

Thematic Parks in the Context of Rural Development in Peripheral Regions

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Abstract

Thematic parks being an element of rural land management in peripheral regions may constitute a very important factor for the development of these areas. To fulfil this task, the programmes and scope of investment of such parks should comply with the specificity of a given region. Localisation, the dimensions as well as the range of influence of thematic parks, should include natural and cultural characteristics of the potential investment area. Thesis: Small, thematic parks promoting the culture and natural values of a given region should be created in the areas which are valuable from a cultural and landscape point of view. Degraded areas may become fields of substantial investment in the thematic parks which are a culture-creating factor activating a given region and at the same time constituting an element of natural rehabilitation of a region.

Keywords: thematic parks, natural and cultural resources protection, amusement parks, entertainment parks

Introduction

Thematic parks, being an element of rural land management in peripheral regions, may constitute a very important factor for the development of these areas. To fulfill this task, the programs and scope of investment of such parks should comply with the specificity of a given region. The world's development of so-called parks of attractions is set in an extremely dynamic way throughout the twentieth century, a symbolic figure of this idea became the American Disneyland, moved later on into Europe. For over 10 years, in Poland as well, we have observed the spontaneous development of the thematic parks, but most of them are small seasonal businesses, complementing the tourist offer in many regions. It is expected that soon will be made large investments, organization plans appear in the media for many years (as recently in the idea of building such a large park, adjacent to the south of Warsaw in Złotokłos, in the area of the protected Chojnowskie forests). Even though such projects are highly desirable, as contemporary trends developing egalitarian spending of family leisure, combining relaxation, some educational elements (such as history and culture of the region, popularization of science or technology achievement, etc.) with business, promotion of the region and policies to create new jobs and the fight against unemployment, it is also necessary to pay attention to the aspects of the protection of nature and the landscape, to which such investments are closely related. The location, size and influence of thematic parks should take into account the natural and cultural features of the area of potential investment. These parks can popularize the idea of nature protection, affect the partial protection of the environment through the regulation of tourism in the terrains with particularly high natural values, as well as become an effective tool for reclamation of downgraded lands of postindustrial exploitation or agricultural large areas.

During the study, the author found that the most important element in the planning of recreational objects of the type thematic parks is not the absolute exclusion of this form of development from attractive areas with high cultural and natural values, or even from areas protected by law, but well-defined guidelines for their creation, depending on the stocks occurring in the field, taking into account the nature protection requirements, the possibility of rehabilitation of the downgraded

areas, the protection and promotion of cultural goods and needs of development, including the fight against unemployment and activation of the region. Based on the above-mentioned reasons, the author has formulated the following thesis: *Small, thematic parks promoting the culture and natural values of a given region should be created in the areas which are valuable from a cultural and landscape point of view. Degraded areas may become fields of substantial investment in the thematic parks which are a culture-creating factor activating a given region and at the same time constituting an element of natural rehabilitation of a region.*

1 Historical conditions of thematic parks — the traditions and origins, recent history.

Traditions of parks, and more broadly thematic attractions, dates back to ancient times, where different types of public entertainment focused in agoras and ancient theaters, and later, in the Middle Ages, when the festivities for the people, carnivals, fairs and court games, knights tournaments as well as games on a specially created grass meadows, called Prato, were a fixed element of community life, centered around the cities of castles and residences of nobles. At the end of the eighteenth century and in the nineteenth century numerous funfairs, amusement parks appeared, and in the mid-twentieth century, Disneyland, which permanently dominated the modern understanding of the park attraction, although recent history has enriched this concept by numerous applications such as parks of education, promotion and popularization of modern techniques in the form of play, cultivation of the history and of the traditions of the region. Therefore, the notion of thematic parks is more capacious and adequate to the contemporary diversity of such undertakings, than the notions amusement park or entertainment park.

2 Types of thematic parks

Having observed for decades the development of park attractions, particularly intense in the twentieth century and continuing to the present day, we can see the most commonly undertaken leading motifs, defining the character of a park. There are botanical and zoological parks, derived from the university, the idea of which has evolved from research facilities to the public forms of entertainment, such as safari parks, or aquariums. Other parks derived from a circus tradition and they present spectacles involving animals. Another form of parks are parks of week-end recreation like water parks (Hansa Park near Hamburg or Aqua Boulvar in Paris, as well as numerous undertakings in Poland, such as the Thermal Baths in Uniejow or in Bialka Tatra), connecting the idea of a spa with aqua parks. There are also parks promoting science and technology such as La Villette in Paris, Futuroscope at Poitiers in France; historical parks, keeping tradition and culture of a nation or region, such as park Puy du Fou in Brittany or the Parc Astérix, near Paris. We can also visit extremely popular fairy tale and fantasy parks, including Disneyland, present on several continents, which can be considered an element of globalization, or the mentioned-above Asterix park, which uses not only the history, but also national tales, hence it is of a rather local character. The parks of miniatures of various famous buildings, promoting the culture and history of the region and country, are also very popular, both all over the world and in Poland. A brief description of the thematic parks all over the world is made in another article of the author, concerning the same subject (Bieske-Matejak 2006). The number and location of the attraction parks is constantly changing, for they are often large financial undertakings, which are liquidated if unprofitable. At the same time, new investments appear, which are reprogrammed in accordance with societal demands and requirements of profitability. The protestations of local communities and environmentalists contributed in the past to close parks, which is why the ecological factor and environmental protection at these investments is becoming more and more significant. It is estimated that there are a few thousand all over the world, most of them in developed countries. Some data can be obtained from an international organization bringing together many of the theme parks in the world — the IAAPA (International Association of Amusement Parks and Attractions)¹ (Lanquar 1991, 25).

1. See: IAAPA webpage [[:]] <http://www.iaapa.org/>.

3 Attraction Parks in Poland

During the last 10 years, about 60 attraction parks were created all over the country, but most of them are small ones, which can be called “mini-parks.” They may become the beginning of more important seasonal and annual investments. Larger investment projects are generally connected with the idea of water parks, which often are built on thermal springs, as in the above-mentioned localities, as well as in many others such as Bukovina or Szaflary. An extremely popular form across the country are dinosaur parks. Another frequently encountered form of parks are parks of miniatures, promoting history and architecture. Attraction parks in Poland are now a rapidly growing market, rather impulsive and not showing the characteristics of a planned nationwide development strategy. We can observe a lot of generally small, grassroots initiatives of a local nature, containing however a valuable activity potential.

4 Characteristics of theme parks in rural areas in the context of the natural features of the region

Rural areas in Poland are extremely diversified, depending on the region and its agricultural character: from areas with a predominance of small farms, through the grounds of the former large-scale farms (so-called PGR's, that is National Agricultural Farms), to the areas in the zone of influence of big industry, characterized by high environmental degradation (especially in the southern Polish Silesia, where 40% of the region is environmentally degraded). Degradation of the landscape results in Silesia from the underground activities in the coal mining areas, associated with cavity processes, alteration of water relationships, and the predominance of ruderal vegetation. For some time, local and regional authorities have been interested in environmental revival of those areas for landscape and leisure purposes. The diversity of rural areas is also associated with the diversity of protected lands in the area, national parks and their buffer zones, nature reserves, landscape parks, protected landscape areas, Natura 2000 areas, natural monuments and their surroundings.

According to the Act of April 16, 2004² the above-mentioned structures, together with others less known to the general public in Polish institutions, are relatively numerous. The above structures include: national parks—23, nature reserves—1 465, landscape parks—122, protected landscape areas—385, Natura 2000 sites—145 areas of special birds protection (PLB), 845 areas of special protection of settlements (PLH), natural monuments—36 293, documentation sites—240, ecological areas—6 877, landscape and nature sites—287, and, in addition, protection of species of plants, fungi and fauna.³ At the same time, it should be noted that the presence of these forms of nature protection does not exclude the use of land covered by it for recreation, education or entertainment, but it must run under reasonable control and be limited. We can present Polish national parks and reserves, where the intensity of use and the number of visitors can be very large, such as an area bordering Warsaw in the immediate vicinity of the last metro station natural reserve, called Forest Kabacki, which was created on the surface of 902,68 ha in 1980.⁴

It should also be noted that large surfaces of our country, especially rural terrains, even if not including areas protected by law still have a high landscape value, due to the nature of the agricultural traditions of our country, and maintenance of the private ownership of farms during the communist period (PRL). Occurrence of landscape elements such as afforesting amongst fields, planting of pollard willows in the baulks, especially characteristic of the lowlands, unregulated watercourses with riparian vegetation, rural ponds and clay pits, crop diversification are the landscape attractiveness of the Polish lands, as well as the specific tradition of landscape, conditioned by morphology of terrain, as well as geographical and historical particularities (more in: Ozimek 2011; Wolski 2002). The protection of these values should be integrated into the culture of creation of large recreational facilities in rural areas.

2. See: Ustawa z dnia 16 kwietnia 2004 r. o ochronie przyrody, DzU z 2004 r. nr 92 poz. 880.

3. See: Baza danych IOŚ „Obszary chronione w Polsce” at webpage of IOŚ-PIB [Institute of Environmental Protection – National Research Institute] [@:] http://www.ios.edu.pl/pol/obszary_chronione.html.

4. [In the journal European practice of number notation is followed—for example, 36 333,33 (European style) = 36 333.33 (Canadian style) = 36,333.33 (US and British style).—Ed.]

Recently, we observe the process of abandonment of field cultivation, which results in secondary natural succession and overgrowing of these areas by forest vegetation. These trends are also observed in other countries, including Western countries, for example Switzerland, where growing conditions were always very difficult because of the mountainous nature of many sites. These areas seem to be a good location for recreational facilities, due to expiration of their agricultural function, but taking into account many other criteria for selection of sites for such purposes is still needed.

According to the leading role of protected sites in the given area, we can distinguish the following territorial types:

- areas of many natural values, with a large number of terrains and protected structures of spectacular landscape
- areas of ordinary natural beauty with a small amount of protected surfaces and with a low degree of environmental degradation. These terrains may, however, have a high landscape value
- environmentally degraded areas—terrains of the former state farms (PGR), rural and agricultural surfaces destroyed by intrusive industry, depopulated lands, fields without agricultural crops, with low values of the landscape.

The environmental rating of the area, in the terms of utility of thematic parks creation, should use available diagnostic tools, such as inventory and natural valuation of selected areas including, in addition to a series of testes, an estimate of the area absorption, based on the use of estimated potential vegetation characteristics, the application of which may increase mentioned-above absorption—example: Warmia Landscape by Wolski (2013).

During the study, all available maps of protected areas, topographic maps, soil maps, maps of hydrological relations, satellite images, analysis of layer arrangement, maps of crop structure and the structure of afforestation are needed. The concept of land use in order to create an attraction park should take into consideration the use of existing surface water (rivers, watercourses, natural water containers), the morphology of the terrain, the use of existing vegetation and the protection of fauna and flora. Examination of the suitability of land for investment purposes should include the estimated impact of the thematic park on the environment.

5 Stocktaking and valuation of the natural environment of the areas from the point of view of the creation of thematic parks in rural areas

The purpose of the stocktaking and valuation of the natural environment is to characterize the natural features of the selected portion of the geographic space and thus to determine the suitability of the site for specific investment and development, as well as to anticipate possible environmental hazards. The subject of research during the stocktaking and valuation of the natural environment are such elements as geological, topographic, hydrological conditions, soil types, characteristics of flora and fauna and specification of the type of landscape.

Anthropogenic natural landscape in non-urban areas is usually dominated by farming and includes elements such as forest, meadow, fields, ruderal ecosystems (accompanying economic facilities, buildings and roads) and water. The primary components of the natural environment are terrain, bedrock and climate, which in turn affect the type of soil, hydrological relations, as well as flora and fauna. All these components of the environment are in constant interaction, modifying one another, for example vegetation influences the processes of erosion and hence the surface runoff and local climate (Obidziński and Żelazo 2011, 7). Lack of observation of any of these factors by large investments can significantly distort the relative equilibrium in which they exist—see: tools of stocktaking and valuation of natural environmental, in Obidziński and Żelazo (2011).

6 Thematic parks in an areas with many cultural values

Considering the cultural resources of the area, we can distinguish the following issues:

- localization of thematic parks should always take into account protection of objects of high cultural values

• protection and utilization of existing cultural resources in thematic parks (moving some historical objects to the terrains of thematic parks — using elements of antique building museums)

In the case of areas with extremely valuable historical objects (e.g., the palace and garden in Nieborów and landscape park of Arkadia), only small projects, promoting history, such as presentation of a court lifestyle, old customs, connected with attractions for children, i.e. activities complementary to the main attractions, which are cultural monuments of the premium class, are allowed. In other situations, in the case of less prominent but also valuable historical buildings, thematic parks may become a way to rescue of old, decaying material culture, which is common in our country. Falling into ruin manor houses, mills, etc. could be included within the park objects, as was done in the park of Puy du Fou, in western France, where many historical buildings were moved, according to the concept of antique building museums.

Conclusions

The idea of thematic parks situated in rural areas and peripheral regions is a very attractive tool for raising socio-economic activity of these sites and should be considered in the context of natural and cultural resource protection. This issue requires preparation of guidelines and detailed proceedings, concerning especially evaluation and estimation of cultural values and natural resources of the area of potential investment as well as estimation of the possible natural and cultural scale of degradation. Thematic parks considered as a factor of sustainable development can also be looked upon as an effective tool for reclamation of natural and cultural resources in the case of downgraded areas, once belonging to National Rural Organization (PGR) as well as postindustrial areas. Small, seasonal parks of differentiated themes do not in general endanger existing resources both on regional or global scale. Moreover, they may become the source of additional income for the local community. At the same time, they may be an element of education, popularization and promotion of a given region. Large nationwide investments or even investments on a scale of Central and Eastern Europe, are a potential factor in the development of degraded regions, transposing old rural farms or post industrial areas into tourist and educational activities. Summing up, the most important factor in the planning of thematic parks in a particular rural area in the context of sustainable development, is to adjust the size of the park and the type of attraction to the environment. Estimation of the value of landscape, as well as natural and cultural resources of the investment area, is essential to decide on the location and size of the planned investment.

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