricultural organizations) are allowed to perform the activity in the sphere of agroecotourism. Enactment of the Decree has promoted the growth of service capacity, provided by units of agroecotourism, enhancement of country infrastructure, joining of small town settlements to the process, stimulated employment of local population.

The important role in the formation of agroecotourism in the country played special public associations, that in accordance with the Decree № 372 were entitled:

- to develop and put forward suggestions in the prescribed manner about establishing standards in the sphere of agroecotourism;
- to summarize and provide interested legal entities and individuals with the data about agroecotourism units and about the services they provide;
- to create consulting and informational centers in order to support agroecotourism;

- to cooperate with individual entrepreneurs and organizations, running tourist business (*The National Law...*, 2013).

The first specialized organization in the sphere of ecotourism in the Belarus was Public Association “Agroecotourism”. The Public Association is a non-commercial organization that was created in November 2002. It is one of few public associations that worked with rural population in order to develop their economic and social activities. During the period of its work, the organization provided the owners of farmsteads with information, consulting and methodical support. Public association “Agroecotourism” implemented activities to popularize agroecotourism, using mass media, organizing meetings with the government (presented by the Minister of Sport and Tourism of the Republic of Belarus) and with members of Belarusian Parliament, in cooperation with executive authorities it provided support to the future owners of farmsteads. The main sources of financing for the organization were membership fees, grants, voluntary contributions, donors’ help. During the period of ecotourism development this organization has raised investments to the Belarus, which amounted at approximately 1 mln. euros.

In 2010 P.A. “Agroecotourism” was reorganized by taking over the Belarusian Public Association “Rural Recreation”, which is a non-commercial organization and includes at the moment more than 700 people.

Since 2005 the process of the creation of regional and district Public Ecotourism Councils in the Republic of Belarus has been launched. Such Councils pro-

mote the development of agroecotourism by means of partnerships among the authorities, owners of farmsteads, tourism agencies, non-governmental organizations, business, science and mass media. Mainly, due to the public association's activities, agroecotourism is being dramatically developed and plays a significant role in the tourism sector of the state. Partnership between the governmental and public organizations is implemented through the Public Advisory Council for agroecotourism at the Department of Tourism of the Ministry for Sport and Tourism of the Republic of Belarus. It consists of representatives of the Ministry, regional Public Councils for agroecotourism, and experts in the field.

At present the most effective activity is provided by Brest and Mogilev, Volozhin and Molodechno Community Councils due to the partnership with the strong leaders ahead.

The programme of "Belagroprombank" PLC... (2013) for the development of agroecotourism in the Republic of Belarus has become the largest investment programme since 2007. "Belagroprombank" offers preferred credits to agricultural organizations and individuals under 5% annual interest rate for the agroecotourism development. The maximum amount of credit is from 750 to 2000 basic units. Cofinancing with the borrower's own funds in amount of 10% is a compulsory prerequisite for obtaining the loan. Individuals can obtain it up to 7 years, organizations up to 5 years with the opportunity of payments delay during the first 12 months. 405 loans have been provided totaling 17,9 bln. r. ("Belagroprombank" PLC..., 2013) since the beginning of credit support for agroecotourism entities as on 01/01/2013.

## CONCLUSION

The development of agroecotourism in the Belarus has been successfully underway: an effective legislation was created, financial credit support programme for agroecotourism entities has been implemented, public organizations are conducting their activities and international technical support programmes for farmsteads are being realized. However, as practice shows one should give consideration not only to the quantitative growth of farmsteads but also to their quality improvement. The set of document for obtaining a preferred loan needs to be reduced, more significant information, consulting and methodical support should be provided for the owners of farmsteads by the local authorities. Belarusian farmsteads have to be classified and their business and marketing cooperation and partnership must be develo-

ped for the promotion of Belarusian farmsteads services on the international market.

A deterrent factor for European tourists, who could become potential consumers of Belarusian farmsteads services, is the difficulty of obtaining an individual Belarusian visa and a high cost of air travelling. In addition, agroecotourism entities are not always ready to provide high-quality reception of tourists, primarily due to a lack of expertise in this sphere (knowledge of foreign languages and country studies) and an insufficient level of service in farmsteads. The lack of appropriate education and skills necessary for the successful development of farmsteads may increase the risk factor especially on the initial stage of a business.

*The paper was carried out under the project "Sustainable development of rural tourism in Belarus", registration number 20061244.*

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