

Possibilities of agri-tourism in the Integro Micro-region

Možnosti agroturistiky v Mikroregionu Integro

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INTRODUCTION

The agricultural sector in the Czech Republic is expected to undergo a number of changes after the country accession to the European Union, which is likely to affect both large and small-sized agricultural enterprises. All member countries have undergone these changes. One of the directions small-sized agricultural enterprises in the EU member states started to follow as a result of decreasing agricultural production were the diversification and orientation towards other sectors related to agricultural production activities (Thompson 1997).

One of the areas the West-European farmers took interest in is the exploitation of farms and agricultural land not only for their common purposes, but also for recreation and sports. Farmers have rebuilt parts of their farms into accommodation facilities, some agricultural land has been transformed into golf courses, forest land and water areas offering opportunities for sport activities and fish farming. It also enables farmers to increase the value of their agricultural products.

The goal of these activities is, first of all, to ensure an additional income for farmers' families and to create opportunities for the involvement of other family members (in particular elderly people and women with small children).

OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

The goal of this study is to determine, based on the analyses made, the conditions and preconditions for the development of agri-tourism in the Integro Micro-region. The first analytic step concentrated on the assessment of the following:

- character of the landscape,
- attractiveness of the area for tourists,
- infrastructure in terms of tourism.

The following step was to carry out non-standardised interviews with farmers and representatives of the regional self-government in order to learn about their standpoints on agri-tourism, farm facilities and conditions for

agri-tourism in the region. On the basis of partial analyses and the elicited data, a SWOT analysis was made with the aim to determine the opportunities for agri-tourism in the region and other related conditions to be created.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Microregion characteristics

The Libčeves municipality is located North of the town of Louny. It houses the School of Countryside Renovation and is regarded, by the surrounding municipalities in the former Districts of Louny, Litoměřice, and Most, as the natural centre of the micro-region. Therefore it has been established the "capital" of the Integro Micro-region, founded in 1998. The micro-region comprises two other larger municipalities lying on the border of České středohoří, including a number of smaller settlements, half-secluded country houses, secluded dwellings (farms): Třebenice, Třebívlice, Velemín, and Slatina pod Hazmburkem. The population of the micro-region reaches nearly 5 thousand inhabitants. Table 1 shows the population and technological facilities in the municipalities and settlements.

Only larger municipalities are provided with water from the public water mains, gas pipeline installation progresses very slowly. For social facilities in these municipalities and settlements see Table 2. In terms of tourism, the most evident shortcoming is the lack of accommodation facilities as only one restaurant (guest house) disposes of accommodation capacities, the network of shops offers basic foods only.

The micro-region is situated in the area with an above-average level of unemployment and a very low industrial production. Some of its inhabitants therefore work in Louny, Lovosice and Most. In the micro-region, there is only one enterprise of greater importance employing over 100 people; other smaller enterprises with less than 25 employees are only of local importance (bakery, construction companies, clothing workshop, agricultural machinery repair shop, etc.).

Table 1. Technical facilities in the municipalities and settlements

Municipality	Population	No of settlements	Wastewater treatment plants	Water supply pipelines	Gas pipelines	Waste disposal
Třebenice	1 710	9	2	3	1	9
Třebívlice	820	8	0	5	2	8
Velemín	1 350	13	3	6	3	13
Slatina	216	1	0	1	0	1
Libčeves	872	11	1	8	1	11
Total	4 968	42	6	23	7	42

Table 2. Social facilities in the municipalities and settlements

Municipality	Grocery shop	Other shops	School	Restaurant	Health centre	Post office
Třebenice	3	1	1	5	1	1
Třebívlice	2	1	1	5	1	1
Velemín	4	2	1	8	2	2
Slatina	1	0	0	1	0	0
Libčeves	4	2	1	2	1	1
Total	14	6	4	21	5	5

Agricultural activities in the micro-region may be divided into two domains. Agricultural land in the area stretching from the border of the natural preserve of České středohoří towards the river Ohře is used for cereal and hop growing. The average area of agricultural farms, however, does not exceed 100 hectares of arable land.

In the higher located Northern parts of the microregion where plains change into steep hills, fruit growing and grazing management (sheep breeding) prevail. Farmers attempt to improve the sales of products through sales co-operatives.

Character of landscape

The micro-region spreads in the area between the rivers Ohře and Elbe. The Southern part is slightly rolling; isolated hills of volcanic origin with steep slopes rise in the Northern parts covered, in particular, by shrubbery and grass. There are no larger water or forest areas in the micro-region. Minor water reservoirs used for recreational purposes are usually poorly maintained.

Attractiveness of the micro-region for tourists

In terms of attractiveness for tourists, the micro-region cannot offer any sights of primary importance. The most important landmark in the area is the ruins of the Házmburk Castle (Klapý) on the border of the micro-region, the Pyrope Museum in Třebenice, memorial of Ulrika von Löwetzow who was born in Třebívlice, and the municipality of Slatina, a protected historical com-

plex. The ruins of Ostrý and Opárno Castles and minor examples of rural architecture belong among the sights of local importance.

The areas of natural beauty include Kamenná slunce, a protected natural monument, and a small nature reserve with protected flora and fauna species. Tourists will appreciate hiking and cycling trails and those flying ultra-light aircraft the airport in Charvátce.

The micro-region is a good starting point for visits of the following towns: Louny, Litoměřice and Terezín; the castle in Libochovice and hiking trips to the mountainous area of České středohoří (surrounding Milešovka). Raná hill, a place of interest for hang-gliders, is located in the vicinity.

In general, the micro-region may attract tourists by several monuments of natural and historic beauty, however, it is likely to be overshadowed by other natural and historic places of interest traditionally sought-after by tourists.

Tourism infrastructure

From the point of view of transport infrastructure, the highway network density is sufficient to meet the demands of tourism. Much less satisfactory is the quality with a number of roads requiring renovation. The micro-region is well accessible both from the North by means of E55 (international road) and from the South by the Prague-Louny-Most road.

Secondary roads are in a highly unsatisfactory condition, the majority of roads drawn in the tourist and cadastral maps does not exist or follows different routes.

Their quality is very poor which makes farms and secluded dwellings difficult to approach.

The micro-region, in particular its minor settlements, is not easily accessible by public transport, the situation being even worse during weekends and summer holidays when the number of tourists increases.

The micro-region lacks sufficient accommodation and catering facilities. Accommodation is offered solely by one guest house and the majority of restaurants serves only the purposes of local people. Other services, necessary for the development of tourism, are not provided at all.

SWOT analysis of the micro-region

The SWOT analysis shows strong and weak points and the potential opportunities and threats viewed as essential for the development of agrotourism in the micro-region. They are listed in such a way as to reflect their potential positive or negative impact on agri-tourism. Some strong points resulting from the analysis turned out to be weak points and threats for the development of agri-tourism.

Strong points

- geographical location on the border of the natural preserve of České středohoří,
- easily accessible by means of the nearby international roads,
- relative closeness to Prague and Dresden,
- places of interest both cultural and natural,
- dense network of field roads,
- preserved environment and relatively low pollution due to the absence of industrial production,
- agricultural and sheep breeding tradition,
- premises suitable for agri-tourism,
- activities of the School of Countryside Renovation in Libčeves.

Weak points

- low awareness of the micro-region in terms of tourism and its attractiveness,
- insufficient infrastructure for the purposes of tourism (accommodation facilities, non-grocery shops, public water mains and waste water treatment plants),
- prevailing agricultural orientation not allowing inhabitants to develop funds essential for the renovation and furnishing of accommodation facilities,
- shortage of finances and low accessibility of external resources necessary for building renovation for agri-tourism purposes,
- insufficient promotion of the protected landscape area of České středohoří aimed at tourists,
- low level of co-operation of inhabitants from below (bottom up),
- relatively large number of unoccupied and empty premises,
- few water reservoirs suitable for recreational purposes and poor quality of the existing ones,

- non-functioning public transport, except for work days.

Opportunities

- large and unique agricultural settlements of historical value, well suited for agri-tourism,
- large number of farmers with private property,
- sheep breeding and orchards enabling direct consumption and thus creating a higher added value,
- exploitation of the existing airport for ultra-light aircraft flying and development of related activities for the well-off clientele (e.g. golf, horse riding, etc.),
- exploitation of expertise and experience of the School of Countryside Renovation and mutual co-operation of municipalities within the microregion (synergetic effect),
- joint promotion of the microregion.

Threats

- impact of unemployment in the region, lower standard of living and increasing deterioration of municipalities within the micro-region,
- lack of interest on the side of governmental institutions and authorities to deal with the specific problems of the microregion and low support of local activities aimed at bettering the situation,
- competition (other traditional holiday areas),
- diversification of interests of individual entities within the micro-region
- passive approach of potential agri-tourism operators in the micro-region.

The introduction of agri-tourism in the micro-region would be of great significance and would improve the overall economic, social, cultural, and aesthetic level of the area. However, it presents a number of problems, the solution of which exceeds the powers of the micro-region.

First of all, farmers lack the initial impulse and their way of thinking and entrepreneurial approach does not count in other activities than those they actually carry out. If they happen to take agri-tourism into account, in the majority of cases their visions are distorted.

The distortion lies in particular in the fact that they do not perceive agri-tourism as a supplementary activity to farming enabling them to earn some extra income, but rather as a “massive” influx of people having a negative impact on the natural preserves in the area. At the same time, they limit agri-tourism to the mere provision of accommodation regardless of other services the visitors should be offered.

Another problem is that farm owners do not dispose of sufficient funds to cover the costs of renovation of their premises to meet certain accommodation standards and sanitary and safety requirements.

The elimination of at least of some of the above-mentioned weak points would require large investments, which, however, the region is unable to ensure either now, or in the future. The only possibility is to acquire the necessary resources outside the micro-region, but dealing with this problem is not expected to be a priority.

The introduction of agri-tourism in the micro-region would be only one of the factors contributing to the improvement of the standard of living of inhabitants in the micro-region, decrease of the outside-the-region migration rate and preservation of the cultural face of landscape and municipalities. External activities aimed at promoting agri-tourism should be interlinked and should focus primarily on the following three areas:

- education; it should concentrate on the development of entrepreneurial thinking and would include the provision of basic information essential for agri-tourism (possibility of using the premises of the School of Countryside Renovation in Libčeves),
- acquisition of financial means required for the renovation and modernisation of farm premises for the purposes of agri-tourism,
- development of infrastructure for agri-tourism (e. g. trail repair and marking, reconstruction of roads, creation of new water reservoirs and modification of those existing).

CONCLUSION

At present, the Integro Microregion is an area scarcely visited by tourists. The micro-region has some back-

ground for the introduction of agri-tourism which could have a positive effect on the decrease of unemployment and out-of-the-region migration rates and contribute to the improvement of the standard of living of local people. The analyses have shown that there is a suitable basis for the development of agri-tourism, nevertheless, its extent will never match that of traditional rural tourist centres.

In order to implement any project for the development of agri-tourism in the micro-region, it is necessary to create conditions “from the outside”. This is an essential prerequisite as the potential entrepreneurs will never be able to start a business without external support.

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