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DEVELOPING GREEN TOURISM IN THE PRECARPATHIAN REGION: USING FOREIGN LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY AS A MEASURE OF SUCCESS

INTRODUCTION

The eastern Carpathians cover more than 40,000 square kilometers, an area stretching from southeastern Poland through western Ukraine before terminating near Brasov, Romania. The ecological value of the Carpathians cannot be overestimated as the region supports plant and animal species not found anywhere else in the world and is the last stronghold of large mammals such as brown bear, wolf, and lynx. The eastern Carpathians are also home to many different nationalities and ethnic groups, a people bound together by a highland way of life.¹ In 2007, the United Nations designated two areas of the eastern Carpathians as world heritage sites and continues to endorse the articles of the Carpathian Convention, a treaty signed in Kiev in 2003 by the parliaments of six countries. Article 2.1 of the treaty states the “overarching goal” of the Convention, namely, “the protection and sustainable development of the Carpathians.” While European Union enlargement could potentially undermine the biodiversity of the eastern Carpathians, the environmental integrity of the mountain region could be enhanced through sustainable development projects in general and the creation of a large network of protected areas in particular.²

At present, green, rural, and eco-tourism ventures remain one of the best hopes for sustainable development in the Ukrainian Carpathians, particular in the area encompassing the Ivano-Frankivsk Region. This proposed research project, “Developing Green Tourism in the Precarpathian Region,” analyzes attempts at developing green tourism in the area known as “Precarpathia,” a mostly mountainous area that includes 913 square kilometers, five National Parks and two National Biosphere Preserves.³ The hypothesis guiding the research is that the majority of individuals working at green tourism establishments have inadequate levels of foreign language proficiency and this lack of proficiency has an important impact on the number of tourists visiting the mountain region. Those institutions with the most success are those which staff employees with the most advanced multilingual skills. This hypothesis was tested by randomly surveying thirty-four green tourism establishments in the Precarpathia, including hotels, hostels, private homes and guest houses. A content analysis of their websites also comprises the data set, as it is assumed that some of these green tourism establishments book their guests online.

The surveys were conducted orally, in three major foreign languages, including English, German, and Polish. Responses were ranked as “poor”, “fair”, “good”, and “excellent”, based on how individuals answer the survey questions in each respective language. Individuals were first asked introductory questions such as “Can I book a room in your hotel?” and then follow up questions, depending upon their level of comprehension. A person scored an excellent ranking by completing the entire booking in a foreign language. Individuals were also allowed to switch to any of the three languages mentioned above during the course of the survey. Internet sites for green tourism establishments were also scored for their language accessibility, with “excellent” websites demonstrating a proficiency in three or more foreign languages, “good” websites in two foreign languages, “fair” if the website was maintained only in Ukrainian or Russian, or “poor” if the establishment maintained no functional website.⁴

BACKGROUND

Ukrainian villages in the Carpathians have a rich ethnographic heritage, and continue to maintain cultural traditions found nowhere else in Europe. The population is generally hardworking and industrious and certainly benefits from its proximity to pastoral landscapes and unspoiled mountain scenery. However, many villages in the Precarpathian region suffer acute social problems, including high levels of unemployment and underemployment, with many residents working abroad a large portion of each year.⁵ At present, very little national attention has been paid in developing green tourism in the Ukrainian Carpathians, even though there is a long legacy of tourism-based economies in the area. During the Soviet period, many “health resorts” (which included mineral spring hotels, sanatoriums, and summer youth camps) in the Carpathians received tens of thousands of guests annually.⁶ Several of these resorts were operated at Yaremche, a town which continues to be an important center of tourism in Precarpathia, with as much as a third of its population currently employed in the tourist industry.⁷



In the Ukrainian Carpathians, social problems are also magnified by the fact that much of the area has, for the last two decades, been in the midst of an economic transition, a transformation due partly to land privatization, an overall decline in agricultural employment, and the continued out-migration of its adult population. After the early 1990s, many important industrial facilities in the region were closed or transformed, leading to fewer jobs in manufacturing but more employment in the lower paying service sector, especially in the largest towns. In the Ivano-Frankivsk Region, per capita GDP does generally not rise above \$3,200 (USD) annually, although that figure is most certainly skewed, since urban dwellers make up more than half the population of the region. In remote rural areas, residents survive on as little as \$150 per month.⁸ These problems are compounded by the lower quality of basic facilities in mountain villages, periodic problems with water supplies, lack of sufficient information about touristic opportunities, and generally substandard infrastructure, including poor roads and lack of adequate signage.

Despite these obstacles, since 2005 sustainable rural tourism has been steadily on the rise in the Precarpathian region, with a number of establishments being opened in even the most remote mountain areas.⁹ In fact, by 2010, the number of tourists who were visiting the larger Carpathian region within the borders of Ukraine had reached 1.5 million people annually.¹⁰ Of those individuals, more than 150,000 were visitors from other countries, although a significant percentage of those tourists were from the neighboring countries of Poland or Russia, and did not necessarily visit Precarpathia, one of three predominantly mountain regions in Ukraine. Of course, when coming to the Carpathians one does not also necessarily patronize green touristic hotels or rural guest houses. So even the most optimistic estimates would place the percentage of foreign tourists annually participating in green tourism in Precarpathia at somewhere between 5% and 10% of the total number of visitors. To increase the number of foreign tourists visiting rural villages to 15-20%, as is the case in France, touristic establishments would need to at least double their present capacity. However, some have even suggested that in order to fully embrace the goals of sustainable development, as suggested by the Carpathian Convention, rural establishments in the Carpathians would need to control as much as 35-45% of the total tourism base.¹¹

While such goals are theoretically obtainable and should be highly applauded, they do not address the most challenging aspect of developing sustainable tourism in the eastern Carpathians. It is the author's contention that the largest obstacle to developing green tourism in Precarpathia is the lack of foreign language mastery by the local population. One preliminary study, for example, found that as many as 60% of the owners of rural touristic establishments in the Precarpathian region did not know ANY foreign language, including Russian.¹² It is therefore not surprising that in the countries of Poland, Slovakia, and Romania, the number of foreign visitors to the Carpathian mountains is exceedingly higher, "resting on one to two orders of magnitude."¹³ What this ultimately means is that government funding for the development of green tourism in Precarpathia should not only include lines of credit for local businesses, but also additional monies for the linguistic training of hospitality staff.¹⁴ If green rural establishments have no employees proficient in at least one additional foreign language, they will remain seriously and forever disadvantaged, and will ultimately be unable to increase their low market share.

RESULTS

Thirty-four "green touristic" establishments were randomly surveyed in the Precarpathian region, representing at least twenty-five different towns or villages. The ski-resort town of Polyanytsya, in the Yaremche district, had the most rural establishments of any of the towns surveyed (five). Bystrytsya, in the more remote Nadvirna district, had four such establishments, which is somewhat surprising given the relatively isolated location of the mountain community. Of the thirty-four facilities surveyed by phone, only two [6%] staffed employees possessing "excellent" language proficiency. The receptionist at the hotel "Dor" spoke English, German, and Polish with functional mastery, although the actual booking of the room was completed in English. The homestead "Filvarok Nad Hukom" in the rural village of Kosiv, also employed a receptionist with exceptional multi-language skills, and responded adequately to queries in German, English, and Polish. Only three [9%] of the thirty-four establishments were ranked as having a "good" level of foreign language proficiency, with employees showing a functional mastery in at least two additional languages.

Conversely, nineteen of the thirty-four establishments [55%] were ranked as "poor" in language proficiency, as their staff persons spoke, with the exception of a few common greetings, only Ukrainian. An additional ten establishments [31%] were classified as "fair" in their level of foreign language proficiency, which means that the staff person could perhaps book a room in another foreign language, although that language was usually Polish, Russian, or English, and very seldom German. In fact, only ten of the thirty-four individuals surveyed understood any German at all, and usually their level of comprehension involved the mastery of a few common greetings or phrases. These data also support the author's original hypothesis that the majority of green tourism establishments in Precarpathia are, in fact, in need of employees with more advanced levels of foreign language proficiency.¹⁵

A content analysis of the establishments' websites also revealed inadequate language proficiency among the thirty-four facilities included in the entire survey. In fact, only four (12%) of the thirty-four institutions maintained websites or website links, and these were exclusively in Ukrainian. Several additional facilities were mentioned in online registries and internet "guidebooks," although the information about the establishment (including booking information, location, and rates) was almost exclusively in Ukrainian or Russian.¹⁶ No single facility provided an option for online booking, in any language, which means that the guest house or hotel receptionist remains the primary point of contact for all prospective clients. This obvious shortcoming makes the issue of language proficiency even more critical for green touristic establishments in the Precarpathians. If rooms are secured only by phone, then the receptionist must be fluent in a language other than their own in order to successfully book foreign reservations. Conventional hotels with online booking options can, on the other hand, accommodate tourists from literally around the globe without necessarily mastering their native tongues.



In Precarpathia, green touristic facilities will remain seriously disadvantaged as long as their staff possess inadequate foreign language proficiency. Although green tourism has been on the rise in the Ukrainian Carpathians over the past decade, much of that growth has been the result of internal improvements within Ukraine, which has, in turn, allowed more individuals from urban areas to take extended vacations in the countryside. Foreign visitors, as the data above suggests, have largely stayed away from the smaller rural villages within the Precarpathian region. If green tourism is to be truly successful in these rural communities, the language proficiency of hospitality staff will need substantial improvement. One remedy might be for universities in Precarpathia to require students in their hospitality degree programs to be fluent in English, since the majority of western Europeans now converse in that language during their time abroad. Having adequate knowledge of a second language would certainly provide hospitality workers in the Ukrainian Carpathians with the necessary cultural capital needed to compete in the 21st-century global economy.

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15. Summary results:

Ranking	Number of Establishments	Percentage of Total
Excellent	2	5%
Good	3	9%
Fair	10	31%
Poor	19	55%
Total	34	100%
16. Examples include: <http://www.karpaty.info/en/uk/if/> and <http://www.carpaty.com/>. A few such directories can also be found in English, including one hosted by a Ukrainian tourist agency based in Lviv, Ukraine. Specializing in Carpathian mountain tours, "Adventure Carpathians" provides information regarding a few hotels in more remote rural areas, though offers no direct online booking options. See <http://www.adventurecarpathians.com/hotels/lviv-region/slavsko/hotel-perlyna-karpat/>.