

ПЕДАГОГИКАЛЫҚ ҒЫЛЫМДАР / ПЕДАГОГИЧЕСКИЕ НАУКИ /
PEDAGOGICAL SCIENCES

UDK 796.34
SCSTI 77.29.33

ASSESSMENT OF RURAL TOURISM SERVICE SECTOR
DEVELOPMENT IN LITHUANIA

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ОЦЕНКА РАЗВИТИЯ СЕКТОРА УСЛУГ СЕЛЬСКОГО ТУРИЗМА В ЛИТВЕ

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ЛИТВАДА АУЫЛ ТУРИЗМІ ҚЫЗМЕТТЕРІ СЕКТОРЫНЫҢ
ДАМУЫН БАҒАЛАУ

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Annotation

The article deals with rural tourism services sector and its development problems. In Lithuania rural tourism the most growing tourism services sector, which must be supported and actively developed due to the fact that rural tourism decide the country's social and environmental problems, enables the development of country's economy, helping to address the employment of rural population. However, rural tourism in the process of its activities as well as facing a number of obstacles and challenges that need to be identified and evaluated. Relevance of the research topic is based on the assessment of rural tourism services sector analysis and its problematic aspects. The study of characteristics of rural tourism service shows that rural tourism service is an activity, which directly or indirectly contributes to the satisfaction of consumers' needs, and manifests as a relation between consumers and servants providing the service. Rural tourism service exists as long as it is provided and consumed. Usually, services are being classified according to several characteristics. This helps to better understand and improve the rendered services, and to strive for their quality and competitiveness.

Key words: services, rural tourism, rural tourism development problems.

Аңдатпа

Бұл мақалада ауылдық туризм мәселесі және оны дамыту проблемалары қарастырылады. Литвада ауыл туризмі ауылдық туризм елдің әлеуметтік және экологиялық проблемаларын шешетіндіктен, ел экономикасын дамытуға және ауыл тұрғындарын жұмыспен қамтуға көмектесетіндіктен ауылдық туризмді қолдау және дамуы керек жылдам дамып келе жатқан туризм секторы болып саналады. Сонымен қатар, ауылдық туризм сонымен қатар белгілі бір қиындықтар мен проблемалармен бетпе-бет келіп, олардың қызметі барысында анықталуы және бағалануы қажет. Зерттеу тақырыбының өзектілігі ауылдық туристік қызметтердің дамуын талдау және оның проблемалық аспектілерін бағалауға негізделген. Ауылдық туризм қызметінің сипаттамасын зерделеу, ауыл туризмінің қызметі-бұл тұтынушылардың қажеттіліктерін қанағаттандыруға тікелей немесе жанама ықпал ететін және қызмет көрсететін тұтынушылар мен қызметшілер арасындағы байланыс ретінде көрінетін қызмет. Ауыл туризмі қызметі ұсынылған және тұтынылғанға дейін болады. Әдетте қызметтер бірнеше сипаттамалар бойынша жіктеледі. Бұл көрсетілетін қызметтерді жақсы түсінуге және жақсартуға, сондай-ақ олардың сапасы мен бәсекеге қабілеттілігіне ұмтылуға көмектеседі.

Түйінді сөздер: қызметтер, ауылдық туризм, ауылдық туризмді дамыту мәселелері.

Аннотация

В статье рассматриваются вопросы сельского туризма и проблемы его развития. В Литве сельский туризм считается наиболее быстро растущим туристическим сектором, который необходимо поддерживать и активно развивать в связи с тем, что сельский туризм решает социальные и экологические проблемы страны, позволяет развивать экономику страны и помогает трудоустройству сельских жителей. Тем не менее, сельский туризм также сталкивается с определенными препятствиями и проблемами, которые необходимо выявить и оценить в процессе их деятельности. Актуальность темы исследования основана на анализе развития услуг сельского туризма и оценке его проблемных аспектов.

Изучение характеристик службы сельского туризма показывает, что услуга сельского туризма - это деятельность, которая прямо или косвенно способствует удовлетворению потребностей потребителей, и проявляется как связь между потребителями и служащими, предоставляющими услуги. Служба сельского туризма существует до тех пор, пока она предоставляется и потребляется. Обычно услуги классифицируются по нескольким характеристикам. Это помогает лучше понять и улучшить предоставляемые услуги, а также стремиться к их качеству и конкурентоспособности.

Ключевые слова: услуги, сельский туризм, проблемы развития сельского туризма.

Introduction

After Lithuania joined the European Union (EU), rural tourism became one of the most rapidly growing industry sectors. Referring to the data given by United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) [2013], rural tourism is the most progressive field in the tourism sector. Rural tourism solves country's social and environmental problems, allows the development of national economy, helps in solving one of the most pressing problems – employment of people in rural areas. Nevertheless, rural tourism is facing certain obstacles and problems that need to be identified and evaluated.

Number of Lithuanian scientists from various scientific fields have studied tendencies for the development of rural tourism services based on different aspects, e.g. Gražulis V., Narkūnienė R. [2015]; Damulienė A. [2012]; Gargasas A., Ramanauskienė J. and Rukuižienė R., Kšivickienė D. [2012]; Žalys L. and Žalienė I. Ižodaitė I. [2006]; Žilinskas V.J. and Maksimenko M. [2008], etc.; however, a systematic approach towards the changes in rural tourism services development, that occurred during Lithuania's integration to EU and later, is missing. The relevance of the research topic is based on the analysis of the development of rural tourism services and on the assessment of its problem aspects.

Research object – problems in rural tourism sector development.

Research aim – to analyze rural tourism sector's development problems in Lithuania.

Tasks:

1. To characterize rural tourism services;
2. To analyze rural tourism service sector's indicators in Lithuania during 2004–2015;
3. To assess rural tourism development problems in Lithuania.

Research methods. Scientific literature analysis, analysis of documents, statistical data analysis, graphic imaging methods, generalization method.

Characterization of rural tourism services

So far, there is no single definition of what activities are to be assumed as rural tourism services. In order to better understand the characteristics of services in rural tourism, first of all, it is necessary to figure out the concept of services and rural tourism. The concept of services is presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Concept of services

<i>Authors</i>	<i>Description</i>
C. Lovelock and J. Wirtz (2007)	It is an action, proposed by one side of the transaction to the other.
R. Pukelytė (2010)	It is a relationship between persons, when one person (the provider) aims to satisfy the needs of another person (the user).
A. Gargasas and I. Mūgienė (2012)	It is an activity, process, benefit, economic good or a sequence of actions and processes.
J.P. Thomassen, K. Ahaus et al. (2014)	It is a satisfaction of consumers' needs, for which they pay themselves.

Source: composed with reference to sudaryta C. Lovelock and J. Wirtz, 2007 [12]; R. Pukelytė, 2010 [13]; A. Gargasas and I. Mūgienė, 2012 [6]; J.P. Thomassen, K. Ahaus et al., 2014 [17].

Further, it is purposeful to review the concept of rural tourism, which is presented in Table 2.

Table 2 Concept of rural tourism (Source: composed with reference to A. Astromskienė, D. Kleinienė et al., 2007 [1]; A. Gargasas and D. Večerskas, 2013 [7]; T. Zou, S. Huang et al., 2014 [18])

<i>Authors</i>	<i>Description</i>
A. Astromskienė, D. Kleinienė et al. (2007)	It is an alternative economic activity to farming that is promoted by measures of regional development.
A. Gargasas and D. Večerskas (2013)	It is a type of tourism that is related to nature, natural environment, agriculture, rural environment, its knowledge, relaxation and recreational activities is the countryside.
T. Zou, S. Huang et al. (2014)	It is a place for leisure time and holidays, which is based on rural tourist attraction places and other resources, as well as, on a culture and heritage preservation.

When integrating both concepts, i. e. rural tourism and services, it can be seen that rural tourism service is an activity, which directly or indirectly contributes to meeting the needs of consumers, and manifests among the consumers and servants of the service providers.

Rural tourism sector's activity is characterized by tremendous diversity; therefore, in pursuance to ensure efficient service delivery, it is necessary to classify them according to certain characteristics. According to L. Bagdonienė and R. Hopenienė [3], rural tourism classificatory features could be the following: rural tourism service providers, rural tourism service consumers, participation of rural tourism service users, nature of rural tourism service supply, nature of relations between rural tourism users and providers.

In summary, it can be stated that rural tourism service is an activity, which directly or indirectly contributes to meeting the needs of consumers, and manifests among the consumers and servants of the service providers. Rural tourism service exists as long as it is provided and consumed. The classification of these services, if based on one feature, might be insufficient,

therefore, these services usually are classified by several typical characteristics. This helps to better understand and improve rendered services, and strive to ensure their quality and competitiveness.

Ratio analysis of rural tourism sector in Lithuanian during 2004–2015

Lithuania is a particularly conducive country for rural tourism development. Rural areas in Lithuania cover 85 percent of the entire territory [5], as a result, the objects for tourism attraction – forests, water bodies, objects of culture heritage and abundance of traditional crafts – distinguish priority territorial regions for rural tourism development.

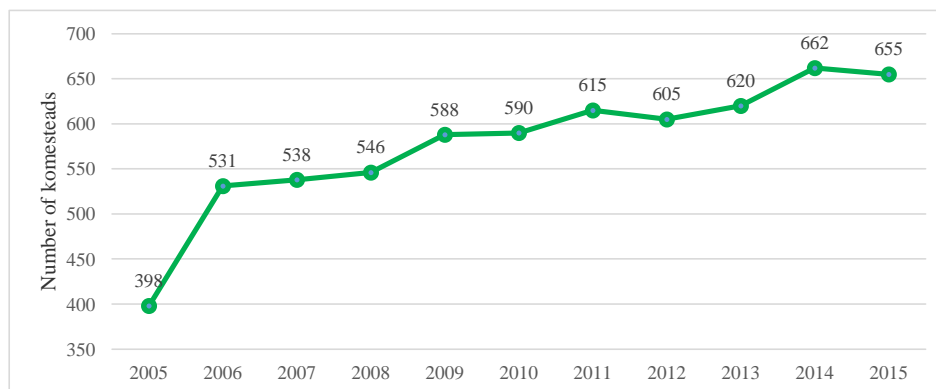


Figure 1 Number of farmsteads in Lithuania’s rural tourism sector during 2005–2015, units. (Source: composed with reference to data provided by Lithuanian Department of Statistics)

Figure 1 shows that during the entire period of analysis, i.e. 2005–2015, the number of rural tourism homesteads was increasing (except for 2011–2012 and 2015–2015). In 2015, as compared to 2005, rural tourism homesteads increased by 257 units, or 64,57 percent. This could have been caused by a growing consumer demand and the obtained support from European Union (EU) structural funds that is encouraging the development of rural tourism sector.

Figure 2 graphically depicts the number of rural tourism homesteads in the counties of Lithuania during 2005–2015.

The figure above shows that the largest number of rural dwellings during 2005–2015 was recorded in Utena County. In fact, Utena County offered a more diversified range of services than other regions due to its abundant ethnographic resources and its favorable relief. Alytus and Vilnius Counties also occupy a fairly large percentage in the development of Lithuanian rural tourism sector. Both of these counties are next to each other, therefore, their percentage is similar.

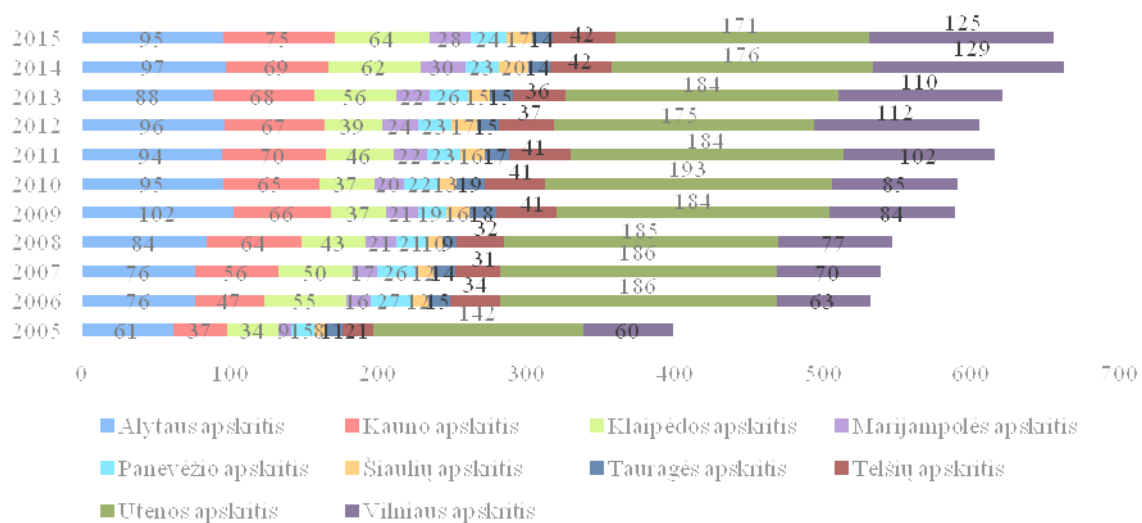


Figure 2 Number of rural tourism homesteads in the counties of Lithuania during 2005–2015, units. (Source: composed with reference to data provided by Lithuanian Department of Statistics (2016))

However, the number of rural dwellings in Vilnius County was tendentially increasing (by 65 units) and when compared to other counties, Vilnius County had the highest increase in the number of homesteads during the period of analysis. Meanwhile, the number of rural dwellings in Alytus County varied unevenly. This could have been caused by a more rapid increase in number of homesteads in the Vilnius County. With reference to the number of rural dwellings, Kaunas County is lagging behind Alytus and Vilnius Counties, having 11 percent of the entire homesteads in Lithuania's rural tourism sector. All of the remaining counties have similar numbers of rural tourism homesteads. As is seen in the Figure 2, the lowest number of dwellings was recorded in Šiauliai County and Taurage County. These regions have long been known to be regions of agriculture; therefore, rural tourism is not the main activity there.

With reference to the Lithuanian Department of Statistics [16], accommodation sites in the homesteads of Lithuania rural tourism sector during 2004–2015 was analyzed. It was found that an average number of beds per homestead varied slightly throughout 2004–2015. An average number of accommodation sites in a single rural dwelling varied from 15 units to 19 units during 2004–2008, i.e. increased by 4 units; during 2009–2010, the average was 21 units, and during 2011–2015 – 22 units. An average number of seats per homestead during the entire period of 2004–2015 increased by 7 units, or 46,67 percent (see Fig. 3).

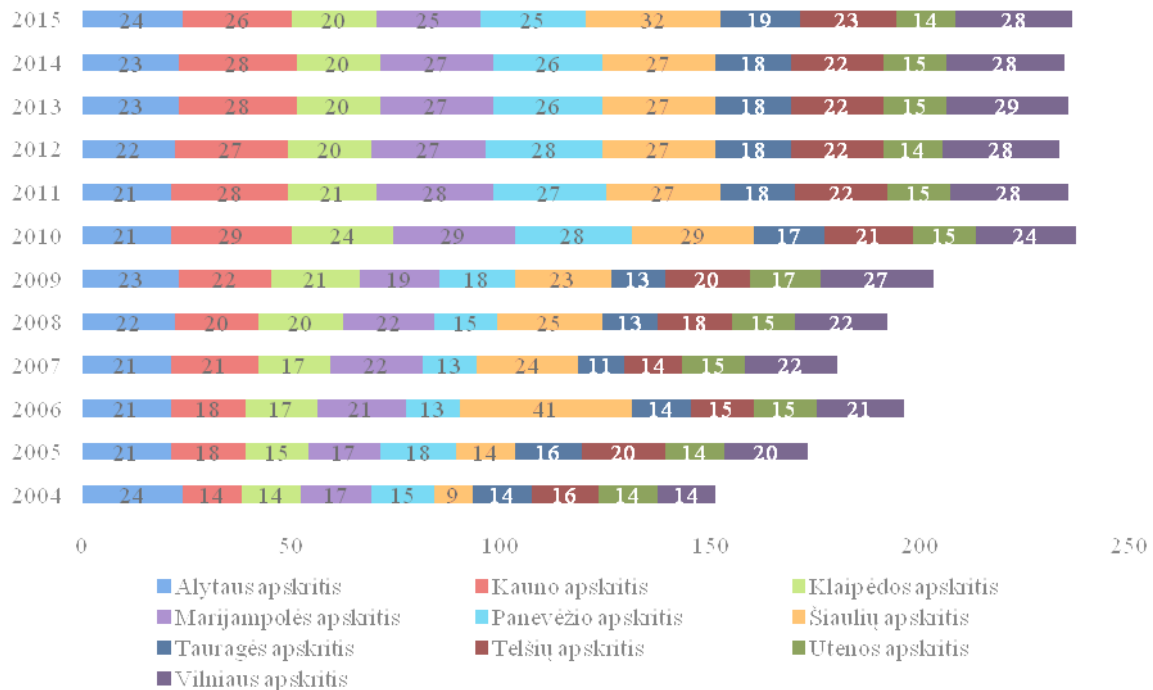


Figure 3 Average number of beds per homestead, in the counties of Lithuania, units.
(Source: composed with reference to data provided by Lithuanian Department of Statistics (2016))

The highest number of average seats per homestead was recorded in Šiauliai County, where the seats increased by 23 units over the analyzed period. Counties of Alytus, Kaunas, Klaipėda, Marijampolė, and Panevėžys also presented similar average number of seats per homestead. An average number of beds per rural dwelling in Alytus and Utena counties remained completely unchanged during 2004–2015. Kaunas and Panevėžys counties experienced a lesser increase than Šiauliai County, which was 12 units and 10 units respectively. In the remaining counties (Klaipėda, Marijampolė, Tauragė, Telšiai), an increase from 5 units to 8 units was observed.

In summary, it can be stated that the number of rural tourism homesteads and beds per dwelling was increasing during 2005–2015. It is noteworthy to mention that the largest number of rural tourism homesteads and number of seats is recorded in Utena, Alytus and Vilnius Counties. The lowest number was recorded at Tauragė and Šiauliai Counties. The analysis proved that the largest number of overnight stays was given in Vilnius and Utena Counties, and the lowest – in Tauragė and Šiauliai Counties.

Rural tourism development problems in Lithuania

The performed analysis of the rural tourism sector indicators showed that each region faces certain challenges. Considering theoretical aspects of rural tourism and completing the analysis of its indicators in Lithuania, given the period 2005–2015, the following problems that rural tourism sector in Lithuania confronts are distinguished (see Fig. 4).

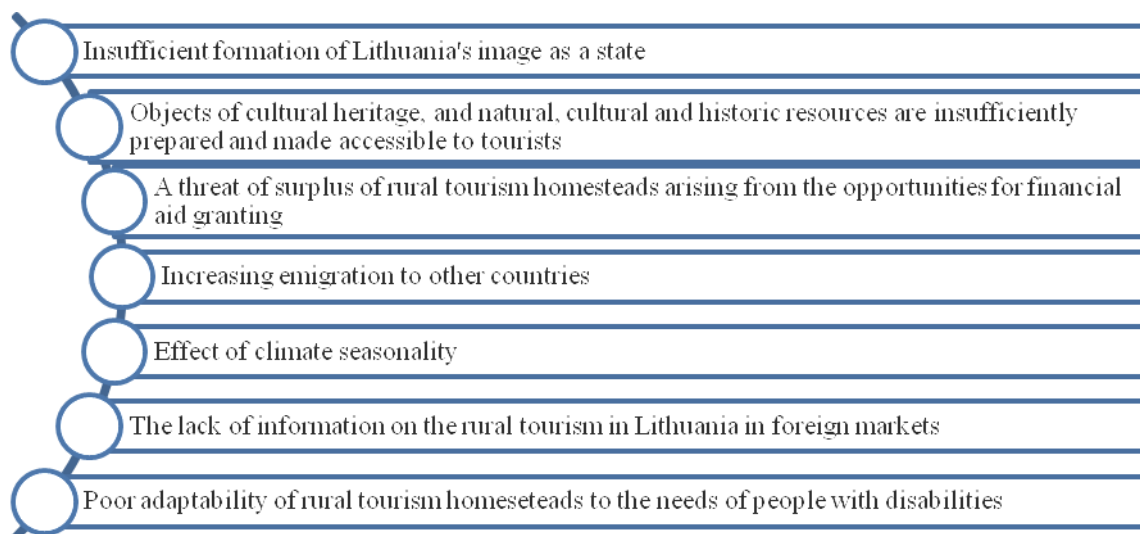


Figure 4 Rural tourism development problems in Lithuania
(Source: composed with reference to the perform research results)

Insufficient formation of Lithuania's image as a state. Foreign countries have little knowledge about Lithuania's countryside. Therefore, it is necessary to improve its image in foreign countries by spreading positive information that would highlight the uniqueness of Lithuania's countryside. The increasing flow of foreign tourists would favorably affect not only the country's economy, but also the performance of rural tourism homesteads.

Objects of cultural heritage, natural, cultural and historic resources are insufficiently prepared and made accessible to tourists. Lithuania is surrounded by forests, water bodies, objects of cultural heritage and there are plenty of traditional craft workshops. The performed analysis of statistical indicators showed that the largest number of rural tourism homesteads is established in Dzukija, Aukstaitija and Zemaitija regions of Lithuania, therefore, it can be stated that the entire development of rural tourism is focused precisely on these regions. It is necessary to motivate entrepreneurs to establish rural homesteads not only employing EU structural funds, but also using the aid from municipalities and the state itself.

A threat of surplus of rural tourism homesteads arising from the opportunities for financial aid granting. EU structural funds contributes to the development of rural tourism, local businesses, and state's economy. However, a rapidly growing number of rural tourism homesteads, and at the same time, an increased competition and a relatively low number of consumers of this service determine the decrease in homesteads that are functioning in rural tourism sector. As a result, people living in countryside, who are working in this section, loose their workplaces and the state loses its tax revenues.

Increasing emigration to other countries. This is an extremely delicate issue on the scope of Lithuania, since the emigration rate conditions the decline in population, and the rural tourism sector, as well as other service sectors, loses potential customers, clients, which in return has a negative impact on state's business development.

Effect of climate seasonality. An increasing number of people are opting for a foreign country, where the climate is more stable and much warmer. Therefore, Lithuania's rural tourism experiences financial detriment as the number of customer declines. As a result, fewer entrepreneurs choose to invest in the rural tourism sector and this in turn has a negative effect on the development of rural tourism sector.

The lack of information on the rural tourism in Lithuania in foreign markets. If Lithuanian residents lack complete information on their country's rural tourism, one should not expect to attract many foreign tourists. Therefore, it is important to spare no investment to marketing, i. e. to promote the homesteads operating in rural tourism market both on the national and foreign levels. This would not only shape the country's image, but would also attract more tourists to Lithuania. Obviously, thus would be a positive impact on the development of the country's rural tourism.

Poor adaptability of rural tourism homesteads to the needs of people with disabilities. The majority of rural tourism homesteads are not equipped to meet the needs of the disabled, e.g. there are no driveways that would lead to the inside of the homestead, the layouts of dwellings are not favorable for the disabled, and etc. As a result, clients of this specific group need to choose other alternatives where rendered services would be favorable to the disabled. Therefore, it is important that entrepreneurs would pay attention to the need of the disabled when establishing dwellings for rural tourism in the future. This would satisfy one of the socially responsible business principles, i.e. not only profit would be made, but also one of the most sensitive sectors of society – the disabled – would be served.

In summary, Lithuanian rural tourism development is seen to be facing such problems as insufficient formation of Lithuania's image; the lack of access to the objects of cultural heritage, natural, cultural and historic resources; a threat of the surplus of rural tourism homesteads due to the possibilities for the financial support; an increasing emigration to other countries; effect of climate seasonality; the lack of information on Lithuania's rural tourism in foreign markets, and a poor adaptability of the rural tourism dwellings to people with disabilities.

Conclusions

Having performed theoretical and empirical analysis of the rural tourism service sector and assessed problems with its development in Lithuania, the following conclusions are obtained.

The study of characteristics of rural tourism service shows that rural tourism service is an activity, which directly or indirectly contributes to the satisfaction of consumers' needs, and manifests as a relation between consumers and servants providing the service. Rural tourism service exists as long as it is provided and consumed. Usually, services are being classified according to several characteristics. This helps to better understand and improve the rendered services, and to strive for their quality and competitiveness.

The analysis of indicators of the rural tourism sector during 2004–2015, shows that number of rural tourism dwellings and seats per dwelling was increasing in Lithuania during 2005–2015. The largest numbers of rural homesteads and seats were recorded in Utena, Alytus and Vilnius Counties, the lowest – in Taurage and Siauliai Counties.

Having assessed the main indicators of rural tourism service sector, it was concluded that the development of Lithuania's rural tourism sector is facing such problems as insufficient formation of Lithuania's image; the lack of access to the objects of cultural heritage, natural, cultural and historic resources; a threat of the surplus of rural tourism homesteads due to the possibilities for the financial support; an increasing emigration to other countries; effect of climate seasonality; the lack of information on Lithuania's rural tourism in foreign markets, and a poor adaptability of the rural tourism dwellings to people with disabilities. All of the problems could be solved if an accountable rural tourism policy would be implemented both at national and local levels, deliberately protecting and respecting both members of the society and natural resources.

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