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Role of tourism in development of rural marginal areas (region of Šumava Mts. in Czech Republic)

Abstract: Marginality is a complex phenomenon resulting from the specific natural, economic as well as socio-cultural attributes of individual regions. It includes impossibility (of majority) of the population living in a given territory to integrate itself into the main developmental trends (e. g. Moller 1995; Sirovátka 1997). Transforming marginality into comparative advantage can be seen as one of promising ways to overcome it. As a region marginal from socio-economic perspective, but highly attractive as tourist destination, Šumava Mts. were chosen as a model area to demonstrate the idea. Documented by empirical findings, the latest history of the region is discussed in terms of assessing the strong and weak points of developmental strategy adopted by the region, which is based on tourism as the main agent fostering region's socio-economic wake.

Key words: marginality, marginal area, rural areas, regional development, tourism.

Introduction

Marginal areas

Regional development is generally based on exploitation of local resources, both natural and socio-economic. As the conditions are unique in any particular case, each region follows different trajectory of its development, despite the tendencies of central government to level, at least to some extent, conditions on the nation-wide scale. As a result, there have always been centres and peripheries. Being in the centre or in the periphery, however, was attributed to different regions in different periods during the course of history. Centres or main focal points of socio-economic development were then the territories that were able to utilize their features in the form of comparative advantage on the market. The others, unable to do that, became marginal, standing out of main developmental trends. Seen from this perspective, marginality has to be regarded as a context-dependent attribute, rather than an absolute one. Regions, considered marginal from one perspective can thus become focal points if put into another context.

Marginal areas in the Czech Republic

Marginal areas, as having emerged during the post-war history on the territory of the present Czech Republic, spatially coincide with what can be generally called rural space, particularly with mountain ranges and their piedmont areas. The effort of central government to bring the conditions there on a par with those in the rest of the country was mainly manifested through subsidising of intensive agriculture – the main source of job opportunities for local people – which otherwise would have been unprofitable. Since the political change in 1989, the agrarian sector as a whole has been undergoing profound changes. This has led, among other things, to decline of productive agriculture in mountain areas. As the process seems to be irreversible, new economic activities are searched for to substitute or at least complement the fading out productive agriculture in order to enable local populations to preserve sustainability. Otherwise, depopulation tendencies draining local population, primarily its young and qualified members, to towns, would increase.

Discovering of tourism

In this context, tourism was believed to play a role of a factor that local socio-economic development can be based on. The idea is built on the hope that the very disadvantages of marginal areas such as their rural character, distance from big centres and surviving traditional cultures and lifestyle, may become comparative advantages. This sounds quite reasonable, since contemporary tourism, or at least some of its forms, can be seen as an expression of the increasing importance of non-material forms of production and consumption, including the well-documented demand for „rurality“ and the associated attributes of closeness to nature, healthy environments, tradition, heritage and authenticity (Jenkins et al. 2001). For tourism that can be characterised as small-scale, decentralised, friendly to natural as well as cultural environment, and based on active participation of locals, the term “rural tourism” has been coined. Its development is promoted and financially supported by the state as well as by the European bodies.

Suggesting rural tourism as an agent fostering development of mountain rural areas raises, however, one principal question, namely: how to manage this phenomenon appropriately, as there is worldwide evidence that tourism is not unambiguous phenomenon at all. This is true generally about tourism; its rural form is not exception. Its close association with the attributes of marginality means at the same time fragility of the related development as rural tourism booms or goes down in dependence on quality of these attributes. There is no doubt that mountain tourism derives partly from the romantic idealism of people jaded by urban living for, as McCannel (1976) noted some years ago, travel has a romantic aspect. Much of this may be seen as related to the current environmental movement in which a return to simplicity and wholesome living is stressed. This statement is half of truth only, as it does not deal with behavioural patterns of majority of the present-days visitors to mountain regions, at least in

Central European milieu. The empirical evidence seem to support another perspective, pointed out e.g. by Bauman (1995) who uses the metaphor of a tourist to describe one of the post-modern phenomena – human uprooting. Tourism's essence lies in 'otherness', contrast and in organised dislocation from the everyday (Smith 1989). At the same time, however, tourism presupposes their opposite, eventual return to the familiarity of everyday life – and this expectation of return is a prerequisite for a worthwhile tourist experience. Being not tied to one specific place tourists, in this perspective, can move freely and change environment they want to stay in. The only thing they cannot change, however, is their style of living which is that of urban people (Price et al. 1997), in which consumer's aspects dominate.

There are other questions worth taking into account, as well, when thinking about the role of tourism in regional or local development. The concept of rural tourism is an idea that was designed outside the rural space itself. Thus, it is necessary to ask if the potential host community identifies itself with the concept. In other words: it is necessary to ask to what extent, if ever, the host community is able or willing to realize it. In the context of recent Czech professional literature, relevant studies discussing this theme are missing. The existing studies primarily focus on suggesting the way to start rural tourism, and to make local population feel involved. From the formal viewpoint they are rather normative manuals describing how to reach a desirable future. Rural tourism is viewed a priori as a positive phenomenon in these studies – something worth to be developed (e.g. Jelšík 1997; Maier 1998; Stříbrná 1997; Kecková 1997; Hošek 2000). The question whether rural space itself meets the preconditions necessary and the local population's ambitions for this way of development has not yet been raised at all. However, according to some field investigations (e.g. Havrlant 1999; Bartoš et al. 1998; Kušová et al. 1998, 1999, 2000), in areas expected to be suitable for rural tourism development, the passivity of local population has proved to be the decisive factor hindering the introduction of new activities of any type. Similarly, domestic studies on potential negative impact of rural tourism on host territory are still not available. And experience from abroad is not unanimous at all. Generally, tourism is perceived both as a benefit and a threat – depending on its forms and intensity. Optimistic perspective is that of tourism as a factor contributing to economic prosperity. Pessimists view tourism mainly as expansion of urban lifestyle, building economic barriers and „occupation“ of the host territory (Librová 1994; Šípek 2001).

The case of Šumava Mts. in Czech Republic

Historically marginal area

The region of Šumava Mts. is the area of a mountain range situated in the south west part of the Czech Republic. Thanks to its geographical position this area retained its natural character almost by the end of the first half of 20th century. The settlements and the natural resource exploitation, however, had been there

for centuries – particularly glass and wood processing industry – leading to a long tradition of harmony between man and nature. The post-war period of development was characterised by the ethnic shift in 1946. Establishment of the “iron curtain” and of the military training areas in this territory were other specific phenomena the territory was famous of. Location on the border separating the East and West European political alliances, distance from political-economic and cultural centres and the predominantly rural landscape were the main factors maintaining the region as economically marginal. On the other hand, the natural beauty of the area remained preserved. As a result, large-scale nature protected areas were proclaimed there – the Šumava Protected Landscape Area in 1963 and the Šumava National Park in 1991 (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Location of the Šumava Region

Political change that took place in Central and Eastern Europe in 1989 introduced quite a new situation. Due to this process the Šumava Mts. region was plunged immediately into the European context, obtaining thus a chance of ceasing to be marginal.

Recognition of tourism internally as well as externally

Tourism has a long tradition in the Šumava Mts. region, dating back to the end of 18th century (e.g. Bašta 1913; Moss et al. 2000). Tourism was always an indisputable part of local economy. However, as a source of income it was viewed differently in different periods. Since the beginning of the 1990s, tourism has been expected to become the most important factor forming the future of the region. (e.g. Těšitel et al. 1999). Recognition of attractiveness of the territory for tourists as the most promising attribute of the region originated evidently from a very good knowledge of local people not only as regards the natu-

ral beauty of the territory but also as regards the local socioeconomic situation of that times. The territory was historically equipped with recreational facilities of different kind, as it has been a target territory for Czech as well as foreign tourists for a long time. There have been facilities as well as tradition which new development has been based on.

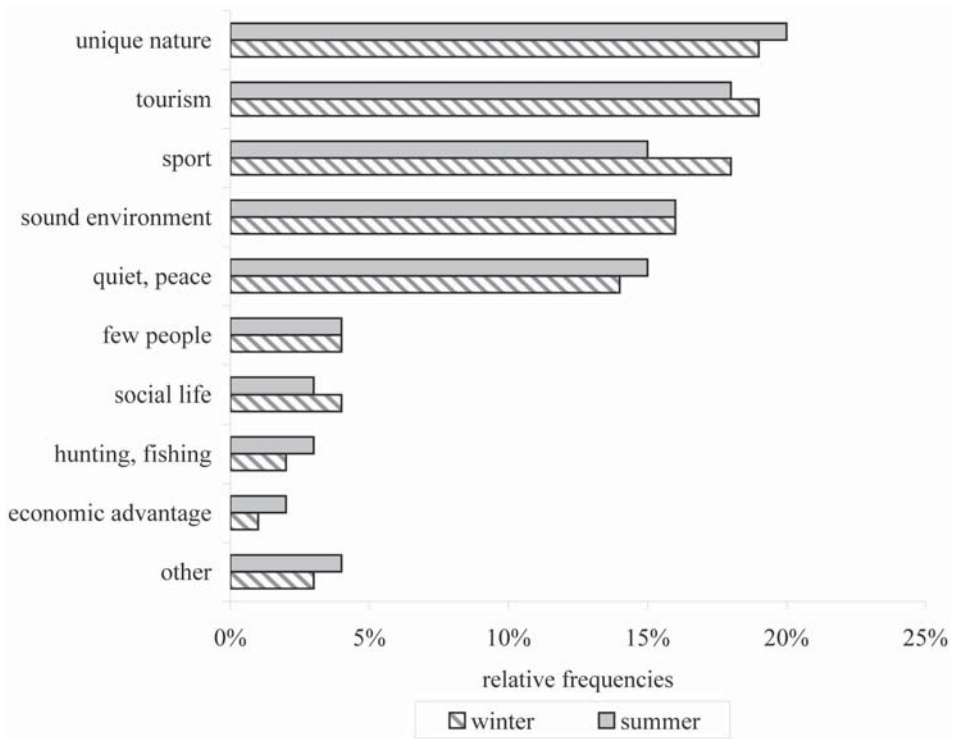
In some respect, tourism can be generally considered as a phenomenon accompanying urbanisation. The increase of urbanisation enhances the demand for recreation especially that, which is realised outside the everyday residential area. „Escape from the city“, as the phenomenon was expressively named by Honzík (1965), was not so widespread at his time. The cause, however, seems to be the same even in comparison with current situation – “non-habitable” urban environment and the possibility of leaving it (in the sense of time, economy and transport). Spreading urbanisation entails a vicious circle, when a swelling city destroys its recreational background and expels its inhabitants to the more and more remote countryside. We can witness a difficult situation: there are more tourists or, generally, people seeking the landscape, and at the same time there is less space where they could realise their desires. This contradiction results in the increasing importance of mountain areas as the recreational background for towns (Librová 1987, 1988). Viewed from this perspective, Šumava Mts. region with its relatively untouched nature has been recognised externally – by tourist clientele – as an ideal destination.

Emerging paradox

The numbers of tourists visiting the Šumava Mts. and the particular forms of tourism there have been changing over time, motivation, to visit the region, however, has been remaining more or less the same – seeking for beautiful nature, quiet and physical exercise¹ (Figure 2).

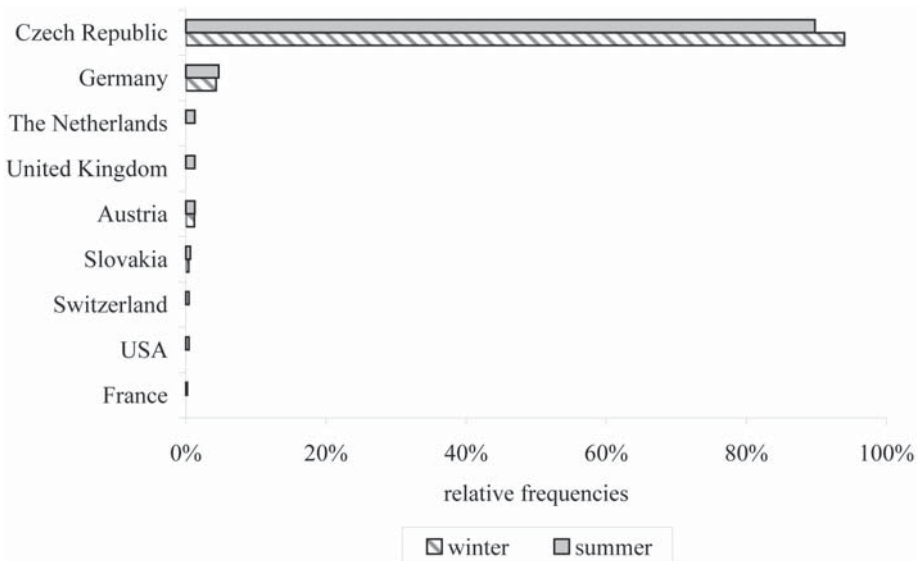
Šumava Mts. can be seen as all-year-round visitors' destination with, however, two main seasons – summer and winter. Based on the data acquired it is possible to state that there are only minor differences between the winter and summer clientele with regard to their demands, expectations and behavioural patterns. Though lying along the Czech – Austrian – German border, the Šumava Mts. region is a recreational territory mainly for the Czech clientele (Figure 3). The boom of foreign visitors – mainly Austrians and Germans, evident at the beginning of the 1990s, is definitely over. The statement of the absolute dominance of the Czech clientele applies to the open landscape of the mountains in general.

¹ Particular aspects of tourism development in the Šumava Mts. region became a subject of some research projects. Recently, an international project was launched, entitled “Supporting and promoting integrated tourism in Europe’s lagging regions (SPRITE)”. It is aimed at comparing conditions for conduct of rural tourism within the following six European countries: Czech Republic, Greece, France, Ireland, Spain and United Kingdom. The territory of the National Park in the Šumava region was chosen as one of model areas. The project analyses tourism as a multifaceted phenomenon that can be described as an interplay among six principal actors involved: tourists themselves, host community, businesses, resource controllers, institutions and gatekeepers (see <http://sprite.econ.upatras.gr/>)



Source: Deliverable 9 - Tourists and Gatekeepers Survey, Results and Analysis, Czech Republic. Projekt QLK5-CT-2000-01211-SPRITE

Figure 2. Reasons to visit the Šumava Mts

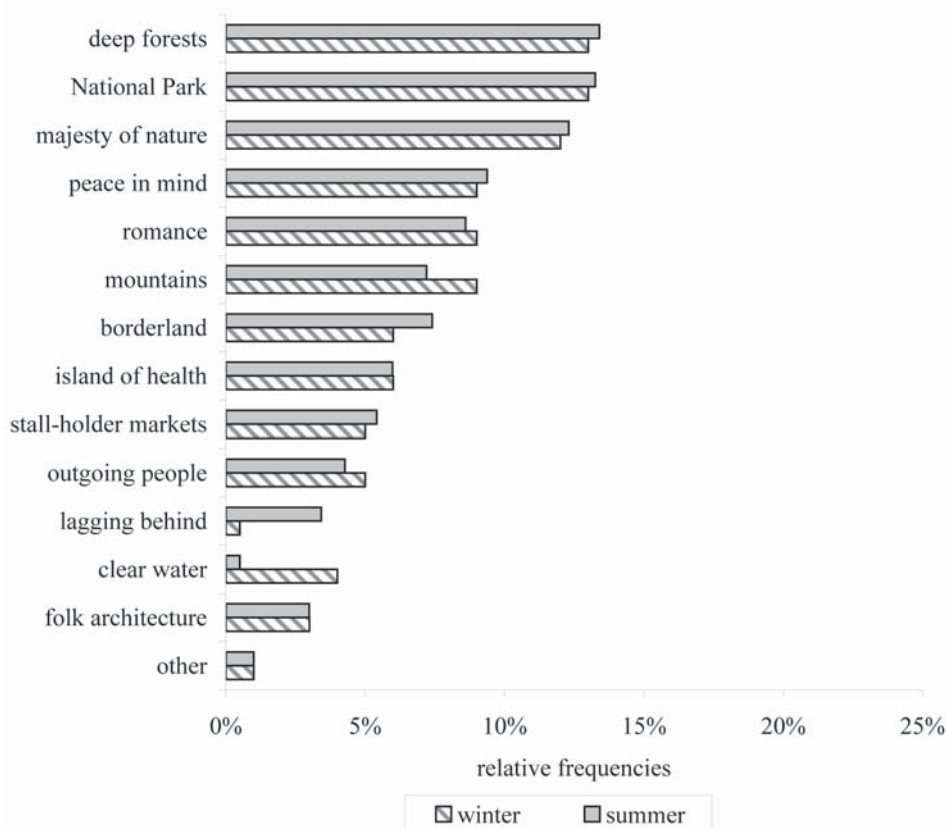


Source: Deliverable 9 - Tourists and Gatekeepers Survey, Results and Analysis, Czech Republic. Projekt QLK5-CT-2000-01211-SPRITE

Figure 3. Nationality of visitors to the Šumava Mts

There are, however, some individual “spots” where the composition of visitors might even be opposite, namely some local holiday centres, towns in the piedmont and the stall-holder markets close to state border crossing. Nevertheless, visitors usually come from the neighbouring areas and larger towns, such as České Budějovice, Plzeň, and, mainly, Prague. They can be thus seen as the typical sample of people visiting European mountains – domestic urban population.

People visiting the Šumava Mts. appreciate their “pristine” character (Figure 4). High value they give to the untouched nature might evoke the feeling that mountains assist in formation of their value system in favour to what was called earlier in this text the “return to simplicity and wholesome living”. It might be so; mountainous environment with its monumentality may really affect human views in many aspects, at least for the moment people are under the immediate influence of it. Nevertheless, under this skin there is a core of the life style patterns learned and experienced during the whole life, which are very hard to overcome during just a short stay in the mountains, no matter how monumental.



Source: Deliverable 9 - Tourists and Gatekeepers Survey, Results and Analysis, Czech Republic. Projekt QLK5-CT-2000-01211-SPRITE

Figure 4. Key words used by visitors to describe the image of the Šumava Mts

Everyday routine resists effectively to any change. As Bauman (1995) states, tourists take their homes with them when they travel. The home serves them as a point of reference, as standard to be used for evaluation of experiences. It is a point they would like to escape from, but only in order to have chance of returning to it with a bag of exotic experiences. It might be the reason why we can still hear voices among the visitors to the Šumava Mts., the same visitors admiring pristine environment, demanding „more and larger parking places“ for their cars, „more public WC meeting West European standard“, „maintaining and improving the system and quality of roads“, etc. Complaining about the lack of cash dispensers can be seen as an extreme wish in the direction of levelling the situation in the mountains with urban milieu.

Scenario that should not be neglected

Viewed through the conceptual scheme of Butlers' destination lifecycle theory (Butler 1980), Šumava Mts. can be seen as a territory that reached the point located between involvement and development stages of its lifecycle trajectory. As a result, negative aspects, e.g. some off-putting local phenomena, have not yet emerged and tourism is still generally perceived by locals as an unambiguous asset. The decisive arguments are mostly economic, i.e. creating job opportunities and financial profit in the form of taxes.

Paradoxically, it is a real behaviour of visitors themselves and their demands that seem to endanger tourism development within the Šumava Mts. region. Businesses in their effort to attract or at least to keep their clientele tend to do their best to satisfy „all visitors' wishes“. As a result we could see the ever-repeating cycle. Attractiveness of the host region, hospitality of the local communities, as well as readiness of local entrepreneurs may lead to paradoxical situation. Visitors flow would tend to expand, especially as more services and facilities catering to visitors needs are installed. The development of lodging, food and beverage, sewage disposal, recreation and entertainment facilities all would attract more visitors to the region, but at the same time alter its innate character. By doing this tourists would participate in the process of driving the Šumava landscape out of its natural „romantic" character.

Converting marginality into comparative advantage generated a chance to overcome the socio-economic marginality of the territory. Tourism development represents one of the promising ways for the Šumava Mts. region to do it. Nevertheless, once the territory's development will follow the way of recreational exploitation a „catastrophic scenario“ could not be a priori avoided. Economic development, if not limited, say, from the „outside“ (by the non-economic limitations) tends generally to gain the „maximum of profit“, up to the point, beyond which stagnation or even decline occur. Tourist industry of the present day type evidently follows this tendency. It threatens thus the continued existence of both the natural and cultural resources, on whose utilisation it is based. Reaching of the point of decline will likely be manifested by the territory having lost its

image of the „area left behind”, i.e. its *genius loci* and, consequently, its attractiveness.

The National Park of Šumava should be mentioned here as it proved to be a very important locally operating actor in this respect. In the course of its short lifetime, the national park has developed into an institution forming “external frame” for development of “soft” tourism on its territory – both restrictive and supportive. On one hand it sets limits on tourism development in terms of specifying its appropriate forms and intensity; on the other hand it has also started to take part in developing and maintaining of so called auxiliary infrastructure (information centres and services related to them, special public bus lines, forest roads, cross-country skiing trails, etc.). Thanks to its real socio-economic and legal power the national park has not yet allowed any large-scale tourism related activities to be realised on its territory. This is so despite the enormous pressures articulated by some local municipalities in the mid of the 1990s to establish a new ski centre on the slopes of the Smrčina mountain, located in the very core zone of the national park.

Regional development based exclusively on tourism industry is also, and in fact even more, threatened by the dynamics of „unpredictable” factors. Besides more or less predictable tendencies such as changes in “tourist density”, changes of climate conditions (snow layer,...) and economic trends (purchasing power of coming tourists, amount of leisure time,...), there might be intangible waves which are generally hardly predictable. One of such waves of fashion brought great numbers of western visitors to the Šumava Mts. territory immediately after 1989. It was fashionable to visit the „wild and left behind“ neighbours. The boom is over, however; other parts of Europe and the World having become more attractive for western tourists.

On the most general level it is possible to state that a system whose development would depend exclusively on utilisation of one source is very vulnerable. Tourism and leisure time activities, despite their potential and leading role, should not be considered the only way of further territory development. A diversity of economic activities seems to be the precondition necessary to ensure the flexibility of the social system, which, consequently, will strengthen its adaptability to future conditions in a long-term perspective.

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