COMPETITIVENESS OF TOURIST DESTINATIONS AS A RESEARCH PROBLEM IN THE GEOGRAPHY OF TOURISM – ANALYTICAL ASSUMPTIONS BEHIND THE RESEARCH MODEL

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Abstract: The paper explores the issue of competitiveness in the field of tourism. Assuming an economic perspective and basing on a discussion of the issue with respect to tourist destinations, the paper looks at this type of analysis in the field of the geography of tourism. The paper utilizes systems analysis to create a competitiveness research model for multifunctional tourist destinations, which factors in a spectrum of determinants driving local tourist development.

Keywords: tourist competitiveness, tourist destinations, research model, geography of tourism

Introduction

In a market economy, the issue of competition has special meaning. Increasing globalization in the tourist sector in recent decades as well as the increasing significance of the tourist sector in the economies of many nations have made it necessary for local governments and the scientific community to look at the issue of tourist destination competitiveness.

Today most studies on competition and competitiveness in the tourist industry are conducted by management and economics researchers. Relatively few publications on these issues are produced by geographers worldwide and in Poland. Much more geographic publications on competitiveness are available in the field of general economic development of nations, regions and cities as well as individual enterprises and their spatial concentration.

Geographic studies on tourist destination competitiveness usually only cover some issues such as the quality of the natural environment, tourist perception of service quality, price comparisons, barriers to local development, and the significance of different forms of tourism (Connelly 2007; Kowalczyk 2008; Kurek, Mika 2008; Marcelpoil, François 2009; Mika 2010; Mika *et al.* 2007; Mika, Krzesiwo 2011; Mika, Kurek 2011; Rogers 2009; Rotter-Jarzębińska 2009; Żemła, Żemła 2006). The lack of comprehensive papers in this area seems to be the result of lacking theoretical and methodological

basis for the geographic analysis of development opportunities for tourist destinations in competitive environment.

The purpose of this paper is to formulate and conceptualize tourist competitiveness as a research problem in the geography of tourism with respect to tourist destinations, present the research model, goals, analytical assumptions, and to suggest potential practical applications.

Tourist competitiveness as a research problem in economics

Researchers and specialists studying tourist competitiveness agree that the issue is rooted in the international trade theory by M.E. Porter (1980, 1985, 1990). Competitiveness became an issue in the tourist industry in the second half of the 20th century due to the globalization of tourism, increased local openness to foreign tourists, large-scale growth in air travel, development of telecommunication and information technologies as well as the generally rising importance of tourist expenditures to businesses, cities, and entire tourist regions.

The contemporary definition of "competitiveness" is dual in nature. On the one hand, it is thought to be an attribute or property of an entity that defines its market position. On the other hand, it is thought to be a process by which the entity becomes competitive (Bednarczyk 2011). Both definitions are relative in nature and are based on market mechanisms and the ability of economic entities to grow in a competitive market environment. Hence, the analysis of competitiveness involves multidimensional thinking such as supply vs. demand, dynamic vs. static, and activity-based concepts.

Tourist competitiveness is analyzed with respect to two separate but related problems:
– microeconomic competitiveness of businesses operating in the tourism sector; this includes hotels, restaurants, etc.;
– competitiveness of tourist destinations often understood as systems functioning in a certain geographical space.

Attempts made by economists to translate issues associated with tourist competitiveness into spatial systems such as towns, cities, regions and countries are of particular interest to geographers. However, researchers do not yet agree on the definition of tourist destination competitiveness and the means used to evaluate it (Bednarczyk 2011).

Most economics research papers on tourist destination competitiveness are not comprehensive and are limited to selected problems and issues (Pashardes, Sinclair 2005), which include description and evaluation of competitive strengths and weaknesses (Gomezelja, Mihalic 2008), competitive positions of selected regions and countires (Assaker *et al.* 2011; Botti *et al.* 2009; Duman, Kozak 2010; Enright, Newton 2005; Cracolici, Nijkamp 2008; Croes 2011; Croes, Rivera 2010; Gursoy *et al.* 2009; Wang *et al.* 2012), price competition (Azzoni 2009; Dwyer *et al.* 2000; Mangion *et al.* 2005; Rogers 2009), competitiveness from the perspective of selected types of tourism (Alejziak 2008; Claver-Cortés *et al.* 2007; Ribes *et al.* 2011), accessibility of tourist destinations (Lasanta Martínez *et al.* 2007), marketing image (Gallarza *et al.* 2002; Żemła 2008), and competitive posture in business management and local government (Bednarczyk

2011; Das, Dirienzo 2010, 2012; Metaxas 2009; Olszewski, Zmyślony, 2009; Camisóna, Monfort-Mirb 2012).

A review of the international research literature suggests that the contemporary framework for the analysis of tourist destination competitiveness can be found in papers by J.R. Ritchie and G.I. Crouch (2000, 2003). The two researchers propose an analytical model based on an array of determinants and internal and external factors that drive the development of tourist areas. Ritchie and Crouch were also at the forefront of the modern trend to link competitiveness to sustainable development. Similar assumptions were made by L. Dweyr and C. Kim (2003) to construct their analytical model. Both models, however, were criticized by researchers analyzing destination competitiveness from an outcome and benchmarking perspective (Mazanec *et al.* 2007).

An outcome-based analysis demands the creation of universal models for the evaluation of competitiveness in order to rank destinations. In most cases, countries are ranked on a global tourist competitiveness scale (Enright, Newton 2004; Kayar, Kozak 2010; Kozak 2002; Mazanec, Ring 2011; Mazanec *et al.* 2007; Pike, Mason 2011). Global evaluations and the resulting rankings are not fully accepted by the research community. Ranking methods are questioned when they produce different outcomes based on, for example, different measures of distance. Other published competitiveness rankings are based on the opinions of tourists or experts from the world of science and business (Crouch 2011; Hong 2009).

The concept of tourist destination

The next problematic issue is that of the actual meaning of the term "tourist destination." From a supply-side perspective, a tourist destination is an area with concentrated tourist-type offers. From a demand-side perspective, it is an area selected by tourists as a place to visit. Existing research literature incorporates both meanings. The prevailing view remains that a tourist destination is either a spatial unit with administrative boundaries or a system associated with a specific geographic area. Other definitions describe tourist destination as an actor in the marketplace offering well-defined products for sale or as a strategic business unit offering a well-defined chain of tourist services and/or products (Kurek, Mika 2007; Żemła 2008). The growth of a tourist destination is viewed primarily through the lens of quantitative characteristics such as the number of tourists, number of business entities, and tourist expenditures as well as purely economic benefits such as the rate of return on specific tourist offers (Bednarczyk 2011).

Several different spatial types of tourist destinations have been identified in modern geography. Each type is determined by a variety of local and non-local factors. Two basic types of tourist destinations can be said to exist: 1) areas, places or localities that specialize in serving tourist traffic and that are dominated by tourist function, i.a. coastal resorts, ski resorts towns that specialize in entertainment services; 2) multifunctional areas, that incorporate tourist services into their general infrastructure, i.a. metropolitan areas, historic cities as well as resort towns that develop thanks to tourism and other aspects of social and economic activity (Kurek, Mika 2007).

An attempt to conceptualize tourist destination competitiveness in geography

The issues of competition and competitiveness are a key part of any development plan for a tourist destination. This is true of both destinations whose development depends on foreign tourists and destinations that depend on domestic tourists. A geographic analysis of this subject must be rooted in basic geographic concepts such as space, development, relations, systems, as well as in concepts native to the geography of tourism such as tourist space, tourist traffic, tourist value, tourist potential, tourist attractiveness, tourist function, and sustainable tourism (Table 1).

A key concept in the study of geography is the concept of space. Tourist space consists of a collection of sites and fragments of geographic space whose value is derived from the degree to which primary and secondary tourist goals are realized. This type of definition of functional tourist space reflects tourist potential in geographic space whose tourist value is determined by the degree to which biological and cul-

Table 1. Selected concepts in the geography of tourism and related tourist destination research problems

Concepts	Research problems
Tourist space	ability to create and evaluate components of tourist space from the perspective of the fulfillment of tourist needs
Tourist potential	identification of local tourist value and assessment of the capability to fulfill tourist needs
Tourist flow	analysis of types of tourism – size, structure, seasonality, direction, spatial distribution
Tourist attractiveness	assessment of the ability to attract various forms of tourist flow
Tourist values	identification and evaluation of environmental and cultural value from the perspective of tourist needs, tourist potential, and tourist attractiveness
Tourist attractions	identification of places attracting tourists
Tourist function	identification of services and organizational actions designed to attract tourists; assessment of the relationship between tourist services and related services vs. other forms of economic activity; size of tourist sector employment in a given tourists
Tourism policy	assessment of the tourism planning and promotion work of local authorities
Social and economic development	identification of factors, mechanisms, stages of development, barriers to development, development forecasts
Sustainable tourism development	evaluation of mechanisms of sustainable tourism development; identification and evaluation of the effects of local conflicts
Tourist economy	identification and evaluation of relationships between stakeholders in the local tourism industry
Relations	identification of internal and external economic, social and functional relationships

Source: author's own work.

tural needs of tourists are met. Tourist space consists of the following components: a) the natural environment, to the extent that it is desirable for tourists, b) cultural elements recognized in terms of usefulness for tourists, c) technical infrastructure and general organization designed to serve a broad spectrum of tourist needs as well as other functional entities (Mika 2011; Włodarczyk 2009).

The concept of development is understood here to be a sequence of intended and irreversible changes made to complex sites and structures (Chojnicki 1999). Tourist development may be defined as all quantitative and qualitative changes taking place within a tourist destination resulting from land management geared towards tourists, changes in incoming tourist migrations, changes in the types of tourists visiting, and changes in its social and economic characteristics caused by tourist flow and tourist expenditures.

The development of a tourist destination based on the financial benefits and other benefits provided by the rendering of tourist services is a unique form of social and economic development with the following characteristics:

– economic benefits derived by businesses from the creation of the means needed by travelers to realize their goals while away from home;
– dependence and susceptibility of business entities in the tourist sector of the economy to changes in demand for their services due to seasonal shifts in tourist migrations;
– susceptibility to difficult to predict changes in social, economic, cultural and political shifts in tourist flow source areas;
– dependence on local environmental conditions, which serve both as a tourist attraction and a factor driving the ability of tourists to realize their recreational goals;
– significant impact on the social and cultural scene of the tourist destination itself.

The basic condition for this type of development to occur is the influx of tourists. Sustaining of this development depends on maintaining or increasing economic benefits rendered by tourist expenditures.

The magnitude and structure of incoming tourist flow depend on two different factors. One the one hand, exogenic factors shape tourist demand in source areas affected by local social, cultural, economic and political issues that determine potential tourists' travel decisions. Exogenic factors serve as push factors. The second factor is internal in nature and is linked to destination's tourist potential and tourist attractiveness. The second factor serves as a pull factor. The higher ranked the tourist destination, the more complex is the set of external factors driving the magnitude and structure of incoming toutist flow.

The flow of tourists from a tourist source area to a destination area creates a functional relationship between the two areas. The more complex the relationship, the greater the diversity of forms of tourism observed at the destination area. The maintenance of this relationship is crucial to the development of a destination. The general assumption is that the attractive force of a tourist destination relative to its source areas is linked to: a) the nature of its tourist potential and its ability to satisfy specific tourist needs, b) short travel times to reach the destination, c) the breadth and nature of the marketing and non-marketing information reaching potential tourists (Gallarza *et al.* 2002; Mazurkiewicz 2007; Richards 2002).

Every type of social and economic activity designed to serve tourists defines the tourist function of a destination (Matczak 1989). Business and organizational activity designed to serve tourists is a key component of a tourist destination's economic base. However, this type of activity is exogenic in nature, as it serves external individuals and creates a unique place for tourist activity in the economy of a destination. The impact of exogenic functions is a departure from classic economic base theory as it applies to cities and towns (Dziewoński 1971).

Concept of tourist destination competitiveness

The identification and evaluation of development opportunities in destinations competing for tourists and their spendings becomes an interesting research subject for geographers. The issue of competitiveness is especially important for cities, towns or regions whose tourist industry has a strategic role in the local economy and whose social and economic development is tied to the local tourist sector. From a geographic perspective, the relationship between tourist destinations competing for tourist traffic should be analyzed on a variety of spatial scales: a) regional, b) national, c) international – continental and global (Kurek, Mika 2008).

Assuming basic market competition and the notion of competitiveness defined as the ability of an economic entity to compete with others (Bednarczyk 2011; Niezgoda 2006, 2008), the competitiveness of a multifunctional tourist destination may be understood as its ability to attract tourists and maintain its tourist function over the long term in a competitive environment. The analysis of competitiveness defined in this manner demands the creation of a research model that would incorporate a wide array of determinants and factors as well as external and internal relationships driving tourist destination development. It appears that systems analysis is the most appropriate approach in this case.

A system is defined as a collection of ordered objects so closely linked with each other and impacting each other to the point where they constitute a certain whole that is unique in its environment (Lisowski 2003). Systems are identified by their components, structure, properties, and environment. Normally in spatial analyses a system–creating factor is concidered a tourist movement (Matczak 1992).

The proposed subject of study may be a "local tourist reception system", which is a sub-system functioning within a complex social and economic supersystem of a given tourist destination. The components of the proposed system are: a) tourists, b) tourist values, c) tourist infrastructure, d) all business entities serving tourists, and e) institutions working to attract tourists (Fig. 1). Tourist migrations create the local tourist reception system. A system defined in this manner is real, open, spatial and functional. It takes up a well-defined space and its nature is determined by relationships between each of its components. Its characteristic features are its complexity and variability over time due to the cyclical nature of tourist flow. The relationships linking the structure of a system are both spatial and dynamic. Spatial relationships apply to the locations of sites and the distribution of tourist migrations across geographic space. Dynamic relationships apply to links between elements designed to

Surroundings   Local tourist reception system   Effects

Internal:
– environmental conditions
– social system
– economic system
– spatial structure
– functional structure

External:
– laws and regulations
– tourist demand
  and demand condition
  in source areas of tourist
  traffic
– tourist attractions
  in the region

Tourists

Tourist values

Tourist and related infrastructure

Tourist sector entities

Tourist-related institutions (local authorities and organizations)

For tourists:
– meeting tourist needs
– social benefits

For tourist destination
– maintaining
  or increasing tourist flow
– economic benefits
– enhancing
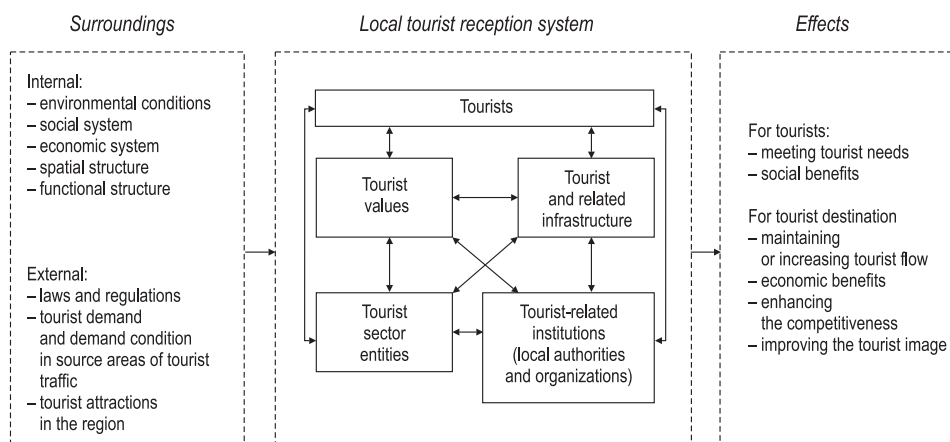 the competitiveness
– improving the tourist image

Fig. 1. Local tourist reception system

Source: author's own work.

meet tourist needs, behaviors of business entities and tourists, changes in urban areas, and internal linkages. The local reception system of a tourist destination may be the main or one of the main elements of its social and economic system. Its effectiveness determines the rate of destination development.

The development of "local tourist reception system" may be described as a transition from lower forms of development to higher forms of development and from simpler structures to more complex structures. The changes shaping the development process are driven by internal system factors and external factors associated with other sites or systems (Chojnicki 1999). Likewise, a system's surroundings need to be analyzed from an internal and external perspective. The surroundings include other systems within the tourist destination as well as legal issues and issues linked to demand in tourist source areas. Other components of the surroundings include all places and tourist attractions that may be subject to day trips by tourists staying at a given tourist destination. The purpose of identifying such as system is to help tourists reach a state of satisfaction that results from their needs being met. Another purpose is to enhance the competitiveness of the tourist destination. Other reasons include the realization of destination residents' financial goals and the implementation of business goals that will depend on how well the system works.

Research model for tourist destination competitiveness

The analysis of the competitiveness of a tourist destination requires a multidimensional analytical approach. A number of complex conditions, factors and relationships need to be analyzed. Any analysis of the development of a destination should be accompanied by an assessment of the ability to generate tourist offers that would make local

tourist development possible over longer periods of time (sustainable development). In order to obtain credible results, a complex research model needs to be created and used in practice. The model would attempt to do the following:
– recognize and evaluate conditions and factors linked to tourist destination development;
– recognize the current state of tourist development of a given destination;
– describe the nature of tourist development from a quantitative and qualitative perspective as well as describe internal and external mechanisms;
– describe local barriers to development and potential means to overcome them;
– recognize and evaluate the competitive environment on a local, regional, national and international level;
– evaluation of tourist destination competitiveness and identification of growth factors;
– evaluation of the capability to keep growing in a competitive environment – pursuit of sustainable tourism development in the face of competition for economic, social, infrastructural benefits derived from tourism.

Figure 2 illustrates the research process. In the tourist destination competitiveness assessment model, the first step is the evaluation of tourism development state, which should include the following:
– an analysis of tourist potential via the identification and evaluation of tourist space as well as the identification of competitive advantages – both absolute and comparative – that differentiate areas in terms of tourist attractiveness;
– characteristics of tourist migrations such as volume, structure, seasonality, and type based on motivation to visit; these characteristics will make it possible to assess demand and identify the most commercially viable types of tourism;
– identification of principal tourist flow source areas and strength and permanence of linkages;
– assessment of the attractiveness and overall image of a destination based on tourist opinions;
– identification of the range and nature of tourist services offered by local businesses and the degree to which these services are linked to local communities and businesses;
– recognition of the entrepreneurial characteristics of the local tourist sector and an assessment of its ability to compete;
– identification of functional linkages between tourist-oriented entities and regional tourist attractions;
– identification of the degree to which local governments are engaged in supporting the tourist sector versus their ability to do so, as well as their relationship with other regional tourist stakeholders;
– identification of barriers to development from a spatial management point of view and the functioning of tourist-oriented business entities;
– identification of conflict areas between tourism and other social and economic functions in tourist destinations as well as conflict areas within the tourist sector itself;
– identification of the competitive environment on several different spatial scales and in relation to principal tourist origin areas;
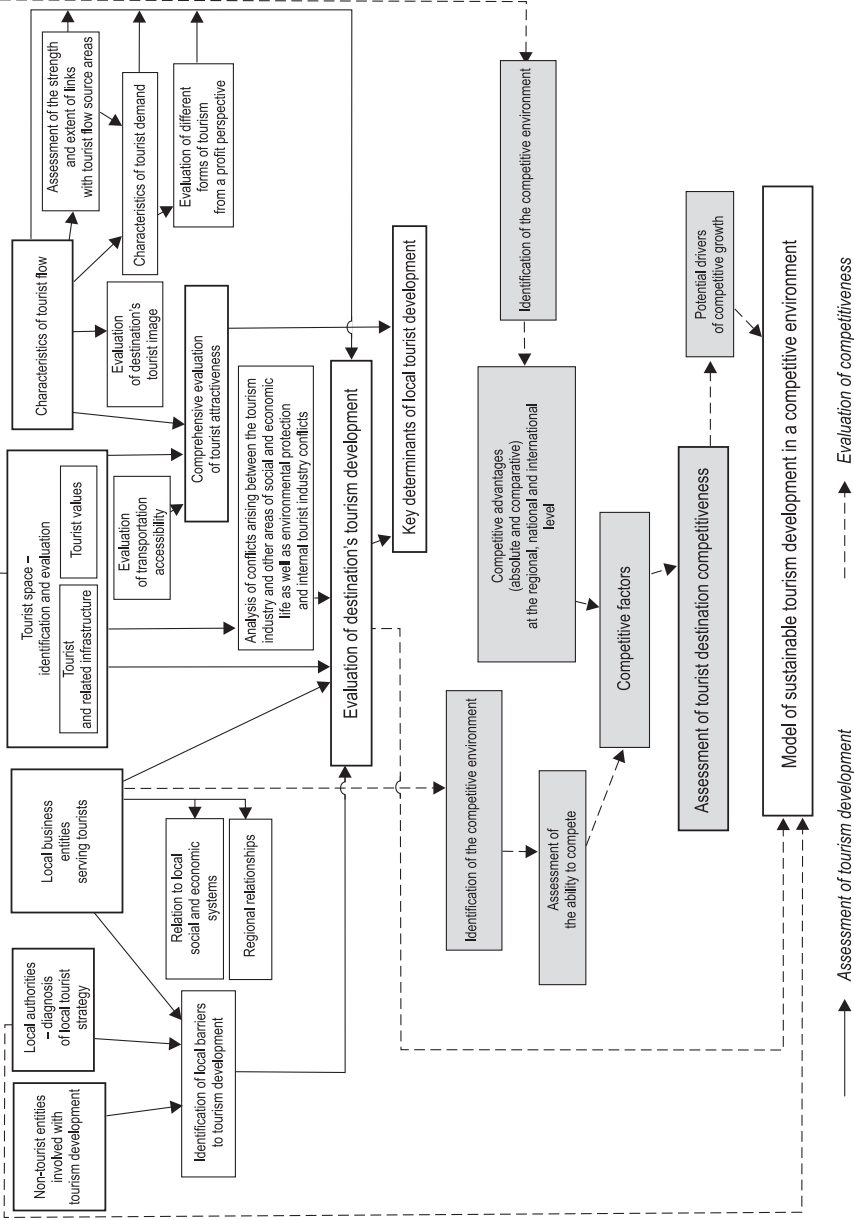
Fig. 2. Tourist destination competitiveness research model
Source: author's own work.

– recognition of competitive factors in relation to entities serving tourist needs and from a tourist space perspective.

The realization of the above stated goals requires a complex operational procedure (Fig. 2). Both quantitative and qualitative characteristics need to be analyzed. The evaluation of each element and given characteristic will help produce a full picture of the development and competitiveness capabilities of a tourist destination.

The ability of local businesses to compete contributes to the competitiveness of the entire geographic region. The local tourist sector normally consists of small and midsize business enterprises owned by local residents with limited capital as well as business entities owned by outside investors and global corporations. The key drivers of competitiveness are innovation, ability to form clusters, employee qualifications, management quality, use of the latest technologies, price levels and others. The integration of the tourist sector with the local social and economic scene is important for destination development. In addition, the relationship between local tourist-oriented businesses and external businesses is also important.

Other key factors include the role of local authorities, community leaders, tourism-oriented strategies, and the elimination of barriers to tourist development. It is expected that local governments will use appropriate instruments to create a business climate that favors the development of tourism and will attempt to eliminate barriers to development. In general, it is expected that local governments will create a positive image of the tourist destination in question.

The overall purpose of the research process is to identify (cognitive goal) and implement (practical goal) a research model designed to help destinations grow in the face of competition. The model should identify short-, medium- and long-term development strategies for tourist destinations. The practical aspect of this model will help create local and regional social and economic policy.

Conclusions

The issue of tourist destinations competitiveness is complex and ambiguous. Economics research on tourist destination competitiveness attempts to create universal models for global tourists flow in order to generate comparative data and identify mechanisms that help destinations become more competitive. There is a lack of papers on this issue from a national and regional perspective. Economics papers rarely differentiate destinations based on the degree to which their tourist sector is developed. The purpose of creating international rankings and the methods used in the process are also somewhat questionable.

The direct use of analyses of tourist market competition mechanisms in geographic analysis creates many questions. However, there is agreement that today tourist destinations are forced to compete for tourists and the economic benefits. Nevertheless, the development of tourist towns, cities, zones and regions is determined by a much more complex system of conditions and factors than would be the case for tourist-oriented business enterprises. The same may be said of the relationship between tourist development and various aspects of social and economic life in general.

The evaluation of the competitiveness of tourist destinations is complicated by the following factors: a) diversity of destination spatial forms, b) variety of development scenarios dependent on local and non-local determinants, c) nature of tourist services at a given destination, d) different degrees of connectivity between the local tourist industry and other aspects of social and economic life in a given destination, e) substantial sensitivity to unstable demand and relatively unpredictable environmental conditions. It appears important to match the competitiveness model to the internal and external factors affecting a given tourist community.

Tourist destinations have a functional relationship with their immediate surroundings as well as regions. This brings up the question of competing tourist destination in a given region. Are nearby destinations competing with each other or are they complementing each other? Is there any type of regional synergy? Does regional synergy even exist? The investigation of the problem of tourist destination competitiveness is made possible by access to data on a wide variety of local conditions including environmental, social, and cultural conditions as well as spatial and functional relationships. Geographic analysis of the development of multifunctional areas is also helpful in this respect. This is especially true of destinations at various stages of tourist development.

The geography of tourism is well suited to the analysis of competitiveness and the generation of applied solutions for the tourist industry. Research in this field produces both analytical and practical outcomes in the realm of land management and planning. A problem that may arise at one point or another is the definition of competitiveness itself.

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