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ACCESSIBILITY OF TOURISM SPACE FROM A GEOGRAPHICAL PERSPECTIVE

Abstract: The accessibility of tourism space is becoming an increasingly significant issue in geographical research due to, amongst other things, demographic changes (an ageing population, growing numbers of people with disabilities) alongside guaranteeing a universal right of access to tourism. The nature of geographical research (physical, socio-economic) allows this issue to be viewed systemically. Drawing on the fields of geography and accessible tourism, this article presents the assumptions of a model which makes a systemic analysis of the factors conditioning the accessibility of tourism space possible. It also highlights the need for further research into the optimal level of detail in universal design principles which can be applied in tourism.

Key words: accessibility, accessible tourism, tourism space, tourism geography, universal design, social model of disability, geographical model of disability.

1. INTRODUCTION – THE ESSENCE OF TOURISM SPACE

Space has been considered the fundamental domain of the geographical sciences since their very beginning. However, if we accept that in a lexical sense space is an infinite and undefined 3-dimensional area (*Słownik współczesnego języka polskiego* 1996) then we can conclude that treating space as the object of geographical research is quite metaphorical. For in reality, such studies refer not to space itself, but rather to the objects and subjects contained therein (LISOWSKI 2003) as well as the interaction which occurs between them. The use of terms such as “space” or “spatial” mainly exposes the location of certain phenomena or objects, and furthermore, it is often connected to an analytical separation of space and time (KOSTROWICKI 1997) which are treated as two separate entities. In the context of research into tourism geography **tourism space** has frequently been defined as part of geographical space:

1) “and socio-economic, in which tourism phenomena occur” (WARSZYŃSKA, JACKOWSKI 1978, p. 31);

2) “which fulfils a function in tourism as it possesses characteristics (either in terms of the natural environment or appropriate infrastructure) which are useful for tourism service providers and for tourists. These include elements of the earth's surface (natural

environment), permanent effects of human activity in the specific environment (economic environment) and also the human environment in a social understanding” (LISZEWSKI 1995, p. 94);

3) “where tourism occurs. The necessary and sufficient condition for classifying a part of geographical space as tourism space is tourism, regardless of its volume and character” (WŁODARCZYK 2009, pp. 74-75, 2011a, p. 59).

Definition (1) distinguishes two basic types of space: physical (natural) and non-physical (cultural, social, economic). This reflects the opinions held by human geographers (LISOWSKI 2003, KOWALCZYK 2011) who, distinguish between autotelic space (physical) in the objective approach, and heterotelic space (non-physical) in the subjective approach. The second of the definitions presented above, provides a more detailed anthropocentric division of the geographical environment into natural, economic and social. It has been the starting point for many studies treating tourism space both statically and dynamically, thus permitting an analysis of how it has changed and evolved (KOWALCZYK 2011). In turn, definition (3) is “centred” on the very core of the tourism system which is “human – tourist”. In this case the basic features of tourism space include its relative nature. Once acknowledged as relative space, it cannot exist without a subject, in this case: human (WŁODARCZYK 2011b).

On the basis of the definitions of tourism space given above two paradigms can be noted, focusing on: 1) **features of geographical space fulfilling tourism functions** (WARSZYŃSKA & JACKOWSKI 1978, LISZEWSKI 1995), 2) an object determining the significance and function of this space – **the tourist** (WŁODARCZYK 2009).

The concept of tourism space is also treated in a wider perspective both as part of geographical space and as abstract or mental space (STACHOWSKI 1993, KRZYMOWSKA-KOSTROWICKA 1997, ZAJADACZ 2011a). However, the second and third ways to interpret tourism space also arise in other disciplines dealing with tourism, therefore the most “geographical” seems to be the view of tourism space as part of real space, in accordance with the term “Geography” which refers to the location of different phenomena in 3-dimensional space (RELPH 1976, KOWALCZYK 2011). In his description of the basic features of tourism space KOWALCZYK (2011) took the following into account: position (location), size (scale), cohesion (content) and permanence (continuity). The first three of these are static by nature whereas the last concerns the dynamics of change with time. The list of characteristics inherently connected with tourism space should also include its accessibility. And here the question of accessibility should be considered both from the point of view of the realities of tourism space and also its user (i.e., the socio-economic position and psychosomatic state of the tourist).

The question “what sort of conditions should accessible tourism space fulfil?” leads to an automatic response that each tourism space (if in accordance with definition (3) its determinant is the presence of tourists) is assumed to be accessible. However, it is also possible to observe that it is not so for everybody nor to the same extent. The starting point in an analysis of tourism space should therefore be the characteristics of the potential tourist, their individual abilities and limitations in regard to being able to penetrate a particular type of tourism space. These are important aspects to consider in the context of human rights, related to universal access to recreation and tourism (Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2006, ratified in Poland in 2012). They are especially significant in the case of those who encounter numerous difficulties when travelling for purposes of tourism (including those with disabilities, the elderly, or those facing socio-economic problems).

In order to present the conditions determining accessibility of tourism space, the first part of the article attempts to explain key notions such as *accessibility*, *accessible tourism* and related concepts (*universal design*, *the social and geographical disability models*). With this in mind, the basic conditions of tourism space accessibility are presented, assuming that the **core of tourism space is the tourist**. However, the character-

istics of geographical space, which fulfil a role in tourism, include components such as the physical (natural), economic and social environments. Accessibility of tourism space is considered from a geographical (real) perspective and a static perspective (i.e. without examining changes over time).

2. ACCESSIBILITY, ACCESSIBLE TOURISM

Accessibility as a condition which must be fulfilled is a fundamental factor for all tourists, if the tourism space is to be penetrated. The term *accessible* means: convenient, achievable, at one's disposal. It is also connected with characteristics such as usability, functionality and versatility. It refers to a place (location) – as it is possible to get to somewhere; information – something that is understandable, clear; social relations – when someone is communicative, open to other people; the activity aim – which can be relatively easily achieved, gained (e.g. thanks to price, level of difficulty, effort involved). In literature, as in the tourism economy the term *accessible tourism* is applied (BUHALIS & DARCY ed. 2011, BUHALIS, DARCY & AMBROSE ed. 2012), and it has replaced the concept of *tourism for all*, which was popular in the 1990s and 2000s.

Accessible tourism is a form of tourism that involves collaborative processes between stakeholders that enable people with access requirements, including mobility, vision, hearing and cognitive dimensions of access, to function independently and with equity and dignity through the delivery of universally designed tourism products, services and environments (BUHALIS & DARCY ed. 2011, p. 10).

Stakeholders are all the persons or groups who have interests in the planning, process(es), delivery and/or outcomes of the tourism service (SAUTTER & LEISEN 1999, p. 315, MICHOPLOULOU & BUHALIS 2011, p. 261).

When defined in this way, *accessible tourism* takes into account the full human life cycle and the fact that anyone, depending on their physical condition (which can change) and the particular stage of family life they are in, can benefit from certain types of facilities. Problems of restricted access to tourism space (due to physical, technical, social, information-based, economic barriers) affect many social groups which include: people with a temporary or permanent disability, the elderly, families with young children, those at risk of social exclusion (e.g., immigrant families, the poor, ethnic or religious minorities). In the case of technical and information barriers which hinder the accessibility of tourism space it is noticeable that this problem especially affects those with disabilities and the elderly. Referring to the needs of people with disabilities

accessibility is defined as meaning that people with disabilities have access, on an equal basis with others, to the physical environment, transportation, information and communications technologies and systems (ICT) and other facilities and services (*Europejska strategia w sprawie...* 2010, p. 5).

Konwencja ONZ praw osób... (2006) – The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006), and subsequent legal acts states “that persons with disabilities are entitled to the enjoyment of the full range of civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights embodied in international human rights instruments on an equal basis with other persons” (OHCHR, 2010, quoted from FOGGIN 2011, p. 99). The needs of persons with disabilities are not currently treated as “special”, but as one of many which occur in today’s society. Any response to them should respect the principles of **universal design** which is:

the design of products and environments to be usable by all people to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design (*Universal design...* 2007, p. 6).

It is worth highlighting that infrastructure which is accessible to people with disabilities is considered a symbol of modernity (PEARN 2011).

Likewise, the starting point in the analysis of accessible tourism for the elderly is the identification of factors determining tourism demand (Fig. 1), to which the nature of supply in the target destination/region as well as areas en-route, should be adapted.

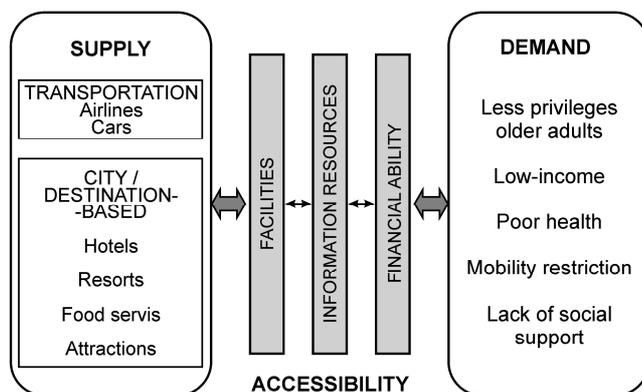


Fig. 1. A description of supply and demand of the ageing travel market regarding accessibility requirements
Source: Y. WANG 2011, p. 195

This adaptation of the characteristics of tourism space to the needs, expectations and limitations of people with disabilities or the elderly reflects the social model of disability (SM) of 1976 (Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation, after PEARNS 2011) which defines disability as the result of the existence of restricting factors in the environment as well as social and mental barriers which compound the dysfunction

of a given person and make participation in society difficult or impossible (OLIVER 1996, DARCY 2010, DARCY & PEGG 2011).

The removal of barriers limiting people with specific dysfunctions raises the quality of life and equal opportunities in relation to the fully-abled section of society. The strength of the social model of disability lies in the assumption that it is not the person with a disability who should adapt to the environment but that changes should be made to social conditions by which the inclusion of the particular individual in society becomes possible. However, some researchers believe that society’s view of disability ignores the fact that not everything is a matter of social perspective “as people have bodies and thus also bodily (physical) problems” (BEST 2010, p. 98). This is why many people with disabilities experience psychological problems which would exist even if society did everything possible to include them in the mainstream of social life.

Geographers today, based on experience so far, use the results of studies into the “person with disability – geographical space” relation in the conceptualisation of a *geographical model of disability* (GM). Geographers have long been interested in issues of disability, even as far back as the 1930s (FARIS & DUNHAM 1939). They connect the factors causing disability (*disabling nature*) with social and spatial aspects of human life. Furthermore, the notion of more “inclusive” solutions which facilitate access to space as well as the full scope of life in society for people with various types of disability is promoted. The proposed model of disability (CHOUINARD, HALL & WILTON 2010) aims to eliminate tensions regarding the social model which treats disability as a process of social exclusion. In the GM, it is assumed that the causes of limited ability are individual circumstances connected to a specific type of dysfunction as well as the surrounding physical and social conditions determining the difficulties which arise in the “person with disabilities – environment (social, physical)” equation. Needs connected to various types and degrees of disability, as just some of many occurring in contemporary society, should be taken into account in the creation of accessible buildings, services and sites through the application of the principles of universal design amongst others (IMRIE 2012, ZAJADACZ 2010a, 2010b, 2012).

3. ACCESSIBLE TOURISM SPACE

The accessibility of tourism space from the geographical perspective was once understood in terms of accessible transportation, as the possibility of getting to the destination via a means of transport, and also as

the transportation links, hiking trails and ski lifts enabling a tourist to go on excursions within the selected tourist region to specific places (WARSZYŃSKA & JACKOWSKI 1978; KOWALCZYK 2001). Geographers also noted the meaning of accessibility represented by the concept of *hospitable space* (KACZMAREK, STASIAK & WŁODARCZYK 2008), identifying hospitable tourism space as that which is attractive, accessible, safe and friendly. The role of accessibility in relation to sites to visit from the viewpoint of tourists with disabilities was emphasised (KOŁODZIEJCZAK & ZAJADACZ 2008). Many geographical papers have been dedicated to the significance of the tourism information system in making tourism space accessible for people with disabilities, in particular, the deaf (ZAJADACZ 2007, 2010a, 2010b, 2012). The issue of the social integration of the able-bodied and those with disabilities as a factor enabling the creation of a tourism offer accessible to all has also been analysed from a geographical perspective (ZAJADACZ 2011b).

Today, particularly in papers related to the tourism of people with disabilities, the notion of accessibility of tourism space is considered in relation to all its components connected to the interaction network (ZAJADACZ 2012). Such a systemic approach to tourism space is significant for practice, especially for the development of universal design principles in tourism infrastructure, both in terms of sites and in open spaces.

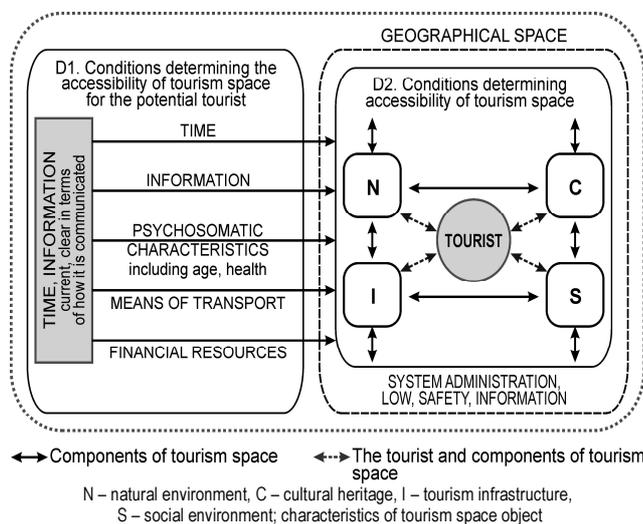


Fig. 2. Accessibility of tourism space – the geographical perspective
Source: A. Zajadacz

The starting point for the development of the accessibility of tourism space model (Fig. 2) was the assumption that it is dependent on two basic groups of conditions. The first group (D1) of elementary variables includes characteristics referring to the situation of the potential tourist (PT), which mean that getting

to the chosen space is actually possible. They include basic conditions such as the time which a given individual has at their disposal (either free time or set as in business or conference tourism) and the financial resources which can be allocated for the trip. Both of these factors condition the possibility of getting to/ and penetrating the given tourism space. The psychosomatic state of the potential tourist, connected to, amongst other factors, age, health, degree and type of disability, susceptibility to fears, phobias (e.g., agoraphobia, socio-phobia) and the skill and ability to acclimatise in an environment different to the place of residence is also of key significance (compare KRZYMOWSKA-KOSTROWICKA 1997).

The actual accessibility of tourism space is also determined by how well means of transport, including the location of car parks, in relation to the tourism space visited, and are adapted to the requirements of the PT. Tourist information is of equal importance. If it is up-to date, reliable and detailed, whether it takes into account the diverse needs of potential tourists and is communicated in a way suited to the various needs of the target audience (including the blind and deaf), planning a tourist trip becomes possible, whether via a travel agent or individually.

The second group of conditions determining accessibility of tourism space (D2) concerns all its components as well as the interaction between them. The basic components include the natural environment (N) and all of its characteristics such as topography (slopes); type of surface (soils); speed of river current, shallows, range of water level fluctuation (on water routes); climate and weather conditions affecting the season and length of time that the tourism space is used, the state of the natural environment and natural catastrophes. Further components are cultural heritage (C) and tourism infrastructure (I), the accessibility of which is conditioned by technical aspects enabling the site to be reached and its exploitation. The skills of the personnel who deal with the tourists are significant, how open and flexible staff are to searching for optimal solutions. Accessibility of the social environment (S) created by the inhabitants of a given tourism space is connected mainly to the political-economic situation which determines whether or not it is possible to stay at a given site. The attitude of the locals towards tourists, in the context of the theory of tourism as an "event" or "dialogue" between cultures, is of fundamental significance (KOWALCZYK 2001). Additionally, social factors include the fact that "humans organise tourism space and also manage it, they likewise undertake business activity within it" (WŁODARCZYK 2011b, p. 17). The attitude of individual entrepreneurs in the tourism industry towards supporting the creation of accessible tourism depends on how this concept is put into practice.

If we acknowledge that the core of tourism space is the user (**T**) this implies that the analysis of the accessibility of tourism space takes individual conditions of behaviour into account. These are connected with all the variables described in group **D1**, as well as the adaptation of specific components of tourism space to individual needs during a stay and getting around within an area.

The presented components of tourism space, as well as its subject (**T**), create a feedback network (interaction) determining the dynamics of this system (e.g. areas a given person can access such as mountain trails which, when physical problems arise, may become inaccessible; surface waters polluted by the local population become unsuitable for swimming, and the use of downhill ski runs can lead to mudslides cutting off accommodation zones or transport routes).

Of significant importance to the accessibility of tourism space is the management of administration, safety and information. This requires the numerous stakeholders to work together in a coherent and consistent way.

The accessibility of tourism space in geographical terms refers above all to physical-functional characteristics. It may therefore be defined as follows:

accessibility refers to how easy it is for everybody to approach, enter and use buildings, outdoor areas and other facilities, independently, without the need for special arrangements (WESTCOTT 2004, p. 7).

Increasing accessibility and providing information on it can benefit many people, both those who wish to travel (but encounter a wide range of difficulties) as well as those working in the tourism industry. By applying universal design to the accessibility of transportation, buildings and spaces used by the public, the local inhabitants also benefit and this has a positive affect on the quality of everyday life.

4. CONCLUSION

The geographical perspective in studies on the accessibility of tourism space carried out in order to create theoretical models and find practical solutions, enables the application of a systemic approach, which permits a holistic view of all the components of this space as well as the interaction between them. This is possible thanks to the complex nature of the geographical sciences, incorporating physical geography (research into the natural environment) and also socio-economic geography. This is of fundamental significance for increasing the accessibility of tourism space due to the need for action – mainly systemic – which guarantees

movement in the tourism space itself, and transit through it, is “fluid”. This fluidity and the related issue of ease of travel is governed by many characteristics of geographical space which fulfil a tourism function, the interested tourist, and also feedback between the subjects and objects which “fill” the tourism space.

Observed trends in the tourism market, connected to increasing the individualisation of tourists' needs, demographic changes (an ageing population, higher numbers of people with disabilities), legal requirements – guaranteeing equal opportunities in terms of access to tourism and leisure, mean the accessibility of tourism space is becoming increasingly important. This increase is founded on accepting that humans – tourists are at the core of tourism space. Any action should therefore take into account the individual tourist's personal situation (psychosomatic, socio-economic). For geographers, this course of action poses current research challenges into the relation between humans and tourism space taking diverse types of tourists and space into account. Moreover, a key issue in practical solutions is finding an answer to the issue of the particulars of amenities introduced in accordance with the principles of universal design. The question as to what solutions exist and the extent to which tourism space should be accessible remains to be answered.

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