

Gatekeepers' role in the development of tourism (Bohemian Forest case)

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Abstract

The International project entitled "Supporting and promoting integrated tourism in Europe's lagging regions (SPRITE)" is aimed at comparing conditions in order to conduct integrated tourism in the six selected European countries – Czech Republic, Greece, France, Ireland, Spain and in the United Kingdom. The region of the Bohemian Forest was selected as one of the model areas. In this project tourism is analysed as a multifaceted phenomenon, which can be described as an interplay among the six principal involved actors – the tourists themselves, the host community, businesses, resource controllers, institutions and the gatekeepers. The role of gatekeepers in the development of tourism in the model area is the subject of discussion in this article. As to their definition, gatekeepers are seen as persons or organisations (public or private), which seek to enable tourism rather than directly supplying tourist services to visitors. Gatekeepers should therefore be defined in terms of their two primary functions – providing information about a particular region to tourists and potential visitors and promoting and/or marketing the study region to tourists and potential visitors.

Key words: integrated tourism, gatekeepers, Bohemian Forest

INTRODUCTION

Tourism in the Bohemian Forest dates back to the end of 18th century (e.g. Moss et al. 1999). It has been an inevitable part of the local life ever since. While the share of tourism in the local economy varied over time it was recognised as the most promising factor fostering local development at the beginning of the nineties (TĚŠITEL et al. 1999). In order to play this role properly it should be integrated into the entire region's socio-economic context. The so-called integrated tourism is then considered as tourism explicitly linked to the economic, social, cultural, natural and human structures of the localities in which it takes place. In practical terms it means that the percentage of local people employed, the type and the degree of participation, decision-making power and ownership of resources in the local tourist sector is taken into account when thinking about the role of tourism in the local development (e.g. SHARPLEY 2000, MICHELL & EAGLES 2001, JENKINS 2001).

The international project entitled "Supporting and promoting integrated tourism in Europe's lagging regions (SPRITE)" is aimed at comparing conditions for conducting such a type of tourism within the following six selected European countries: Czech Republic, Greece, France, Ireland, Spain, and the United Kingdom (Fig. 1 – SPRITE study regions). The territory of the National park in the context of the Bohemian Forest region was chosen as one of model areas (Fig. 2 – Model area). This project analyses tourism as a multifaceted phenomenon, which can be described as an interplay among six principal actors involved – the tourists



Fig. 1. SPRITE study regions.

themselves, host community, businesses, resource controllers, institutions and gatekeepers (see <http://sprite.econ.upatras.gr/>).

The main subject of discussion in this article is the gatekeepers' role in the development of tourism. Gatekeepers are generally understood as persons (individuals or groups), who influence the flow of information necessary for decision-making (Bočánková 2001). They might also control or mediate access to information, services and goods (Calhoun 2002). In the context of SPRITE they are seen as persons or organisations (public or private) seeking to enable tourism rather than supplying tourist services directly to tourists. Gatekeepers should therefore be defined in terms of their two primary functions – providing information about the researched region to tourists and potential visitors and promoting and/or marketing the study region to tourists and potential visitors. As such they could be based outside as well as inside the studied region.

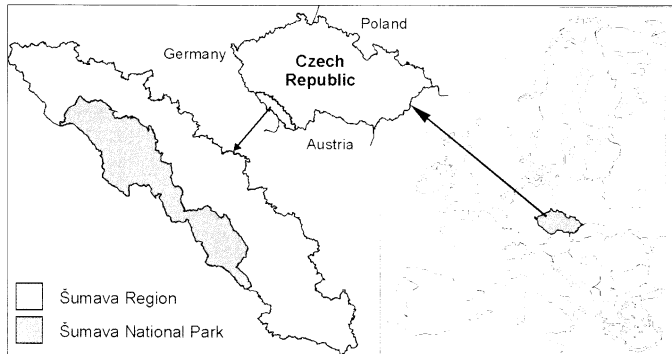


Fig. 2. Model area.

METHOD USED AND FINDINGS

According to the SPRITE methodology, qualitative technique of interviewing was used to reveal the gatekeepers' opinions on expectations and motivations of tourists and tourists' behavior, on cooperation with local businesses, institutions and local population (CUDLINOVA et al. 2002). This information was aimed at enabling us to estimate the degree of involvement of gatekeepers in the local economy. Gatekeepers relevant to the study area represented the basic set, while the sample consisted of ten of them, purposely chosen to represent a broad spectrum of gatekeepers' activities. To be more specific the respondents were representatives of one town information centre, two tourist agencies specialising in the Bohemian Forest region, two municipalities, the Information and Rangers Service Department of the National Park, Public Relation Department of the National Park, Internet agency, ski centre, private local museum and an art gallery. They were addressed in September and October 2002.¹

The profile of gatekeepers

The gatekeepers in tourism have already established a tradition in the region; the first printed guide introducing the region to tourists was issued as early as in 1913 (BAŠTA 1913). However, most of the present day gatekeepers came to existence only after 1989, when this activity became a subject of a business. Private company owners often started their activities as gatekeepers on part-time basis; nowadays it has become their full time job. Gatekeepers are generally relatively small organizations, the number of their full-time employees ranges between 1 and 15 persons. Compared with the regions' average, people engaged in gatekeeper activities are rather well educated; they have knowledge of at least one foreign language (German is

¹ Whereas the identification of the role of gatekeepers was not a problem, finding particular individuals, who play this role in its pure form proved to be not an easy task as actors involved in tourism play as a rule multiple roles. It is evident from the list of respondents, roles of businesses, social institutions and gatekeepers frequently overlap.

preferred to English) and the ability to work with a PC and the Internet. In fact, all of them can be called enthusiasts with love for Bohemian Forest.

Current gatekeeper activities in the Bohemian Forest are aimed at business operations in the line of mediating accommodation, providing information about the region, organising cultural and sporting events, providing tours and excursions, guide activities, education in ecology, creation and running of a regional internet server etc. As a complete novelty, a network of information centres has been created in the course of the last decade, supplemented by nature trails and the regional information system.

Promoting the image of the region

In order to play their role as mediators properly, it is essential for the gatekeepers to understand the visitors' motivations and expectations. On the other hand the knowledge of the regions' resources available for tourist activities as well as the ability to market them, forms another essential aspect of the gatekeepers' activity.

It is generally known that well-preserved countryside and what can be called *genius loci* can be regarded as the most important visitor-attracting factor of the Bohemian Forest, together with the disposition of landscape for active tourist activities, such as hiking, cycling and winter cross-country skiing. To pronounce the image of the region as a romantic and a health promoting area, most of the gatekeepers use keywords such as natural scenery, tranquillity, peace, relaxation and facilities for soft-tourist activities. Nevertheless, gatekeepers are very well aware of the fact, that it is primarily the tourists visiting the region themselves, who fundamentally participate in the image making of the Bohemian Forest. "Oral recommendation to visit the region made by friends or relatives proved to be the most efficient way of the promoting the region", said one of the respondents. As a result the image is mostly spread by the "word of mouth", rather than by tour operators' materials, local tourist information points and the Internet. Any rule has its exceptions, which are, in this particular case, represented by the promotional activities of the national park. In fact its logo is the only label perceived as representing Bohemian Forest as a whole. Furthermore, information materials provided by its administration are highly valued both by visitors and other gatekeepers.

As it is obvious in any modern information society, the mass media play crucial role in the image making; especially media publicity of negative facts. Topics as illegal felling and bark beetle calamity to mention the two most known affairs related to this territory played an ambiguous role. On one hand such publicity effected the reputation of the area as a region with properly conserved nature; on the other those affairs attracted people who wanted to see the calamity for themselves.

Control over the information flow

From the managerial perspective, mediating inflow of tourists into the desired destinations means in fact keeping control over the information flow between visitors and businesses related to tourism. In case of the Bohemian Forest, it is sometimes difficult for the gatekeepers to partake in the game and to keep their position of mediators between visitors and providers of tourist services. For this there are at least two interrelated reasons – visitors' long-term familiarity with the region in general and a family-like relationship between some of the hosts and guests.

Almost two thirds of the visitors come to visit the Bohemian Forest repeatedly. Visiting particular places in the region at least once a year has even become an inevitable part of life-style for some people and omitting it would be perceived as affecting their annual routine. Those visits are not necessarily the main aim of their whole vacation, which they can otherwise also spend abroad, but as one of the visitors said: "Walking along the Vydra River or to

the springs of the Vltava River at least once in a year is something we are not able to do without". Visitors proved to have a relatively firm relationship not only with the region and its specific natural beauties but also with particular hotels or bed and breakfast accommodation facilities, where they stay during their repeated visits (KUSOVÁ et al. 2002). Building family-like relationship with their guests has been adopted by most of the accommodation and catering providers in the region as their general entrepreneurial strategy.

"Content guest is likely to come back", said one hotel-owner. As a result, more than half of the guests leaving a hotel when their holidays are over, book automatically for the next season. Second-home owners can be seen as a special group in this context. They visit the region all the year round regularly. In some aspect they represent intermediate form between visitors and local population. Returning to the region anyway they don't need to be attracted there. Neither visitors who visit repeatedly nor the second-home owners represent the gatekeepers target group in this particular case.

Among those, who neither come repeatedly, nor vary their visited places, two groups can be distinguished as to the way of getting information about the region. In contrast to foreign visitors Czech clients do not generally look for travel agencies. Czech visitors prefer getting information directly from the service providers using the Internet or telephone. Approximately 80% of visitors who come to the Bohemian Forest individually, only 20% use the services of travel agencies.

Irrespective of the way that attracted them to visit the Bohemian Forest, once in the region, tourists actively seek information about it. Gatekeepers found, that most visitors come to the region only with a general idea about what they would like to do during their stay. The actual programme is then elaborated on the spot, often after a visit to information centres, where visitors obtain detailed information on the interesting sights in the region – including suggested trails, border crossings, walking tours etc. In this context eleven newly built information centres related to the national park play a very important role in directing or guiding visitors within the park territory. Especially for foreign visitors, information centres serve as the "enclaves of known world" in a relatively strange and not fully known socio-cultural environment of the host region. As one of the gatekeepers said: "We sometimes serve as the 'first aid point' of some kind for foreign visitors when they get lost".

Shaping demand

Keeping the region attractive to tourists seems to be the fundamental precondition for tourism to sustain itself as the Bohemian Forest's number one economic activity in the future. Paradoxically, it is the real behaviour of the visitors themselves and their demands that may endanger the development of tourism within the region. Providers in their effort to keep their clientele tend to do their best to satisfy "all the visitors' wishes". As a result ever-repeating cycle may arise. Attractiveness of the host region, hospitality of local communities as well as readiness of local providers may lead to the situation, when the flow of visitors would tend to expand, especially as more services and facilities catering for visitors' needs are installed. The development of accommodation, catering, sewage disposal, recreation and entertainment facilities may attract more visitors to the region, but it might at the same time alter its innate character. As a result the tourists would participate in the process of driving the landscape of the Bohemian Forest out of its natural "romantic" character – its most important attractiveness. This may consequently lead to the decline of the number of tourists. Gatekeepers can participate in preventing such a development. They as actors participating profoundly in the image making of the region as well as having some control over the information flow have a chance, at least theoretically, to shape the tourists' demand.

Doing this, individual gatekeepers go their particular way. Having in mind that soft tourism

is the most appropriate form of activity for the region, some of them adopted strategy of focussing on special target groups, visitors who have positive attitude to nature – mostly families with children, hikers, cyclists and cross-country skiers in winter. One tour operator who focuses on providing educational programmes about the region on both nature and history can be used as another example. Additionally, providing these services for German clientele it is perceived as a contribution to the improvement of the mutually historically sensitive relationship between the Czechs and Germans.

National park occupies a special niche in this respect. Besides being a gatekeeper, it also plays roles of decisive resource controller and an institution. As such, it complements positive guidance to tourists and provides them with information and a set of limitations for their behaviour when on the national park territory. Viewed from the long-term perspective, the National Park has been recognised by other gatekeepers as the most important and powerful guardian of the development of soft tourism in the Bohemian Forest.

CONCLUSIONS

Information and especially a reliable one has always been a very important matter. Information based society has even declared the importance of information. As a result the actors who have a control over the information flow can be considered as key players in any social activity. The gatekeepers of tourism in the Bohemian Forest, even if they due to the specific conditions can control the information flow only partially, bind successfully the clients with providers of services and vice versa. Ever rising number of gatekeepers in the region can document the growing importance assigned to the tourist industry in the region as well as the stress put on the role of mediators in its development.

Their strong point is their excellent knowledge of the market, i.e. the knowledge of expectations of the clientele on the side of demand and the services provided by tourism related businesses on supply side. In order to get to know this kind of data some gatekeepers even make their own surveys among visitors. At this point it is also necessary to mention the long-term perspective in the gatekeepers thinking when trying to shape the demands of the current as well as the potential clientele.

The statement: "It is a long way to Prague and we have to help ourselves", documents the fact that gatekeepers expect development to be predominantly based on mobilisation of their internal resources. What can be seen as a weak point, however, is a lack of commonly shared policy. Most of the gatekeepers operate mainly on their own, trying only occasionally to cooperate with others in promoting the region as one package. Such a self-oriented behaviour can be seen as a temporary phenomenon, accompanying the initial stage of the development of tourism in the region. If all goes well, we can very likely expect development towards sharing and a new process of division of labour might in this case also take place.

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