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Natural Resources in Function of Sustainable and Competitive Tourism Development of the EU Countries

Zasoby naturalne a zrównoważony i konkurencyjny rozwój turystyki w krajach UE

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Abstract
Natural resources are the base of tourism development and competitive position in the tourism market of many tourist destinations. At the same time, the issue of their use in the function of tourism development is very complex and must be based on the idea of sustainability. The paper examines the importance of natural resources for the competitiveness of tourism in the European Union (EU). The aim of this paper is to consider the relationship of natural resources and tourism competitiveness in the EU countries, as well as to identify countries of good practice, but also countries that require improvement of natural tourism attractions and their activation in function of competitive and sustainable tourism development. In accordance with the defined aim of the research, correlation and cluster analysis are applied in the paper. The results of the research can benefit the creators of tourism development policy, because they enable the selection of indicators of availability and attractiveness of natural resources that can be improved, as well as countries in which special attention should be paid to more successful tourism valorization of natural resources.

Key words: natural resources, tourism, competitiveness, sustainability, EU countries

Streszczenie
Zasoby naturalne są podstawą rozwoju turystyki i pozycji konkurencyjnej na rynku turystycznym wielu destynacji turystycznych. Jednocześnie kwestia ich wykorzystania w funkcji rozwoju turystyki jest bardzo złożona i musi zgodna z ideą zrównoważonego rozwoju. Artykuł analizuje znaczenie zasobów naturalnych dla konkurencyjności turystyki w krajach Unii Europejskiej (UE). Celem niniejszego artykułu jest rozważenie relacji zasobów naturalnych i konkurencyjności turystycznej w krajach UE, a także wskazanie krajów dobrych praktyk, ale także krajów, które wymagają zmian w traktowaniu przyrodniczych atrakcji turystycznych i ich aktywizacji w funkcji konkurencyjnej i zrównoważonej rozwój turystyki. Zgodnie z wyznaczonym celem badań w pracy zastosowano analizę korelacji i skupień. Wyniki badań mogą przynieść korzyści twórcom polityki rozwoju turystyki, ponieważ pozwalają na dobór wskaźników dostępności i atrakcyjności zasobów przyrodniczych, które można poprawić, a także krajów, w których należy zwrócić szczególną uwagę na skuteczniejszą waloryzację turystyczną zasobów naturalnych.

Słowa kluczowe: zasoby naturalne, turystyka, konkurencyjność, zrównoważoność, kraje UE

Introduction

In order for a tourist destination to be successful in a market, it is necessary to have two basic characteristics, its competitiveness and sustainability. It is not enough only one parameter to be satisfied, but both and they must support each other. The competitiveness of a destination refers to its ability to compete efficiently and profitably with other destinations in the tourism market. Sustainability refers to a destination's ability to maintain the quality of its natural, social, cultural, and environmental resources while competing in the market (Goeldner and Ritchie, 2012). Sustainability plays the most important role in the long-term competitiveness of a tourist destination (Goffi et al., 2019). In other words, sustainability is a central element of a tourist destination's competitiveness. The idea of sustainable development are applicable to all types of tourist destinations, i.e. in all types of tourism, including mass tourism development and specific forms of tourism (UNEP and WTO, 2005; OECD, 2016). According to Dugulan et al., (2010) competitiveness is one of the common concepts used to present the sustainable development of tourism.

Natural resources play a huge role in achieving competitive and sustainable tourism development. If used in a sustainable way, they are the basis of the competitive advantages of many tourist destinations. In this paper, the authors focus on the analysis of indicators of availability and attractiveness of natural resources of the EU countries as a basis for competitive tourism development. Namely, in the literature there are certain researches of the connection and impact of natural resources on the competitiveness of tourism of certain groups of developing countries. A comprehensive understanding of this relationship at the level of EU countries was lacking, so the authors perform the analysis on a sample of EU 27 countries. The research was realized through two stages. Firstly, the interdependence between the availability and attractiveness of natural resources and the competitiveness of tourism in a sample of EU countries was examined by applying a correlation analysis. Subsequently, a cluster analysis was applied to examine the homogeneity of EU countries according to available natural resources and their use for tourism purposes. The analysis and discussion of the obtained results enabled the selection of key indicators of tourism development, but also the countries in which the use of natural resources for tourism purposes requires improvement, and the formulation of appropriate recommendations on that basis.

1. Literature Review

In order to understand the concept of destination competitiveness, many authors point out that it is necessary to get acquainted with the concepts of comparative advantage and competitive advantage, which are essential elements of competitiveness (Hassan, 2000; Michael et al., 2019). Comparative advantage includes all resources possessed by one destination, and competitive advantage implies the ability of the destination to allocate them efficiently and effectively, i.e. uses these resources over an extended period of time (Crouch, 2011). According to Porter (1990), resources can be divided into five basic categories: human resources, natural resources, knowledge resources, capital, and infrastructure. Ritchie and Crouch (2003) believe that when considering competitiveness in tourism, it is necessary to add a new category of resources, the historical and cultural resources of the destination, and to expand the category of infrastructure with a tourism suprastructure.

Tourism, as a global phenomenon today, owes its success to the wealth of natural resources. Quality and preserved natural resources are a key value of a tourist destination and can create the comparative advantages for tourism development (Krstic et al., 2016). Climatic and geographical factors, flora and fauna, are the determining factors when tourists choose a destination (Milićević and Štetić, 2017). Due to the growing interest of tourists in nature-based tourism, protected natural areas, such as national parks or special nature reserves, are becoming very attractive tourist destinations, where tourists can enjoy untouched nature, see landscapes, study flora and fauna, etc. (Krejić et al., 2019; Trišić, 2020) and, at the same time, learn about the protection and sustainable use of natural resources in the area (Esfandiar et al., 2019).

The basis for the development of nature-based tourism are natural resources, such as forests, rivers, waterfalls, mountains, lakes, which represent the primary attraction (Lundberg and Fredman, 2012; Taczanowska et al., 2019). However, the expansive development of tourism affects the greater utilization of natural resources, and poses a major threat to the natural environment (Podhorodecka and Dudek, 2019). The negative consequences of tourism on the natural environment are reflected in land degradation, endangering biodiversity, disturbing the landscape, polluting water resources and air. Authors Asghari (2011) and Marković et al. (2020) state that the tourism industry, investors and tourists still do not have a clear awareness of how to use natural resources in a sustainable way, because uncontrolled use often leads to their destruction.

Numerous authors agree that natural resources are a very important determinant of modern tourism development and an integral part of a country's tourism competitiveness model (Mihalič, 2013; Gios et al., 2006). Countries with preserved natural resources have a significant competitive advantage in attracting tourists (WEF, 2019). The quality of natural resources in the destination must be maintained in order to maintain the level of tourist demand. If the high level of quality of these resources is not main-

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of the observed indicators, source: Authors' calculation

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variation Coefficient
Number of World Heritage natural sites	27	0.00	5.00	1.52	1.53474	101.07
Total known species	27	232.00	538.00	383.85	76.92389	20.04
Total protected areas	27	1.69	55.07	22.56	12.19683	54.07
Natural tourism digital demand	27	1.23	91.95	29.08	27.70110	95.24
Attractiveness of natural assets, 1-7	27	3.02	6.46	5.24	0.82766	15.80
TTCI	27	3.97	5.44	4.53	0.42872	9.46
Valid N (listwise)	27					

tained, the demand for tourists will inevitably decrease (Goeldner and Ritchie, 2012). Aguiló et al. (2005) conducted research in the Balearic Islands, which proved that tourists have become increasingly demanding in terms of the natural environment and its quality. Du Toit et al. (2010) showed in their study that there is a strong link between the natural environment and the competitiveness of a tourist destination. The authors used a number of indicators of the natural environment in the analysis, such as natural heritage (with the number of UNESCO World Heritage natural sites), coast, thermomineral spring, land area, etc. They concluded that the wealth of natural resources significantly increases the competitiveness of the tourist destination.

Jovanović and Janković Milić (2013) also state that the quality of natural resources can provide a significant competitive advantage in a country's tourism. Therefore, according to them, it is extremely important to measure the contribution of this indicator to the overall tourist competitiveness. The authors analyzed the impact of the quality of natural resources on the tourism competitiveness of South Eastern European countries in the period from 2009 to 2013. The results of their research showed that there is a positive and statistically significant impact of the quality of natural resources on the tourism competitiveness of these countries. Dugulan et al. (2010) analyzed the competitiveness of Central and Eastern European countries, from the aspect of the impact of natural resources. However, their results showed that natural resources are not a significant factor in the competitiveness of these countries as tourist destinations. Namely, the authors conclude that a larger number of World Heritage natural sites, known species and protected natural areas, as well as the overall higher quality of the natural environment, should contribute to these countries becoming more attractive destinations for international tourists, which will affect their larger competitiveness in the tourism market in the future.

2. Information Basis of Research, Methods and Hypotheses

The aim of this paper is to consider the relationship between the quality of natural resources and the competitiveness of tourism in the EU countries, as well as the homogeneity of the EU countries when it comes to natural resources as a basis for tourism development. In order to realize the defined aim of the research, the paper starts from the following assumptions: 1) There is a positive correlation between the specificity and attractiveness of natural resources and the competitiveness of tourism in the EU countries; 2) the EU countries differ significantly in the specificity and attractiveness of natural resources.

The information basis of the research is the report of the World Economic Forum on the competitiveness of tourism and travel for 2019. In addition to the Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Index (TTCI) values for the EU member states, the analysis also includes data for indicators within the pillar Natural Resources. The quality, i.e. specificity and attractiveness of natural resources of the EU countries is measured by the values of the following indicators: Number of World Heritage natural sites, Total known species, Total protected areas, Natural tourism digital demand and Attractiveness of natural assets (WEF, 2019). Descriptive statistics of the data included in the analysis are given in Table 1.

The value of the indicator Number of World Heritage natural sites in the EU countries ranges from 0 to 5. Countries with a value of 0 are: Cyprus, Czech Republic, Estonia, Ireland, Malta, Lithuania. Luxembourg and Latvia, while the value of 5 is recorded in Italy and Spain. The minimum value of the indicator Total known species which measures the total known species of mammals, birds and amphibians was recorded in Malta, and the maximum in Spain. The minimum value of the indicator Total protected areas which represent total square kilometers of terrestrial and marine areas under protection as a share of the country's total territorial area (WEF, 2019) was recorded in Cyprus, and the maximum in Slovenia. The minimum value of the indicator Natural tourism digital demand, which measures online search for natural based forms of tourism on a scale from 0 to 100, was recorded in Lithuania, and the maximum in Italy. Attractiveness of natural assets was rated best in Austria and weakest in Belgium (Annex 1). In addition to the minimum, maximum and mean values of the analyzed indicators, Table 1 also shows the values of the standard deviation and the coefficient of variation for each of the observed indicators for the sample of the EU countries. It can be concluded that the greatest variability among the EU countries was recorded when it comes to the

Table 2. Correlation matrix, source: Authors' calculation

	Number of World Heritage natural sites	Total known species	Total protected areas	Natural tourism digital demand	Attractiveness of natural assets	TTCI
Number of World Heritage natural sites	1					
Total known species	0.813 (0.000)**	1				
Total protected areas	0.209 (0.294)	0.215 (0.282)	1			
Natural tourism digital demand	0.483 (0.011)*	0.518 (0.006)**	-0.230 (0.249)	1		
Attractiveness of natural assets, 1-7	0.287 (0.146)	0.322 (0.101)	-0.195 (0.329)	0.578 (0.002)**	1	
TTCI	0.631 (0.000)**	0.521 (0.005)**	0.035 (0.864)	0.638 (0.000)**	0.336 (9.086)	1

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Table 3. Final Cluster Centers, *ource:* Authors' calculation

	Cluster		
	1	2	3
Number of World Heritage natural sites	1.63	0.13	3.88
Total known species	397.13	296.38	509.00
Total protected areas	27.64	15.24	18.15
Natural tourism digital demand	26.64	15.36	65.70
Attractiveness of natural assets, 1-7	5.04	5.27	5.93

value of the indicator Number of World Heritage natural sites, followed by the Natural tourism digital demand indicator.

In order to provide answers to the research questions, i.e. hypotheses, correlation and cluster analysis were applied in the paper. Correlation analysis was applied in order to determine the interdependence between the quality of natural resources and the competitiveness of tourism in the EU countries. Cluster analysis was applied in order to determine the homogeneity of the EU countries according to the quality of natural resources. Th The membership of countries by selected clusters is shown in Table 4. It can be concluded that 4 out of 27 analysed countries (France, Greece, Italy and Spain) belong to the cluster of best performance (cluster 3). This group of countries records the leading values of four of the five analysed indicators of availability and attractiveness of natural resources. A total of 8 countries (Cyprus, Estonia, Finland, Ireland, Latvia, Malta, Luxembourg, Lithuania) belongs to the cluster with the lowest performance (cluster 2). This group of countries records the weakest results in all analysed indicators. This can be a guideline for tourism policy makers at the EU level, given the pronounced interdependence between the availability and attractiveness of natural resources and the competitiveness of tourism, to pay more attention to the protection and promotion of natural resources in these countries. The largest number of countries, 15 in total, i.e. all remaining EU countries belong to the cluster with medium performance (cluster 1). e Post Hoc Test was applied in order to test the significance of the difference between the defined clusters, after grouping the EU countries according to the analyzed indicators.

3. Research Results and Discussions

The first part of the analysis is dedicated to testing the relationship between the availability and attractiveness of natural resources and the competitiveness of tourism in the EU countries. To this end, the values of the Pearson correlation coefficients between the observed indicators are calculated. The values of the correlation coefficients (r) and the corresponding p - values (p) are shown in Table 2.

The results shown in Table 2 indicate that there is the highest correlation level between the TTCI and Natural tourism digital demand indicator ($r = 0.638$, $p = 0.000$). This is followed by the values of Pearson's correlation coefficient between TTCI and Number of World Heritage natural sites ($r = 0.631$, $p = 0.000$) and TTCI and Total known species ($r = 0.521$, $p = 0.005$). There is a moderate statistically significant positive correlation between these indicators and the TTCI values. A positive correlation also exists between the TTCI values and the other two indicators, Total protected areas and Attractiveness of natural assets, however the values of Pearson's correlation coefficient are not statistically significant. This interdependence between the TTCI value and all observed indicators speaks in favor of confirming the first initial assumption of the research. Namely, there is a positive correlation between the specificity and

Table 4. Clusters of the EU countries according to the indicators within the pillar *Natural Resources*, source: Authors' calculation

Country	Cluster	Distance	Country	Cluster	Distance
Austria	1	39.448	Italy	3	26.711
Belgium	1	48.844	Latvia	2	46.794
Bulgaria	1	49.440	Lithuania	2	25.134
Croatia	1	64.491	Luxembourg	2	50.774
Cyprus	2	21.849	Malta	2	74.026
Czech Republic	1	20.749	Netherlands	1	34.847
Denmark	1	44.898	Poland	1	17.700
Estonia	2	29.319	Portugal	1	59.440
Finland	2	33.740	Romania	1	45.151
France	3	17.928	Slovak Republic	1	24.926
Germany	1	35.858	Slovenia	1	28.564
Greece	3	39.796	Spain	3	29.531
Hungary	1	27.308	Sweden	1	39.249
Ireland	2	37.398			

Table 5. Multiple Comparisons (Post Hoc Test), source: Authors' calculation

Indicators	(I) Cluster	(J) Cluster	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.
Number of World Heritage natural sites	1	2	1.50833(*)	0.43133	0.005
		3	-2.24167(*)	0.55441	0.001
	2	1	-1.50833(*)	0.43133	0.005
		3	-3.75000(*)	0.60332	0.000
	3	1	2.24167(*)	0.55441	0.001
		2	3.75000(*)	0.60332	0.000
Total known species	1	2	100.75833(*)	14.77570	0.000
		3	-111.86667(*)	18.99222	0.000
	2	1	-100.75833(*)	14.77570	0.000
		3	-212.62500(*)	20.66761	0.000
	3	1	111.86667(*)	18.99222	0.000
		2	212.62500(*)	20.66761	0.000
Total protected areas	**1**	2	12.39292(*)	4.87433	0.045
		3	**9.49167**	**6.26531**	**0.302**
	2	1	-12.39292(*)	4.87433	0.045
		3	**-2.90125**	**6.81800**	**0.905**
	3	1	-9.49167	6.26531	0.302
		2	2.90125	6.81800	0.905
Natural tourism digital demand	**1**	**2**	**11.28450**	**10.18639**	**0.519**
		3	-39.05300(*)	13.09327	0.017
	2	1	-11.28450	10.18639	0.519
		3	-50.33750(*)	14.24829	0.005
	3	1	39.05300(*)	13.09327	0.017
		2	50.33750(*)	14.24829	0.005
Attractiveness of natural assets	**1**	**2**	**-0.22808**	**0.34975**	**0.793**
		3	**-0.88683**	**0.44956**	**0.141**
	2	1	0.22808	0.34975	0.793
		3	-0.65875	0.48922	0.384
	3	1	0.88683	0.44956	0.141
		2	0.65875	0.48922	0.384

* The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level

attractiveness of natural resources and the competitiveness of tourism in the EU countries.

Given that the existence of a positive correlation between the competitiveness of tourism in the EU countries and the availability and attractiveness of natural resources has been confirmed, the second part of the analysis is dedicated to examining the homogeneity of the EU countries according to available natural resources that can be in function of tourism development. First, three clusters of the EU countries are singled out according to the observed indicators of natural resources (Table 3). Cluster 3 is

identified as the cluster with the best performance, followed by cluster 1, then cluster 2.

In order to determine between which clusters of countries and for which indicators within the pillar Natural Resources there is a statistically significant difference in the values of the indicators, a Post Hoc Test is conducted. The results are shown in Table 5.

Based on the results presented in Table 5, it can be concluded that there is a statistically significant difference between clusters in a number of analysed indicators. This result is the basis for confirming the second initial assumption of the research. Namely, the EU countries differ significantly in terms of specificity and attractiveness of natural resources. It should be noted that a statistically significant difference between clusters is not observed when it comes to the Attractiveness of natural assets indicator, between the third cluster compared to the first and second when it comes to Total protected areas indicator and between the first and second cluster according to Natural tourism digital demand indicator.

Conclusion

The huge role and importance of natural resources for the tourism development of countries imposes the need for a more detailed examination of their connection and impact on the tourism competitiveness. The results of previous research on this topic differ depending on the selected sample of countries. While some authors find a significant impact of natural resources on the competitiveness of tourism (Jovanović and Janković Milić, 2013), others talk about the lack of any significant link between natural resources and tourism competitiveness in certain groups of countries and about the possibility of more successful use of natural resources (Dugulan et al., 2010). Unlike previous researches, which took into account a relatively smaller sample of countries, the research in this paper was conducted on a sample of 27 EU countries. The results of the research confirmed the existence of a positive correlation between the indicators of availability and attractiveness of natural resources and the competitiveness of tourism in the EU countries. At the same time, the highest level of positive correlation was recorded between the values of the indicator Natural tourism digital demand and TTCI. This fact can be significant, because it is an indicator that does not represent a given state of affairs, but can be further improved by implementing the achievements of modern technologies in the process of tourism development.

Since the first part of the research confirmed the existence of a positive correlation between natural resources and tourism competitiveness of the EU countries, the second part examined their homogeneity according to the availability and attractiveness of natural resources. The research showed that the EU countries differ significantly according to the values of the analysed indicators, as well as that there are certain countries (Cyprus, Estonia, Finland, Ireland, Latvia, Malta, Luxembourg, Lithuania) where it is necessary to make additional efforts to more successfully valorise natural resources for the purpose of tourism development. Of course, this valorisation must be based on the sustainability, with the maximum possible preservation of available natural resources for future generations and future tourism development.

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Annex.

Table A1. Values of the TTCI and indicators within the pillar *Natural Resources*, Source: WEF, 2019

Countries	Number of World Heritage natural sites	Total known species	Total protected areas	Natural tourism digital demand	Attractiveness of natural assets, 1-7	TTCI
Austria	1.00	412.00	28.40	63.14	6.46	4.95
Belgium	1.00	351.00	24.65	11.02	3.02	4.55
Bulgaria	3.00	446.00	28.30	19.29	5.00	4.21
Croatia	2.00	424.00	23.58	85.12	6.04	4.53
Cyprus	0.00	312.00	1.69	22.36	5.97	4.22
Czech Republic	0.00	384.00	22.16	11.65	4.25	4.33
Denmark	3.00	355.00	17.93	14.62	5.08	4.58
Estonia	0.00	322.00	19.51	1.77	4.89	4.20
Finland	1.00	330.00	14.16	13.09	6.10	4.52
France	4.50	516.00	33.21	58.99	5.57	5.40
Germany	3.00	431.00	38.79	23.11	5.35	5.39
Greece	1.00	473.00	11.03	50.57	6.18	4.55
Hungary	1.00	383.00	22.60	3.84	4.52	4.19
Ireland	0.00	263.00	4.04	27.96	5.89	4.54
Italy	5.00	509.00	13.37	91.95	5.65	5.09
Latvia	0.00	341.00	17.51	1.46	5.09	4.04
Lithuania	0.00	317.00	17.76	1.23	4.64	3.98
Luxembourg	0.00	254.00	40.87	4.17	4.60	4.56
Malta	0.00	232.00	6.41	50.82	4.97	4.36
Netherlands	1.00	364.00	21.21	18.09	3.75	4.79
Poland	1.00	392.00	38.06	13.32	4.40	4.23
Portugal	1.00	424.00	16.89	78.55	6.00	4.89
Romania	2.00	438.00	24.31	7.74	5.08	3.99
Slovak Republic	2.00	397.00	37.63	3.81	5.09	3.97
Slovenia	2.00	396.00	55.07	18.82	5.90	4.35
Spain	5.00	538.00	14.97	61.27	6.31	5.44
Sweden	1.50	360.00	14.97	27.51	5.67	4.56

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