

Belarusian Agricultural and Ecological Tourism within SME Sector and its Further Development in Current and Modern Conditions

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Abstract

The article offers brief history of the development of rural tourism in Belarus and identifies the main problems in this sphere. It also shows the results of a sociological study investigating the attitude of residents living in the border regions toward agricultural and ecological tourism. The priorities and the level of attractiveness are also analyzed. The article provides recommendations aimed at optimizing the activity of the actors in the sphere of rural tourism.

Keywords: Belarus, rural tourism

Introduction

In this article, the authors set the following objectives: a) to briefly describe the history of the development of rural tourism in Belarus; b) to outline the main problems in this sphere, and c) to analyze the results of sociological research, conducted to examine public opinion about agricultural tourism. Analyzing this problem, one should pay attention to rather diverse terminology of the concept: agrotourism, ecotourism, agroecotourism, rural tourism, green tourism, recreation in the countryside. Though the article is not aimed at clearly defining these concepts, we note only that while organizing a holiday in the countryside homestead you can implement a variety of aspects of tourism reflected in these terms.

Rural tourism in Belarus, as well as in other countries, is the alternative activity for agricultural producers. In economic crisis this activity becomes rather important when the villagers try to find a way out of this situation, seek to realize themselves in other business areas. For farmers in many countries agrotourism, as a kind of small family business, has become a means of earning additional income, a compensation of reduced income from the sale of agricultural products.

1. Rural tourism in Belarus: History, challenges and problems

Based on the experience of Belarus and other countries the following main aims and objectives in the sphere of rural tourism can be distinguished:

- Sustainable development of rural settlements and the local community;
- Increased rural employment and incomes;
- Development of tourism infrastructure in rural areas;
- Organization and maintenance of a healthy, active recreation areas;
- Preservation of cultural and historical heritage of the region;
- Preservation of the natural potential of the regions.
- Development of people's knowledge about nature, culture, regions of Belarus;
- Practical implementation of the cluster development model in the sphere of rural tourism;
- Integration of the regions as well as the whole country into the European world economic space;
- The growth of tourism promoting a positive image of the country abroad.

Rural tourism in Belarus in its current period of existence began to emerge at the turn of 2002 and 2003. At this time the press published the articles informing about the creation of the Belarusian public association "Agro-ecotourism", describing its goals and outlining the formation problem of this type of activity in our country.

The publication of these articles gave motivation to those who have already realized the potential of Belarus in this sphere. As a result, many private house owners in the village contacted this public association. The association organized a series of informational workshops in Belarus, Ukraine, Lithuania, and Poland, in which the owners of homesteads had the possibility to obtain the appropriate knowledge. It should be noted that ecotourism occurred and developed organically and was not directed from above. This fact shows the large potential of civil society which in our opinion is not always used in our state.

Initially rural tourism developed rather spontaneously with main participants being homestead owners, farmers and private entrepreneurs. Certain organization and coordination was provided by the activity of Belarusian public association "Agroecotourism" and Belarusian public association "Village escape". It should be noted that the UN Development Programme contributed to the improvements in the structure of rural tourism. In 2003 it announced grants aimed at farmsteads' improvement on the territory close to Belovezhskaya Pushcha (Kamenets, Svisloch, Volkovyssk and Pruzhany districts). As a result financial and informational support was provided to ten rural homesteads in these areas.

The next stage is connected with the publication of the Decree of the President of the Republic of Belarus on June 2, 2006. "About measures on development of agro-ecotourism in Belarus", which first defined the legal basis for tourism service in rural homesteads. This meant that state institutions and authorities became engaged in the problems of rural tourism in the country.

The adoption of the Participation Programme by Belagroprombank in the development of rural tourism in Belarus from July 25, 2007 marked the third milestone in the quantitative and qualitative development in the sphere of rural tourism in Belarus. The programme resulted in preferential crediting of agricultural tourism activities that led to a significant increase in the number of farms and improvement of their services.

The fourth stage is connected with the publication of a new version of the Presidential Decree from November 26, 2010 which preserved the existing benefits to entities engaged in this kind of activity as well as offered some new opportunities.

Practice of development of rural tourism in the country showed that this sector includes three real types of participants. They are: the owners of rural estates registered with the local authorities; the farmers who combine farming with tourism services; large agricultural enterprises (agricultural co-ops, public corporations etc.).

The analysis shows that the largest share in the volume of agro-tourist services is provided by the first group and the smallest share is provided by the third one. In 2010 there were 1100 rural households in Belarus, 151 of them situated in Brest region. Fourteen thousand people chose Brest Region homesteads as a place of their vacation.

What concerns large-scale farms in rural areas, their capabilities have not been involved yet, although some of the leaders of these enterprises, like for example, the agricultural co-op "Ostromechevo" and public corporation "Komarovka" have already taken steps in this direction.

The potential of farms the number of which reached 452 at the end of 2010 is not fully used.

Qualitative analysis of the participants shows that farmsteads themselves and the service provided need substantial improvement. Most of the buildings are in a state of incomplete reconstruction, not all have the required sanitary and hygienic conditions. Most owners lack tourism sector experience, especially offering services to foreign customers thus language barrier is seen as a major obstacle. They also offer similar services to different categories of tourists.

According to the analysis during the last years the following target categories of clients of farmsteads have been established: Belarusian tourists from cities and towns; foreign tourists; corporate groups or colleagues; groups of friends; family members; cycling teams and boating teams.

The following forms of service have been defined: organization of short weekend getaways; long multi-day vacation in a rural homestead; organization of family and corporate celebrations; receiving and serving cycling and boating teams.

The list of services offered by the hosts includes: accommodation, meals, fishing, swimming in ponds, sauna, gathering mushrooms, berries and herbs, sports, entertainment, hiking, water and cycling tours. Tourists have also the possibility to visit local sights, to listen to local folklore groups, to meet local people, to buy handmade local handicrafts, etc.

What are the main development areas of rural tourism in the country?

First, according to the UN World Tourism Organization it is necessary to develop a network of homesteads in particular in those regions that are most attractive and possess the largest number of opportunities and tourist sites of interest. Currently, the number of homesteads in such areas is low and they are not able to provide the sufficient amount of tourism services. Lack of competition affects both the quality of services and their costs. If compared with neighboring countries, tourists from abroad pay attention to the fact that for the same money better and more various services are provided in Ukraine and Poland.

Second, it is necessary to produce advertising materials, booklets, brochures, leaflets and catalogues.

Third, since the number of homesteads in the country has tripled during the last two years, there is a large group of owners who have no corresponding training and do not have enough practical experience. In this regard, seminars and training should be conducted to familiarize them with the best achievements in this sphere in Belarus and abroad. This practise is developing quite successfully and the practice of occasional seminars has already evolved into a coherent educational system resulted in the creation of a business incubator in the sphere of rural tourism.

Fourth, we should continue to develop walking, cycling and water routes taking into consideration the location of rural homesteads, thereby stimulating their growth and quality of service.

Fifth, it is necessary to encourage competition among homesteads' owners by means of festivals and contests.

Sixth, the work in the sector of rural tourism should be based on the analysis of positive and negative experiences.

According to the experience gained from organizing a number of "green" routes (water, cycling) we can note, that they attract not only domestic tourists, but also the visitors from other countries. Over the past two summers tourists from Poland, Germany, Holland, Belgium, France and England travelled on the territory of Brest region. Summing up the useful experience in implementing "green" routes and basing on the opinion of the participants from different countries we can draw the following conclusions:

- The practice of organizing such tours for foreign and Belarusian tourists has good prospects in the future and should be continued;
- There are a number of unique features in Belarus which attract foreign tourists. They are the unique preserved nature, the hospitality of the population, the ability of hosts to cook tasty food, and authentic Belarusian villages;
- There are also negative factors that hinder the development of tourism in this area. They are a poorly developed infrastructure (insufficient number of homesteads, hotels, places to eat etc.).

The quality of service to customers leaves much to be desired, hygienic conditions are often not adequate enough. The absence of the required number of road signs, paved bike paths and walkways also harms the development process. There is no possibility to buy detailed maps that would allow moving through unfamiliar terrain without problems.

The progressive growth trend of inbound tourism is constrained by the necessity to open visas to Belarus and by the complicated procedure of registration for foreign citizens, that is, bureaucratic procedures that don't exist in Ukraine and Poland. At most border crossings it is prohibited to cross the border on foot or by bicycle. The exception is the crossing in Belovezhskaya Pushcha and the Augustow Canal crossing.

It is for these and other reasons inbound tourism in Brest District as well as in the whole country is on the starting level of development. For example, last year the number of foreign tourists visiting Belarus per 1000 inhabitants per year was only 9 people, (compared with 160 in Russia, 400 in Poland, 500 in Ukraine, and 850 in Lithuania).

Therefore, one of the priorities of rural tourism here is to promote the flow of foreign clients to Belarus through adequate service.

The practice of rural tourism development in Belarus shows that there is a need for sociological and marketing research. The first of these studies have been already conducted and the results will be presented in the following section.

2.Public opinion on rural tourism: A Sociological Analysis

Prospects for the development of rural tourism in Belarus are strongly dependent on what the residents of this region think about this segment of tourism. To answer this question, the sociological poll was conducted by researchers in the field of social and culture studies from Brest State University named after Pushkin and from Brest State Technical University in cooperation with the Support Programme of German Federal Government. By quota sampling 271 residents of border areas of the Brest region, representing various social and demographic groups were interviewed. Note that such studies were carried out for the first time in Belarus. Certain aspects have been studied in several works, without reliance on the sociological empirical [1, 2, 3, 4].

3.Results of the study

Before doing the analysis of people's relations to rural tourism as well as to the recreation on rural homesteads, we would like to determine their value priorities on the various forms of recreation, using some associative series. The data obtained during this sociological study indicate that nearly two thirds (62,6%) of respondents prefer "the classic triad" (sun, sea and sand). Positive and promising for rural tourism is the fact that the second place was given to "outdoor recreation away from civilization "(43,9%) (due to the increasing urbanization of the Belarusian society). In this regard there is an urgent and necessary goal for the participantss of rural tourism to integrate these public preferences into the practice of rural tourism. About a quarter of respondents (24.6%) preferred a popular Soviet-era "rest in sanatoriums".

The majority of residents in Belarus have low incomes. So no surprise that many of them prefer traditional cheap and economical kinds of recreation, such as "vacation at home" (31,6% of respondents), "visiting relatives" (28,1%) and "datchas" (21,1 %). A considerable number of residents, especially young ones,

have chosen the cognitive types of tourism such as tourist trips to interesting places (19.3%) and travelling abroad (16,4%). Quite naturally, that due to their "childishness" and the weakness of the social infrastructure the rural tourism as a form of recreation was preferred only by 4,7% of the respondents (Table 1).

Table 1. What are your associations to the word "rest", in %

Possible answers	%
Sun, sea, sand	62,6
"Camping" away from civilization "	43,9
Rest at home	31,6
Visiting relatives	28,1
Sanatoriums	24,6
Datchas	21,1
"Tourist trips to interesting places "	19,3
Travelling abroad	16,4
Rural tourism	4,7
Active sports activities	4.1
Another	3,5

It is thus obvious that rural tourism is not yet an important part of tourism activities. Nevertheless, this study showed that there are substantial grounds for optimism regarding the prospects of its development. First and foremost, a high degree of "recognition" of rural tourism in public opinion should be noted. Indeed, according to the poll, 77.2% of residents of the region are already aware of such type of rural tourism as vocations on rural homesteads (Table 2).

Table 2. Do you know anything about the recreation on rural homesteads?, in%

Possible answers	%
Yes	77,2
No	22,8

How did this information breakthrough happen? Results of the study indicate that the most intensive and productive influence on the recognition of rural tourism was provided by mass media. Anyway, 43.9% of respondents think this way. These figures are rather reliable, as the problem of rural tourism is paid much attention to in newspapers and on TV. Some regional editions have even employed journalists specializing just on agricultural and ecological tourism's issues.

It is worthy to note that information about rural tourism is often the subject of interpersonal communication. 29,8% of the respondents indicated that they got information about recreation on rural homesteads from friends and relatives. It was also found that 5.9% of residents of the region have already used the services of rural homesteads.

It must be noted that in Belarus minimal role in the promotion and advertising of rural tourism is devoted to road signs, which is usually one of the important provisions of its development (Table 3).

Table 3. How did you get information about recreation on rural estates?, in%

Possible answeres	%
Mass Media	43,9
Relatives/ friends	29,8
From my previous experience of visiting farmsteads	5,9
Road signs	5.3
Another	4.7

Based on the results of this study, we can assume that the information received from the respondents about rural tourism is mainly positive, since more than three-quarters (78,9%) or inhabitants of the region have expressed willingness to use services of a rural farmstead in the future. Only 11.7% of respondents are not ready for this type of recreation and another 9.4% were undecided. This figures indicate a high image of rural tourism (Table 4).

Table 4. Are you ready to use the services of a rural farmstead in the future?, in%

Possible answers	%
Yes	78,9
No	11,7
I don't know yet	9,4

Assumptions about the attractiveness of rural tourism for the inhabitants of modern-day Belarus are confirmed by the answers to the question about the prestige of rural tourism. Only 1,2% of respondents consider recreation on rural farmsteads non-prestigious. 18.7% of the region residents have the opposite view. The majority of respondents (55,0%) consider themselves quite aware about this segment of tourism and believe that the prestige rate of agricultural and ecological tourism depends on the quality of the rural farmsteads' services. (Table 5).

Table 5. In your opinion, is recreation on rural estates prestigious or not?, in%

Possible answers	%
prestigious	18,7
Sometimes is, sometimes isn't	29,8
Non-prestigious	1,2
It depends on the farmstead	55,0
I don't know	13,5

The fact that the prestige level of spending holiday on a farmstead is rather high is proved by the answers to the following question: who are usual guests, visitors, customers of these tourism services. 74,3% of respondents believe that the usual customers are urban residents whose social status in our country is higher than the one of the rural population. 61.4% of rural residents consider that "foreign tourists" form the main part of the visitors and 33.9% are sure that the main consumers of the farmstead's services are businessmen. Only 11.1% of the respondents chose people with "low income" as the target group. (Table 6).

Table 6. Who are the main consumers of rural farmstead's services?, in%

Possible answers	%
City dwellers	74,3
Foreign tourists	61.4
Businessmen	33,9
Youth	17,5
«Green tourists»	15,8
People with low income	11,1
Another	0
I don't know	0

Why is recreation on rural farmsteads (still quite exotic to modern Belarusians) so attractive?

The results of sociological research can answer this question. We should not forget that the Belarusian society has entered into the urban phase characterized by growing concentration of population in urban areas with its peculiar rhythm, quality of life and ecology. As a consequence, peace and quietness not available to city dwellers become a rather valuable element of rural tourism. It is for this reason 59,6% of the people surveyed are ready to come to rural homesteads. Another reason is "to rest from city life" which was indicated by 24.0% of respondents.

A significant number of people (57,9%) chose "nature" as a valuable advantage.

For 35.1% of respondents farmstead is an ideal place for corporate meetings and family vacations.

We should not forget that currently the city dwellers face the problem of food quality, namely, that it loses its natural taste and biological properties becoming part of agricultural production. Therefore, 28,7% of respondents value the opportunity to eat organic healthy food during their vacation on a farmstead.

Of course, we should not forget that the citizens of Belarus mostly have a modest budget for recreation. For this reason, 26.3% of residents of the region chose rural tourism due to its "reasonable price", though this point of view is quite erroneous.

It is noteworthy that 15,2% of respondents suppose that the holiday in the countryside can even improve their health (table 7).

Table 7. What could attract you in spending holiday on a farmstead?, in%

Possible answers	%
Peace and quietness	59,6
Being away from civilization	57,9
Collective or family recreation	35,1
Healthy food	28,7
Reasonable price	26,3
Being away from city life	24,0
Entertainment	19,3
Health improvement	15,2
Interest in rural lifestyle	6,4
Exotic	3,0
Another	0

Recreation on a rural homestead involves communication with its hosts. Positive side of this communication largely depends on the expectations of tourists and the reality. In this regard, we got interested and asked the respondents what kind of services to tourists, in their view, should be provided by the owners of rural farmsteads.

The survey showed that 58,5% of the respondents would like "tours to the natural and cultural sights" to be organized by the hosts. We'd like to note that this activity requires specific knowledge which most of the hosts do not possess.

For 40.4% of the respondents it is important to have a possibility to gather berries and mushrooms, to hunt, to fish. These activities are normally available in most farmsteads.

33,3% of respondents chose homemade ecological food as a main requirement.

There is one more point we'd like to pay attention to. Farmsteads are usually located far from public transport routes. That is why the delivery of tourists to the farmstead can become a real problem. It is therefore quite natural that nearly a third of respondents (32,3%) appreciate the owners of homesteads to assist them in their delivery (Table 8).

Table 8. What kind of services to tourists should be provided by the owners of rural farmsteads?, in%

Possible answers	%
Excursions to natural and cultural attractions	58,5
Fishing, gathering mushrooms and berries	40,4
Good food	33,3
Delivery service	32,3
Selling handicrafts	5,8
Anoter	2,9

According to the results of the sociological survey the knowledge of the region's inhabitants about recreation on rural farmsteads is mainly obtained from mass media or from friends, rather than from direct promotion. Nevertheless, it's rather interesting to find out what people consider necessary to be done to contribute to the development of rural tourism. The sociological data show that the undisputed leader here is the offer to decrease prices "(72,5% of respondents). Indeed the study proved that an overwhelming number of respondents are willing to pay around 30-40 thousand rubles for an overnight stay, while the real price is slightly higher.

37,4% of respondents suggest to improve living conditions to attract tourists.

35,7% of respondents offer "to provide tourists with ecologically pure products", which fully complies with the environmental paradigm of the modern world.

29,2% of residents think that relevant promotion should be implemented. 26,3% indicate the necessity to work on the image of rural tourism as a whole.

22,8% of respondents believe that the attractiveness of rural households will increase through the development of ecological tourism where the farmsteads could be the main suppliers (Table 9).

Table 9. What should be done in order to make recreation on the rural farmsteads more attractive to tourists?, in%

Possible answers	%
to lower prices	72,5
to improve living conditions	37,4
to provide healthy ecologically friendly food	35,7
to implement promotion	29,2
to improve the image of rural tourism	26,3
to develop ecological tourism	22,6
to organize fishing, gathering mushrooms and berries	17,5
another	0

Conclusions

According to the survey we can draw several conclusions.

First, the number of people who already used the services of rural farmsteads is rather small and does not exceed 6%.

Second, it is clear that the potential for this segment of tourism is significant. On the one hand, the image of rural tourism in Belarus is already high. On the other hand, there is a demand for services provided by the owners of rural farmsteads. We can also speak about relatively high degree of awareness of Belarusian society about rural tourism.

Third, there are two significant contradictions in the segment of rural tourism constraining its dynamics that must be overcome. The first is a mismatch between pricing policy of the owners and expectations of the guests. The second is the poor infrastructure of rural tourism.

Fourth, it is necessary to improve the skills and knowledge of the owners needed both to equip their houses in accordance with certain standards and to provide guide services to tourists. Interrelation between the participants of the rural tourism is an important resource for efficiency improvements.

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