

## DIFFERENCES IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE TOURIST FUNCTION IN POLAND'S RURAL AREAS

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**Abstract:** Rural areas are an important place of tourist reception. Tourism in rural areas takes many forms which can be analysed at three levels: as agritourism, rural tourism and countryside tourism. The level of development of the tourist infrastructure, the volume of tourist traffic, and economic activity of local communities in the field of tourism have an impact on the development of the tourist function in rural areas. Rural communes with a clearly developed tourist function account for 20.9 per cent of all rural communes in Poland. They are concentrated at the seaside, in mountain and lake districts, where the development of the tourist function is generally connected with vacation tourism, as well as around urban agglomerations where the tourist function developed mainly on the basis of week-end tourism.

**Key words:** countryside tourism, rural tourism, rural areas, tourist function

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of the paper is to present geographical differences in the development of the tourist function in rural areas in Poland. The tourist function has been defined by four factors. One of them defines the accommodation base in rural areas (the number of beds per 1,000 inhabitants), two others – the tourist traffic (the number of visitors using accommodation facilities per 1,000 inhabitants and the average duration of tourist visits), and the last one – the economic activity of local communities in the field of tourism (number of business entities in sections G and H registered in the REGON system per 1,000 inhabitants). The application of a cluster analysis made it possible to obtain an overview of the tourist function development level in rural areas.

The surveys have been conducted on the basis of statistical data from the Regional Database of the Central Statistical Office for 2002. The analysis has covered 2,171 rural communes and rural areas from urban-rural communes in Poland.

## 2. COMMENT ON TERMINOLOGY

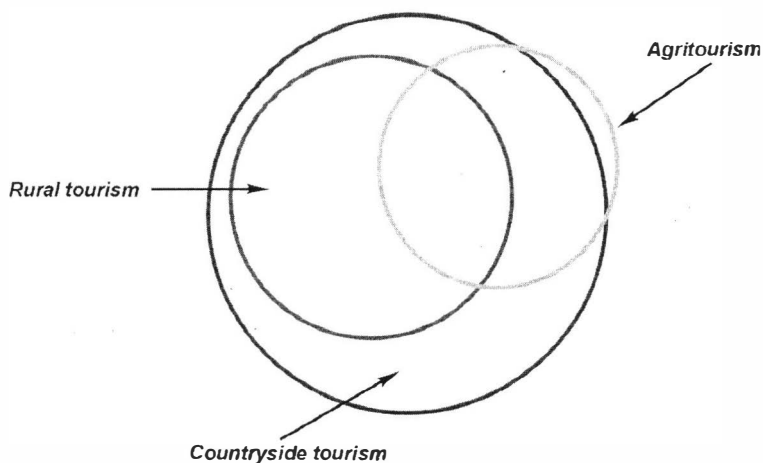
The literature on the subject contains a number of terms with a similar meaning which are often used interchangeably. It mainly refers to the following terms:

- ♦ countryside tourism, country tourism, village tourism;
- ♦ rural tourism;
- ♦ agritourism, farm tourism.

For a number of years, there has been an on-going dispute whether the terms can be used interchangeably and in what situations they should be used. To a large extent, the dispute results from the lack of a consistent definition of rural areas [Lane, 1993, quoted after H. Legienis, 2002]. Moreover, at the beginning of the nineties, the European Commission issued an official opinion stating that *"./.../ in Europe there is neither a precise definition of rural tourism nor even of rural environment, (...) the forms of the phenomenon are differently perceived in various countries"* [Community... 1992, quoted after M. Drzewiecki, 1998, p. 25].

In her analysis, the author has adopted the following assumptions for the usage of the above-mentioned terms:

- ♦ Rural tourism – covers various forms of tourism developed in rural areas in the functional meaning (agricultural-settlement areas).
- ♦ Countryside tourism, country tourism, village tourism – refer to various forms of tourism developed in rural areas in the formal and administrative meaning (outside city borders).
- ♦ The characteristic feature of agritourism (farm tourism) is its immanent connection with a farm. However, location of agritourist farms is not necessarily limited to areas of a clearly agricultural character. Agritourist farms are often established in well-known tourist regions and small urban centres (e.g. Kazimierz Dolny, Zwierzyniec).



**Figure 1** Relationships between countryside tourism, rural tourism and agritourism.  
Source: the author's own data

Thus, various forms of tourism developed in rural areas can be analysed at three levels: as agritourism, rural tourism and countryside tourism. This differentiation is important due to differences in development of the tourist infrastructure, landscape and impact on the natural environment. Farms provide an accommodation base for agritourism, while private apartments and small boarding houses – for rural tourism. Therefore, development of the tourist infrastructure does not burden the natural environment, and agricultural-settlement areas are dominating the landscape. Countryside tourism has the most diversified accommodation base with a high percentage of large facilities (e.g. hotels, holiday centres). It is often reflected in a high level of development of the tourist infrastructure and transformation of the environment.

### 3. ACCOMMODATION BASE IN RURAL AREAS

The first factor taken into account when determining the tourist function of rural areas is accommodation. There are 265,700 beds in rural areas accounting for 43.5 per cent of all beds in Poland. The analysis of the accommodation base structure in rural areas supports a statement that the largest accommodation resources are located in highly attractive tourist areas, especially in terms of the natural environment. The following regions have been distinguished in this respect for many years:

- ♦ the seaside communes,
- ♦ rural areas in Masurian and Suwalki Lake Districts,
- ♦ Kashubian and Bory Tucholskie regions,
- ♦ Lubuskie Lake District,
- ♦ the Carpathian communes,
- ♦ Kłodzko Basin communes.

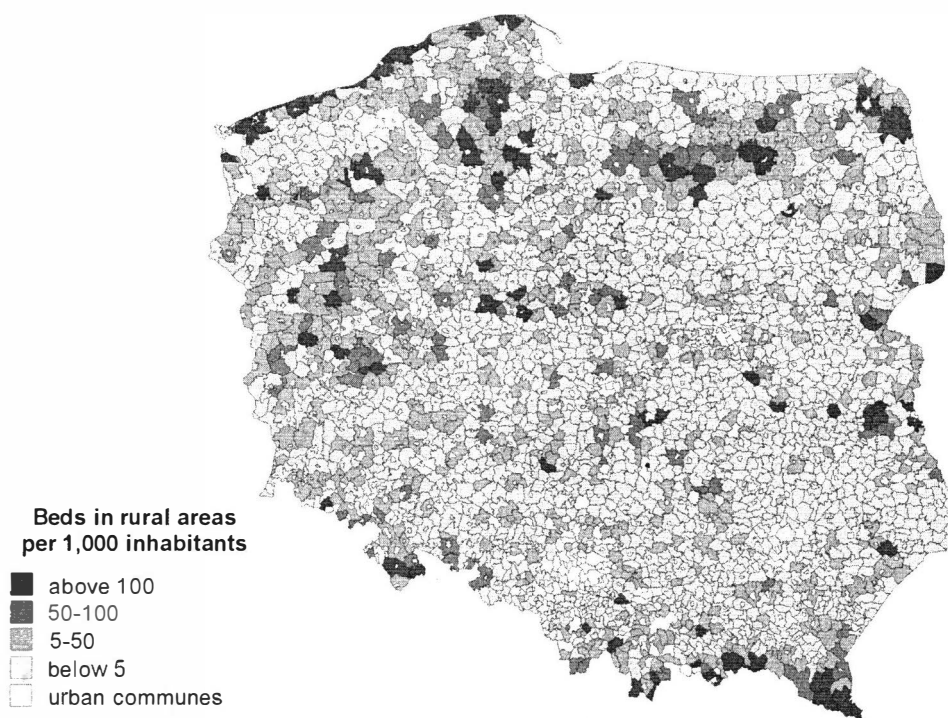
It is mainly the so-called vacation base, since holiday centres are prevailing in the structure of accommodation types in rural areas (both in terms of the number of facilities and the number of beds). Therefore, it could be assumed that the main beneficiaries of countryside tourism in these regions are persons going on longer vacations. Moreover, natural and partially cultural conditions offer various types of tourist and recreation activities (e.g. hiking, bicycle trips, water sports, climbing, horse riding, skiing).

The accommodation base in less attractive tourist areas is not developed on such a scale. Thus, geographical differences in the development of an accommodation base in rural areas are to a large extent determined by differentiation of tourist values especially connected with the natural environment.

Therefore, differences in the development of the accommodation base in rural areas are a permanent spatial element. Moreover, it should be recognized that *".../ nowadays, a lot of attention is paid to a suitable quality of the natural environment. Spatial order and sustainable development have been accepted as the basis for activities connected with spatial planning and management, including tourism<sup>1</sup>, which should eliminate any excessive large-scale development. A limitation of vacation tourism development is imposed by large-area forms of natural environment preservation, such as landscape parks and national parks where qualified tourism is permitted"* [Werner, Mikułowski, 2003, p. 25].

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<sup>1</sup> *Spatial planning and management Act* [Dz. U. 2003, No. 80] refers to the issue.



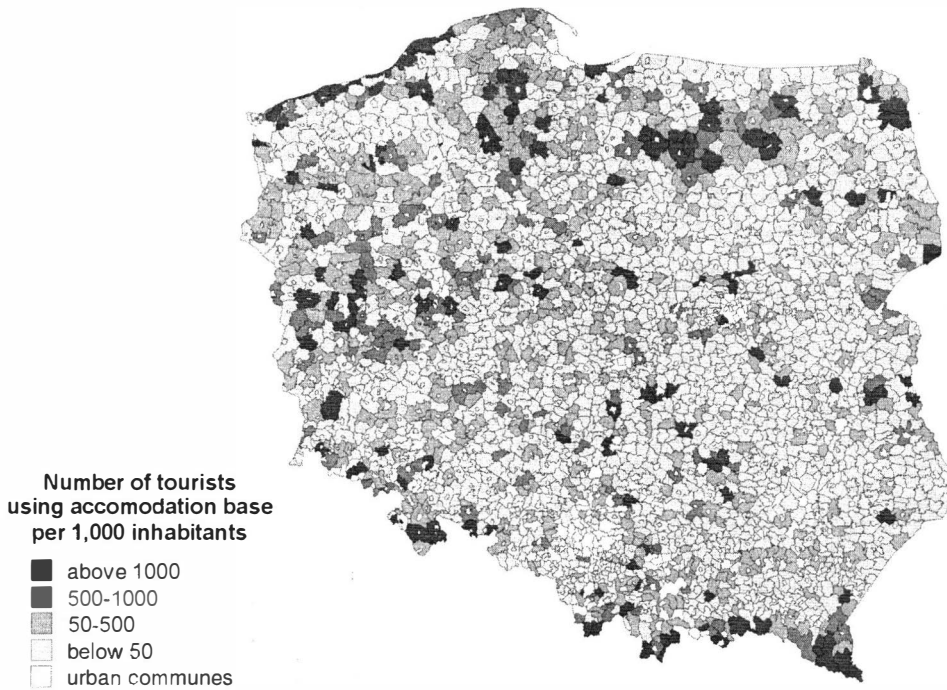
**Figure 2** Beds in rural areas per 1,000 inhabitants. Source: the author's own data based on the Regional Database

Unfortunately, a characteristic feature of the accommodation base in rural areas is its clear seasonality. As much as 66.4 per cent of beds located in rural areas have a seasonal character with operations limited to 3 – 4 months a year. It means that the importance of tourism as an economic activity is also reduced to a few months during the year.

#### 4. TOURIST TRAFFIC IN RURAL AREAS

A measure which has been applied to estimate the volume of tourist traffic in rural areas is the number of people using the accommodation base. It resulted from availability of statistical data. However, the author is aware of underestimation of the values, at least due to fact that the co-called one-day tourists are not taken into account, who, especially in the suburbs, account for a large percentage of tourists.

The volume of tourist traffic in rural areas is estimated at 3.4 million people accounting for 24.1 per cent of the total number of tourists in Poland. The characteristic feature is concentration of tourist traffic in rural areas located in traditional tourist regions (seaside, mountain and lake district communes).

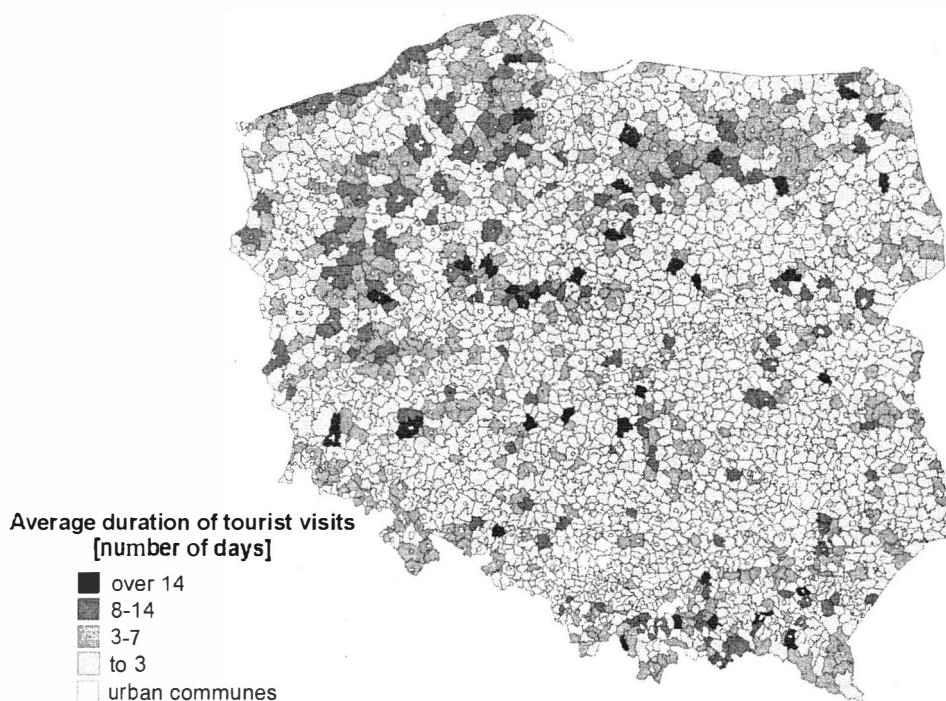


**Figure 3** Tourists using accommodation base in rural areas per 1,000 inhabitants.  
Source: the author's own data based on the Regional Database

Among accommodation facilities selected by tourists, holiday centres are ranked as the most popular. This type of accommodation is chosen by one fourth of tourists. To a large extent, it results from the fact that holiday centres are the main accommodation base in rural areas accounting for almost 40 per cent of the total number of beds. It should be mentioned, however, that the number of tourists staying in hotels is systematically growing (16.1 per cent of tourists). There are a few reasons for the growing popularity of hotels among tourists resting in rural areas:

- ◆ low standard of holiday centres which, in the majority, were built in the 1970s;
- ◆ increasing demands of tourists concerning the standard of accommodation facilities;
- ◆ increased number of incentive trips which are often organized in rural areas with participants staying in hotels.

Tourist visits to rural areas are usually short, to a large extent reflecting a general trend to shorten vacation periods with a simultaneous increase of their frequency during the year. On average, tourists stay in rural areas for 5 days. For longer vacations (over a week), they choose the seaside, lake and mountain areas, i.e. rural areas located in traditional tourist regions in Poland which are mainly connected with vacation tourism. The geographical structure of vacation tourist traffic demonstrates an explicit correlation with the geographical location of the accommodation base designed for vacation tourism.

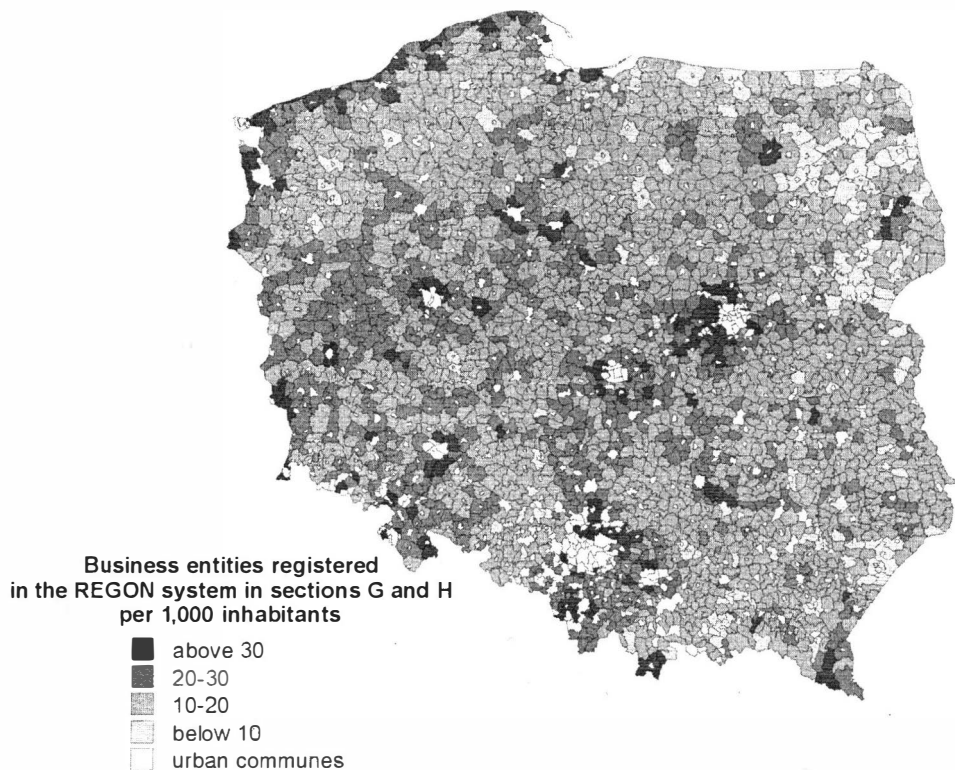


**Figure 4** Average duration of tourist visits in rural areas. Source: the author's own data based on the Regional Database

## 5. ECONOMIC ACTIVITY OF LOCAL COMMUNITIES IN THE FIELD OF TOURISM

There are approximately 808,700 business entities operating in rural areas in Poland registered in the REGON system, including 26,400 – in section H (hotel business) and 258,600 thousand – in section G (catering business). Private companies clearly dominate both in section G and section H (99.3 per cent of business entities in section H and almost 100 per cent of business entities in section G).

It should be emphasized, however, that there are significant regional disparities in the activity of local communities in the field of tourism development. The biggest concentration of business entities from sections G and H is located in rural areas around urban agglomerations (Warsaw, Łódź, Poznań, Toruń-Bydgoszcz, Kraków, the Upper Silesian conurbation, Wrocław, Białystok) (over 30 business entities per 1,000 inhabitants) and in the seaside region (often over 150 business entities per 1,000 inhabitants, e.g. Rewal, Mielno, Ustronie Morskie). It results from the fact that communes located at the seaside are the most frequently visited by tourists and, as mentioned above, they are connected with longer vacation visits, which is reflected in a considerable percentage of section H companies and an emerging advantage of section G companies. Rural areas located around cities, on the other hand, are often connected with one-day visits, reflected in a clear domination of catering companies (section G).

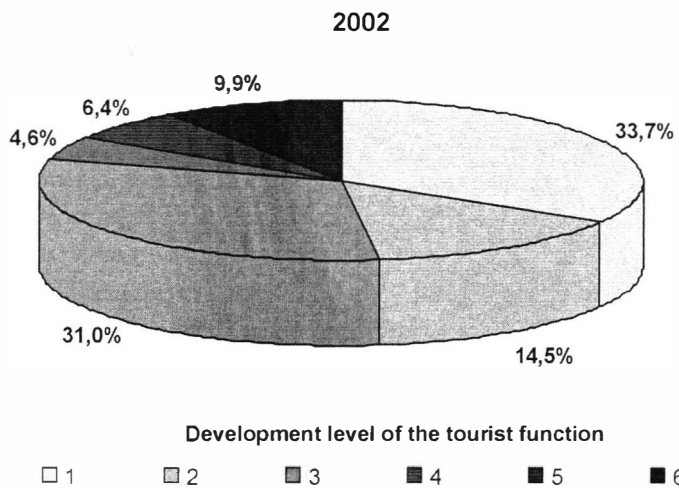


**Figure 5** Business entities registered in the REGON system in sections G and H per 1,000 inhabitants. Source: the author's own data based on the Regional Database

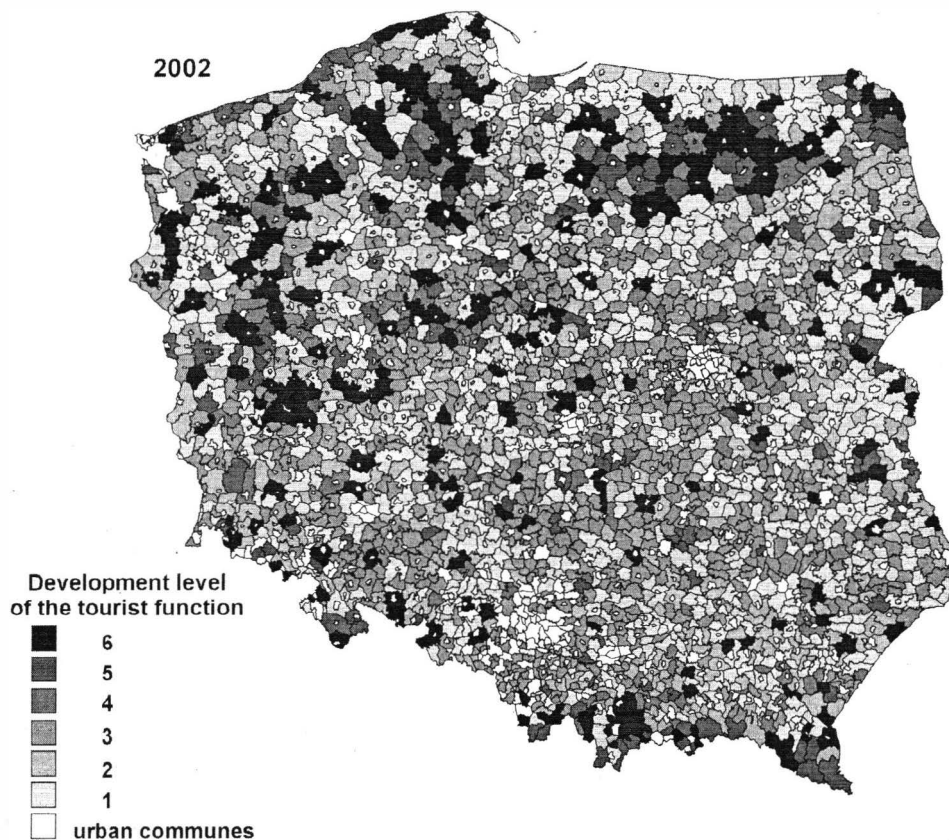
## 6. TOURIST FUNCTION OF RURAL AREAS

The tourist function of rural areas has been determined on the basis of four factors (the number of beds per 1,000 inhabitants, the number of visitors using accommodation facilities per 1,000 inhabitants, the average duration of tourist visits and the number of business entities registered in sections G and H in the REGON system) using a cluster analysis. Six levels of the development of the tourist function have been defined (1 – 6), where level one applies to the least developed tourist function in rural areas and level 6 – the best developed one.

In Poland, communes with a well developed tourist function (level 4 – 6) account for 20.9 per cent (452 rural communes and rural areas from urban-rural communes). However, tourism does not play any role in one third of rural communes (731 communes) (level 1), which supports the statement that the tourist function does not have to develop in all rural communes. Moreover, the factors necessary for development of tourism, mainly tourist values, are not always present. It is clearly reflected in the geographical structure of the development of the tourist function.



**Figure 6** Structure of communes by tourist function. Source: the author's own data based on the Regional Database



**Figure 7** Development level of the tourist function in rural areas. Source: the author's own data based on the Regional Database



The development level of the tourist function in rural areas demonstrates substantial geographical differences. The tourist function is best developed in the seaside and mountain communes as well as in communes of Masurian, Suwalki, Lubuskie, Kashubian and Drawsko Lake Districts, i.e. in the regions which have been a place of tourist reception for many decades and where the agricultural function has been phased out to be replaced by the tourist function which has gradually become the basis for the local economic life.

The tourist function is also well developed in rural areas around urban agglomerations, such as Warsaw, Łódź or Poznań, and to a slightly smaller extent, around Kraków or the Upper Silesian conurbation. The development in these areas is usually connected with week-end tourism and "second houses". In case of Kraków and the Upper Silesia, the proximity of the Beskids, the Podhale region and the Tatra mountains resulted in the fact that the tourist function did not develop as clearly as in case of cities such as Warsaw, Łódź or Poznań which are located in a substantial distance from the rural areas which are the most attractive in terms of the natural environment.

Analysing the geographical differences in the development level of the tourist function in rural areas, it is also visible that the tourist function is not developed in a considerable number of communes in Małopolska, Podkarpacie, northern Masovia and northern Lublin regions. It is important since various types of strategies consider tourism in the regions to be an important factor of economic activation and improvement of the inhabitants' standard of living, since the regions (especially Małopolska and Podkarpacie regions) are characterized by their large fragmented ownership of farms and agrarian overpopulation. Therefore, tourism could become a factor having an impact on enriching and differentiation of the employment structure of the local population, and consequently, through an increase of income, on improvement of the standard of living. Unfortunately, the proximity of the Beskids and Bieszczady mountains, i.e. the areas attractive in terms of their natural and cultural values, results in the fact that many communes of Małopolska and Podkarpacie regions are not able to meet the competition.

## 7. FINAL REMARKS

Tourism in rural areas is often treated as an absolute remedy, a factor which will help backward agricultural areas to quickly overcome their crisis. Especially, agritourism is believed to play a beneficiary role. In practice, however, the role of agritourism in the activation of rural areas, despite a continuous increase of the number of agritourist farms, is insignificant. A large scattering of agritourist farms and a small number of beds<sup>2</sup> they offer result in the fact they do not play a significant role in the functional structure of rural areas. Moreover, the majority of agritourist farms concentrates in regions offering

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<sup>2</sup> According to the Central Statistical Office (GUS), there are only 807 agritourist farms which offer 8.5 thousand beds. However, according to Agricultural Consulting Centres, 5.5 thousand agritourist farms operated in 2002, offering 53.2 thousand beds [Legienis 2002]. The differences come from the fact that the obligation to register an agritourist business in the economic activity registers of commune offices was introduced on 1 May 2004 [Act of 29 August 1997 on tourist services, consolidated text DZ. U. 2004 No. 233, item 2268].

attractive tourist values where the tourist function has been well developed for a long time (Warmia and Masurian regions, the Beskids, Pomerania).

The geographical structure of the development level of the tourist function in rural areas is characterized by a considerable stability. It means that the function is strengthening in the traditional tourist areas, and hardly is becoming significant in agricultural regions.

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## Roznice w rozwoju funkcji turystycznej w Polskich obszarach wiejskich

### Resume

Obszary wiejskie są ważnym miejscem recepcji turystycznej. Różne formy turystyki realizowane na terenach wiejskich można rozpatrywać w trzech płaszczyznach – jako agroturystykę (*agritourism*), turystykę wiejską (*rural tourism*) oraz turystykę na obszarach wiejskich (*countryside tourism*). Stopień zagospodarowania turystycznego, wielkość ruchu turystycznego oraz aktywność gospodarcza społeczności lokalnych w zakresie rozwoju turystyki wpływa na kształtowanie się funkcji turystycznej na obszarach wiejskich. W skali Polski gminy wiejskie o wyraźnie wykształconej funkcji turystycznej stanowią 20,9% wszystkich gmin wiejskich. Koncentrują się one w regionach nadmorskich, górskich i pojeziernych, gdzie rozwój funkcji turystycznej jest z reguły związany z turystyką urlopową, oraz wokół dużych aglomeracji miejskich, gdzie funkcja turystyczna wykształciła się głównie w oparciu o turystykę weekendową.