COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF CONSUMERS'AND TOURISM EXPERTS' ATTITUDE TO THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF THE TOURISM SECTOR IN THE REGIONS OF LITHUANIA

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Abstract. The processes of economic, social and political globalisation have made tourism one of the leading sectors of the economy and a major economic activity and source of income in many countries. Tourism development encourages regions to compete with each other to attract more tourists, and regional competitiveness is inextricably linked to and has a direct impact on tourism growth. The aim of the study was to compare the views of tourism experts and consumers and to find common ground in assessing the competitiveness of tourism regions in terms of sustainability. Two quantitative surveys were conducted: tourism consumers and tourism experts. The results of the surveys are compared. The conclusions are reached: when comparing the opinions of consumers and tourism experts on the most important factors of sustainable development of the tourism sector, the opinions of consumers and tourism experts agree on such factors of the tourism sector as the accessibility of tourism, the creation of tourist routes accessible to all (people with disabilities). Comparing the opinions of consumers and tourism experts on the most important problems of sustainable development of the tourism sector and the most important activities for sustainable development of the tourism sector, the opinions of both consumers and tourism experts agree on the most important problems of the tourism sector: it would be the lack of knowledge about the nature and principles of sustainable tourism in local politics, underdeveloped infrastructure and economic problems: insufficient investments in sustainable tourism development.

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Keywords: sustainable development, tourism sector, consumers' attitude, tourism experts' attitude, tourism regions.

Introduction

According to the United Nations World Tourism Organisation [UNWTO] and the World Travel and Tourism Council [WTTC], tourism is one of the world's largest economic sectors. The sustainable development of the tourism sector encourages regions to compete with each other to attract more tourists, while at the same time increasing the competitive advantages of tourism regions, and the competitiveness of regions is inextricably linked to the growth and sustainable development of the tourism sector.

Relevance of the issue. The competitiveness of a tourism region is inextricably linked to the growth of the tourism sector and has a direct impact on the development of the tourism sector. The development of the tourism sector in line with the principles of sustainable development and the efficient use of leisure resources can be a driver for the development of the regional economy and businesses in the region, as it attracts investment, creates jobs, increases incomes and stimulates growth in demand. Sustainable development of the tourism sector encourages regions to compete with each other to attract more tourists, thereby increasing the competitive advantages of tourism regions, and regional competitiveness is inextricably linked to the growth and sustainable development of the tourism sector. Attention to the principles of sustainable development and sustainable regional development is reflected in Lithuania's National Progress Plan 2021-2030 [NTP 2021-2030].

*The scientific probl*em of this article is formulated as a question: What are the attitudes of consumers and tourism experts towards the sustainable development of the tourism sector in the regions of Lithuania, and do these attitudes have common points of contact?

The subject of the research is the attitude of consumers and tourism experts towards the sustainable development of the tourism sector in the regions of Lithuania.

The purpose of the research is to conduct a comparative analysis of the attitudes of consumers and tourism professionals towards the sustainable development of the tourism sector in the regions of Lithuania.

Research tasks:

1. To carry out a theoretical analysis of the attitudes of consumers and experts towards the sustainable development of the tourism sector in the regions.

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2. To conduct a survey on the attitudes of consumers and tourism experts towards the sustainable development of the tourism sector in the regions of Lithuania.

Methodology. Two quantitative studies (questionnaire survey) were carried out. Data collection methods - analysis of scientific literature and sources (carried out to reveal the attitudes of consumers and tourism professionals towards the sustainable development of the tourism sector in the regions from a theoretical perspective), document analysis, questionnaire survey.

Theoretical analysis of the sustainable development of the tourism sector in the regions

In order to achieve the competitiveness of the tourist region and in the planning of tourist activities in the regions, the concept of sustainable tourism development is applicable - an essential principle of future development that dates back to 1980 and has recently been widely recognised. The foundations of the concept of sustainable development were formulated in 1980 in the document "World Conservation Strategy", published on behalf of three international institutions - the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), which states that the rational management of the use of natural resources is an integral part not only of social development but also of environmental protection. The report of the World Commission on Environment and Development "Our Common Future" (1987) formulated the concept of sustainable development: "*Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs*".

Researchers (Štreimikienė et al., 2020; Petkevičiūtė, & Balčiūnaitė, 2018; Agyeiwaah et al., 2017; Bramwell et al., 2017; and others) point to the importance of sustainable development in shaping the competitive advantages of a tourism region and thus increasing the region's competitiveness. Sustainable development of the tourism sector is a prerequisite for a competitive tourism system. In order to increase the competitiveness of the tourism sector, it is important to promote the development of tourism that is accessible to all, or to improve the accessibility (adaptation for people with disabilities) and accessibility of tourism. In 1980, the UN WTO linked tourism and accessibility for the first time in the Manila Declaration. In Europe, there are a total of 50 million people (10 per cent of the population) with some form of disability, and it is estimated that one in four European households has a person with some form of disability (Reyes-García et al., 2021). Another reason for promoting accessibility in the tourism sector is the ageing of the world's population. This issue is particularly important in developed countries. Sustainable tourism emphasises equal opportunities for all tourists, regardless of their disability, age or other specific needs. Researchers Reyes-García et al. (2021); Stulpinaitė (2016); Indriūnas (2015); Baležentis & Žuromskaitė (2012) and others argue that the adaptation of facilities in the tourism sector to the needs of people with disabilities affects the sustainable development of tourism. It is appropriate to install special infrastructure in tourism facilities, provide appropriate services (specially trained staff, sign language interpreters, descriptions in Braille), organise activities and exhibitions adapted to people with special needs. This corresponds to activities such as providing the necessary information for tourists with special needs in a special section on the official websites of the Tourist Information Centres [TIC] and the creation of tourist routes.

Another very important activity for the sustainable development of the tourism sector is the certification of services in the tourism sector - this is one of the most important and widely used measures to ensure the integration of the principles of sustainable development in the tourism sector and the competitiveness of the sector, with the aim of improving the quality of services in the tourism sector in the tourist region, the competitiveness of tourist regions and reducing the impact of the development of the tourism sector on the environment (Gkoumas, 2019; Font & Harris, 2004).

Among the priorities for promoting the sustainable development of the tourism sector, the development of ecotourism is also included in the development of regional tourism sector promotion activities. This type of tourism includes rural tourism services, slow, educational and active tourism (cycling, water, walking, other) and travel in the natural environment. Hall et al. (2013); Goosling et al. (2012); Jenkins et al. (2011); Hoffmann (2011) found that it is necessary not only to develop the growth of ecotourism, but also to reorient consumption in the tourism sector (shorter distances, reuse, recycling, more orientation towards local tourism and more use of short supply chains).

Researchers Dayoub et al. (2019) argue that the development of cultural routes becomes a tool to promote the development of the tourism sector in regions and contributes to the priorities of promoting

the implementation of sustainable tourism development, and thematic tourism routes and cultural routes that connect several regions or countries are usually more attractive and popular.

Another priority for the sustainable development of the tourism sector is the promotion of inbound tourism. The development of inbound tourism contributes significantly to the qualitative development of regions and helps to justify tourism development decisions more objectively. According to Žabaliūnas & Skarbalius (2004), a well-planned, dynamic and professionally implemented national and inbound tourism policy ultimately generates economic results that are beneficial to the country. The development of inbound tourism can be measured by one indicator - the number of foreign tourists (the target indicator is up to 30 per cent of the total tourist flow).

After analysing the scientific literature, the factors of sustainable development of the tourism sector in the tourist regions were distinguished - accessibility of tourism (adaptation for people with disabilities) and accessibility; the visit of foreign tourists (target indicator up to 30% of the total flow of tourists); certification of tourism services ("*Green Key*", "*Blue Flag*", etc.); the growth of tourism service providers.); the increase of tourism service providers with international certificates; the development of ecological tourism; waterways; the development of public and private water tourism infrastructure; the development of cycling tourism infrastructure through the creation of regional routes; the development of a common national route linking different regions of the country and enabling tourists to plan longer trips; the development of cultural routes; the provision of information needed by tourists with special needs in a separate section on official TIC websites; the creation of tourist routes accessible to all (including people with disabilities).

In promoting the sustainable development of the tourism sector, a very important role belongs to each tourism user (potential tourist), who chooses one or another form of tourism and thus shapes the supply of this sector (Dagiliūtė, & Bartkutė, 2014). It is important how each tourism user perceives and practically expresses his choices and actions, which influence the implementation of sustainable development of the tourism sector. In order to understand the behaviour of sustainable consumption, it is important to pay attention to the consumer himself and the aspects related to his behaviour (Juška, & Kinderis, 2022).

Methodology of the survey

The aim of the research is to conduct a comparative analysis of the attitudes of consumers and experts towards the sustainable development of the tourism sector in the regions of Lithuania.

Research objective: To find out the consumers' and experts' point of view on the most frequent problems of sustainable development of tourism sector in the regions of Lithuania and the most important activities for sustainable development of tourism sector in the regions.

The sample of the consumer survey

The survey was carried out in 2023, in the months of May - June, by distributing the questionnaire link on the portal www.apklausa.lt and on social networks, among travelers who were offered to answer 16 questionnaire questions. 423 respondents were interviewed. The research is considered exploratory.

Research tool. In the introductory part of the questionnaire, the purpose of the study was presented, the purpose for which the collected data will be used, and anonymity was guaranteed. The questions were formulated taking into account the data from the analysis of the scientific literature. When preparing the questionnaire, groups of questions were used: a group of special questions (questions aimed at finding out how consumers understand the concept of "sustainable development", whether they themselves are responsible consumers; consumers' attitudes towards the sustainable development of the tourism sector in the regions; respondents' opinions on the problems of sustainable development and the most important activities for the harmonious development of the tourism sector) and a group of demographic questions (demographic and social characteristics of the respondents).

Research ethics. When distributing the questionnaires, ethical principles were followed (privacy, confidentiality, voluntary decision-making, etc.). Each respondent was free to choose whether to participate in the research. The data is used to summarize, preserving the anonymity of the respondents.

Demographic and social characteristics of the respondents. Every third respondent (34.1 %) belongs to the 19-30 age group, every second respondent (22 %) belongs to the age group 31-40 age group, respectively every second respondent (19.5 % each) belongs to the 41-50 and 51-60 age groups, and 4.9

% respondents belong to the age group of 61 - 65 years age group. 80.5 % answered the questionnaire questions women and 19.5 % men.

The expert survey sample

Methodology of research. The quantitative method chosen for the research is a questionnaire survey. The questionnaire was filled out by specialists in the tourism sector at the local level - employees of district tourism information centers (TIC) and tourism and business information centers (TBIC). These persons are involved in the management process of the tourism sector at the local level and participate in the formation of the current tourism sector policy, decision-making and their implementation. Interviewing tourism specialists ensures the reliability of the research.

Interviews with tourism experts ensure the reliability of the survey. The Lithuanian Tourism Development Programme identifies the following priority tourism development regions, which include the most attractive tourist attractions in the municipal territories and to which 27 out of 60 (or 45%) municipalities are assigned: the Lower Nemunas River Region; Seaside region; Southern Dzūkija region; Eastern Aukštaitija region; Vilnius region; Žemaitija highlands region.

The calculated value of Cronbach's alpha coefficient is 0.908, which is higher than the suggested (Aiken, 2002) value of 0.7, so the internal consistency of the questionnaire is satisfactory and further analysis of the questionnaire data is possible.

The expert survey sample. The survey was conducted after sending the survey link to the tourism specialists of the already mentioned six tourist information centers (TIC) and tourism and business information centers (TBIC) of the districts that make up the tourist regions, who were offered to answer 7 questionnaire questions. The sample size for the study was calculated according to the Schwarze formula (Rudzkienė, 2005):

$$n = \frac{N \times 1{,}64^2 \times p \times q}{\varepsilon^2 \times (N-1) + 1{,}64^2 \times p \times q}$$

Where:

- N - the general entity, which consists of 27 tourist information centers (TIC) and tourism and business information centers (TBIC) of the districts that make up the priority tourism regions.
- p/q - the probability of the test grade appearing/not appearing (the probability of the worst option was taken, i.e. 50 percent, then p=q=0.5);
- ε – desired accuracy, in this case ε = 0.1 (10 percent); a value of 1.64 corresponds to 90 percent of the standardized normal distribution confidence level.

22 tourism specialists participated in the survey (according to Schwarze's formula, the sufficient size to ensure the representativeness of the research sample is 19 respondents). The processing and analysis of the results of the questionnaires of the quantitative research participants was carried out using the SPSS software package.

Research instrument. In the introductory part of the questionnaire, the purpose of the research was presented, the purpose for which the data will be used and anonymity was ensured. Formulated questions have been prepared taking into account the data of the analysis of the scientific literature carried out in the theoretical part of the dissertation. When compiling the questionnaire, groups of questions were used: a group of special questions (questions intended to find out the assessment of the factors of sustainable development of the tourism sector and their trends in tourist regions by tourism specialists; the opinion of respondents about the problems of sustainable development and the most important activities for the sustainable development of the tourism sector in tourist regions - questions 1 - 3) and a group of demographic questions (demographic and social characteristics of the respondents - questions 5 - 6). They were also asked to answer the question of what TIC or TBIC has planned for the development of sustainable tourism in the region.

Research ethics. When distributing the questionnaires, ethical principles were followed (privacy, confidentiality, voluntary decision-making, etc.). Each tourism specialist was free to choose whether to participate in the research. The data is used to summarize, preserving the anonymity of the respondents.

Results of survey comparative analysis of the attitude of consumers and tourism experts towards the sustainable development of the tourism sector

Consumers were asked to identify the five most important factors for the sustainable development of the tourism sector. Tourism experts were asked to rate the sustainable development factors of the tourism sector on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 - being very poor and 10 - being excellent. The experts' ratings were ordered from lowest to highest. The answers of the respondents are presented in Table 1 (see Table 1), where the factors for sustainable tourism development identified by the consumers are ranked from those with the highest number of responses to those with the lowest number of responses. The factors for sustainable tourism development identified by the experts are ranked from lowest to highest. The factors for sustainable tourism development with the lowest scores are considered to be the factors most in need of improvement for the sustainable development of the tourism sector in the regions.

Table 1. Comparison of the most important factors of the sustainable development of the tourism sector from the point of view of consumers and experts

No.	Sustainable tourism sector development factors (consumers)	Percents	Sustainable tourism sector development factors (experts)	Scores
1.	Development of ecological tourism	18.50	Certification of tourism services	4.89
2.	Tourism accessibility	14.40	Holders of international certificates	5.39
3.	Development of tourism routes accessible to all	13.30	Tourism accessibility	5.72
4.	Certification of tourism services	9.70	Information for tourists with special needs	6.11
5.	Development of the common national route	9.70	Development of tourism routes accessible to all	6.20
6.	Development of bicycle tourism infrastructure	8.70	Development of ecological tourism	6.58
7.	Visits of foreign tourists to the regions	6.20	Water tourism routes	6.78
8.	Water tourism infrastructure	6.20	Water tourism infrastructure	6.79
9.	Development of cultural roads	5.10	Development of the common national route	6.72
10.	Holders of international certificates	4.10	Development of cultural roads	7.17
11.	Information for tourists with special needs	2.60	Development of bicycle tourism infrastructure	7.24
12	Water tourism routes	1.50	Visits of foreign tourists to the regions	7.39

Source: Author

Consumers consider the following factors of sustainable development of the tourism sector to be the most important: 1) development of ecological tourism (18.5%); 2) accessibility of tourism (for people with disabilities) (14.4%); 3) development of tourist routes accessible to all (13.3%); 4) certification of tourist services (9.70%); 5) development of the common national route (9.70%), etc. (see Table 1). According to the tourism experts, the most important factors to be improved for the sustainable development of the tourism sector are 1) certification of tourism services (4.89 points), 2) holders of international certificates (5.39 points), 3) accessibility of tourism (5.72 points), 4) information for tourists with special needs (6.11 points), 5) development of tourist routes accessible to all (6.20 points) and etc. (see Table 1). Consumers' and experts' opinions agree only on water tourism infrastructure (8th place according to consumers' and experts' evaluation), while opinions differ on other sustainable factors of the tourism sector. Consumers consider the most important factors for the sustainable development of the tourism sector to be the development of ecological tourism, the accessibility of tourism (for people with disabilities), the development of tourism routes accessible to all, the certification of tourism services and the development of the common national route, as well as the development of infrastructure for cycling tourism. Experts consider the most important factors of sustainable development of the tourism sector, such as certification of tourism services, holders of international certificates, accessibility of tourism, information for tourists with special needs, development of tourist routes accessible to all. In conclusion, it can be said that the opinions of consumers and experts agree on such factors of the tourism sector as the accessibility of tourism and the development of tourist routes accessible to all.

The respondents were asked to identify the three most important problems that are usually encountered in the sustainable development of the tourism sector. The answers of the respondents are presented in

Table 2, where the most important problems of the development of the tourism sector are ranked from the problems that received the most answers from the respondents to the problems that received the least answers from the respondents (see Table 2).

Table 2. Comparison of the most important problems of the sustainable development of the tourism sector from the point of view of consumers and experts, percent

No.	Sustainable tourism sector development problems (consumers)	Percent	Sustainable tourism sector development problems (experts)	Percent
1.	Economic problem: insufficient investment in the development of sustainable tourism	21.80	There is a lack of knowledge about the essence and principles of sustainable tourism in local politics	25.60
2.	There is a lack of knowledge about the essence and principles of sustainable tourism in local politics	20.30	Underdeveloped infrastructure	25.60
3.	Underdeveloped infrastructure	18.00	Economic problem: insufficient investment in the development of sustainable tourism	23.30
4.	Seasonality	15.80	Seasonality	16.30
5.	Lack of information	12.80	Lack of information	3.30
6.	Excessive use of natural resources for tourism	8.30	Excessive use of natural resources for tourism	3.30
7.	Unskilled tourism specialists	3.00	Unskilled tourism specialists	2.60

Source: Author

According to consumers, the following problems of sustainable development of the tourism sector are usually encountered: 1) economic problem: insufficient investment in the development of sustainable tourism (21.8%); 2) lack of knowledge about the nature and principles of sustainable tourism in local politics (20.3%); 3) underdeveloped infrastructure of the tourism sector (18%) and others (see Table 2). According to tourism experts, the most common problems of sustainable development of tourism sector are: 1) lack of knowledge about the nature and principles of sustainable tourism in local policy (25.6%); 2) underdeveloped infrastructure (25.6%); 3) economic problem: insufficient investment in development of sustainable tourism (23.3%) and etc. (see Table 2). In summary, it can be said that the opinions of both consumers and tourism professionals agree on the main problems of the tourism sector. These would be the lack of knowledge about the nature and principles of sustainable tourism in local politics, underdeveloped infrastructure and economic problems: insufficient investment in the development of sustainable tourism.

Respondents were asked to identify the three most important activities for the sustainable development of the tourism sector. The answers of the respondents are presented in Table 3, where the most important activities for the development of the tourism sector are ordered from the problems that received the most answers from the respondents to the problems that received the least answers from the respondents (see Table 3).

According to consumers, the three most important activities for the sustainable development of the tourism sector are 1) investments in the sustainable development of tourism (30.4%); 2) tourists' own responsible attitude towards the use of natural resources (23.2%); 3) legalisation of sustainable tourism development in the country's strategic documents (17%); etc. (see Table 3). According to the experts, the three most important activities for the sustainable development of the tourism sector are 1) investment in the sustainable development of tourism (29.8%); 2) tourists' own responsible attitude towards the use of natural resources (25.5%); 3) development, planning and control of the tourism sector (19%) and etc. (see Table 3). In summary, it can be said that the opinions of both consumers and tourism professionals agree on the most important activities for the development of the tourism sector. These would be investment in the sustainable development of tourism and a responsible attitude of tourists themselves towards the use of natural resources. Similar responses were received regarding the development, planning and control of the tourism sector and the legalisation of sustainable tourism development in the country's strategic documents.

Table 3. Comparison of the most important activities for the sustainable development of the tourism sector from the point of view of consumers and experts, percent

No.	The most important activities for the sustainable development of the tourism sector (consumers)	Percent	The most important activities for the sustainable development of the tourism sector (experts)	Percent
1.	Investments in the sustainable development of tourism	30.40	Investments in the sustainable development of tourism	29.80
2.	Responsible attitude of tourists to the use of natural resources	23.20	Responsible attitude of tourists to the use of natural resources	25.50
3.	Legalization of sustainable tourism development in the country's strategic documents	17.00	Tourism sector development, planning and control	19.00
4.	Tourism sector development, planning and control	15.20	Legalization of sustainable tourism development in the country's strategic documents	14.90
5.	Increasing income of the local population	8.00	Certification of tourism services	6.40
6.	Certification of tourism services	5.40	Increasing income of the local population	2.20
7.	Another option (recognition of tourism sectors as a priority branch of the economy)	0.80	Another option (recognition of tourism sectors as a priority branch of the economy)	2.20

Source: Author

When consumers were asked whether they were interested in sustainability, conservation and responsible consumption, it was found that most of them were interested in sustainability, conservation and responsible consumption (70.7%) and 29.3% had heard about it. Less than half of the respondents (34.1%) consume responsibly, while the majority (65.9%) try to consume responsibly as much as possible. When consumers were asked if they consume responsibly when travelling, the majority of respondents (58.5%) said that they always try to consume responsibly, including when travelling. Less than half of respondents (36.6%) do not always use responsibly, but at least try to. 2.4% of respondents use responsibly in everyday life but not when travelling.

Conclusions

In order to promote the sustainable development of the tourism sector, each tourism consumer (potential tourist) plays a very important role by choosing one or another form of tourism and thus shaping the supply of this sector. In order to understand sustainable consumption behaviour, it is important to pay attention to the consumer himself and the aspects related to his behaviour.

After comparing the opinions of consumers and tourism experts on the most important factors for the sustainable development of the tourism sector, the opinions of consumers and experts agree on factors of the tourism sector such as the accessibility of tourism and the development of tourist routes accessible to all. Comparing the opinions of consumers and tourism experts on the most important problems for the sustainable development of the tourism sector, the opinions of both consumers and tourism experts agree on the most important problems of the tourism sector: it would be the lack of knowledge about the nature and principles of sustainable tourism in local politics, underdeveloped infrastructure and economic problems: insufficient investment in the sustainable development of tourism. Comparing the opinions of consumers and tourism experts on the most important activities for the sustainable development of the tourism sector, the opinions of both consumers and tourism experts agree on the most important activities for the development of the tourism sector: these would be investment in the sustainable development of tourism and the responsible attitude of tourists towards the use of natural resources. Similar responses were received regarding the development, planning and control of the tourism sector and the legalisation of sustainable tourism development in the country's strategic documents.

Proposals

The sustainable development of the tourism sector in tourism regions should focus on increasing the number of internationally certified tourism providers, certification of tourism services, accessibility (for people with disabilities) and accessibility of tourism. Ways should also be sought to address the most pressing problems of sustainable tourism development, such as the lack of awareness of the nature and principles of sustainable tourism in local politics, and the economic problems of underinvestment in the sustainable development of the tourism sector, underdeveloped infrastructure and the reduction of seasonality.

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