

## ECOTOURISM - A 21ST CENTURY NECESSITY OR RESPONDING TO CONSUMER DEMAND?

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**Abstract:** This article identifies ecological tourism as a type of tourism that is most fully in line with the principles of sustainable development being a global ecological and economic concept and corresponding to "slow tourism", as a form of behavior alternative to mainstream tourism. Particular attention is paid to the study of ecological tourism in protected natural areas in the forms as close as possible to "green" tourism. The scientific novelty of the work is aimed at studying the essential features and the following trends in the development of ecological tourism as a special type of recreational activity. The authors conducted a sociological study using questionnaires and focus group interviews. Tour guides providing services in a specially protected natural area were selected as the target sample. The study was carried out in the Curonian Spit National Park – a UNESCO site. The authors have studied and analyzed the individual motives and desires of tourists when visiting specially protected natural areas. The results of the study reveal the significance of various types of resources for ecological tourism; the significance of the historical and cultural potential of the territory; the role of natural resources in creating a tourist product aimed at environmental education and awareness; technologies for excursion and educational activities with an ecocentric orientation. The authors demonstrate and propose possibilities and techniques for extrapolation of the principles of "slow tourism", including ones for visiting natural areas. The role of guides as conductors of "slow tourism" is indicated.

**Key words:** sustainable development, ecotourism, green tourism, slow tourism, protected natural area, sparsely urbanized territory, National Park, Baltic region, Curonian Spit

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### INTRODUCTION

The key topic of our research is the study of the essential content, the deep foundations of ecological tourism as a complex socio-economic phenomenon based on the use of rare and unique landscapes for recreational purposes. Is this type of tourism a respond of the tourism industry to a set of dynamically changing necessity of consumers, who are forced by the accelerating process of urbanization to turn to sparsely populated, native natural landscapes, or a new quality of recreational demand, a natural development of tourism due to a change in the level of ecological consciousness of people?

Our study was carried out for the Curonian Spit National Park, the westernmost one in Russia. The regulatory documents stipulate that the key tasks of the national park administrations for a variety of protected areas are: nature conservation, nature study and limited recreational activities. In this example, we will consider the features of the organization and development of ecotourism in specially protected natural areas, how specifically the main actors interact, the role of international cross-border projects in creating a new tourism product and preserving the natural and cultural heritage of a transboundary natural area. Earlier studies identified one of the negative features of the recreational space of the Curonian Spit National Park – a significant and unbalanced load on ecological routes (Anokhin et al., 2021). As a result, a number of routes were virtually unvisited, while others were over burdened by tourists. All this led to a decrease in the quality of the recreational process and adverse consequences for the biogeocenoses (or ecosystems) of the national park.

The study will answer the following questions: what is the resource potential of the territory and what resources are most attractive and how this potential is exploited by tour guides when organizing excursions; it will allow an assessment of the motivation for visiting the national park; to forecast demand for "slow tourism". According to the Statistics in 2019, the ecotourism industry worldwide was estimated at 181.1 billion U.S. dollars. The sector is forecast to reach 333.8 billion U.S. dollars by 2027 (Ecotourism market, 22.11.2021). In the era of covid, an even greater increase in the development of ecotourism might be expected, due to such reasons as increased concern for personal safety, which during the pandemic has been ensured primarily by maintaining distance and implementing tours in small groups, as well as being outdoors in open-air.

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Natural parks should be prepared for overloading of natural pressure points due to this increased demand, and to adjust existing strategies and plans accordingly. It is no coincidence that in the last two years amount of work devoted to advanced technology, new educational methods, and other related aspects of ecotourism has increased. An analysis of recent research in the field of eco-tourism suggested that, following Page and Dowling (Page and Dowling, 2002), the most harmonious and full definition of the concept of "ecotourism" was for IUCN by Héctor Ceballos Lascuráin in 1996 and quoted in the work of Freude (Freude, 2019). It described ecotourism as "environmentally responsible travel and visitation to relatively undisturbed natural areas, in order to enjoy and appreciate nature (and any accompanying cultural features – both past and present) that promotes conservation, has low negative visitor impact, and provides for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local populations" (Freude, 2019, P.1). Later, not only by other authors, but also by environmental organizations, attempts were made to concretize this definition []. Nevertheless, this study will rely on this IUCN definition. Modern trends in the development of tourism, which received a new round due to the coronavirus pandemic, reveal a gradual transition from mass tourism to individual tourism and from "hard" to "soft". The term "soft tourism" was introduced into scientific circulation by the German academic Robert Jungk. Jungk characterized this form of organization of tourist activity as increasing the duration of trips, reducing the speed of movement of individual tourists, greater spontaneity in the programme, in the activities of tourists, greater immersion in the historical and cultural environment of the destination and an increased emphasis on impressions and emotions (Jungk, 1980). Similar characteristics are inherent in another, "fashionable" form of tourism - "slow tourism". Most researchers define it as the antonym of mainstream or mass tourism. Studying this form of tourism, scientists consider the concept of "slow" in terms of time, speed of decision-making, means of transport, holiday duration and location, slow food (Guiver and McGrath, 2016; Fullagar et al., 2012; Oh et al., 2016). Guiver and McGrath specifically point to its anti-commercialism as "an alternative to the homogenisation of the holiday experience, destinations and their tourism provision by conventional (mass) tourism and package holidays" (Guiver and McGrath, 2016). Following Guiver and McGrath, we understand "slow tourism" as a group of associated ideas rather than as a watertight definition (Lumsdon and McGrath, 2011). Not coincidentally, the study by H. Oh, A. G. Assaf and S. Baloglu found that the focus group suggested most frequently two universal goals of "slow tourism": revitalization and self-enrichment (Oh et al., 2016:5).

If slow is the opposite of fast, one of those used in conjunction with "fast-food", which is associated with a consumer society, is often perceived as "omnivores", that is, those who are indifferent to what they consume. In relation to tourism, this can be correlated with indifference to what they see, feel, etc. Despite the fact that entire associations of "slow tourism" are already being created in the world, for example, Cittaslow concept, which is turned through the time to the slow cities association. Content analysis by Guiver and McGrath (2016) found that potential "slow destinations" are often rural: "tranquil heart of Brittany", "sleepy", "slowly in accordance with the time and with the seasons, the true speed of life", especially Italy, the starting point of the slow food and Cittaslow movements: "live at an Italian pace", "where time seems to have stopped centuries ago". Or they distinguish another option as "untouched", "unknown destinations, and unstepped routes, and out of season scenarios, far from the madding crowd". They conclude that "the slow travel philosophy" stresses the importance of getting "to know one small area well" rather than seeing "only a little bit of many different areas", underlining that "It's about getting to know one place well, focusing on quality rather than quantity, and connecting with the place and its people" (Guiver and McGrath, 2016:23). But the most important thing is that one of the major benefits of 'slow tourism' is a deeper understanding of the destination (Guiver and McGrath, 2016:27). That makes this type of tourism to be very significant for protected areas. Thus, according to its characteristics, the implementation of travel as "slow tourism" largely corresponds to "responsible tourism". Firstly, being out of hurry a person uses environmentally friendly mode of transport, and secondly, he or she prefers traveling within natural areas, because the contemplation of beautiful landscapes let him or her "slow down" the journey. This allows us, following many scientists, to consider "slow tourism" as the most suitable for the implementation of ecological tours within the protected areas. The work has the following structure. The introduction (section 1) presents the relevance of the work and offers a brief overview of the problem area. The second section presents the characteristics of the study area. The third section outlines the materials and methods of research carried out in the *Curonian Spit*. The fourth section reports results from the study. The fifth section is devoted to discussion and conclusions.

## STUDY AREA

In order to study, on the one hand, the current needs of visitors to specially protected natural areas and on the other hand, its capacity. The study focused on the example of the Curonian Spit National Park (Russia). Until the creation of the Kislovodsky National Park in 2016 (area 965.8 ha) (Official website of Kislovodsk National Park), the *Curonian Spit* was the smallest national park in Russia (6627 ha). The national park occupies 49 km in the southwestern part of the *Curonian Spit* (the national park of the Republic of Lithuania is located on its other half part). The entire *Curonian Spit* is included in the UNESCO heritage list as a unique cultural landscape. The Curonian Spit National Park has regulated entrance with an environmental entrance fee (Na Kurshskoy kose proverili, 2021). The minimum width of the *Curonian Spit* (long peninsula) is 380 m, its maximum width is 3.9 km. The uniqueness of its landscapes is associated with the relatively recent formation of the spit itself (8500-6500 years ago), the formation of unique biogeocenoses (or ecosystems) on its territory, some of which (*Korolevsky pine forest* on the 6<sup>th</sup> km of the spit) is original ancient or primary forest. Dune complexes are another example of a unique landscape: in particular, a ridge of high dunes stretching along the bay, reaching a height of 62 m in the Russian part of the spit (Shaplygina and Volkova, 2017). On the territory of the spit, you can find examples of almost all natural zones represented in Russia, including steppe and desert landscapes atypical for the Baltic Sea region. The spit is even more famous for the intensive movement of sands, which began after the cutting down of primary forests. At the same time, the sands collected in huge dunes up to 70 m high, and covered the fishing villages, which was recorded in history as the Great Sand Disaster.



Figure 1. Dune Efa, Sea View (Source: Kropinova, 2022)



Figure 2. Dune Efa, Bay View (Source: Kropinova, 2022)

Even more extraordinary is more than a hundred years of history of the confrontation between man and nature (Kropinova, 2020). Over a hundred years ago, a unique sand trapping system was developed to anchor dune complexes to protect land from damaging storms (Figure 1), and to keep the winds from uncontrolled movement of the dunes (Figure 2). The landscape created with the help of man was recognized as unique, which became the basis for including the territory in the UNESCO list (O nazionalnom parke Kurshskaya kosa, 2022).

There are different levels of protection in the territory of the Curonian Spit National Park. Only twenty nine percent of the territory (1920 hectares) is allowed a recreational function and is open to visitors. On the Russian part of the spit, there are three settlements with an area of 461 hectares, in which about fifteen hundred people live, but the locally based population increases tenfold during the summer tourist season (O nazionalnom parke Kurshskaya kosa, 2022). Visitors experience the natural and cultural heritage of the national park through a system of ecological routes, each of which is equipped with the appropriate infrastructure (parking, flooring for movement, ecological paths), as well as information (information stands, in some cases with QR codes). (Figure 3). There is a brief overview of the routes including their location, a description of the sights, and the length of the route presented in Table 1. At the 14<sup>th</sup> kilometer of the spit, there is a Visit-center – a cultural public space that includes several museums, art objects, and a marina.



Figure 3. National Park "Curonian Spit", Information Display on the ecological trail (Source: Anokhin, 2021)

Table 1. Brief description of tourist routes on the territory of the Curonian Spit National Park (Source: compiled by the authors)

Trail name	Location on the Spit	Length	Content (it must be seen!)
Royal Forest	6 <sup>th</sup> km	2,9 km	Relic forest, giant thuja nursery, Grenz forestry, observation deck, accessible to persons with disabilities Tourist infrastructure: minimum of infrastructure; Information infrastructure: information displays
Muller Height	32 <sup>nd</sup> km	2 km	The highest point of the Bolotnaya dune (Bruchberg). The panorama of the Baltic Sea and the Curonian Lagoon, Lake Chaika and Rybachy village. The area is the oldest part of the Curonian Spit – the island Rasyte of glacial origin. A memorial stone erected here in honor of the arborist Müller. Tourist infrastructure: minimum of infrastructure; Information infrastructure: information displays
From Rossiten to Rybachy	33 <sup>rd</sup> km	3,8 km	Rybachy settlement: architecture and history of the settlement, its famous inhabitants. Church and communal house of the 19th century, the house of Professor Johannes Thienemann (famous German ornithologist), the historical building of the former Rossitten school. Historic cemetery; Tourist infrastructure: restaurants and shops, bird museum; Information infrastructure: information displays
Rossiten Forest	34 <sup>th</sup> km	2 km	Mixed forests, hurricanes on the spit, birds, animals and mushrooms of the Curonian Spit Tourist infrastructure: missing; Information infrastructure: information displays
Dancing forest	37 <sup>th</sup> km	1 km	Coniferous forest, the trunks of which wind in bizarre zigzags. This forest is called "Dancing Forest". It is hard to imagine what makes the coniferous trees in this place "dance" like that. Tourist infrastructure: developed (cafe, souvenir shops); Information infrastructure: information displays
Efa Height	42 <sup>nd</sup> km	2,4 km	The highest point of the dune - 62 meters - was named the "Height of Efa" in honor of the dune inspector Franz Efa, whose work was devoted to the study and fixation of shifting sands. All the variety of landscapes of the spit opens from the observation platforms: the sea, the bay, the spaces covered with forest, the cozy houses of the Morskoye village; Tourist infrastructure: the most developed (numerous cafes and tents with food, souvenir shops, stationary toilet); Information infrastructure: information displays
Lake Swan	46 <sup>th</sup> km	3 km	A unique lake of eolian origin. Coastal protection constructions. Unique landscapes of the sea coast, the palve plain, a large dune ridge and the coast of the Curonian Lagoon. Tourist infrastructure: missing; Information infrastructure: information displays

A visit to the *Curonian Spit* is usually organized as an excursion, either as an organized group in a coach for up to 50 people - or on an individual basis in a tour guided car, with a capacity of up to 6 people. According to the national park, attendance is constantly growing. So, in 2018, 471,666 people visited the park, in 2019 – 589,044 people. In 2020, despite the long (March-June) covid lockdown and subsequent restrictions there were 529,180 visitors. In 2021 there were even more – above 800,0 visitors (Letom Kurshskuyu kosu posetili, 09.09.2022).

## MATERIAL AND METHODS

As already shown above, the main issue of the study is to determine the essential features and trends in the development of ecotourism and to identify the best forms of its implementation. The theoretical basis of the work is based on research on eco-tourism in the works (Freude, 2016; Dowling and Fennell, 2003; Fennell, 2001; Fennel, 2003). The most significant dichotomy required for conclusions on the work is formulated by us as follows:

- ecotourism arises and develops as a reaction to changes in the recreational necessity of people in an urbanized society;
- ecotourism is a new quality of realization of recreational necessity arising from changes in the level of ecological consciousness of people;
- the implementation of ecotourism in specially protected natural areas requires the designation of the so-called responsible tourism, implemented in a “soft” form of tourism, for example, “slow tourism”.

The more specific purpose of this study was (i) to give an assessment of the resource potential of the territory; (ii) analyze how this potential is used by tour guides when organizing ecotours; (iii) to identify the tourists’ motivation for ecotours, (iiii) to assess the existing infrastructure and the resource potential for organizing ecotourism in the form of “slow tourism”, identifying shortcomings and making recommendations for improvements. The assessment of the recreational potential of the Curonian Spit National Park was based on the results of numerous studies carried out earlier by scientists of various profiles, which reveal in detail the geographical, geomorphological, floristic, faunistic and landscape features of the territory, as well as its accumulated historical and cultural potential (Anokhin et al., 2021; Kropinova, 2017; Shaplygina and Volkova, 2017). Also, to clarify the issues that are significant for our study (ecological routes, infrastructure and information support for tourists), the expedition method and a detailed study of the area were used. To assess the recreation characteristics of the territory of the national park, its use for tourism and recreation, and the interests and motives of visitors, a survey of tour guides working in the area was conducted. In total, sixty two guides were interviewed, each of whom accompanies between four and thirteen hundred tourists a year to the *Curonian Spit*. The sample covered was therefore about six and a half percent of the total number of visitors to the spit in 2021.

The choice of the indirect method of questioning was due to the fact that the guides, on the one hand, are the most significant actors in shaping the style and model of visiting the national park by tourists, determine the content and volume of acquaintance of tourists with the national park. On the other hand, they see and evaluate the needs of tourists in the most detailed way, they can compare and evaluate their compliance with the concept of ecotourism.

The use of the method of indirect questioning was also due to the fact that earlier in the studies of other authors on this issue, similar variations of this method were also used. Thus, D. Fennel in his work refers to a study conducted by Weiler (1993), in which a survey of tour operators was conducted to assess consumer preferences in the field of ecotourism, which made it possible to simultaneously identify the degree of their nature-centrism. As part of this survey, it was found that 40% of operators promote themselves as eco-friendly, 66% consider their routes to be beneficial for the environment, 70% say that their tours teach tourists to respect nature, 7% of tour routes are aimed at improving the environment (they practice garbage collection while walking) (Fennel, 2003: 118). To develop the questionnaire, we invited tourism experts, from the tourism business community (Association of Tourism Industry Enterprises), tour guides, researchers of the I. Kant Baltic Federal University, employees of the Curonian Spit National Park as well as representatives of the local community. The questionnaire was trialed on a small group of tour guides undergoing advanced training at the University in 2021. The questionnaire consisted of 3 sections and 31 questions. For the purposes of this study, blocks of questions were used that made it possible to differentiate the significance of various types of ecotourism resources on the spit, to compare the views of guides as conductors of ecotourism and the expectations of tourists from visiting the National Park, to assess the orientation of guides to the values and norms of ecological tourism and the concept of “slow tourism”.

On the basis of these preliminary results, the questionnaire was improved, and, then, launched for focus group interviews, which were conducted among the tour guides of the Kaliningrad region.

To assess the transport component when visiting the Curonian Spit, the data of the National Park were used, demonstrating that today the majority of tourists (more than 99%) arrive on the spit and move along it by vehicle.

## RESULTS

### Resource potential of the National Park

Results indicated that all components of the National Park received a fairly high rating evaluation from the tour guides (Figure 4). The tour guides highly appreciated the fauna and flora of the spit, as well as its geomorphological resources, which form the basis of its unique landscapes. Historical and cultural heritage was rated a bit lower. In general, the data obtained allow us, not surprisingly, speaking about the perception of the National Park as a combination of, first of all, natural objects as far as ecotour is concerned. An attempt was also made to compare how closely the attitudes of the guides and visitors to the National Park are aligned to the values of ecological tourism, ecological education and awareness, as opposed to simply seeing the spit exclusively as a recreational space. An analysis of the routes of the National Park, which are visited by tourists as part of one-day excursions, shows that the main route of the Park is visited most frequently

(32.4%) – it is the “Height of Efa” (Duna Efa), which is the main attraction of the Curonian Spit. Tour guides rate it most highly (26.9%) as well. The next in rating, according to the guides’ opinion, which is interesting in terms of geomorphology, species composition of plants, altitudinal zonation, is the route called "Muller's Height" (Vysota Mullera), which also opens up landscape views of the village *Rybachy* and *Lake Chaika*. More than a quarter (26.3%) of the guides are to show them in their programme of visit. In reality, it is visited less frequently – 16.5%. Almost the same opinion (22.4%) among the guides is given to the route "Royal Forest" (Korolevsky Bor), which is a preserved fragment of a relict forest in the root of the Curonian Spit. Its attendance (19.3%) is close to the assessment of the guides, which demonstrates the interest of tourists in longer and more original routes. Visiting the “Lake Swan” route happens much rare (1.1%), probably due to its rapid remoteness and rather high length, which limits the number of visitors. The fact to be explained by the desire to save time, although the guides assess its environmental content is an order of magnitude higher – 11.5%.

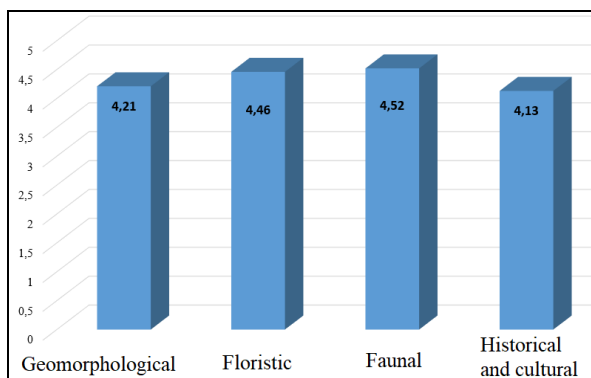


Figure 4. Comparative assessment of the resource potential of the Curonian Spit, by scores, indicated by tour guides (the research was conducted by the authors in Autumn, 2021)

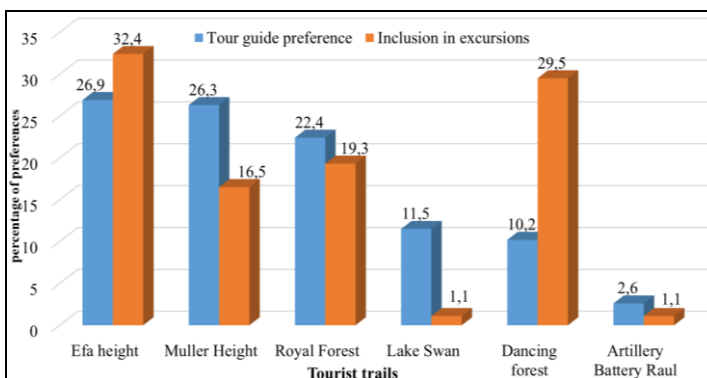


Figure 5. The ratio between the guide’s assessment of the tourist trail and of the excursion attendance of the routes in the Curonian Spit National Park (the research was conducted by the authors in Autumn, 2021)

Only 10.2% of tour guides highly appreciate the intricately curving pines of the “Dancing Forest”, and for the tourists they meet, it is one of the most sought after (29.5%). The “Battery Raul” route does not have ecological health, although formally, like all routes of the National Park, it belongs to eco-routes. And such significant and interesting routes as "From Rossiten to Rybachy" and "Rossiten Forest" are practically not visited by sightseers precisely because of the transience of their stay on the Curonian Spit. At the same time, the guides also do not mention these routes, probably about providing them to tourists for individual acquaintance within the framework of “slow tourism”. This allows us to conclude that today, within the framework of an excursion visit, mainly “fast”, famous routes with a high concentration of sights are significant. You can also see a high correlation between the presence of tourist infrastructure (cafes, souvenir shops) and route attendance. Thus, the analysis of the data in Figure 5 allows us to state that most of the excursion programs of the National Park "Curonian Spit" today relate to educational, and not to the ecotourism and they are not so much correspond to the concept of "slow tourism".

### Themes and content of the excursions in the National Park

Despite the dominance of the format of educational tourism over the slow and calm pastime, which is provided by the concept of "slow" tourism, the results of the analysis of the content of excursions confirmed our hypothesis: the ecological orientation is the dominant semantic focus for the vast majority of guides. The survey found that 43% of the guides make purposeful accents on it, and another 19% use it as the basis for design of the excursion. Approximately one third of the guides – 34% maintain a balance between natural and historical-cultural sights, and only 4% are guided solely by the interests of the guests. From the point of view of visitors’ expectations, the picture is as follows: only 9% of tourists expect to see the Spit as a natural object, 34% of tourists pay much attention to natural sights, 47% are only somewhat oriented towards ecotourism, and imagine the Spit as a territory of cognitive tourism, without pronounced environmental accents only 10%. Based on the joint analysis of questions on the attitude of tourists and guides to the Curonian Spit as an area of ecotourism, we formed 4 groups of answers in descending order of focus on the values of ecotourism (Table 2).

Table 2. Nature orientation of tourists and guides by groups of values (according to the value decreases) (Source: compiled by the authors)

Nº of Group	Tourists	Tour guides
I	They imagine the Curonian Spit as a unique natural object and have little interest in other aspects	They make targeted accents on the uniqueness of the Spit as a unique natural landscape
II	They pay a lot of attention and time to natural display objects	Basically, they build an excursion with the dominance of natural components
III	They are to some extent focused on ecotourism, but without expressed requests	They try to keep the balance of natural and historical and cultural objects on the spit
IV	They completely unfocused on ecotourism. Curonian Spit for them is a place of cognitive tourism	They pay nature aspects relatively little time. The main idea of the trip is that the tourist has a rest

A comparative analysis (Figure 6) shows a higher level of focus on ecotourism values among tour guides, which is probably the result of their deeper knowledge about the content of excursion objects and. based on this, the perception of the spit as a unique landscape that deserves a more reverent attitude. So, in the first group, this ratio is more than obvious.

In the second and third groups, the ratio is relatively evened out, however, numerically the third group (the balance of ecological and educational tourism) statistically significantly exceeds the second. It is pleasant that a small number of tourists and only one guide from the respondents are included in the least alien to ecological tourism group.

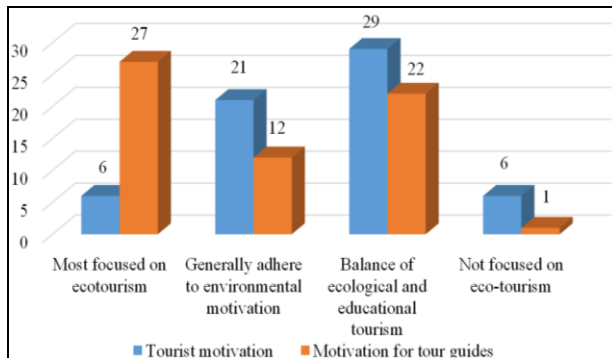


Figure 6. The attitude of visitors to the values of ecotourism (the research was conducted by the authors in Autumn, 2021)

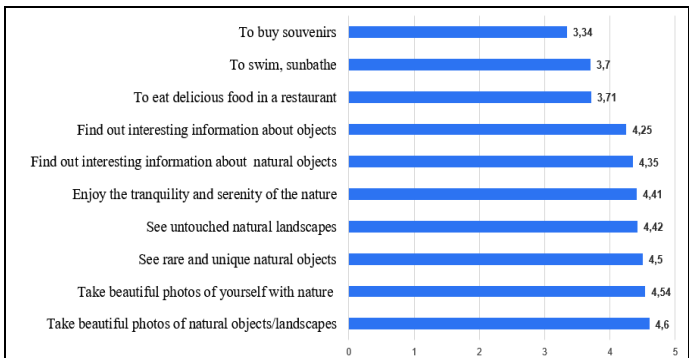


Figure 7. The main motives and needs of tourists on the Curonian Spit National Park (the research was conducted by the authors in Autumn, 2021)

Forty three percent of the tour guides made ecotourism a priority and a further nineteenth percent used it as the basis for building an excursion. Approximately one third of the tour guides were neutral between natural, historical and cultural objects, and only four percent were guided solely by the interests of the guests. At the same time, the knowledge of specific landscapes and elements was high among the guides, rather than a general commitment to the ideas of ecological tourism.

So, to the question about the knowledge of the “10 commandments of ecological tourism” among the guides, the answers were distributed as follows. “Yes, I know, I can even just about name them” – 34%

- “Yes, I read them, but I don’t remember them” – 16%
- “I heard about their existence” – 27%
- “I didn’t hear anything about it” – 23%

### Motivations of the Tourists

The revealed attitudes towards the presentation of the unique natural attractions of the National Park can be compared with the dominant motives and interests of the National Park visitors (Figure 7).

### The relevance of creating new tourists’ objects

The activity of the visiting center was also an object of our study. Almost three quarters of the respondents noted that they rarely visit the Visit-Center of the National Park. However, it is important to note that at the time of the study, there was an entrance-fee to the Visit-center (in addition to the cost of entering the National Park), but that now that entrance fee has been abolished. The questionnaire analyzed the reasons for not visiting the Visit-center exhibitions. If we exclude price reasons, then fifty two percent noted that a visit to the Visit-center is an inefficient use of excursion time, nineteen percent noted the small size of Visit-center, and twelve each noted the displayed contents and the working schedule.

In this part of the questionnaire, it was possible to express an opinion in terms of an open comment. It is worth mentioning one of the significant comments: “the museum is good, but a lot is presented in the museum tour, and further information from the guide on other routes makes little sense. The guide can’t say every time – Do you remember what we saw in the museum?” A more detailed analysis of the comments question allowed a more complex identification of contradictions in the whole visit and the excursion process in the National Park. First of all about the scale of the landscape and cultural potential of the spit. It is impossible to do all the ecological trails in one day. Optimally timed excursions cover two or three routes out of the nine. A visit to the Visit-center limits the time for experiencing acquaintance with the wildlife of the spit to an even greater extent. However, tourists are not ready to go to the spit for two to three days in a row. A guest who made an excursion to the spit, regardless of the number of attractions visited, believes that he “has done the spit.” For this reason, unlocking the potential of the *Curonian Spit* for ecotourism purposes is incomplete.

The study identified how tour guides (based on their experience of communication with tourists) assess the prospects of their repeated visits to the spit with a stop in accommodation facilities. Among the surveyed guides, over thirty percent noted that such a desire arises “very often, they are even interested in accommodation facilities”, thirty five percent answered that “most likely yes”, about nearly a third of the guides answered that such a desire arises only in a small number of people. Only about 3 percent of the respondents stated that “definitely not, the spit is a once only visit destination.” Averaging these answers, we can say that at least half of the tourists would like to return and spend much more time on the *Curonian Spit* than a one-day excursion allows. The results of the study revealed:

1) When visiting the Curonian Spit National Park, natural resources are of decisive importance for ecological tourism. Tourists are equally interested in both flora and fauna. This confirms the effectiveness of the measures taken by the administration of the national park to install information boards about endemics and other plants growing here, as well as about living birds and mammals.

2) Historical and cultural heritage, although to a lower extent, is of some interest to visitors, but its potential is either underestimated or not sufficiently used by the park administration as a resource to attract tourists. At the same time, it is the historical and cultural heritage that can play a significant role in creating new centers of attraction for tourists and relieving natural ecosystems.

3) It is natural resources that form the basis of excursions and underlie scientific, educational and cognitive tours to the National Park. The profile of the National Park as a UNESCO site as a cultural landscape is the main theme in constructing excursion programs.

4) Only one third of the guides had in-depth knowledge of the principles of ecotourism, which indicates the need to improve their environmental education. When conducting educational courses, the administration of the national park should pay more attention not only to information about the tourist and recreational resources of the territory, but also to the basics of ecological tourism and sustainable development.

5) When deciding on topics for excursions, tour guides were driven not so much by their commitment to sustainable development goals, but rather by the total amount of knowledge available.

6) The motivations to visit the National Park were identified as a) to take beautiful photos of natural objects / landscapes or b) yourself against the backdrop of nature; c) to see unique natural objects; d) see untouched landscapes e) enjoy the tranquility and serenity of nature; f) learn about natural objects and g) get interesting information about historical and cultural objects. Of somewhat lesser interest for visitors are restaurants located within the National Park, swimming and buying souvenirs.

7) Within the National Park there is a demand for new display facilities. New attractions could be included in new tourist routes, which might reduce the pressure on existing eco-trails. Particular attention could be paid to the creation of such tourist facilities in settlements located within the National Park, since, on the one hand, this would shift the focus from visiting natural areas to developed areas and on the other, would allow the local population to be more involved in ecotourism activities. Such objects could be created with an emphasis on the history and culture of the Park area.

8) As of today, there is an ambiguous situation as far as the organization of tourism in the territory of the Curonian Spit National Park is concerned. The guides present and are ready to present the park as a territory full of rare and unique natural objects. For a significant part of tourists, these accents in the representation of the Curonian Spit are also significant. At the same time, the high attendance and popularity of the Spit as a tourist site lead to an excessive increase in the number of tourists, especially during the high season (in summer). Recreational capacity is exceeded on most tourist routes. A significant part of the tourists, due to limited time or financial resources, are visiting the Spit as part of a one-day excursion, which includes 4-5 hours of stay on the Spit (travel agencies) or 7-8 hours (individual excursion by car). We can attribute this format of visiting exclusively to cognitive tourism, which is far from the principles of ecotourism and the concept of "slow tourism". However, the questionnaire also says that half of the tourists have a desire to return and spend more time on the Spit, which already fits into our concept of "slow tourism" in this area.

9) The concept of "slow tourism" should be used to the fullest when visiting a national park. This will shift the focus from a one-day stay on its territory in the "everything in one day" format, to the format of a longer acquaintance with accommodation in one of the guest houses on its territory, using non-motorized vehicles. We assume that the implementation of the started project for the construction of a bike path in the national park, scheduled for 2022-2024 will make it possible to realize the idea of ecotourism for the Curonian Spit to full extend.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

### i) Local conclusions from the results of the study

The results of the study suggest conclusions about the current exclusively excursion format of visiting the National Park as insufficient to unlock its potential. The "tourist inhibition (slowing-down)" can be achieved through stopping at places of accommodation, the formation of additional tourist and excursion routes, including using other (softer) modes of transportation. The *Curonian Spit* has a sufficient number of accommodation units, which are concentrated mainly in the village of Lesnoy, as well as in the villages of Rybachy and Morskoe. On the Russian part of the *Curonian Spit*, it is planned to construct a bicycle path (in the Lithuanian part it is already functioning), it is planned to organize sightseeing water based excursions along the bay inside the spit. In previous studies, the author's team developed transboundary water routes (Kropinova and Anokhin, 2014; Anokhin et al., 2021). The "tourist inhibition" described above is completely in line with the requirements of sustainable development: tourists could "get the best" out of their visit as they could learn the natural landscapes in detail as well as experiencing certain geomorphological elements as well as the fauna and flora; they would spend time leisurely, taste local cuisine and enjoy the specialties of the *Curonian Spit*. All this corresponds to the most up-to-date tourism theory, which is described as the "experience economy" (Pine and Gilmore, 1998).

The information given above demonstrates the number of tourists to the *Curonian Spit*, is quite enough to create flows to justify existing tourist infrastructure and the ecological tourist routes. A significant part of the ecological routes could be visited by tourists who travel along the *Curonian Spit* in personal cars or on personal bicycles. To encourage them to visit the tourist excursion routes of the National Park, information about them would be posted on the National Park website. Dissemination of information about trails, accommodation facilities and catering facilities for tourists and about museums through various promotion channels would create sustainable tourist flows and position the *Curonian Spit* as a developed area of ecological tourism, which would also be facilitated by organizing bicycle rental points in the settlements, developing water routes along the bay from Zelenogradsk to Rybachy and Morskoy, as well as the creation of walking excursion trails between the harbors of the Rybachy village and the pier near the ecological route Dancing Forest.

"Slow tourism" concept is one of the "brand" of national parks. The following attributes of "slow tourism" could be indicated as low carbon travel, low impact on nature, longer stays, high degree of adaptability to the environment, immersive travel, high involvement of locals (Kostilnikova et al., 2022). In these ways the concept of "slow tourism" would be used to the fullest extend when visiting the National Park and would shift the focus from a day trips ("everything

in one day”) to a longer experience by over-nighting in one of the guest houses in the Park and using non-motorized vehicles. The implementation of the project for the construction of a bike path in the National Park, scheduled for 2022-2024, would thereby make it possible to realize the idea of ecotourism for the *Curonian Spit* in full measure.

The new tourist routes are being regularly created on the territory of the National Park. Among the new eco-routes, it should be noted “From the museum to the museum”, “From the Spit to the Mainland”, “Geological and Geomorphological Chronicle of the Baltic”, etc. – all fit this pattern. These local conclusions and recommendations fit in with modern trends in the development of tourism, which received a new boost as a result of the coronavirus pandemic and reinforce a gradual transition from mass tourism to individual tourism and from “hard” to “soft” tourism.

### (ii) Wider conclusions

In specially protected natural areas, due to the availability of certain resources, it is possible to implement various types of tourism. For example, the Curonian Spit National Park is popular as a beach tourism center due to its long (over 40 km) sandy beaches; as a center of health tourism due to the presence of forests rich in phytoncides in combination with ionized sea air; natural and historical and cultural heritage contributes to the development of educational tourism; museum expositions created in settlements support urban tourism; the water expanses of the bay are conducive to water sports tourism; the national park administration promotes event tourism. At the same time, various types of tourism are to varying degrees influenced by modern trends, directed from hard to softer forms. The most industrialized segment of tourism (sun sand and sea beach tourism) has been dominated by mass production and rigid forms of organization.

In Figure 8 we have identified these trends, as well as some types of tourism. The location of tourism types in the different dimensions makes it possible to supplement the diagramme with the category of “green tourism”, which implies a maximum orientation towards nature. Forms of organization and the content of ecotourism conform closely to these trends, which allows discussion of strategic prospects for its development. In the context of Figure 8, ecological tourism is closest to what is called “soft tourism” and to individual forms of tourism organization. Thus, ecological tourism is one of the promising areas of sustainable development of tourism with the optimal form being to promote both basic (recreational) and higher-level (environmental) desires of tourists. A retrospective comparative study of the motivation of eco-tourists showed in a 1992 study (Eagles, 1992), that respondents placed the main motivational emphasis precisely on landscape preferences and physical activity. The rest of the components of ecotourism and the image of the activity of the tourist in ecotourism remained in the background. In this study, as reflected in Figure 6, it has been shown that the motivation of tourists is generally similar, but the values of ecological tourism are now beginning to pre-dominate. To a large extent, this is due to the change in the role and function of the landscape, the image of which also plays a positive role in its perception by tourists and the desire to preserve it (Chen and Tsai, 2007). In their study, Chow et al even linked visitor attachment to a place and their satisfaction with their urge to behave environmentally responsible. The results show that place dependence and place identity are positively correlated with satisfaction and an intention to behave in an environmentally responsible manner (Chow et al., 2019). Tourist animation is an additional chance adding value to traditional heritage (Ilies et al., 2017). Event tourism could usually provide different types of animation. At the same time, more recent work also reveals the evolution of some of the ecological philosophies that underlie discussions about the sustainability of ecotourism (Wearing and Schweinsberg, 2018:13). The authors concluded that

“...the broad philosophical basis of ecocentrism includes the following elements:

- a belief in humanity and harmony with nature;
- attempts to alleviate (or eliminate) negative human impacts on the environment - atmospheric pollution, land degradation, etc.
- arguments for all life having its own specific intrinsic value.
- arguments against economic growth and consumerism etc.” (Wearing and Schweinsberg, 2018:23-24).

Considering therefore forecasts for the development of ecotourism in the XXI century, Wearing and Schweinsberg rightly pointed out the necessity to take into account the changing needs of subsequent generations (Wearing and Schweinsberg, 2018). The subsequent transformation of existing definitions, then, as noted by Wearing and Schweinsberg (Wearing and Schweinsberg, 2018), is that as ecotourism develops, the number of parties interested in this type of tourism (stakeholders) expands. The most complete identification of all stakeholders would allow the building of a most harmonious and sustainable model of ecological tourism. Traditionally, in tourism there is talk about tourists and employees of the tourism industry, however, the most complete coverage would also include the local population, tour guides, authorities, public environmental

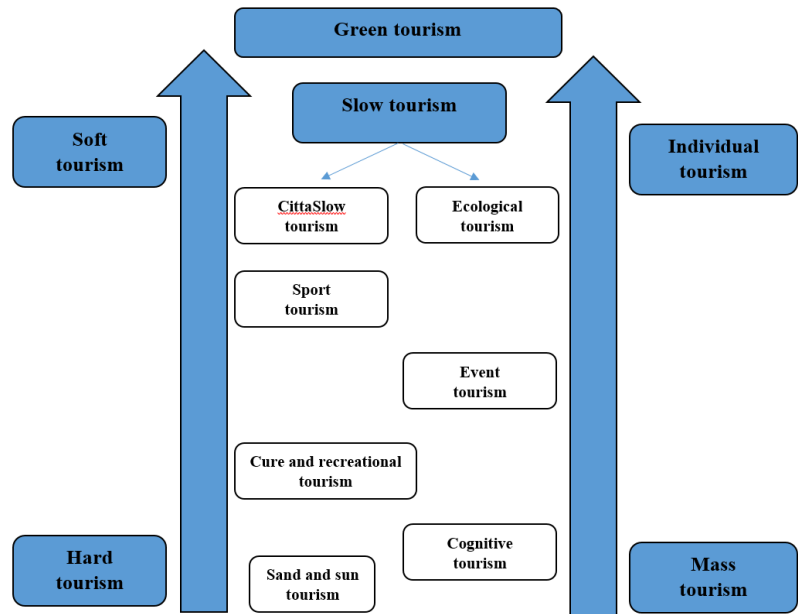


Figure 8. The main trends in the development of tourism (Source: authors)



organizations, financial players, departments for the protection of historical, cultural and natural heritage and even more. This study has confirmed the initial hypothesis that tourism, as a complex socio-economic phenomenon, is currently undergoing a number of transformations based on global trends. Among them are: differentiation of the tourism product, the transition from mass tourism to individual tourism, a more in-depth experience by tourists with features of destination resources and the social environment of the destination, the penetration of sustainable development and ecocentrism into tourism. These trends, interacting, could change the very face of tourism and tourists. For protected areas, such as national parks, these trends are expressed in the development and methodological design of ecological tourism, the growth of its importance for the area and for tourism demand. The new "ideology" of ecological tourism in the territory of national parks is increasingly taking shape in new forms of infrastructure (tourist trails, museums and other places of attractions) and methodologically (targeted orientation of tour guides to appreciate the in-depth experience of tourists with natural attractions and landscapes). The outcome could therefore be the formation of new principles for the organization of ecological tourism fully in line with the concept of the sustainable development, as well as increasing the role of slow tourism as a promising travel philosophy.

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