

**ECOTOURISM IN THE REPUBLIC OF BELARUS:
ADVANTAGES, CHALLENGES, PROSPECTS**

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Аннотация. The article discusses the main trends in the development of ecotourism that promotes the development of the country's economy. The advantages and challenges of ecotourism industry have been identified. The dynamics of the development of agriecotourism in the Republic of Belarus for the period 2017-2021 and the main factors causing its growth are presented.

Ключевые слова: tourism industry, ecotourism, agritourism, recreation, trend, entity.

Ecotourism is an industry that has been growing at an exponential rate over the last few decades. The growth of this industry has been driven by many factors, one being the increasing need and growing awareness for sustainability. More and more of us now understand the need for conservation of natural resources and avoidance of environmental degradation. This growing awareness has led to more people wanting to experience nature firsthand and can be used to teach people about environmental issues, without having to compromise on their environmental or economic footprint. Additionally, ecotourism is increasingly being seen as a way to learn more about different cultures while supporting local economies [1].

Ecotourism is a form of tourism aimed at exploring wildlife, local culture and customs, supporting the conservation of nature and natural resources as well as the sustainable development of local communities. It represents a fairly wide range of travelling from long scientific expeditions to outdoor recreation at weekends.

One of the types of ecotourism is scientific ecotourism which involves the study of nature, scientific research and field observations. It is radically different from natural history tours, which can be called a subtype of ecotourism, but the main focus is on exploring the local culture and environment. Typically, such a developed tour represents a set of educational, popular scientific and thematic tours through the specially equipped ecological trails. In addition, there is also adventure ecotourism with elements of risk and share of fun adventures associated with the participation of tourists in adventure activities. Its distinctive feature is that it pays more attention to physical activity and an active lifestyle than to the scientific and cultural aspects. Another type of ecotourism is a tour to nature reserves and reservations. It is very similar to scientific tourism and natural history tours as they are all aimed at studying nature and the his-

tory of its development. However, this type of ecotourism is focused on visiting protected natural areas where animals and plants can develop naturally without human intervention [2].

Ecotourism, like any other type of tourism, has its advantages and disadvantages. Among the advantages of ecotourism it is necessary to highlight the opportunity of studying and exploring the local culture and traditions; the development of environmental awareness and initiation to a healthy lifestyle as well as the opportunity of raising the country's profile which leads to the investment growth and so on.

But there are a number of shortcomings in the development of ecotourism in the country such as environmental pollution due to unregulated visits, significant financial costs for the development of ecotourism infrastructure in general and negative impact on culture implying violation of local traditions and customs [2].

Thus, ecotourism can be useful and effective if it is developed in accordance with local needs and conditions and at the same time potential negative impacts on the environment and local communities should be taken into account.

The best destinations for 'green' tourism in the world in 2021 recognized by The Lonely Planet Publishing House were such places as Sweden, Italy, Canada, Namibia, Palau, Greece, Antigua and Barbuda. However, it is not necessary to leave your country to get an unforgettable experience, for example, the ecotourism potential of the Republic of Belarus has recently been assessed and there are a number of unexplored places that can be found here.

During the pandemic some business ideas failed but it gave rise to the development of organized ecological tourism. Belarusians did not introduce full lockdown during the active spread of the COVID-19 virus, but, in general, there weren't so many restrictions in our country that were common in Western European states. These measures made it possible to attract a number of tourists, and, as a result, in recent years ecological tourism in the Republic of Belarus is gaining popularity among local and foreign tourists and it is the most dynamically developing type of tourism which attracts tourists with its unique natural beauty, richness of forests, water resources and biodiversity.

There are a number of national parks and reserves in the Republic of Belarus which are popular destinations for ecotourism. A striking example is the National Park 'Belovezhskaya Pushcha' that is considered to be one of the most famous places for ecotourism in the country. It is listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site and is famous for its rich and diverse flora and fauna, including the famous European bison which are the symbol of this park.

In addition, there are other national parks and reserves in the Republic of Belarus that offer unique opportunities for ecotourism, such as the National Park 'Pripyatsky', the National Park 'Braslav Lakes', the National Park 'Narochansky', where tourists can visit ecological trails, make excursions and participate in other types of ecotourism [3].

Agritourism as a form of ecological tourism is one of the promising areas of the tourism industry that promotes the development of the country's economy. It provides an excellent opportunity for the residents of big cities to relax from the hustle and bustle, enjoy the clean ecological environment and plunge into rural life.

The positive dynamics in the development of agritourism has been shown in terms of the number of farmsteads, the number of tourists and the revenue share received by agricotourism entities in the Republic of Belarus in the recent years.

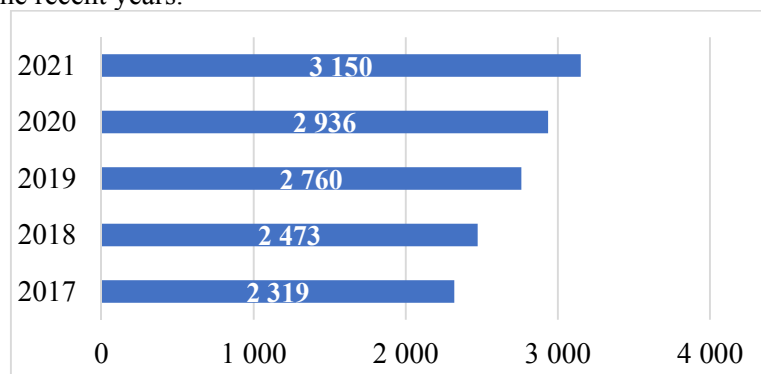


Figure 1. – The number of agricotourism entities for the period 2017 - 2021, units [4]

Based on the data provided in the diagram it can be concluded that the number of agritourism entities is constantly increasing (fig. 1). Their number increased by 831 units for 2017-2021 and amounted to 3150 entities in 2021 due to the fact that the authorities of the Republic of Belarus support the development of agritourism, for example, through the allocation of subsidies and simplification of the procedure for opening farmsteads [4].

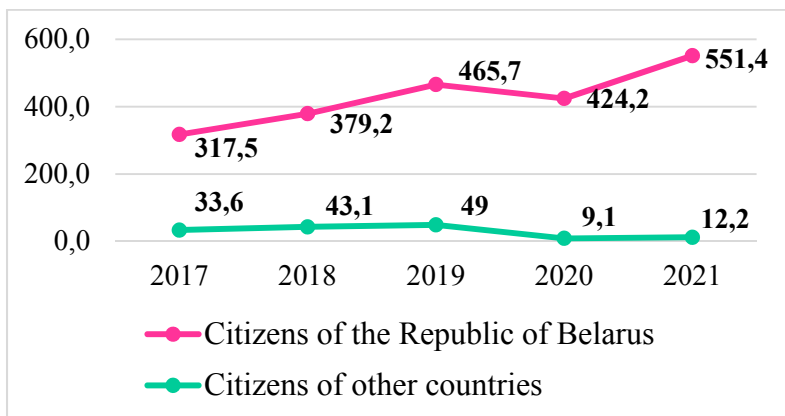


Figure 2. – The number of tourists served by agritourism entities for the period 2017 – 2021, thousand people [5]

In 2021 despite the pandemic restrictions the number of tourists vacationing in farmsteads increased by 60% compared to 2017 and by 30% compared to 2020. The data provided in the graph also reflects changes in the tourist structure (fig. 2). If we compare the number of foreign tourists in 2021 and in the pre-pandemic period decreased significantly and amounted to 12 thousand people, the difference accounted for 75%, besides the majority of foreign travellers were Russian tourists. But the number of Belarusians served by agritourism entities increased by 234 thousand people for 2017-2021. Thus, the consumer inclination has grown exponentially showing strong consumer resilience in recent years. This is due to the fact that during the pandemic a large number of countries were closed for visits and the best option for Belarusians was domestic tourism, including visiting farmsteads [5].

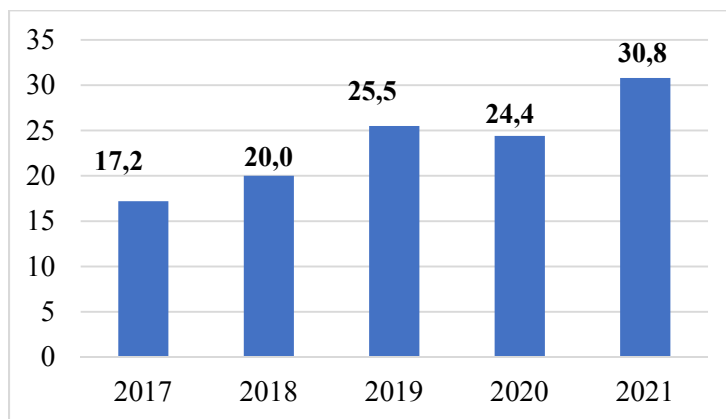


Figure 3. – The revenue share received by agritourism entities for the period 2017 – 2021, million rubles [5]

In accordance with the data provided in the figure 3 the positive dynamics in the revenue share received by agritourism entities can be recorded (fig. 3). The largest increase by 26% occurred for the period 2020 - 2021 and amounted to 30,8 million Belarusian rubles compared to previous years because of the increased demand for domestic tourism among Belarusians and new opportunities for foreign tourists during the severe restrictions imposed in the Western European states [5].

The development of agritourism is a good opportunity for the development of local communities and producers. The owners of farmsteads organize various activities to attract attention of tourists such as various master classes (for example, culinary classes), children's camps, bike trips, theatrical programs, vari-

ous festivals and holidays and so on. These activities are easy to do and are economical as compared to other activities. Ecotourism enthusiasts are interested in the products of local manufacturers from food products to natural cosmetics and, thereby, tourists promote their brand, increase the recognition and attractiveness of their products.

However, the development of tourism is associated with a number of problems, the main of which are environmental problems (pollution of water bodies, violation of biological balance and other consequences) and strict environmental regulations and measures are needed to solve this problem; limited seasonality (for example, in winter, most farmsteads cannot provide their services, which limits the development of agritourism); lack of public awareness of ecotourism opportunities. These are not the only problems, but they show the need to work on the development and improvement of the strategy for the further development of ecotourism in the Republic of Belarus based on the world experience.

Thus, it can be concluded that the Republic of Belarus has a very substantial potential for the development of ecotourism, including agritourism, thanks to untouched nature with majestic forests, lakes and rivers as well as an amazing variety of flora and fauna. It offers unique opportunities for tourists to get acquainted with nature and local culture and the development of this industry will lead to the improvement of the economic and social development of the country as well as the preservation of the cultural heritage and natural resources.

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