

## EDUCATIONAL TRAIL AS AN INSTRUMENT OF TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN RURAL AREA

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### ABSTRACT

The paper deals with the issue of creation an educational trail as a tourism product that is considered to be a potential instrument for tourism development in countryside. The aim consists in pointing out the decision-making process that goes along with a selection of the particular tourism product in the tourism region of Horná Nitra. Within the light of the mentioned decision-making process, the analysis of existing tourism products was taken into account. Consequently, we realized a questionnaire research among the population, which was concerned on their contentment with the tourism promotion in the region. The last step of the research consisted in the application of Delphi method, where the opinions of professionals engaged in tourism in the area of interest were recognized. This research was preceded by a survey concentrated on natural, cultural and historical heritage located in the region. By using the results of questionnaire we came to the design of an educational trail called “Po Uhrovskom okolí” that can support a development of tourism in the target region. At the end we highlighted the benefits of an education trail as a tourism product and synergic effects, which can arise due to its direct application in the landscape.

**Key words:** tourism product, educational trail, rural development

## INTRODUCTION

Tourism development is closely related to the development of countryside, what is a term to label the activities and initiatives that are concentrated on improving the standard of living in extra-urban areas and countryside. Activities connected with the rural development are aimed at social and economic development of regions (Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development of the Slovak Republic, 2013). Tourism development and the development of rural territories affect tourism products in a positive way. In terms of law, tourism product is defined as a group of services that are produced and offered by a final destination, enterprises and institutions that have an ability to satisfy the requirements of visitors and hence to create a complex set of adventures (Act No. 91 on Support of Tourism, 2010). Medlik and Middleton (1973) bring another view on the selected concept. They think that tourism product is a bundle of activities, services, and benefits that constitute the entire tourism experience. This bundle consists of five components: destination attractions, destination facilities, accessibility, images, and price. When thinking about a creation of tourism product, it is necessary to lay stress on cultural, historical and natural assumptions, built-up infrastructure, material and technical support, own region's presentation inside and outside its area and affordability of products and region, as well. From our perspective, the tourism product helps the visitor to answer the question: "Why do I want to visit the destination?"

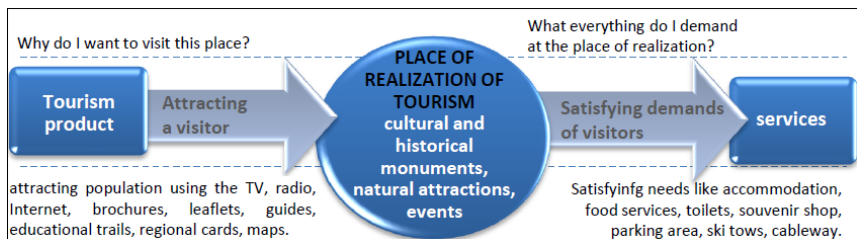


Fig. 1 Tourism product (Source: Žoncová, M. 2013)

Based on the Fig. 1, the tourism product can label everything that attracts population to the target place, thus to the visit of cultural, historical and natural heritage or various events. Firstly, a tourist should know about these places, what the role of tourism product is. There are many ways how to catch the attention of visitors, for instance via TV, radio, internet, through booklets, leaflets, guidebooks, educational trails, visitor cards, maps and so on. At the target place should visitors find a complex bundle of services in order to meet their demands. This bundle should include an accommodation, boarding, toilet, offer of souvenirs, parking, ski-lifts, cable cars and the like (Žoncová, M. 2013). An important tourism product that can largely contribute to the development of the branch is just an educational trail. Bizubová and Nevfelová (2007) define it as a separate content and programming point of view, which is installed in the landscape, which aim is an acquisition of information about the nature, history, culture, as well as additional information from specialized publications. Another goal lies in the illustration of the relationship between the man and nature in a broader context.

## MATERIAL AND METHODS

The choice of suitable tourism product was realized by using three picked methods. A penetration of results from these methods made a basis to decision about final type of product.

Firstly, we conducted the **survey of current tourism products** in the tourism region of Horná Nitra. Products were monitored in tourist information offices, but also directly in the landscape. We divided them into particular categories, and consequently set aside products with sufficient and insufficient representation.

Consecutively, we realized a **questionnaire survey** on a representative sample of the total 206 respondents. This questionnaire was created via Google Docs and was available to public from 25<sup>th</sup> June 2012 to 16<sup>th</sup> October 2012, what accounts 114 days. It was distributed via e-mail; hence there was no direct contact with participants. Almost all of the questions were closed and respondents could choose from several options. There were also the questions, where respondents could tick more than one answer. In general, a questionnaire consisted of two parts. The first section collected the basic information about respondents and the second, main, section dealt with the contentment with the tourism in the tourism region of Horná Nitra. The questions were focused mostly on tourism products and participants answered what type of tourism product they lack and what type of heritage they would visit. Generally, a questionnaire survey can be considered as one of the most often used methods within geographical research.

The last step consisted in application of **Delphi method** (Fig. 2), which monitored the opinions of professionals involved in tourism issues.

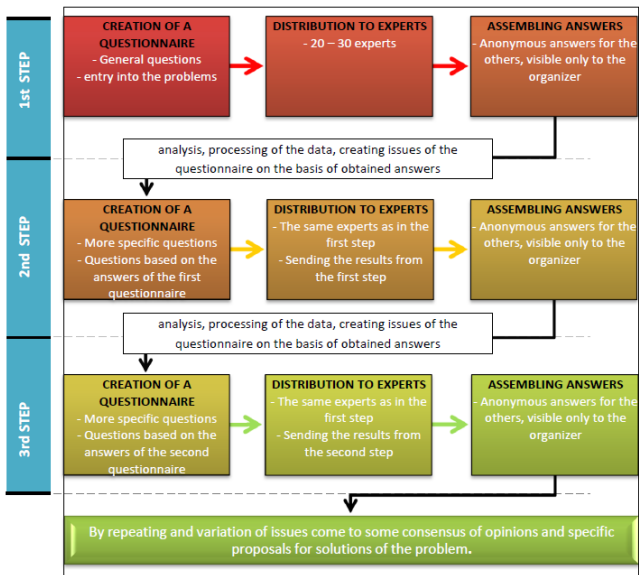


Fig. 2 Methodology of Delphi method - (Source: Žoncová, M. 2013)

It is a flexible research method successfully used at various universities (e.g. University of Calgary). Its punch line consists in repetitive questioning, whereas the subsequent questionnaire is made from obtained questionnaires in previous rounds. The final result is a consensus of views. The utilization of this method is in development of understanding the issue or in making predictions (Skulmonski G., Hartman F., Krahn J., 2007). Its key advantages lie in time for a reflection, anonymous reactions (professionals do not affect themselves), instructing and motivating experience for participants and the possibility of the cooperation with experts from various regions.

Disadvantages are represented by the large amount of time needed to reach a final view, lack of personal contact and tendency to tiredness due to large number of questionnaires. At the end, we took into account findings of all three analyses what reflected to direct assessment of suitable tourism product as well as its geographical localization. We applied these methods in the tourism region of Horná Nitra that is defined within the Regionalization of Tourism in the Slovak Republic.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Through the application of aforesaid results we concluded that an educational trail is the most appropriate tourism product to be used in the selected region.

The **questionnaire survey** reflected that castles and chateaux are the most desirable types of cultural and historical heritage. In the tourism region of Horná Nitra are located just 4 castles and the only one chateau; hence we tried to concentrate the final tourism products on them. Within the light of publicity materials, visitors would prefer especially maps with marked sites, websites or information boards next to the sights. One third of all respondents considered an inefficient publicity of tourism as the biggest failure in the selected region.

The survey of current tourism products showed that there is sufficient number of websites dealing with cultural and historical heritage, but on the other side, there is not any that would offer comprehensive information about the tourism region of Horná Nitra as a whole. Moreover, participants declared their lack of awareness about those websites. There are enough amounts of publicity materials as leaflets or brochures. Maps with marked attractions are processed, too. We also monitored the knowledge about educational trails within the questionnaire. Based on the available information we found that 9 educational trails are located in the region, 5 of them are placed in the district of Prievidza, 2 of them in the district of Bánovce nad Bebravou, and the last two in the district of Topoľčany and no trail is placed in the district of Partizánske. However, this is not a final number, because in Slovakia there is no complex database about educational trails. Creation of such list would be efficient and it would create an integrated tourism product on national level. Considering that respondents required mostly creation of websites and maps with marked sites, we should concentrate on these types of products. But, we found that there is a sufficient amount of them and people are not informed about their existence. An educational trail was also desirable product, and hence there is lack of them, we decided to design just this kind of product. These thoughts had to be proved by professionals, who have a decisive word in the development of such projects.

We gained experts' opinions by using **Delphi method**. We sent short questionnaires via e-mails to the selected sample of 13 professionals in the region. Questions were related to the future possible investments in tourism. Whereas only three persons answered to mentioned questionnaires, Delphi method had to be stopped. Nevertheless, opinions of these three participants were useful in designing the final tourism product. All of them confirmed that they would appreciate creation of cycle routes or educational trails.

Based on aforesaid results we can state that the tourism region of Horná Nitra has a great potential for creating educational trails. Their formation and intersection would set a complex tourism product that would link cultural, historical and natural heritage in the region. The bundle of topical trails for one-day or multi-days trips would be established. The geographical placement of product resulted from a high popularity of castles and chateaux. Whereas in the district of Bánovce nad Bebravou only one castle and two educational trails are located, we decided to apply this product right in this location. The educational trail called "Po Uhrovskom okolí" combines natural, cultural and historical sights of the municipalities Uhrovec and Uhrovské Podhradie and consists of six educational boards. The first of them provides basic information about the municipality, education trail and sights of the municipality of Uhrovec (birthplace of E. Štúr and A. Dubček, renaissance mansion, Museum of Uhrovec, memorial board, churches, glasshouse, carving school, and monuments). The second board is focused on natural conditions of vicinity and displays the

territory on historical maps. The subsequent, third, board is located on Janko's Hill, at the place of the known Slovak National Uprising memorial, amphitheatre, partisan bunkers or victims' monuments. The fourth board informs visitors about protected areas in the area, such as nature reserve Janko's Hill and Jedlie, national nature reserve Rokoš, nature monument Castle cave, protected bird area Strážov Mountains and site of community importance Rokoš. Another stop of trail is the Uhrovec castle. It is shown at the educational board the plan of castle and its neighbourhood, tidings about its history, legends and myths. The last board is dedicated to basic information about educational trail again, and shows next tips for trips in the vicinity.

The issue of creating educational trails in the selected tourism region of Horná Nitra was the aim of study of other geographical professionals, such as Oláhová and Nemčíková (2009a, b), who designed an educational trail in the district of Prievidza. Later, it was implemented in practise and became a new item in the country.

## CONCLUSIONS

Nowadays, tourism is a strong driving force that brings a great potential for regional development of rural territories. Stimulation of tourism can be caused by application of suitable tourism products. The created educational trail is designed not only for tourists, but for families and elderly people, too, and can be realized in practice within the cooperation among municipalities, civil association "Save the Castles" or micro-regional organisation Uhrovská dolina. The application of mentioned product into the country can induce a multiplier effects, which can be reflected in increased attendance of the region, number of overnight stays at the local accommodation facilities, improvement of visual character of the countryside or in growth of environmental awareness among the residents. Other effects may be related to the increase of local employment, inflow of new investments or various specific features to support rural development through getting in touch with the local culture, habits and traditions. The realised research may be an input basis and inspiration for further future researches in the field of tourism products.

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