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## The role of rural tourism in sustainable rural development using the example of Kashubia

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**Abstract:** The Kashubia region is characterized by its rich history and unique folklore, beautiful landscape, natural wealth, clean lakes and magnificent beaches of the Polish coast. Kashubia is also known for its unique language, cuisine, historical sites and music and art. It is undoubtedly, one of the most beautiful corners of Poland. The purpose of the study was to present and characterize the role of rural tourism in the sustainable development of rural areas and to assess the degree of its development in a sustainable direction. The study showed the forms and types of rural tourism and its functions. An important element of the study was the evaluation of tourism development, including accommodation and accompanying facilities in accordance with the concept of green economy, which has a special role in the development of rural areas, due to the fact that it is based on natural resources. The spatial scope concerns the area of historic Kashubia within the administrative boundaries of the three counties of Pomorskie Voivodeship (i.e., Kosciierzyna, Chojnice and Kashubia counties). The paper uses a spatial analysis based on data from the Central Statistical Office (CSO) and a survey conducted in 2021-2023. The results of the study clearly indicate that there has been significant progress in the development of tourism infrastructure during the period under review. Rural tourism can contribute to the development of sustainable rural areas of Kashubia, in line with the current of the green economy concept. Of particular importance is folklore and folk art, including folklore events; harvest festivals, festivals, folk concerts and the activities of agrotourism farms, which combine the tradition of the farming profession with environmental protection and promotion of the Kashubian region.

**Key words:** sustainable development, agrotourism, ecotourism, rural tourism, Kashubia, Poland

### 1. Introduction

Rural areas are highly significant to tourists as places for direct interaction with nature, leisure, and meeting people for social and sporting events. The increasing environmental awareness of the community and agricultural transformation, accompanied by the necessity to look for extra sources of income for the rural population, have contributed to the development of so-called rural tourism (Durydiwka, 2013; Roman et al., 2020). Sustainable tourism in rural areas aims to preserve the economic and social benefits of developing rural tourism while simultaneously mitigating undesirable impacts on the natural (Hegarty and Przeborska, 2005), social (Bański and Mazur, 2016), historical (Greinert et al., 2019), and cultural environment (Jezierska-Thöle et al., 2018). Rural tourism has played an increasing role in

the sustainable development of rural areas and has become an essential branch of the economy, creating new jobs in rural areas; hence, it is an important process in the diversification of the rural economy (Balińska, 2011). It offers a chance for the rural population who associate their future with rural areas but not necessarily are interested in farming (Biczkowski and Jezierska-Thöle, 2012). Rural tourism can be an alternative source of income for rural populations. Simultaneously, all the various initiatives to improve the rural infrastructure and organisation of different forms of rural tourism have contributed to so-called rural revitalisation (Szczęsna and Wesołowska, 2018; Glapa et al., 2021).

It should be emphasised that not all tourist activities in rural areas can be classified as rural

tourism, such as seaside resorts where hotels and holiday centres set up a mass tourism system. Rural tourism relies on genuine natural, historical, and cultural resources of a given area; involves different local entities; integrates tourism with other developmental aspects of the local community and local economy; and reinforces the socio-economic structures of the local community (Gaworecki, 2007). Rural tourism is a form of leisure associated with agricultural activity in rural areas (Kozak, 2009). Its characteristic setting is non-urbanised areas and nature featuring rural values and resources, which can rarely be seen in strongly built-up areas (Panasiuk, 2010). Rural tourism offers, among other things, close interaction with nature and culture, and an introduction to rural areas and their inhabitants (Szpilko and Ziółkowski, 2010; Sikora, 2014).

Agrotourism has enjoyed a growing interest among farmers. It is a form of leisure on a farm, based on leisure activities associated with the farm and its surroundings. The targets of agrotourism are individual tourists, families, or small groups. It does not require extensive accommodation facilities. The natural and cultural resources of a region play a significant role in the development of agrotourism (Sadowski and Wojcieszak, 2019). Agrotourism promotes the cultural heritage of rural areas and the beauty of their cultural landscape (Zeppel, 2012; Woźniak and Jezierska-Thöle, 2022). Tourists often

choose rural areas as tourism destinations due to their direct contact with nature, the possibility of active leisure in the open air, and access to healthy regional products. Another advantage is the consorting with old-time folk art, traditional regional cuisine, culture, and music. Agrotourism has become popular in Poland (Król and Hernik, 2022). and other member states of the European Union (Galluzzo, 2022). An example of a region in Poland with a rich history and unique folklore (Zieniukowa, 2015), beautiful landscape (Essing-Jelonkiewicz, 2022), natural wealth, clean lakes (Augustyniak and Serafin, 2021) and magnificent seaside beaches is Kashubia (also spelt Cassubia). Kashubia is famous for nurturing tradition, culture, cuisine, historic sites, music, and art. Undoubtedly, it is one of the most beautiful parts of Poland (Mysiak, 2000; Rurek, 2021).

This paper outlines and describes the role rural tourism plays in the sustainable development of the rural areas of Kashubia. We attempted to assess the development of rural tourism based on the development of accommodation facilities that generate new non-farming jobs and contribute to the diversification of agricultural holdings. Simultaneously, we evaluate the degree of sustainable development in rural tourism. The results of our study may contribute to the sustainable development of tourism in rural areas with similar tourism conditions.

## 2. Theoretical background

Rural tourism is based on the natural, historical and cultural resources of an area. It involves various actors from among the local community, integrates tourism with other aspects of community development and the local economy, and strengthens the socio-economic structures of the local community (Gaworecki, 2007; Jepson and Sharpley, 2018). Rural tourism is also defined as a form of recreation found in rural areas associated with agricultural activities (Kozak, 2009). It is one of the forms of alternative tourism, which takes the form of trips that are usually organized independently in small groups, and the stay in the visited locality is combined with accommodation in small hotels, boarding houses, pri-

vate lodgings, summer houses or campsites. It offers recreation closer to nature and is expected to bring as many benefits as possible to local people and tourism entrepreneurs. The premise of this form of tourism is to minimize social and environmental damage. Rural tourism is such a form of tourism that adapts to the local natural and cultural environment in a minimally invasive way, often enriching it with new values (Lane and Kastenholtz, 2018). One of the important elements of rural tourism is also agrotourism. This is a popular form of tourism and a type of activity in the countryside, and its peculiarity is the offering of tourist services in a rural environment, closely linked to agriculture.

Another form of rural tourism that can also perform functions related to nature conservation is ecotourism. It is a form of sustainable tourism, which actively contributes to environmental protection, brings economic benefits and improved quality of life for local communities in the most attractive (natural and cultural) corners of the world (Liu, 2006). Ecotourism is a developmental element of a region which involves getting to know new areas and natural environments, while contributing to the protection of its cultural and

natural heritage. It provides economic benefits to the local community and raises their standard of living. Tourism in rural areas also has an economic function, due to the great opportunities for rural development in economic terms. It affects the economy and influences the volume of demand in the form of tourists using accommodation, shopping opportunities, cultural and entertainment services. Tradition and folklore can be a tourism product that brings additional income to the farm (Jezierska-Thöle and Biczkowski, 2013; Ivona, 2021).

### 3. Area descriptions, methods and material studied

The study area is a geographical region of Kashubia situated in the northern part of Poland, with three districts selected and accepted for surveys: Chojnice, Kościerzyna, and Kartuzi (Fig. 1). Kashubia is a cultural region inhabited by Kashubians, who are a true ethnic minority and speak their own Kashubian language. This region is often referred to as Kashubian Switzerland due to its fascinating, picturesque landscape with numerous ranges of hills and lake-lands (Fig. 2). The analysed area is a location for landscape parks: the Kashubian Landscape Park, the Kashubian Ethnographic Park, and the Wdzydze Landscape Park. In 1996, in the southern part of the Zaborski Landscape Park, the Tuchola Forest National Park formed a part of the World Network of Biosphere Reserves (Szumińska, 2009; Rurek et al., 2013).

The district of Chojnice covers 1364 km<sup>2</sup> of area and has 97.389 inhabitants. It is situated in three mesoregions: the Tuchola Forest, Krajna Lakeland, and Charzykowy Plain. The district's main river is Brda, a major destination for kayakers in northern Poland. The Kościerzyna district is located in the Kashubian Lakeland. The district covers an area of 1.165 km<sup>2</sup> and has a population of 72.808. In terms of natural and landscape value, the district of Kościerzyna is one of the most attractive places in Poland. Varied terrain relief, a network of channel lakes surrounded by forests, clean rivers, and a wealth of plant and animal species make the district of Kościerzyna unique in terms of its natural values. Forests cover 44% of the district of Kościerzyna. The district of Kartuzi has an area of 1.121 km<sup>2</sup> and 140.770 inhabitants (Gonia and Podgórski,

2019). There are many tourist amenities in the



**Figure 1.** Geographical location Kashubia region in Poland and study area (LAU 1). (Source: <https://pl.wikipedia.org>; <https://najlepszemorze.pl/kaszuby/>)

district of Kartuzi, including the Kashubian Miniature Park, the Kashubian Giants Park in Strysza Buda, the Upside-Down House in Szymbark, the Pomeranian Griffin Bunker, and the



**Figure 2.** Kashubian Landscape Park (photo by P. Mazur, 2023)

Siberian House. The district of Kartuzy has 173 lakes, with a surface area of over 1 ha. The most picturesque place is the Szymbark Hills, with the highest point of the North European Plain, the Wieżyca (328.6 m a.s.l.).

The research period covers the years 2012–2021, which is associated with the EU schemes implemented in the rural areas of Poland and changes in rural tourism towards sustainable development. Quantitative and qualitative analyses were also conducted. The development of rural tourism was assessed using the change dynamics indicator, assuming that the starting year of 2012 was 100% (Jezierska-Thöle, 2018). During the research, we assumed that change dynamics above 0 testify to progression, whereas those below 0 denote regression. This assessment concerned changes in the number of tourist accommodation facilities (annual and seasonal) and places (i.e., beds). The source of data was the Local Data Bank (<https://stat.gov.pl/>) and websites <https://slowhop.com/>, <https://www.booking.com/>, <https://www.noclegowo.pl/> and qualitative research was used to evaluate the degree of sustainable development in rural tourism. To this end, we conducted surveys from 2021 to 2023. The indicators for assessment were selected based on three groups of features: (1) agricultural holdings, (2) tourism offers, and (3) culture and folklore (Włodarczyk, 2014; Kozłowska-Adamczak, 2017; Studzieniecki and Palmowski, 2019; Czapiewska, 2021; Gonia and Jezierska-Thöle, 2022).

The features associated with agricultural holdings, distinguishing rural tourism from mass tourism, included the following:

- direct contact with the host's family,
  - presence of domestic animals,
  - fresh food from the farm,
  - possibility of participating in farm activities.
- Associated with the tourism offer are as follows:
- mushroom picking, angling, and regional hikes,
  - visits to museums and exhibitions,
  - kayaking,
  - leisure activities and sports activities.

The features associated with culture and folklore are as follows:

- direct contact with the local community,
- participation in cultural events (folk festivities, harvest festivals),
- introduction to life in the countryside, rural culture and customs, traditions, and history of the village and the region.

## 4. Results

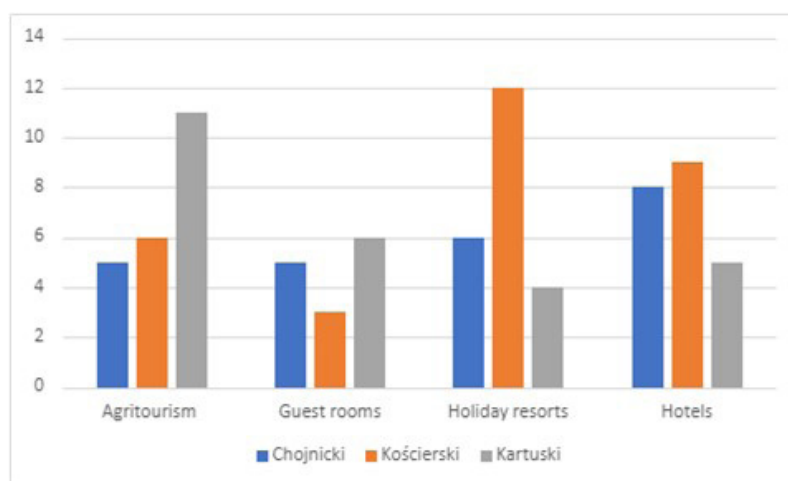
### 4.1. Dynamics of change in accommodation capacity

The accommodation base is a major element of tourism development, consisting of accommodation facilities and accompanying equipment, which makes it possible for tourists to stay in places other than their permanent residence. The structure of the base is closely linked to natural and socio-economic conditions. Tourism generates new jobs and increases the income of the rural population.

In the analysed area of Kashubia, in the districts of Kościerzyna, Chojnice, and Kartuzy in 2021, a total of 80 tourist accommodation

facilities were recorded. Most are situated in the district of Kościerzyna (30). The structure of accommodation facilities is dominated by holiday resorts, which are the most numerous in the district of Kościerzyna (12), followed by agrotourism farms, which are the most numerous in the district of Kartuzy (11), and finally guest rooms (6) (Fig. 3).

The assessment of the development of the tourism base was determined based on the dynamics of changes in tourist accommodation facilities and accommodation places in these



**Figure 3.** Tourist accommodation facilities in 2021 (source: Authors own study based on [www.stat.gov.pl](http://www.stat.gov.pl))

facilities from 2012 to 2021. In the analysed period, the number of accommodation facilities increased in the districts of Kartuzy and Kościerzyna, whereas in the district of Chojnice, it declined. Regarding the structure of accommodation facilities, the highest increase

was observed in the category of hotels, especially in the district of Kartuzy, which testifies to increased tourist demand for such facilities with a higher standard. Similarly, the number of tourist cottages has increased in Kartuzy (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Dynamics of change in the number of tourist accommodation facilities in 2012-2021 (source: Authors own study based on [www.stat.gov.pl](http://www.stat.gov.pl))

Tourist accommodation 2012	Chojnicki			Kartuski			Koscierski		
	2021	Change in %	2012	2021	Change in %	2012	2021	Change in %	
Tourist facilities total	47	37	-21	54	49	-9	41	50	+22
Tourist facilities year-round	24	20	-17	34	33	-3	16	22	+38
Hotels total	7	8	14	1	5	400	8	9	+13
Hotels total rooms	128	139	+9	28	197	604	269	289	+7
Hotels rooms with private bathrooms and WC	111	139	+25	28	197	604	269	289	+7
Holiday resorts total	9	6	-33	6	4	-33	14	12	-14
Holiday resorts year-round	3	1	-67	2	2	0	2	4	+100
Training and recreation centers total	4	4	0	3	2	-33	3	3	0
Tourist cottages total	4	2	-50	1	3	+200	3	8	+167
Campgrounds total	1	0	-100	1	1	0	0	1	
Guest rooms total	4	5	+25	10	6	-40	1	3	+200
Guest rooms year-round	2	2	0	5	4	-20	1	1	0
Agritourism total	6	5	-17	17	11	-35	1	6	+500
Agritourism year-round	5	4	-20	9	5	-44	0	4	
other tourist accommodation facilities total	3	1	-67	5	3	-40	1	2	+100
school youth hostels total	-	-	-	1	1	0	2	1	-50

Agritourism has a special place in the development of rural tourism. A clear increase in the number of agritourist farms was noted in the Kościerzyna district. Analysis of the structure of accommodation places from 2012 to 2021 shows explicit growth in Hotels and Tourist

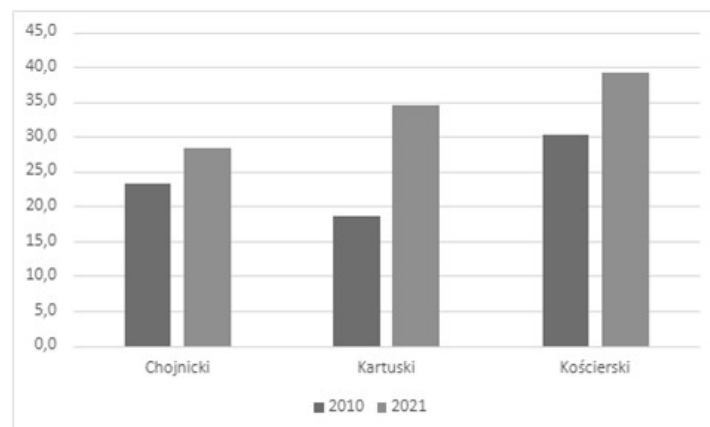
cottages (Kartuzy) and in the Agritourism category (Kościerzyna). Simultaneously, the number of accommodations provided by agritourism declined in the districts of Kartuzy i Chojnice (Table 2).

**Table 2.** Dynamics of changes in tourist accommodation establishments (total and seasonal) in 2012-2021 (source: Authors own study based on [www.stat.gov.pl](http://www.stat.gov.pl))

Tourist accommodation 2012		Chojnicki			Kartuski			Kościerski		
		2021	change in %	2012	2021	change in %	2012	2021	change in %	
Tourist facilities	total	3.241	2.104	-35	2.081	2.766	+33	4.301	4.861	+13
Tourist facilities	year-round	1.143	717	-37	1.276	1.491	+17	1.125	1.326	+18
Hotels	total	240	271	+13	69	417	+504	641	634	-1
Holiday resorts	total	688	386	-44	656	525	-20	2.169	1.824	-16
Holiday resorts	year-round	186	17	-91	268	107	-60	225	236	+5
Training and recreation centers	total	970	514	-47	238	459	+93	366	409	+12
Tourist cottages	total	256	110	-57	100	227	+127	353	901	+155
Campgrounds	total	30	0	-	60	55	-8	0	100	-
Guest rooms	total	71	69	-3	168	113	-33	11	43	+291
Guest rooms	year-round	34	32	-6	64	64	0	11	11	0
Agritourism	total	276	94	-66	292	177	-39	15	99	+560
Agrotourism	year-round	264	81	-69	164	74	-55	0	54	-
Other tourist accommodation facilities	total	197	54	-73	123	114	-7	44	74	+68
Youth hostels	total	0	0	0	25	25	0	355	280	-21

The decline in agritourism may be associated with the pandemic of Covid-19 and its consequences. From 2010 to 2021, the use of accommodation increased in all surveyed dis-

tricts, which testifies to the attractiveness of tourist accommodation. The dynamics were particularly high in the district of Kartuzy (a 16% increase; Fig. 4).



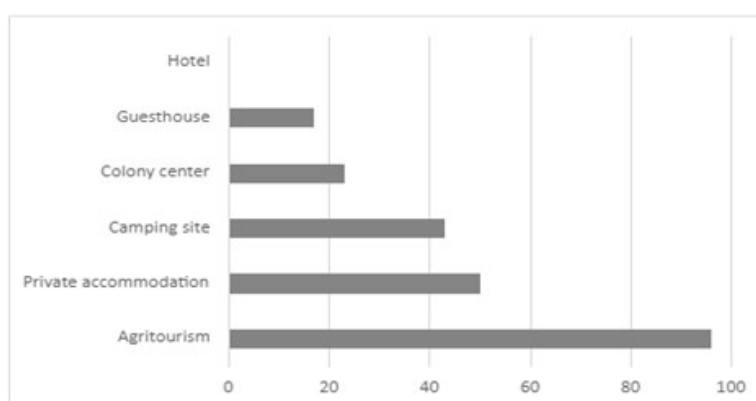
**Figure 4.** Occupancy rate of overnight stays in 2021, % (source: Authors own study based on [www.stat.gov.pl](http://www.stat.gov.pl))

## 4.2. Assessment of the degree of sustainable development in rural tourism

One of the key initiatives in sustainable rural tourism is encouraging tourists to visit local amenities and experience regional cultures. Rural tourism in the analysed area is associated with the history of Kashubia, its regional culture, and its natural resources. Kashubians, as nations, are communities with deeply rooted customs and traditions associated with family and farming. These include harvest festivals, weddings, folk songs, poetry, regional dances, folk paintings, sculptures, Kashubian embroidery, and making wicker baskets.

The prerequisite for the development of rural tourism is creating a package of diverse proposals for leisure activities that are not limited to accommodation and boarding. To allow tourists leave more money in a given locality

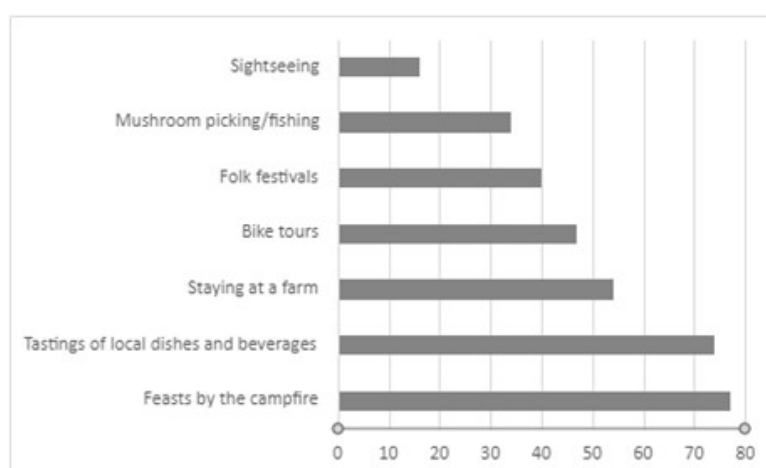
without raising service prices, many additional attractions should be introduced. Fifty respondents, of which 60% were women and 40% were men, participated in the surveys. The age structure was dominated by those in the 18-29 age bracket (63%), followed by those aged 30-60 (27%), and 10% were retired. The survey results suggest that the best way to enhance rural tourism is by organising countryside picnics and folk festivals. Respondents chose agri-tourism farms (96%) when asked about the facilities associated with rural tourism. This is understandable, as such farms offer their visitors a unique experience of direct contact with nature, animals, and rural life, and the opportunity to taste rural specialities (Fig. 5).



**Figure 5.** Accommodation facilities associated with rural tourism in 2021, % (source: Authors own study based on [www.stat.gov.pl](http://www.stat.gov.pl))

The results of the surveys regarding tourist amenities clearly show that the most popular

were campfire feasts (77%), tasting local food and drink (74%), and farm experience (54%).



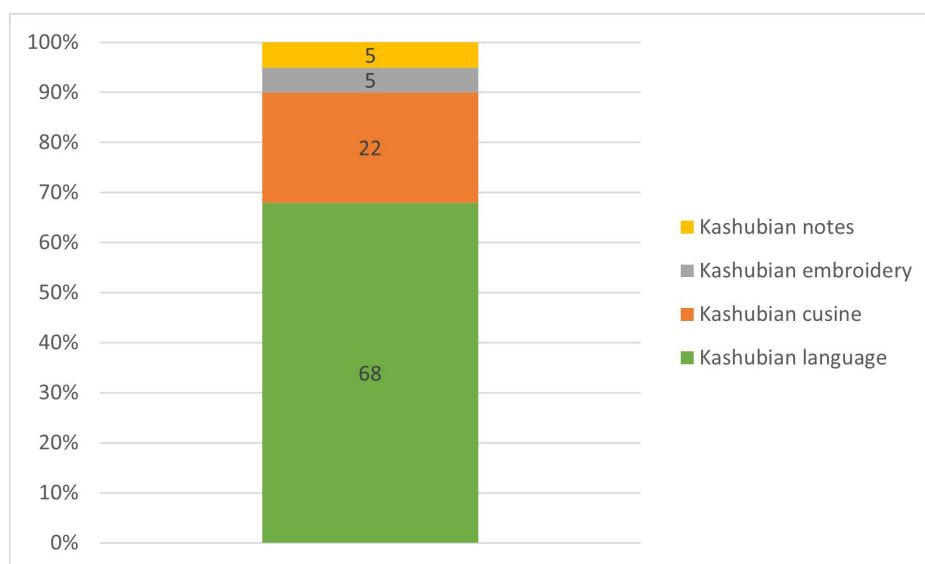
**Figure 6.** Attractions associated with rural tourism in 2021, % (source: Authors own study based on [www.stat.gov.pl](http://www.stat.gov.pl))

Such cultural events provide an excellent opportunity to showcase and express local traditions, learn about local products and handicrafts, and taste local produce. The results may suggest that tourists find it valuable to integrate together, have fun, and eat delicious food while learning about the traditions and culture of Kashubia. Other activities, such as bike tours, folklore festivals, mushroom picking, and angling, were also very popular. The least popular was sight-seeing, which was dominant in cities (Fig. 6).

Kashubia is particularly famous for its rich traditions and history and, above all, for the Kashubian language. In the survey, 68% of the respondents considered the Kashubian language to be the most characteristic of Kashubia. It is one of the oldest and best-preserved regional languages in Poland. Films, books, dictionaries, and village name signs written in Polish and Kashubian contributed to their popularity (Fig. 7 and 8).



**Figure 7.** Folk accents in culture and space- double naming and Kashubian notes (photo by P. Mazur, 2023)

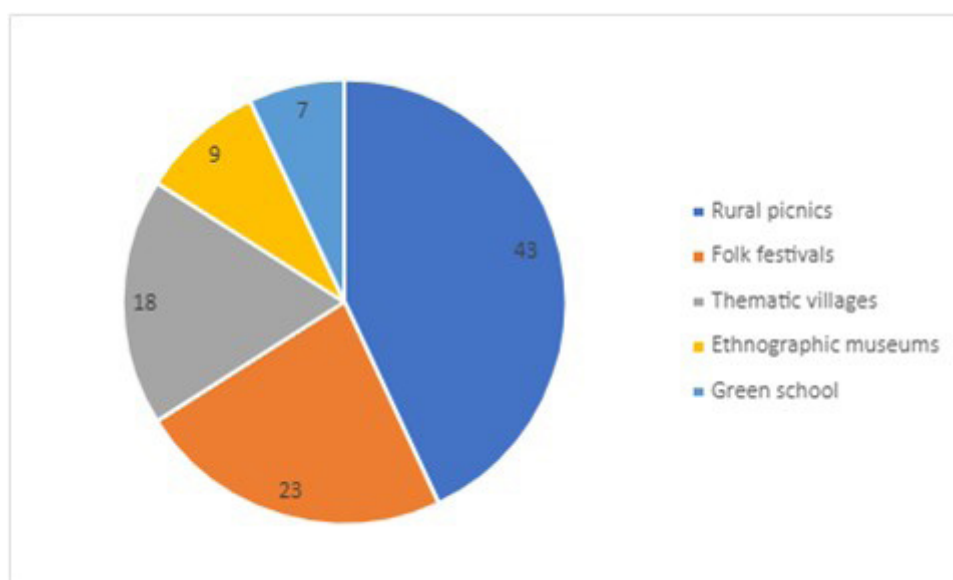


**Figure 8.** The most common associations with Kashubian folklore in 2021, % (source: Authors own study based on [www.stat.gov.pl](http://www.stat.gov.pl))

Respondents could also name a tourist amenity which would expand rural tourism offers. The best way to enhance the offer of rural tourism is by organising countryside picnics and folk festivals. Such cultural events

offer an excellent opportunity to showcase and express local traditions, learn about Kashubian products and handicrafts, and taste local produce (Fig. 9).





**Figure 9.** Enrichment of rural tourism offer in Kashubian in 2021, % (source: Authors own study based [www.stat.gov.pl](http://www.stat.gov.pl))

## 5. Discussion and conclusion

Rural tourism undoubtedly plays an important role in the Polish economy and provides major support for farmers and rural residents. Tourists are increasingly interested in learning not only about historic monuments and architecture but also about local traditions, the atmosphere of the sites, and their history. Rural tourism in Poland should be viewed as an important branch of economic activity, both locally and internationally. This product has become increasingly popular in international markets. In EU countries, the proportion of people holidaying in the countryside is growing, for example, in Germany (43%) (Belias et al., 2018), France (39%) (Olimovich, 2020), the Netherlands (38%) (Kamiński, 2015), and the UK and Ireland (28%) (Ozturk and Isinkaralar, 2018). A vital element of tourism development in these countries is a well-developed tourist infrastructure and a network of cycling routes (Earl, 2008). Opportunities for rural tourism development in Poland are very diversified due to the insufficient service level and condition of accommodation facilities, and low attractiveness in terms of the presence of architectural monuments (Kozłowska-Adamczak, 2019). Therefore, we should search for new solutions in line with the trend towards sustainable development, which means creating new tourism products that leverage tradition, folklore,

and culture. This direction in tourism offers the possibility of close contact with nature and local people, learning about their life, culture, customs, and everyday problems as well as local food made from local products. Our research results explicitly indicate significant progress in the development of tourism infrastructure during the period under review. Rural tourism can contribute to the development of sustainable rural areas in Kashubia in line with the concept of a green economy. The development of the accommodation base in Kashubia fits in with the concept of sustainable development as it generates new jobs. Meeting the diverse leisure and recreational needs of tourists in rural areas not only increases the earning potential of hosts receiving visitors directly, but also that of other rural residents, triggering various other forms of visitor-related activity. Sustainable tourism in rural Kashubia can contribute to an increase in local economies and nature conservation. The rural areas of Kashubia have great potential for the development of sustainable tourism. This function can be fulfilled by agritourism farms and themed villages that combine environmental protection and leisure tourism.

Our research produced the following recommendations. Consideration should be given to extending the tourist season by introducing

new features, irrespective of climatic conditions, boarding based on regional cuisine, additional amenities such as horse riding, appealing excursions, and involvement in farm work. The range of various amenities offered to tourists is enormous and can be shared by several farms in the area. Nowadays, online promotion has

played an essential role: to show the beauty and uniqueness of Kashubia to the world, it is worth involving the potential of social media. Sharing information, photos, and videos will help effectively reach a wider audience, which will significantly contribute to raising awareness of the significance of rural tourism.

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