

FOREIGN TOURISTS ON HIKING TRAILS IN POLISH MOUNTAINS

Michał Żemła

Summary

The paper presents some insights into the topic of foreign tourists visiting Polish mountains, especially for hiking tours. The author used a method of combining the data gathered from the questionnaire sent to all operators of Polish mountain huts with the analysis of statistical data of PTTK Wisła and a short survey conducted among Czech and Slovak tourists. The result of the study confirmed that the number of foreign tourists participating in hiking in Poland is small and that they are generally unknown as a group. Also, the structure of this group is a bit surprising, as the number of German tourists is comparable or even higher than those from Slovakia and the Czech Republic sharing the same mountain ranges with Poland. Managers of mountain huts do not make much of an effort to attract tourists from abroad. Their main advertising is conducted through their web pages in English. As a result, Slovak and Czech tourists do not perceive the Polish mountains as a good place to hike. There is little consensus as to the reasons for this situation. The responses from the mountain huts managers were inconsistent and inconclusive. Generally, they agree that Polish mountains are attractive site of tourist activity. However, it turns out that the tourists prefer hiking in their own countries where they can find even more attractive and developed areas.

Keywords

mountaineering • mountain huts • inbound tourism • foreign tourists

1. Introduction

The topic of Polish tourists in the mountains abroad and foreign tourists in the Polish mountains is not well explored. In fact, instead of relying on scientific research and data we often explain this phenomenon by intuition. Intuitively, it seems that the Poles practice tourism in the mountains of Slovakia, the Czech Republic and the Alpine countries. Similarly, it seems that there are little or no foreigners on Polish mountain trails. However there are few rational arguments that can confirm this intuitive belief based on everyday observations. One can give rare examples of resorts in the Polish mountains successfully attracting visitors from abroad, especially those from eastern countries, but these tourists arrivals as a rule are related to the time spent at the resort, with its special atmosphere or with winter sports.

The purpose of this article is to look at the possibility of attracting foreign tourists to the Polish hiking trails in the mountains, which is important for the functioning of mountain huts and the economic contribution to the socio-economic development of entire towns and whole mountain regions. Just like a hiking tour is often seen as the most traditional form of tourism in mountainous areas, it is the basis for the creation of the image of an attractive mountain resort and not simply an interesting tourist destination. Due to the specifics of mountain hiking and the border location of mountain ranges in Poland, the emphasis of the analysis has been placed on tourists from the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

As the detailed data are not available, it is difficult to perform an accurate quantitative analysis of foreign tourist arrivals on the Polish trails. The aim of the paper is rather to stimulate a debate and perhaps future research projects based on a set of viable information, available from different sources. The review of the gathered information led to distinguishing six interesting phenomena that were looked upon more closely and discussed more extensively. These phenomena are: 1) ignorance of the number of foreign tourists among managers of mountain huts and their lack of interest in the subject; 2) reluctance to attract foreign tourists to the Polish trails among managers of mountain huts; 3) the small number of tourists from the Czech Republic and Slovakia, even in border locations; 4) the lack of knowledge about the attractiveness of the Polish mountains among foreign tourists; 5) absence of reflection on the causes of this state of affairs; 6) the strong association of mountain tourism with domestic tourism, not only in Poland. This list does not cover all the important and interesting issues related to the topic. It is only an invitation for further discussion, research and action on the part of practitioners.

2. The specificity of domestic and inbound tourism

Domestic and inbound tourism often fulfil slightly different functions. Foreign tourists often limit their visit to the most famous and emblematic places in the country, while domestic tourists form the basis for the development of tourism in peripheral regions of the country [Athanasopoulos and Hyndman 2008]. Also, large domestic tourism is often the basis for the development and economic existence of a lower standard of accommodation facilities, while foreign tourists tend to choose better hotel facilities. There are several exceptions to this rule. In Austria for example private homes and apartments offer relatively high standard and are available through efficient national, regional and local booking systems on the Internet. Also, they are a very popular choice for foreign tourists.

The decision of tourists to participate in national and international tourist traffic is determined by a number of elements. These vary and are different for all the inhabitants of the various countries of the world. There are factors directly related to a tourist making a decision about their future trip, such as language barriers, fear of contact with others, an often unknown and misunderstood culture or the simple ignorance of the attractions located in that country. Some factors will have an objective character associated with a specific country. Not incidentally, most of the research focusing on domestic tourism is devoted to the analysis of the markets of the large area. To some extent, it is also relevant

to isolated markets from the rest of the world, such as China [Wen 2000], Australia [Huybers 2003], USA [Witt et al. 1992] or Japan [Ehrentraut 1993].

It is essential for the development of the tourism economy for particular area to strike an appropriate balance between the arrivals of domestic and foreign tourists. However the balance will depend on the specificity of a given location. There are numerous places in the tourism market that thrive almost exclusively on domestic tourism or only on inbound tourism. In such cases, the limitation of development only to one category of tourism (domestic/inbound) is usually caused by objective factors (e.g. transport accessibility, wealth of the inhabitants of the country, political barriers) that are a barrier to the development of the second category. In the case of mountainous regions in Poland or particular Polish mountain ranges it is difficult to find such objective barriers of development for inbound tourism. Also, it is possible and even desirable to attract foreign tourists.

3. The role of mountain huts in the development of mountain tourism

Hiking is probably the oldest form of tourism attracting tourists in mountain areas. For many years it was regarded as one of the most highly cultivated forms of activity in mountain areas. In recent years, a slight decrease of mountain hiking popularity has been observed. It is related to the polarization of tourist interests. On the one hand there is a growing number of enthusiasts of more extreme recreational activities in the mountains (skiing, mountain biking, rock climbing, etc.) and on the other – more people whose stay in the mountains is limited to passive recreation activities. However, the hiking tour remains a phenomenon of considerable importance in the economy of the mountain regions. It is still important in both Poland and in the other countries of Europe and the rest of world.

The most characteristic elements of tourism development related with hiking are the mountain huts. Often dilapidated during the period of political changes in Poland, these objects are forced to re-define their role in the tourism market and actively seek new visitor segments. Mountain huts as compared to other accommodation facilities have some essential specific features that may impede the implementation of the principles of economics and accommodation managing. In the management of objects of this type an important factor must be taken into account, namely their location in valuable and sensitive natural areas. Also, the huts construction and the earlier choice of location are the project of a completely different scale than the construction of accommodation facilities of similar capacity in urban areas. Likewise, after the completion of construction and during normal operation, mountain huts have significant logistic problems associated with them. These are usually technical difficulties of costs and supply. Special rules of personnel recruiting and management have to be established too. Unique is the offer of mountain huts, mostly a relatively low standard of accommodation [Szczechowicz 2006]. In Poland and abroad food services often play increasingly important role in the income. One could mention more of such specific features of mountain huts in comparison with other types of accommodation facilities, but there is no comprehensive collective data

about this problem in the specialist literature. However, it seems that from the economic point of view there are other more interesting aspects of the operation of tourist facilities of that kind than just the specificity of these objects. The market in which mountain huts operate is of a peculiar kind. In fact, the most significant and crucial factor influencing the number of visits proves to be a hut's location, and more precisely the attractiveness and popularity of specific mountain ranges or peaks. In many cases, due to the significant spatial dispersion of huts, tourists willing to reach a particular peak may use the services of only one mountain hut. And huts do not compete with each other, because a tourist does not consider other facilities as a real alternative in his choice. The sole fact of a hut's existence can often prompt tourists to choose a particular mountain range or peak. In such cases, relatively few tourists make a decision based on the offer or availability of the hut, the number of beds it has, its standard and services. The absence of alternatives is the reason why the use of the huts depends entirely on the demand for active tourism and more specifically on mountain hiking (or cycling, horse riding and skiing) [Szczechowicz 2006].

From the point of view of the gathering information about people engaged in mountain tourism the relationship between the demand for this type of activity in the area and the demand for services of localized mountain huts carries an important implication. Mountain huts can be considered adequate source of information illustrating the development of hiking, in the mountain ranges. In this article, this information was partially used in data analysis, where much of the data presented is derived either from the managers of huts or from the tourists themselves.

4. Sources of information

The information about the number of foreigners visiting particular locations in the Polish mountains is contained in the statistics gathered by the Central Statistical Office (GUS). However, in summary statements there is little information about the motivation of these people and their ways of spending free time. Hiking, which is the primary motive of most tourist visiting mountainous areas, has long reached the state of maturity. In most places in the mountains the number of tourists does not increase, but there is no downward trend either. The specific features of the mountain hiking have changed. The number of casual hikers, whose knowledge and equipment is poor, has increased. For them the excursion to the mountain is no longer an expedition or adventure, but rather a walk. Mountain huts are becoming rather like bars on the trails during day trips and less the base for people engaged in itinerant tourism¹.

¹ According to the survey presented in this article, the revenues from the provision of accommodation services represent less than 30% of the income of the mountain huts in Poland, and catering services to 70%. In one of surveyed objects the catering facility was not provided, and managers of 7 huts evaluated the role of both factors at the same level. In the remaining 26 surveyed mountain huts, the importance of catering dominates in the income generated by the facility, while in three of them the difference in importance of services has been determined to be as much as 90% to 10%, in favor of catering services.

Mountains are often the boundaries between states and in Poland the vast majority of mountains are located in the border area. Tourism development and particularly a network of hiking trails in the mountain ranges around the border will most probably boost the development of international tourism in some mountain ranges. One factor that should greatly facilitate the development of international hiking in the Polish mountains and other European countries is the Schengen Area that allows tourists to freely cross the border of states. This applies to almost the entire section of the Polish border in the mountains. However there is a strong attachment of hikers from different states to hike in their own country and not abroad.

One of the main obstacles in the description of significance of the international hiking tourism in the Polish mountains is the lack of knowledge on the scale of the phenomenon and its structure. In the preparation of this study information from different sources was used that allowed to capture some interesting facts related to it. The main source of information was an unpublished survey conducted in the framework of a research project carried out by the Department of Tourism of the Katowice School of Economics. In the study, a questionnaire was sent to all the mountain huts in Poland (74 survey forms) of which 33 filled the form and sent it back. This provides a rate of return of 45%. The research was conducted via electronic delivery of questionnaires to the official e-mail addresses of the huts in February 2013. Furthermore, on March and April of the same year, phone calls were made to remind them of the survey and request them to complete and submit them. Among the responses received 31 were from facilities administered by the Polish Tourist and Sightseeing Society (PTTK) and the other 2 from private facilities. 21 responses were received from the mountain huts located in the Carpathians and 10 from the Sudeten huts. The questionnaire survey asked hut managers for the number of foreign guests, their origins, how they attracted tourists and what reasons the tourists gave for their visits. In addition, the article uses statistics on the Tourist Beskid International Badge action, co-organized by agencies PTTK in Żywiec and Wisła, RR KST Čadca (Slovakia), CTC Trinec and PTTS-Beskid Śląski (Czech Republic). An interestingly source of information were the results of a small-scale survey carried out for two dissertations written at the Katowice School of Economics between 2007 and 2011 [Sorys 2007, Sorys 2011]. They compared the standards and the range of services offered at mountain huts in border areas in the Beskid Mountains of Poland and the Czech Republic (survey was carried out in 2007). In the second thesis (in 2011) Czech and Slovak tourists encountered in Czech and Slovak mountain huts were questioned about the attractiveness of the Polish mountains.

5. Negligible amount of foreign tourists in Polish mountain huts and the lack of knowledge about them

According to the managers of huts, the number of foreign tourists is negligible. On average, it is only 4–6% of the guests using the accommodations and 7% of the guests using the restaurant services. It should be noted that these “average” results were raised

by the five hostels (located near the border) visited by 10–30% of foreign guests (as related by the managers). However, the median value for the whole group of hostels is 1% for guests using accommodation services and 3% for guests using only the food services. Furthermore, in two of the huts there were no foreign guests.

The detailed analysis of these results and additional comments made by the managers of huts (supplied on the margins of the questionnaire or during phone calls) show that in general the vast majority of managers were not interested at all in the topic of foreign tourists. They are seen as some exotic element in their work which does not have a material impact on the financial outcome. Therefore, the previous results and estimates submitted earlier, as provided by the managers of the survey, are high suspect and might be easily undermined. The lack of interest in attracting foreign tourists showed by the majority of hut managers was confirmed by their answers to other survey questions that are discussed below.

6. A small number of tourists from neighbouring countries (Czech Republic, Slovakia)

While the small number of foreign tourists in Polish mountain huts was hardly surprising, the structure of this group could not be easily predicted. The three nations have practically received almost the same rating numbers: 25% of tourists were Czechs, 23% – Slovaks, and 23% – Germans. In nine huts the most frequent reported nationality of visitors were the Czechs, in other nine – the Germans and in seven – the Slovaks. Tourists from other countries rarely appear, in the Polish huts. The French made 5%, the British and the Dutch about 2% and each of these three nationalities was indicated by one of the managers as the most frequent visitor at their hut. Although the percentage of visitors from Germany is similar in both huts on the Sudeten and Carpathian mountains the number of Czechs is significantly higher on the Polish-Czech borderland (40%) (Sudetes and Beskid Śląski). The number of Slovaks on the Polish-Slovak borderland (Carpathians) is 34%. This trend is in line with the predictions.

However, further analysis and the comparison of the results obtained from various huts with their location and estimation of the percentage of foreign tourists lead to interesting but not very positive conclusions. It turns out that the structure of foreign tourists visiting mountain huts reflects the structure of guests in nearby mountains resorts and is only slightly correlated with the number of tourists crossing the border on the tourist hiking trails. Some mountain huts located close to the border are more popular among foreign tourists than others. Among the completed questionnaires 4 came from huts located very close to the border (up to 300 m). The average number of foreign guests in these facilities is 10% (using the accommodation) and 12% (using food service) and is higher than for the all huts but it does not correspond with extremely divergent responses from particular huts. In one of the huts located directly on the Czech border there were no foreign tourists at all. In the second hut, also located directly on the Czech border, the proportion of foreign tourists was 0.5% (both using food service, as well as those using the accommodation). Among the foreign tourists

visiting the hut there were no visitors from the Czech Republic. The other two huts located close to the border (one of them close to Czech, the other to Slovak border) has had the highest proportions of foreign guests (10–35%) and they are dominated by visitors from neighbouring country. Although in the case of the hut on the Czech border the structure of foreign visitors is set at the 40% of Czechs and Germans. This phenomenon is even more evident in the following nine huts located at a distance of 0.3–1 km from the border, so in location enabling and encouraging crossing the border. In five of them the most frequent foreign guests were considered the Germans, the British (one hut) and the French (one hut). In addition, the Czechs are recognized as the most often visiting foreign tourists of one of the huts located in the Carpathian Mountains not on Czech but on the Slovak border. Therefore, the increase of distance from the border of up to another 700 meters was not only responsible for a few percent decrease in the number of foreign tourists but also drastically decreased the number of people crossing the border on the trail and coming from a neighbouring country (in the case of the nine huts it is respectively 6% and 7% fall among the tourists that used accommodation and food service).

The factor explaining to some extent the uneven number of tourists crossing the border on the hiking trails around the various Polish huts can be attributed to tourist attractiveness of particular mountain ranges appreciated by the residents of the neighbouring country. Relatively many tourists from the Czech Republic are observed in the Karkonosze huts. The mountain range is massively visited by our southern neighbours, while the hostel with only a 0.5% visits from abroad is situated at the Czech border in the Beskid Mountains in the range which is very popular among Poles but situated away from the main mountain trails of the Czech Republic. Also, in the case of Slovakia residents, the highest rates were recorded in the hut located close to the border, in direct proximity to the famous ski resort with the all year access cableway and some Tatra huts².

The disparities between Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia in the interest in mountain hiking in a neighbouring country are confirmed by statistics on acquiring International Tourist Beskid Badge (Table 1). This badge has been jointly established by the two branches of the Polish PTTK (PTTK Żywiec and PTTK Wisła) and analogous organizations of Trinec and Frydek-Misztek (Czech Republic) and Čadca (Slovakia). The awarding of the badge was limited until September 2012 and was based on the confirmation of reaching the eight appointed peaks in each of the three countries in border areas (in Poland it was Beskid Śląski and Żywiecki). The small badge is granted to those who have documented reaching six selected peaks in one of the countries, and a larger badge is for the winners of all 24 peaks. From the data presented in Table 1 it

² The Tatra huts are an extremely interesting case: for the five received questionnaires, in each case the image drawn is different. In the particular facilities dominate visitors from Germany, Slovakia and the Czech Republic, with a high proportion of visitors from other countries (UK, France and Hungary). The percentage of foreign visitors in all five huts Tatra is similar and hovers around 10%, which means that it is significantly higher than the average for all huts. In the Tatra huts there were practically no guests from the East even though they are known to come quite often to Zakopane and surrounding area.

is clear that the biggest interest in acquiring the badge was in Poland. Polish tourists have won 64% of all badges and as many gold badges. Especially the second number means that tourists hiking in the mountains on all three sides of the borders are mainly Poles. However the majority of Czech tourists (especially those that got their badges in Trzyniec) were limited to receiving a small Czech badge. Small national badges was of similar popularity among Slovaks but they were definitely least interested in the action.

Table 1. List of badges earned and awarded in the first edition (2008–2012) of the International Tourist Beskid Badges

The verifying body	Cz	Pl	Sk	Large	All
PTTK Żywiec	215	337	249	211	1012
PTTK Wisła	221	299	222	202	944
PTTS-BS	70	68	67	70	275
KCT-TRINEC	187	112	126	108	533
KST CADCA	80	75	79	52	286
Total	773	891	743	643	3050

Source: www.pttk.wisla.pl

7. Huts' managers not interested in attracting foreign tourists

The structure of mountain huts visitors is similar to the structure of foreign guests in mountainous regions where these huts are located. The reason for this is the absence of promotion of mountain hiking in Poland. As a result, people who practice mountain tourism in neighbouring countries perceive the Polish mountains as not very attractive and overcrowded. This was reflected in the results obtained from the surveys conducted by P. Sorys [2011] among citizens of Slovakia and the Czech Republic, who were accommodated in mountain huts in these countries. More than 60% of Czech respondents and more than 70% of Slovak respondents had never done hiking in the Polish mountains. Furthermore, a slightly smaller percentage of respondents indicated that in the future they would not be visiting the Polish mountains. The main reason mentioned here was often the very low standard of Polish huts, in addition to the aforementioned low attractiveness of the Polish mountains and overcrowding. Moreover, by the way these opinions were expressed one could conclude that the respondents had little knowledge of the Polish mountains. It should be once again emphasised that the survey by P. Sorys was carried out with tourists encountered in mountain huts located in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, in the mountain ranges situated in close proximity to the Polish border.

The lack of knowledge and obvious negative image of the Polish mountains among tourist that might be potentially interested in hiking in Poland is certainly the result of, among the others, an almost total absence of promotional activities of Polish huts' managers. Also PTTK and other organizations focused on communicating the attractiveness of the various mountain ranges in Poland are rather passive in this respect.

38% of huts managers responded that they did not take any action aimed at attracting foreign tourists. Among those who try to attract foreigners 35% do it by their foreign language website and cooperation with foreign organizations³. Only 6% of the managers used a simple, effective and affordable method of advertising, in the form of tourist information on hiking trails abroad. Another 6% reported the organization of events of international importance.

These results seem to be too optimistic compared to reality. Respondents indicated all the tools ever used in their activities, including those which were used only once. Moreover, with a high probability we can assume that the questionnaire associated with visiting foreign tourists was completed by the huts' managers who were more interested in this topic. Among those who did not respond the majority was probably those who were not interested at all. This is easily verified by doing a research on the Internet and checking which huts run their websites in foreign languages. Among the huts that responded to the survey 35% run their own website, but if one checks websites of all mountain huts in Poland this ratio drops to only 24%. Moreover, the vast majority of sites are in only one foreign language. The foreign language versions are often significantly truncated in comparison with the Polish versions. With the exception of two sites all the huts running websites in a foreign language run these pages in English. In addition, seven huts have a website in German, two huts have a website in the Slovak language and one in Czech. Surprisingly very small number of huts located close to the border (up to 300 m and in the range of 0.3–1 km) offer a website in foreign languages. Any of the huts located very close to the border and that responded to the survey do not have their web pages in a foreign language and more than 60% of those located 0.3–1 km in the area of the border run websites only in English (one hut had both German and English websites).

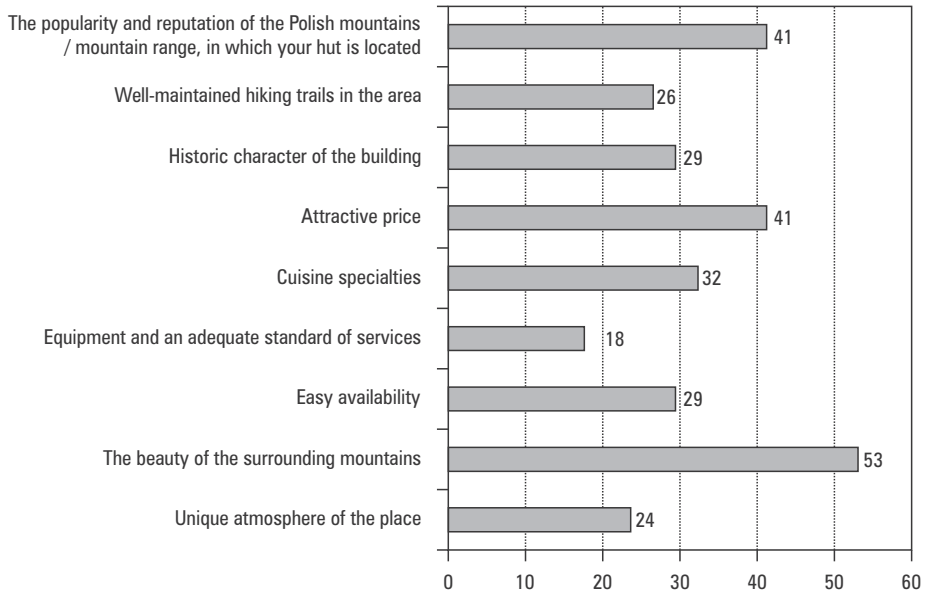
Therefore foreigners' visits in Polish huts are often entirely casual and are not motivated by the recognition of the attractiveness of the Polish mountains. Very few of foreign tourists have prior knowledge of the attractiveness of the Polish mountains. Similarly, tourists practicing mountaineering in neighbouring countries do not yet recognize the attractiveness of the Polish mountains. As a result, many Polish tourists wander in the Czech and Slovak mountains and few Czechs and Slovak tourists go to the Polish mountains.

8. Lack of knowledge and reflection on the causes of this state of affairs

Managers of mountain huts in Poland were asked about the main reasons why foreign tourists visit or do not visit their locations. Answers to both questions are presented in Figures 1 and 2⁴. The main reported reasons for foreign tourists' arrivals to the Polish huts were (in order of importance): beauty of the surrounding mountains, attractive price, great popularity and a renown of the Polish mountains and Polish mountain

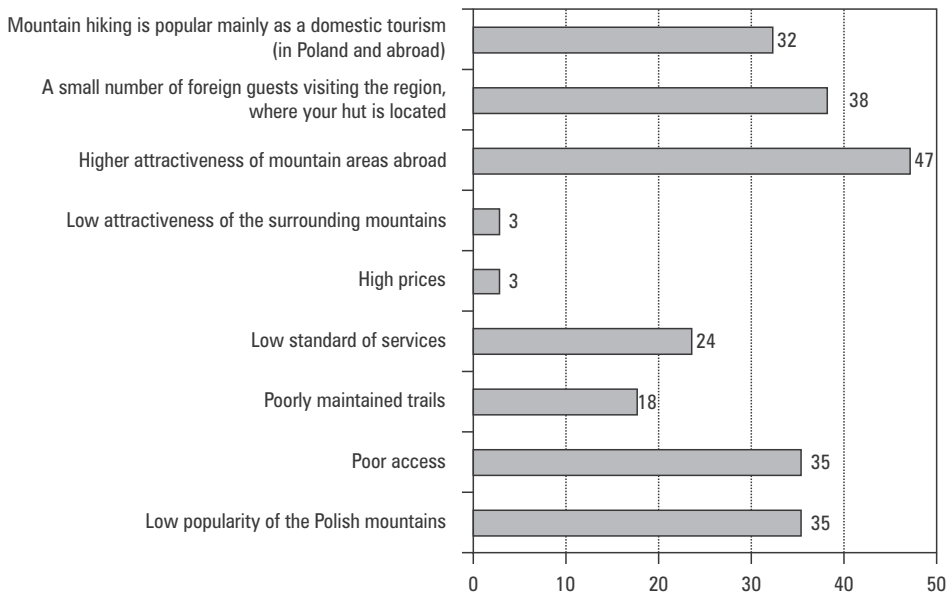
³ Percentages do not add up to 100%, respondents could indicate any form of promotion used in their facility.

⁴ Percentages do not add up to 100%, respondents could choose more than one response (maximum of 3).



Source: author's study

Fig. 1. The reasons why foreign tourists visited / would visit the Polish mountain huts



Source: author's study

Fig. 2. The reasons why foreign tourists rarely visit Polish hostels

ranges. These responses were given much more often than the others, however there is a relatively equal distribution of answers to this question. Conversely, what discourages foreign tourists from going to the Polish mountains and huts in the opinion of respondents is: higher attractiveness of mountain areas abroad, a small number of foreign guests visiting mountain regions in Poland, the low popularity of the Polish mountains and poor road infrastructure. The relatively large number of respondents pointed out to the fact that a hiking tour is primarily domestic tourism and that is why, regardless of other circumstances, huts have problems with attracting visitors from abroad. Other responses received significantly less indications. Respondents said that high prices and low attractiveness of the mountains is not a problem for them.

Results of responses presented in Figures 1 and 2 seem to fairly well explain the reasons of arrival of such number of foreign tourists in Polish mountains. It should be remembered that they come from the managers that run huts with different history, of different technical conditions and above all located in different mountain ranges.

However a thorough analysis of the answers and the juxtaposition of responses to each of the questions leads to the conclusion that many of the huts' managers had never reflect on this issue and their answers were accidental. Asked about the reasons of tourist arrivals and absence of foreign tourists in their facilities huts' managers often gave contradictory answers. As many as ten of the eighteen managers who responded that the reason for the arrivals of foreign tourists is the beauty of Polish mountains and seven of the fourteen, who said the reason was the popularity and reputation of the particular range, indicated also that fewer foreign visitors come to their place because of the higher attractiveness of the mountains abroad. Also, one in three respondents, who indicated that the reason of arrivals is good trails condition, pointed out that the reason for the small number of foreign visitors is the poor conditions of trails. In addition, one respondent marked the answer "easy accessibility" and "hard to reach by road", in the same questionnaire. Generally, the survey paints the image of the Polish mountains as interesting and attractive and at the same time lost to tourism in advance because mountains ranges abroad are perceived as more attractive.

9. Mountain tourism is a form of activity usually associated with domestic tourism

Very interesting material for interpretation is in the statements of one-third of the respondents who reported that people do hiking mainly in their own country. This applies not only to Poland but also to other European countries (Figure 2). The fact that mountain hiking is often chosen as domestic tourism may be confirmed by some statistics of the International Tourist Beskid Badges (Table 1). This formulation clearly requires further study. However, if it is true, then the issue of why so few tourists are coming to Poland to go hiking and how to attract them becomes less important and the ignorance of huts' managers and their inactivity appear as justified. But to put it the other way round, one can ask whether opinions presented by the respondents are not a kind of fig leaf, a convenient excuse justifying their idleness?

10. Conclusions

The presented results of the survey of Polish mountain huts' managers along with the statistics and the results of the pilot studies carried out by P. Sorys [2007, 2011] confirm the everyday observations that much more Poles practice mountaineering abroad than foreign tourists do it in Poland. In particular, the study shows relatively little tourist traffic through the border on the tourist trail, by which the Polish huts should have attracted a lot more visitors from the Czech Republic and Slovakia. Unfortunately, because of the lack of promotion and no information about Polish mountains foreign tourists perceive them as relatively unattractive. That is why the initiatives such as the International Tourist Beskidy Badge are particularly valuable. Thanks to this program admittedly many more Poles wandered on the Czech and Slovak trails than the tourists from these countries walked the Polish trails but it helped in changing negative stereotypes and promoting international mountain tourism.

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Prof. nadzw. dr hab. Michał Żemła
Górnośląska Wyższa Szkoła Handlowa w Katowicach
Katedra Turystyki
40-659 Katowice, ul. Harcerzy Września 3
e-mail: michal.zemla@gwsh.pl