

Article

A Sustainable Approach to Tourism Development in Rural Areas: The Example of Poland

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Abstract: The research presented in this article concerns the issue of rural tourism, which is associated with significant economic and landscape changes in the countryside. It is important that tourist development in these areas be subject to the principles of sustainable development, which are important for the preservation of the environment in which tourism operates. The research topic is related to two of the most salient features of rural tourism today, environmental sustainability and pro-environmental behavior, which are considered the right ways to achieve sustainability goals. The main research aim presented is to indicate which of the postulates of sustainable development are being implemented and how concerning the functioning and development of rural tourism is on the Polish tourism market. Another goal is to indicate what types of resources in the rural environment are the basis for the preparation of a tourist product; for whom and how these resources are to be used; as well as the participation of the local community in the management of the resources that constitute its own environment, one of the basic principles of sustainable development. The primary method used was a document analysis and an analysis of selected websites presenting rural environmental resources used in this form of tourism. The research identified that sustainable approaches to tourism development in rural areas in Poland are appropriate with respect to the resources available there and to both natural and cultural values. For resources used in a rural environment, emphasis is placed on the protection of both elements. It has been identified that one idea for their protection is sustainable sharing, which assumes rational use to an extent that would not affect the nature of the assets but at the same time could benefit the local community. Both values are used in different ways but, in addition to their purely recreational value, their educational value is equally important each time.

Keywords: sustainable development; rural tourism; educational homesteads; participation; local action group



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1. Introduction

Nowadays, it comes as no surprise that tourism can be counted as one of the most significant global economic sectors. Since the end of World War II, it has become one of the fastest-growing sectors of the world economy [1]. The multiplicity of forms of tourism and leisure activities is due to many factors. These could be a tourist's interests, curiosity about the world, cultural or recreational offerings, tourist resources, infrastructure, technical possibilities, or a destination understood as a specific area or type of landscape. One of the more popular forms nowadays, which combines some of these factors, is rural tourism. Recent decades have been a period of particularly intensive development for this type of tourism [2,3], and this is connected to changes in the rural economy and landscape. It is satisfying, however, when such tourist development is subject to the principles of sustainable development. These are important for the preservation of the environment in

which tourism operates on the one hand and, on the other, for the possibility of a type of tourism that minimizes its negative impact on both natural and social environments. Many studies point out [4–7] that rural tourism is becoming increasingly important all over the world and is seen as a kind of subsidiary strategy for the sustainable development of rural areas. Rural tourism, through the concept of sustainability, focuses on the protection of natural and cultural environmental resources, and explicitly emphasizes the participation of local people and the responsibility of the tourists using its resources [8,9]. The central, or one of the main roles in the development of sustainable rural tourism, is pointed out by many researchers [10–12]. It is emphasized in EU documents that sustainability is a contributing factor in the competitiveness of a destination, including rural environments [13], and rural tourism is a viable alternative that can positively influence sustainable regional development in villages and communes with less environmental impact compared with classic tourism models [14–16].

Furthermore, global agendas indicate the need to apply sustainable development to the management of rural areas to create a quality tourism product. Agenda 21 pointed out environmental problems and how to manage resources in terms of eco-development above all, as well as guaranteeing a participatory management system for these areas [17]. Rural sustainable tourism also fits in with the objectives set by Agenda 2030 [18] by referring to the following:

- Objective 1: end poverty (drawing attention to the earning potential of those living in rural poverty).
- Objective 4: good quality education (improving the quality of education through learning by example and exposure to nature).
- Objective 7: clean and accessible energy (promoting renewable energy sources in the countryside).
- Objective 10: less inequality (redressing gender inequalities in tourism product development).
- Objective 12: responsible consumption and production (sustainable use of space for cultivation and recycling).
- Objective 13: climate action (sustainable crops and agricultural production).
- Objective 15: life on land (protection of biodiversity).

In the coming years, the implementation of the goals contained in Agenda 2030 for the economy, including rural tourism, and the monitoring of their implementation, will become one of the most important challenges for the politics and economics of countries worldwide [19].

The need for consultation when initiating a tourism development process in a region is pointed out by many authors [20–22]. In recent years and even decades, tourism has become one of the main economic activities in rural areas. It has the potential to definitively generate new sources of income and employment [23] and appears to be crucial to the long-term sustainability of rural areas that attract tourism [24]. Rural tourism can be used as a diversification or adaptation strategy to supplement existing livelihoods and improve the ability of local people to secure income to reduce the risk of economic decline. However, this will not take place without the involvement of the people living in these areas [5]. As long as the local community is increasingly aware of the role of tourism in providing them with additional income or even wealth, a shift in the local economy towards tourism to improve livelihoods is an almost natural direction [23,25]. It can also be a tool for revitalization.

Contemporary approaches to tourism that address negative impacts are not only concerned with minimizing the impacts of tourism but also look at the long-term viability of good quality natural and social resources, the quality of life of communities receiving tourism, visitor satisfaction, and the conservative use of natural and social resources in the context of sustainable tourism development [26–28]. The tourism industry was one of those hardest hit by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. In addition to being an important branch of an economy

with a large impact on the value of its gross domestic product (GDP), it is also a powerful job base, providing employment for many inhabitants of depopulating villages.

The main goal of the analysis presented is to indicate which postulates of sustainable development of rural tourism are concerned with the Polish tourism market. The research is related to rural areas in Poland that, according to the definition, are areas outside the administrative boundaries of cities, consisting of rural communes and rural parts of urban–rural communes. According to EUROSTAT, ‘rural areas’ are all areas outside urban clusters. ‘Urban clusters’ are clusters of contiguous grid cells of 1 km² with a density of at least 300 inhabitants per km² and a minimum population of 5000 [9]. For statistical surveys in Poland, they are distinguished on the basis of the territorial division of the country using the identifiers of the National Official Register of the Territorial Division of the Country (TERYT) [29]. According to data from the Central Office of Geodesy and Cartography, in 2020, rural areas occupied 29.0 million ha, which accounted for 92.9% of Poland. In 2020, there were 1533 rural communes and 642 urban–rural communes, and the largest percentage were those with a population of less than 5000 (37.8%) [30]. As of 31 July 2020, there were 4700 tourist accommodation facilities in rural areas (45.6% of all such facilities), which had 30,690 beds (39.6% of the total). Compared with 2010, the number of facilities in rural areas had increased by 61.9% and the number of beds by 29.7%.

2. Sustainable Tourism in the Rural Environment: Literature Review

In tourism, sustainability is usually linked to the issue of development and is defined as ‘new tourism’ [31,32], the essence of which is its low environmental impact. Sustainable tourism in rural areas is often reduced to farms hosting tourists, local food and crafts, small-scale businesses, and transport. Almost always in tandem with the development of rural tourism, which emphasizes a sustainable approach, is the need for nature conservation [30]. Its absence can have consequences for the future quality of life of the local community but also for the tourism product offered [33]. Sustainable tourism, including that practiced in the rural environment, focuses on natural and cultural environmental resources in order to protect them, and emphasizes the responsibility of tourists and the need for the local community to participate in these efforts [34]. One of the most salient features of rural tourism today is environmental sustainability, and pro-environmental behavior is recognized as one of the ways to achieve this goal [34–39]. Such development is more than just sustainable economic growth. The concept of sustainable development takes into account environmental, economic, cultural, and social factors in rural areas. As Erokhin [40] emphasizes, each element matters, and rural tourism represents a new element of sustainable development in the tourism industry [41,42].

According to Gilbert and Tung [43], rural tourism is a form of tourism in which farmers play an important role, providing tourists with accommodation and the necessary conditions for various leisure activities in a farm environment. It can be seen that rural tourism is multi-faceted, not only because of farming activities but also in terms of the tourist product offered. Bramwell and Lane [44] emphasize other forms such as nature tourism, ecotourism, exploratory tourism, sports tourism, health tourism and other forms of active tourism such as hiking, mountain biking, horse riding, fishing, etc. They also point to forms of tourism related to heritage such as cultural and traditional tourism, folk and ethnic tourism [44–46], and educational tourism. Many researchers [47,48] emphasize the link between tourism activities and the rural environment. So far, literature on the subject has emphasized the small scale of the rural tourism market and few have noticed that it is not only seasonal tourism but all year round. This type of tourism has been particularly appreciated since lockdown when the excellent organization of this market was noticed. Two decades ago, Roberts et al. [4] had already emphasized that it is a small-scale but well-managed market, often of great educational value. Thus, proper management and a responsible policy influencing the promotion of rural tourism is crucial. In the EU, the development of rural areas is pivotal. Both Cork declarations 1.0 and 2.0, concerning the future of rural areas, set out the main policy goals to reverse rural migration; fight

poverty in the rural environment; stimulate employment; and, finally, meet the demand for quality, health, safety, and personal growth to increase rural environmental quality. Declaration 2.0 goes even further, advocating the promotion of prosperity in rural areas with an emphasis on entrepreneurship, investment, and innovation. It emphasizes the need to invest in their vitality, and this would include the elimination of digital exclusion. An important demand is the protection of the environment, and this should translate into local economic development; the development of ecological forms of tourism; and, more broadly, recreation in rural areas. It is also important to support climate action, especially in the production of sustainable energy from renewable sources, and to increase knowledge and innovation [49]. These postulates have a direct or indirect impact on the development of tourism in rural areas. Sustainable rural tourism is seen in this context as a tool for the development not so much of agriculture (although that too) but as an element stimulating the development of the rural collective economy, which will increase employment opportunities for farmers, promote the marketing of agricultural and other local products, ultimately improve production in rural areas, and improve living conditions by effectively increasing the income received by rural residents [50–52]. Non-agricultural activities in the countryside can contribute to the economic growth of a region [14,15,53], and rural tourism provides the opportunity for regional economic, socio-cultural, and environmental sustainability [54–56]. This element may also be important in building global food security. Climate change along with the liberalization of trade affect rural agricultural areas and, consequently, the practical survival of small farmers all over the world [57–59]. Therefore, the postulate of developing sustainable rural tourism, referring to the principles of social justice and economic profitability, is all the more important [60–62].

2.1. The Concept of Sustainable Development in Rural Tourism

Sustainability in tourism is reflected in three dimensions: economic, social, and environmental. The first refers to income management and the development of institutions and business ventures; the second translates into mutual cooperation, innovation, and creativity; while the third includes environmental awareness, the management of environmental resources in the spirit of rational use, and the management of tourism that occurs in the region [63]. However, other researchers [64,65] point to four dimensions of sustainable activities in the rural environment, which should be coherent at economic, social, environmental, and ecological levels so as to be able to satisfy present needs without harming future generations who will use the same resources. Sustainable development involves appropriate progress simultaneously in all four dimensions [66,67]. This reaches back to the definition proposed in the 1987 Brundtland Report, which defines sustainable development as development that meets the needs of the present without depriving future generations of the opportunity to meet their needs [68]. Three characteristics of sustainable development are mentioned by He [69]. Firstly, both present and future development should be taken into account to avoid harming future generations. Secondly, the development of one aspect should not undermine or restrict the development of others. Thirdly, natural resources—or more broadly, the natural environment—should be protected without abandoning the development of the economy; however, care should be taken to ensure a harmonious relationship between the economy, society, and natural resources. In this view, sustainable tourism development has become widely accepted and is seen as an important and politically appropriate tool for tourism development [70]. It resonates with an approach to tourism as a tool for improving the livelihoods of local communities by identifying tourism as the main remedy to eradicate poverty [71,72]. This is also the case for rural tourism, whose objectives are essentially aligned with those of sustainable development, e.g., eradicating poverty (Objective 1), promoting inclusive and sustainable economic growth as well as full and productive employment and work (Objective 8), and ensuring sustainable consumption and production (Objective 12) [73].

2.2. Sustainable Rural Tourism and the Local Community

Rural areas are important for tourism development due to the fact that they are ecologically attractive areas offering, in addition to nature, the usually well-preserved traditional culture of the region with its ethno-cultural heritage [74]. Sustainable tourism can, therefore, be an important element of sound socio-economic development. However, nature or traditional folk culture are still not enough for sustainable rural tourism development. A key factor is the local community and its attitude to the functioning of tourism in the region, as its involvement determines possible success in this field [75–77]. Without acceptance for various forms of tourism, and products offered in the region expressed in the active involvement of villagers, success cannot be expected [78,79]. By engaging in tourism activities, communities switch from a product-based economy to a service-providing one [80]. Sustainable rural tourism has a better chance of success if all participants in the rural area where tourism activities are to be developed are willing to actively participate in sustainability initiatives [81]. Community-based tourism includes all interactions between local people and external stakeholders [82–84].

Community participation in decision-making regarding the tourism product, information exchange, development of knowledge about the tourism industry, and the specifics of its operation can positively influence sustainable rural tourism as well as its social, economic, and environmental characteristics [85–87]. Thus, rural tourism appears as another important factor in the development of rural communities [72,88,89]. Studies emphasize the strategic role of rural residents as a group convinced of the need to protect natural resources and aware of their importance [90,91]. Many authors [92,93] focusing on the role of a community in relation to sustainable development have pointed out that a sustainable approach requires a fair distribution of economic benefits among the community when putting forward the need to protect this environment as a fundamental resource both for present and future generations. Therefore, this resource should be skillfully shared with tourists [94].

The local community can also have a significant impact on the tourists using the rural environment and any intention to revisit the region [95]. In order for this to happen, the local community should be properly prepared to act. Thus, stimulation of their creativity, innovation, managerial and social skills, as well as environmental awareness are essential [96]. It is thought that the participatory approach [97] enables the application of sustainable tourism principles by creating more opportunities for local people to gain greater and more sustainable benefits from tourism, leading to the need to protect nature and resources, which stems from this bottom-up belief [98]. Therefore, there is an emerging awareness that it is in their own interest to participate in the decision-making process because all preparatory undertakings affect the life of the community. Participation translates into an opportunity to express hopes, fears, and desires regarding tourism development [99]. The aim of such participation is to protect local residents and the resources available to the region from the impact of tourism planning, and at the same time to be able to benefit from rural tourism development [100]. Community participation is also important because local people are the main stakeholders in rural tourism areas. Stakeholder training should be a top priority, as lack of awareness and participation may lead to failure to implement rural tourism in a sustainable manner. Guo and Huang [101] recognize the interactive relationship between rural community development and rural tourism. Jing-Ming, Du, and Su [102,103] go a step further by arguing that it is even the responsibility of rural communities to support and participate in tourism development. Regardless of their level of involvement, rural community residents are not mere observers of activities undertaken in rural tourism. Their active participation fosters sustainable rural environment development; the rational and subordinate use of both cultural and natural resources; and also an improvement in living standards and the economic situation of farmers, thus increasing employment opportunities. All this can happen provided there is the participation of the rural community in the rural tourism designed for the region.

3. Research Questions, Methods, and Sources of Research Material

One of the main goals that the authors of this publication want to achieve is to indicate which postulates of sustainable development are implemented and how, as far as the functioning and development of rural tourism in the Polish tourism market is concerned. Is it possible to indicate a scheme of sustainable activities that will ensure the success of tourism in the rural environment (success measured not so much in terms of the number of tourists visiting the region or economic prosperity but in terms of sustainability, where local resources and the community are the main element and where profit is of secondary importance)? It is also important to indicate what types of rural environmental resources constitute the basis for a tourist product; for whom and how these resources are used; as well as how one of the basic principles of sustainable development, i.e., participation of the local community in the management of resources that constitute their living environment, is implemented on the Polish market. An important objective is the assessment of information distribution, being pivotal for tourism development, and whether sustainability is relevant here as well. What matters is its accuracy [104,105], reliability [106–109], and its completeness and relevancy [110]. Therefore, it is necessary to check which elements of the rural environment resources used in tourism are highlighted (how, why, and with what tools).

The conducted research is causal and concerns rural sustainability. The research method is connected to case study analysis and includes collecting and categorizing data related to aspects of rural sustainability, both empirical and theoretical, and its organization, systematization, and evaluation. The primary method used is document analysis related to rural environmental resources and the sustainable development of local communities. The postulate of the sustainable functioning of a rural community was analyzed on the basis of strategic planning documents. This was important for several reasons. First of all, these documents were developed by institutions responsible for rural development, as is the case with the whole project of ‘Educational Homesteads’, the principles of its functioning; the use of rural environment resources; and the method of promotion, which was prepared by the Agricultural Advisory Center. These are units directly subordinate to the state administration, specifically the Minister for Agriculture and Rural Development. The Agricultural Advisory Centre cooperates with national and local government administration institutions, industry organizations, scientific and research institutions, and others working for rural development and agriculture. For the detailed analysis, we chose two groups of well-established rural communities operating in Poland: ‘Wrzosowa Kraina’ (Heather Land) and ‘Ogólnopolska Sieć Zagród Edukacyjnych’ (National Educational Homesteads Network). These groups are two of the most active groups of their kind operating in Lower Silesia, a region of Poland that has for years been one of the most effective in exploiting its tourism potential. In the case of ‘Heather Land’, the main motive for its selection was that it is an example of bottom-up action. While ‘Educational Homesteads’ is an idea for the use of resources in tourism developed by the state administration, ‘Heather Land’ is an example in which the local community is involved, aware of its resources, and independently develops the rules for using them. It is one of the longer and better-functioning associations of this kind in Lower Silesia, one of the most attractive Polish tourist regions with diverse tourist potential. A library investigation was conducted to collect and systematize information on sustainable rural tourism from local strategic programs, spatial development plans, and tourism development strategies; among them is the Local Development Strategy of ‘Heather Land’ [111] and documents related to the activities of the National Educational Homesteads Network, the largest network in Poland comprising 305 homesteads (as of 8 August 2023). We have analyzed factors such as its statute, relevant reports, and the organizing principles for operating homesteads on the basis of the quality and authenticity of the product (Figure 1). Both organizations’ strategies were analyzed in terms of information about the tourism products offered by its network members, as mentioned in paragraph 6 of the Network Regulations [112]. This is one of the popular methods to evaluate web resources [113–116]. The following websites were analyzed:

- <https://zagrodaedukacyjna.pl> (accessed on 8 August 2023)—the official website of the National Network of Educational Homesteads [117];
- <https://wrzosowakraina.pl> (accessed on 8 August 2023)—the official website of the ‘Heather Land’ Local Action Group [118].

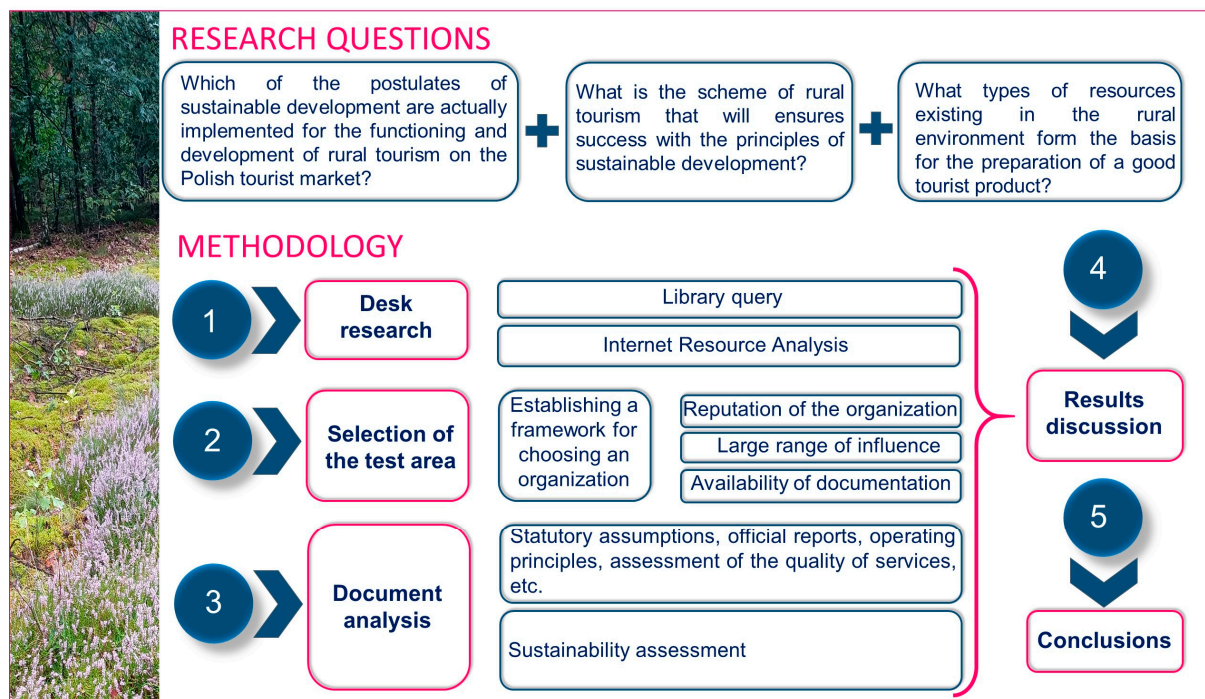


Figure 1. Research methodology (authors’ elaboration).

Simultaneously with the analysis of strategic documents, field studies were carried out in January and July 2023 in order to take into account possible changes in the development of the research area. At that time, exploratory, in-depth, and open talks with members of the National Network of Educational Homesteads and ‘Heather Land’ were also conducted. These were to provide information not only of a factual but also an ideological nature, expand and deepen the initial plan for the study, as well as suggest new ideas and hypotheses.

4. Results and Discussion

An important aspect of properly functioning rural tourism is the use of local resources in combination with sustainable policies and appropriate management from the administrative level. In this way, the local potential of both the area, the products offered, and the community can be fully exploited.

4.1. Educational Homesteads

In tourism space, an interesting idea to increase such potential is the so-called Educational Homesteads, which are based on the idea of using the existing resources of a farm to create new income for its owners [4,46,48,51]. The creation of Educational Homesteads is not only focused on additional income but also provides an opportunity to sustain a family’s existing lifestyle in familiar surroundings and at a good economic level while maintaining social contacts. One idea for using a homestead in the countryside is to combine the resources of the rural environment, both natural and cultural, with an educational function [119–121]. Today, fewer and fewer people are familiar with the rural environment, its way of life, traditions, and culture. For example, in Poland, about 60% of the population live in cities [122], which is not far from the world average; so, the need to create an appropriate educational offering becomes an opportunity for rural farms. The purpose of education used in rural tourism is to learn about and experience the environment in a

different way than in school [119]. Rural tourism in this view is an event that promotes rural farms, the culture of farm work, traditional activities, animal husbandry, growing crops and herbs, all while discovering traditions and rituals [123,124]. These challenges can be met by Educational Homesteads, which have already become a recognizable tourist product. In Poland, the largest organization representing them is the National Network of Educational Homesteads, an idea developed in 2010–2011 by the Kraków branch of the Agricultural Advisory Centre in Barwinów. The Centre is a national organizational unit under the authority of the Minister for Agriculture and Rural Development. Its tasks as defined by law are mainly to improve the level of agricultural income, support the sustainable development of rural areas, and improve the professional qualifications of farmers and other rural residents. Cooperating with governmental and local authority institutions, branch organizations, scientific and research institutions, and others for the development of rural areas, e.g., agricultural advisory staff; representatives of institutions and organizations; local action groups; and rural inhabitants through conferences, training sessions, seminars, etc. [125].

The idea to create Educational Homesteads grew out of the idea of sustainable development, whose elements are based on three key ideas:

- Farmers' work and the origin of food need to be brought closer to society to counter globalization processes;
- A farm has the potential to provide attractive educational activities that will result in desirable environmental and consumer attitudes [126,127];
- Educational services represent an opportunity for additional income for farmers and the motivation to continue farming and maintain the vitality of rural areas [115].

The National Network of Educational Homesteads gives its own detailed definition of an educational homestead; in practice, it is a set of conditions that need to be met in order to apply for participation in the project. According to the guidelines, an 'educational homestead' is a facility located in a rural area that is run by a resident of the village. In addition, it will welcome children and young people on school programs and extracurricular activities. It is worth noting that targeting activities primarily at the young is quite common and this group as a particular audience for the offering is also highlighted in the literature [23,128]. There must be livestock and it should present agricultural crops. Based on its resources, it should pursue at least two educational objectives out of the five set by the organization:

- Crop growing;
- Livestock rearing;
- Crop processing;
- Environmental and consumer awareness;
- Rural material culture heritage, traditional professions, handicrafts, and folk art.

The minimum mandatory technical requirement is to have a roofed place for the activities so as to ensure a minimum of comfort during educational tasks. Hygiene requires the provision of toilets for participants. The organizer must also meet any safety conditions stipulated by law.

It is also interesting to note that §2.2 of the regulations of the National Network of Educational Homesteads [112] defines three objectives for the network's functioning. These are to raise the prestige of the farming profession and to disseminate knowledge on the origin of food, to diversify non-agricultural activities in rural areas, and to preserve the cultural heritage of the countryside. The project, which aims to span under a single name previously dispersed over several educational initiatives, involves the creation of a brand that promotes better use of resources and an increase in the quality of educational programs. It will also help attract external funding and increase the effectiveness of promotional activities. It is important to maintain quality when becoming widespread; therefore, according to §4 of the regulations, any facility meeting the above conditions may join the Network. Furthermore, according to §2, participation in the Network is voluntary

and free of charge. Access takes place on the basis of an application questionnaire together with a program for educational activities (§4.3) [112]. The application is verified in terms of the compatibility of the educational activity profile with the farm's resources and the Network's objectives. Quality is guarded by §4, which specifies that the application requires the recommendation of an authorized advisor from the territorially competent agricultural advisory center (AAC). Membership of the organization entails not only obligations but also tangible benefits, including the following:

- The right to identify the educational offer using the logo;
- Promotion of offers on a nationwide internet site;
- Promotion at trade fairs and other events, and in the media;
- Access to content guides;
- Participation in periodic training courses;
- Advisory support from the AAC;
- Exchange of experience on a social networking site.

The benefits of educational activities on farms are manifold and concern both sides of the education process: the teachers (here, farmers) and the education sector (schooling). Farmers undertaking activities of a teaching nature on the farm obtain additional income, which affects their overall economic situation, as emphasized many times in the literature [24,25,60,129,130]. It is also an excellent promotion for the products that the farm offers available for direct sale. Besides, educational activities are a way to extend the tourist season. As a rule, the use of the accommodation offered in the rural environment coincides with the high season in the region, i.e., summer. Educational activities can be conducted all year round, provided the facility is suitably adapted. Schoolchildren who follow part of their syllabus outside school are excellent customers. Schools offer their pupils a varied and enriched learning process of practical and workshop activities in a variety of subjects conducted in the rural environment as an alternative to their daily learning process. The benefits are mutual as the farmers through educational activities can enrich and diversify their daily lives, feel the satisfaction and joy of working with children and young people, influence their personal development and that of their families, and offer new prospects for development.

At present, 305 farms in Poland function within the National Network of Educational Homesteads. This number has been increasing steadily in the last decade.

The growing popularity of the offer means that nowadays practically every region in Poland offers an educational homestead, although their distribution is not even and is not necessarily derived from a concentration of rural areas. Almost from the beginning of the Network's establishment, the most popular region has been the southwestern part of the country: the Dolnośląskie voivodeship (Figure 2). There are 38 homesteads there (12.5% of the total number). Somewhat fewer are in Małopolska (33), and third is the Mazovian Voivodeship with 28 homesteads. These three regions account for one third of Poland's examples. Surprisingly few homesteads can be found in the eastern, less-urbanized regions: Podlaskie, Lubelskie, and Podkarpackie have a total of 44 homesteads, comprising 14.5% of the total (Figure 3).

The themes offered by Network members are quite varied and reflect the farms' potential in the rural environment. There are a total of twelve thematic groups where references to both natural and cultural resources can be found (Figure 4).



Figure 2. Eco-museum Bee Trail, Godzięcin—Educational Farm (photos taken by authors).

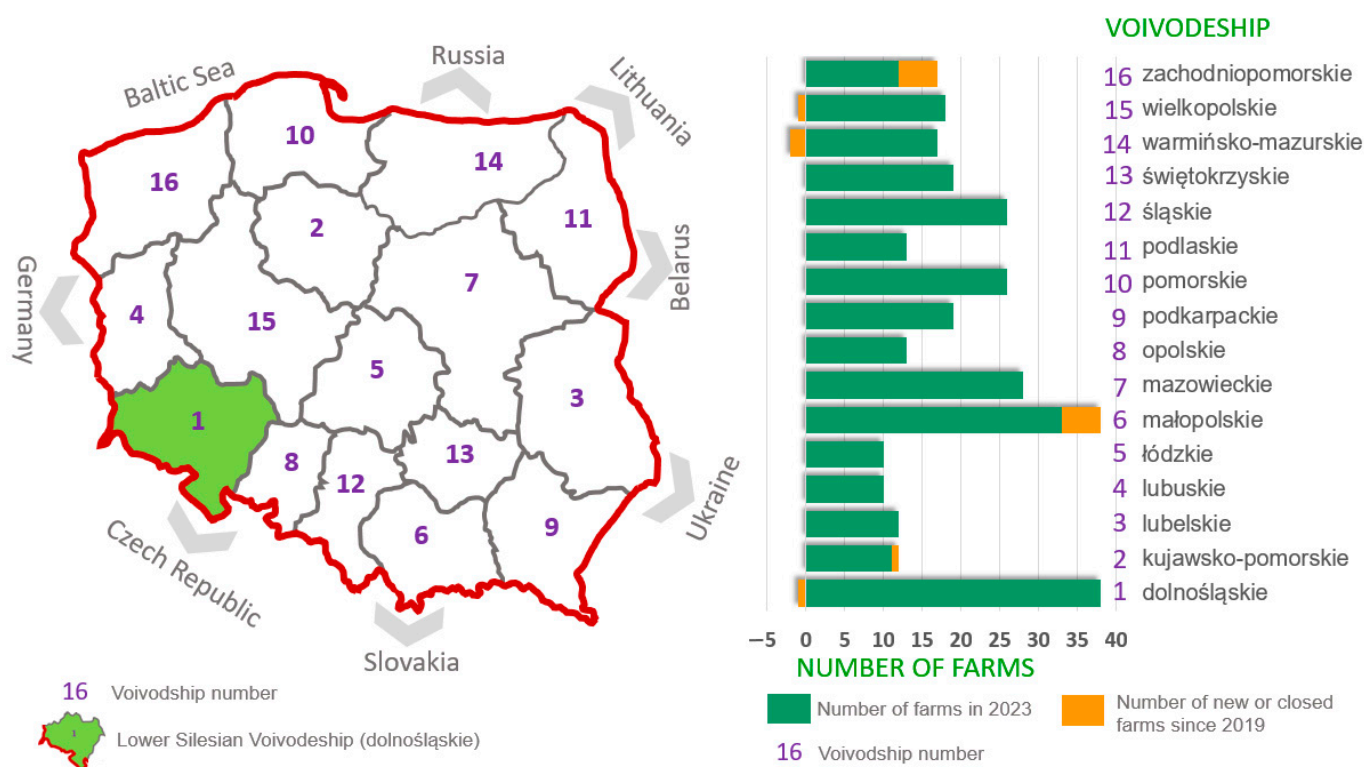


Figure 3. Division of educational farms by regions (created by the authors based on data [115]).

According to the analysis, the most popular themes relate to the natural resources available in the countryside. Almost 82% of all homesteads base their didactic offer on nature in its broadest sense; agricultural and daily farm activities are also important. It is worth noting that of the twelve themes proposed for the homesteads, most relate to cultural potential.

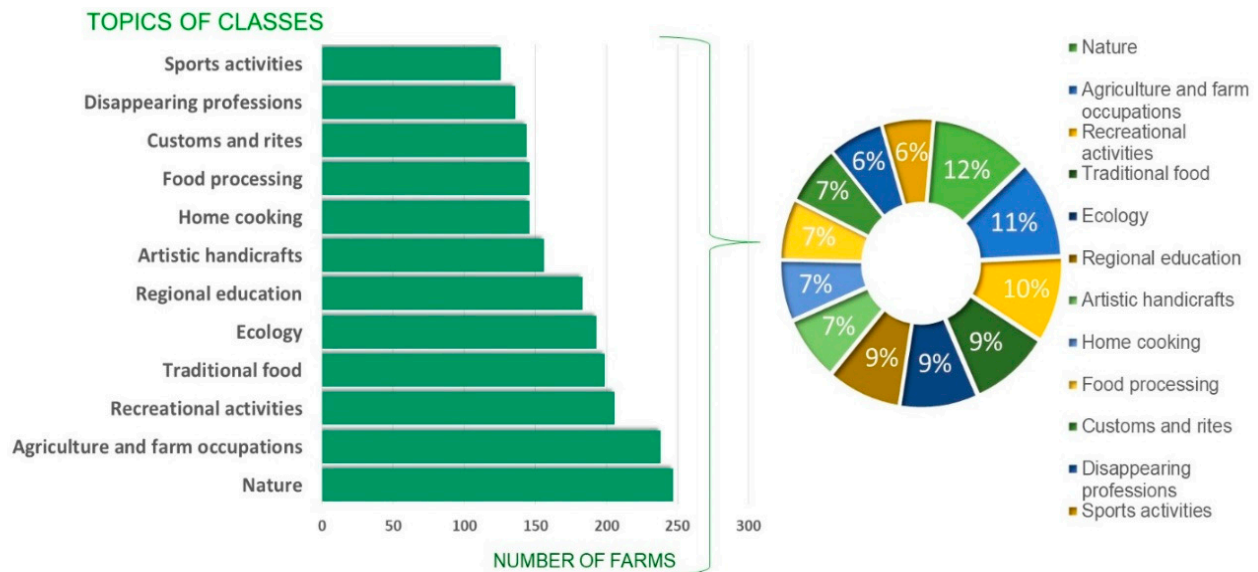


Figure 4. Examples of thematic activities carried out on the farms belonging to the National Network of Educational Homesteads (created by the authors based on data [115]).

The National Network of Educational Homesteads defines the target groups to which it addresses its offer [115]. There are six main groups: children and adolescents without adult supervision, kindergarten children, primary-school-aged children, special groups, adults, and school-aged adolescents (Figure 5).

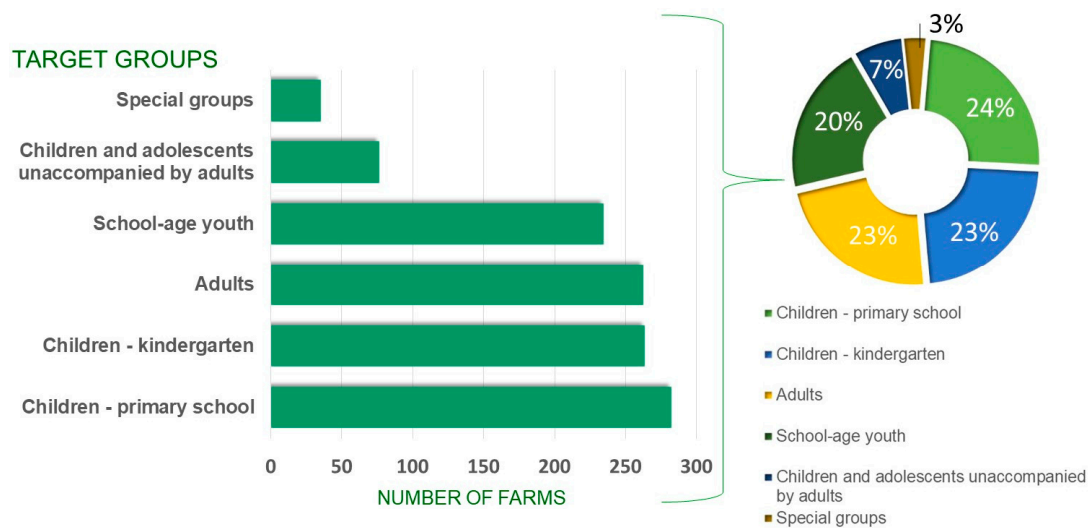


Figure 5. Main addressees of an educational homestead offer: analysis based on applications to farms belonging to the National Network of Educational Homesteads (created by the authors based on data [115]).

The research indicates that of the six target groups defined by the Network, they are mainly formed of groups of children or schoolchildren; however, 263 educational homesteads have mixed offers for adults with children. There is also an important educational offer for special groups, emphasizing the therapeutic nature of the resources important for those groups, as well as an offer aimed at specialists. Staying and participating in activities at the educational homesteads can vary in duration and price (Figure 6).

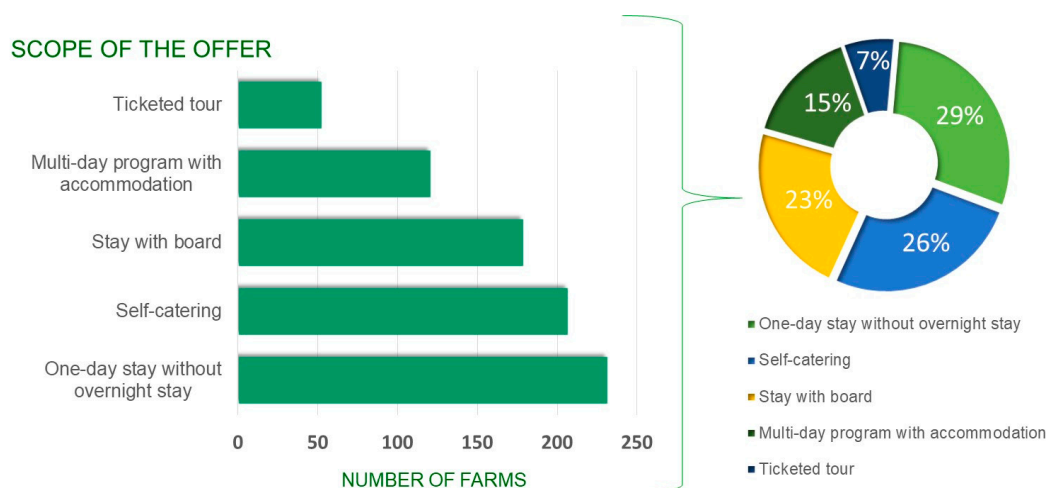


Figure 6. Scope of the offer in an educational homestead: analysis based on applications to farms belonging to the National Network of Educational Homesteads (authors based on data [115]).

Previously, the educational offer was complementary to the basic tourism activity present in the rural environment, which was accommodation. Nowadays, education is an equally important activity, which often does not presuppose the possibility of staying longer than one day, and this is enough to visit a farm or take part in a proposed program.

4.2. The 'Heather Land' Association: An Example of Integrating a Region's Potential

The 'Heather Land' Association, a local action group (LAG), is an example of an organization able to foreground the region's potential. The association is located in Lower Silesia in southwestern Poland—a geographical region and at the same time an administrative one at the rank of voivodeship. The total area of the communes comprising the association is 1590.32 km², which is slightly more than 10% of the voivodeship's area. The population, however, accounts for approximately 3% of the total for the region with 94,860 inhabitants.

'Heather Land' is in the east of the Lower Silesian Forests, one of the largest forested areas in Central Europe (forest cover ratio—44%), which influences the profile of tourist use. Nature tourism, green tourism, ecotourism, and sustainable tourism naturally fit into the economic activity in the region. Monuments of nature, five Natura 2000 areas, six nature reserves, and the Przemków Landscape Park mean that almost 80% of the area is protected; therefore, tourism in this area should be carried out in a sustainable way. The association is committed to environmental sustainability in its strategy by operating within the European Green Deal, which will improve the quality of EU citizens' lives while helping to play a leading role in the global fight against climate change. The Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) combines social, economic, and environmental approaches to build sustainable agricultural systems in the EU. The CAP also recognizes and promotes the links between rural communities and the rural environment. Measures that protect the landscape, wildlife, and natural resources, such as clean air and rivers, benefit not only agriculture and the environment but also contribute to improving the quality of life in rural areas and open up opportunities for recreational activities and tourism, all while serving to support rural communities [111].

In addition to the most valuable natural resources, cultural resources are also important for the tourist offer (the heritage of the local community organized in various ways, from local products to eco-museums, educational homesteads, and thematic villages). This heritage is a reflection of the complicated history of Poland and the region. After World War II, the area where the association now operates was settled by immigrant populations from various regions of pre-war Poland. The communities brought their own traditions and customs to their new, small homeland, which are translated into the current way of life, wealth, and diversity of resources. This is seen in regional products having their roots

either here or coming from areas hundreds of kilometers away that are recognized as its own. These include the following:

- Preserves, especially heather honey from the Lower Silesian Forests, which has held a European Protected Geographical Indication certificate since 2008, as well as nuts in honey, bee platter in honey, and jams and fruit preserves;
- Venison sausage and pâté from ‘Heather Land’;
- Keselica—smoked Przemków carp;
- Wine vinegars with herbs;
- Pressed oils;
- Local wines;
- Honey gingerbread from Przemków;
- Country bread.

Local products and traditions are a pretext for organizing cultural events of tourist value as well (Figure 7). Tourist assets are accompanied by tourist infrastructure and the tourists that use them. In 2021, the region offered 53 catering establishments and 51 accommodation facilities, which were used by 26,873 tourists (this is an increase of 11.5 per cent compared to 2014), and the number of nights provided amounted to 49,026 in 2021. It should be noted that the above figures do not take into account the number of tourists using the agrotourism offer; therefore, it slightly underestimates the volume of tourism in the region [111].

The beginning of the ‘Heather Land’ Association was the Przemków Landscape Park Partnership Group, established on 17 September 2004 and co-founded by representatives of local governments, companies, NGOs, and state and scientific institutions. The aim was to prepare and implement actions to solve the economic, social, and environmental problems of the associated municipalities. In 2005, the name was changed to the ‘Heather Land’ Partnership Group, and in 2006, the ‘Heather Land’ Local Action Group Foundation was established. In 2008, the ‘Heather Land’ Foundation and local government units were established, which still operate today. The association works on the basis of the Act of 7 March 2007, supporting rural areas through the participation of the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development [131], and Council Regulation (EC) No 1698/2005 of 20 September 2005, supporting rural development by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development [132]. The association covers the rural communes of Gromadka, Lubin, Chojnów, Bolesławiec, Miłkowice, and Kunice; the urban–rural communes of Przemków and Chocianów; and the town of Chojnów.

According to the statute of the ‘Heather Land’ Foundation, its objectives include supporting the development of the rural areas of the communes that are its members, promoting its area; stimulating the initiatives of the local community; protecting what is of historical, cultural, urban, natural, or landscape value; as well as giving opinions on undertakings related to the development of the region. Finally, it promotes social integration, activities on the labor market, as well as building a common identity. According to §8 of the statutes, the Foundation pursues its objectives through the following:

- Creating and implementing strategies, programs, plans, and projects related to the development of the region;
- Carrying out research, analyses, giving expert opinions, and collecting materials concerning the area;
- Organizing meetings, seminars, training courses, conferences, competitions, exhibitions, concerts, and other forms of cultural life;
- Conducting informational, promotional, and publishing activities;
- Organizing and supporting charitable activities;
- Acting as an opinion-former with regard to the decisions of local authorities;
- Providing free advice on the preparation of projects related to the implementation of the Integrated Rural Development Strategy for the region;
- Cooperation and exchange of experience with public institutions and NGOs at national and international levels [133].



Figure 7. ‘Heather Land’ (A); Village of tastes (B); Agritourism farm: Village of Darów Lasu (C); Capercaillie heath (D); Gajówka Głuszczyk Eco-museum (E); Village of Gifts, Forest Lipa Wróżka, Mill Pond (F); Village of Gifts of the Forest Blueberries Path of the Senses, a path on which tourists walk barefoot (G) (photos taken by the authors).

The objectives of the association are defined in the Local Development Strategy to be implemented in the years 2023–2027:

- Objective 1. Development of the tourist offer and the local brand ‘Heather Land’.
- Objective 2. Activating the local community to strengthen local capital.

Activities supporting Objective 1 are addressed to entities operating in tourist and tourism-related services who want to operate under the ‘Heather Land’ brand. The implementation of this objective will foster the development of entrepreneurship and the creation of new jobs; this will translate into economic development in the spirit of innovation and an increase in residents’ incomes, which itself will translate into a better quality of life of the region’s inhabitants. Emphasis is placed on giving preference to undertakings of an innovative nature, and pro-climate investments will allow synergies to be achieved in terms of natural resources and environmental protection. Reducing emissions, increasing energy efficiency, and implementing good practices for nature and climate protection will allow the local community to gain additional benefits from living in a healthy and clean environment. A conscious approach to environmental protection and heritage conservation in the region will promote responsible tourism and support the education of both local residents and tourists on ecological forms of travel and the preservation of local culture and traditions [111]. Within this objective, two main undertakings have been identified: infrastructure for tourism and local heritage as well as support for entrepreneurship in tourism and local branding. Within the infrastructure framework, support will be given to those activities that will improve the tourist attractiveness of the area through the creation of new places for recreation and tourist activities along with a dispersion of tourists through a network of cycle routes and educational paths, taking into account the promotion of natural potential. Support for entrepreneurship will give preference to those tourism service activities that will relate to investments of an innovative and pro-climate nature, such as RES (Renewable Energy Sources) installations in local tourist entities. Objective 2 supports initiatives for the broadly defined activities of the local community, especially for young people; the implementation of the Smart Village concept; and the social inclusion of the elderly and identified socially disadvantaged groups. The strategy defines quite precisely the groups of people who are disadvantaged or at risk of exclusion, which includes women, those with disabilities and their carers, those seeking employment, low-skilled and young people without work experience, subsistence farmers, young people under 25, and seniors older than 60. Measures to stimulate social activity and combat digital exclusion are important here.

4.3. The Participatory Nature of Associations Promoting Rural Tourism Based on the Example of ‘Heather Land’

The ‘Heather Land’ LAG relies on a holistic approach in acting and in implementing tasks. The idea of the LAG is to work in each of the three sectors—public, social, and economic—together with the inhabitants. The LAG’s 104 co-founding members include 15 institutions representing the public sector, 69 members from the social sector, and 20 entities from the economic sector [111]. Decisions made within the LAG are taken by a 15-member council comprising representatives of all three sectors. In addition, each member of the council should be a resident of the LAG area. The participatory character of the LAG is best seen in its activities, which are regulated and formed through actions defined in detail in relevant documents and development strategies formulated for specific periods of time. In strategy development, many bodies have been involved, representing all sectors co-founding the LAG, i.e., local entrepreneurs; tourism service providers; representatives of institutions cooperating with excluded groups such as Social Assistance Centers or the Poviát Employment Office; representatives of those excluded groups; local leaders from each commune; the local community; representatives of the senior citizens’ community; representatives of educational institutions; the National Agricultural Support Centre; the Social Economy Support Centre in Legnica; members of the Council and the Management Board; the General Meeting and employees of the LAG office; communes and their em-

ployees; representatives of cultural centers; and, finally, representatives of eco-museums, educational homesteads, and thematic villages. The Local Development Strategy was drawn up based on widely applied participatory methods, including information meetings, setting up a working group for the Local Development Strategy, setting up an on-line information and consultation point with the use of the ZOOM platform, holding call-in meetings in the LAG office, questionnaire surveys among the region's inhabitants and interested groups, consultation meetings with LAG members, consultations with groups of excluded people, social consultations on the draft document, data collection using a contact form, thematic meetings of LAG authorities, and making everything available on the website dedicated to the document. Activities using the above methods were carried out between June 2022 and May 2023 [116]. It was also decided to set up a working team for the Local Action Strategy, an Enterprise Club, a Senior Citizens' Forum, and an e-sports league for young people. It was assumed that they will be actively involved in the implementation of the document under development as well as in the implementation of regional innovations for LAG activities. They will also become platforms for cooperation in the implementation of new ideas and concepts.

The idea of sustainable development is included in the declaration signed when joining the 'Heather Land' Association as a member, which is an annex to the statute and contains a significant section specifying the means of achieving the objectives set out in that document. In the first place, emphasis is put on the sustainable development of rural areas with regard to the protection and promotion of the natural environment as well as the landscape, historical and cultural resources, and equal opportunities. Some other points are as follows:

- To activate the rural population.
- To promote rural areas and LAG communes.
- To mobilize the local community to participate in the process of sustainable rural development in the LAG area.
- To take initiatives and actions to stimulate the activity of local communities and their active participation in the development and implementation of the Local Development Strategy (LDS) and other programs, and to support and disseminate the idea of self-governance in this framework.
- To undertake initiatives and actions for the development of the LDS area aimed at the development of regional products, tourism, entrepreneurship, human resources, and civil and information society; improvement of the aesthetics of the villages in the LAG area and the safety of the inhabitants; aesthetic and artistic education of the inhabitants; economic and professional activation; counteracting social exclusion and social pathologies; promotion of a healthy lifestyle; and the preservation of cultural heritage in the LAG area.
- The creation of local products and services, particularly tourist services and the creation of a tourist infrastructure in the area covered by the LDS.
- Protection of women's rights and activities for equal rights for women and men [134].

One of the main tasks of sustainable rural development is to raise the standard of living of local communities without them having to leave their home environment. This is important in the case of Poland because a significant part of the community lives in the countryside and, two decades ago, made a living from agricultural activity. In addition, economic changes and accession to the EU have caused a decline in the profitability of agricultural production. There was a threat that the village, for economic reasons, might begin to depopulate. Hence, the idea of creating a center coordinated at the ministerial level (which indicates the importance attached to it by the national administration and the government) was put forth, which works for rural development in four main areas:

- Supporting non-agricultural forms of economic activity for farmers and their families;
- Cultural heritage of the countryside;
- Support for rural tourism;
- Support for rural households.

Three of them directly or indirectly relate to non-agricultural activities linked to the development of tourism. The key is a balanced approach that gives local communities a chance to prepare a tourist product that concerns spatially dispersed, small-scale activities. This excludes mass tourism and gives an opportunity for the development of small family businesses that will be able to provide funds to function in their home areas without having to leave them. One of the main initiatives, if not the main one, in the field of rural tourism is the Educational Homesteads project. It has been planned in detail so that it can function in a rural environment without the risk of degradation, thus translating into the quality of the offer. Quality is also an important feature of those tourist products required by the modern tourist, which is why it is so important to analyze the assumptions that underlie the creation of this idea. The first step to the development of tourism in a sustainable way is to properly design the rules of operation. These principles have been clarified in documents that, on the one hand, limit or even eliminate the risk of undesirable phenomena appearing on the rural tourism market, harming both the environment and the local community, as well as the image of a rural region, usually perceived as a pro-ecological area. The assumptions contained in the documents are crucial for the sustainable functioning of the rural tourist environment and are the starting point for all activities, which is why it seems so important to present these elements because they shape rural tourism, indicate the potential and use of resources, and are a signpost and tool for local communities that allows them to act in a sustainable way.

5. Discussion

Sustainability is the key word for the functioning of modern tourism in rural areas [8,11–13,135,136]. It refers to many factors such as environmental protection and the economy, as well as the participation of local communities, which leads to combating social exclusion [17–19]. One of the main aspects of the sustainable approach is the protection of the resources available in the rural environment. Two types of tourist value are available, natural and cultural, complementing each other and making tourists aware that people and their culture cannot and do not function isolated from the nature that they use for their needs. It is important to demonstrate in the educational programs (the case of Poland is quite a good example) [111,112,125] how to use these resources in a sustainable way, where not only the present counts but also the future. It is not so much that we pass on resources to the next generation but rather we borrow them from future generations.

It seems that the economic aspect shapes the sustainability of rural tourism and convinces farmers to go green. The economic status of the communities that live in rural areas is very important, and the opinion of the groups running both ‘Heather Land’ and ‘Educational Homesteads’ is also reflected in the literature [133,134,137,138]. Nowadays, in the era of commodity agriculture, it is increasingly difficult to preserve smaller farms that are unable to compete in this market. Farmers leaving their businesses, their home, and their traditions are a real threat to the heritage of rural areas. Such a situation is seen in the rural areas in Poland. This is why there is an urgent need to diversify rural activities in order to prevent this threat, which is a common problem for developed countries globally [139–141]. One such tool is a sustainable approach to rural tourism, which takes care of the resources and, thus, increases the quality and attractiveness of the offer (these are the factors that the modern tourist is looking for). This fits in with the view expressed in the literature emphasizing the multi-tasking of sustainability in rural tourism [5]. If activities are supposed to be effective, they cannot be reduced to nature conservation alone. The aim should also be to preserve the culture and character of the communities that are opening up to tourism, the sustainability of the landscape and habitats, the sustainability of the rural economy, and maintaining a tourism industry that is viable in the long term rather than focused on short-term profit. Finally, the implementation of a sustainability strategy should involve organizing the local community around the goal: from developing an understanding of the need for such action to shaping leadership and vision among decision-makers so that everyone is aware of both the benefits but also the risks of relying too much on tourism

alone, and continuing to work towards a sustainable and diverse rural economy [142–144]. Such an approach, seen in the literature, appears in this article in both the case studies presented, i.e., Educational Homesteads as well as ‘Heather Land’. A sustainable approach to resources is pivotal in many documents describing their activities [111,125]. In order to develop the right approach, it is important to involve many actors and virtually the whole community; although, of course, the degree of involvement varies. A key word that is important for a sustainable approach is participation [145–147]. The activities of ‘Heather Land’ are a good example of such bottom-up activities whose bases are constant contact with the local community and the use of the resources in a sustainable manner, which are emphasized in its strategy and other documents in many places [111,133,134]. The economic benefit of preparing a tourist offer is not the main objective but, rather, a means used to integrate the community; reduce exclusion by continuously involving these groups [4,144] in tourism and recreational activities; and reduce migration from the area by showing new kinds of economic activity, thus sparing the necessity of leaving the region. The activities of ‘Heather Land’ and Educational Homesteads stress the role of women in planning and realizing the tourist offer in the rural area [134], and this is part of a world trend. Many emphasize the need for engagement [148,149], pointing to the importance of support for small-scale, community-focused tourism initiatives because this offers the greatest potential for enhancing the lives of economically marginalized groups, including rural women. The offer described in this article is an excellent example of a sustainable approach to tourism based on resources of local social capital not necessarily appreciated in mass tourism, which often attracts transnational corporate tourism businesses and external labor [2].

An equally important element is to point to such directions of development that translate into care for the natural and cultural environments of the region. Appropriate education shows the local community a way of development thanks to which resources will be preserved because of their regional or supra-regional uniqueness, as well as an element thanks to which a new kind of activity enabling a visitor to stay in the region is possible [150,151]. This approach, the preservation of nature and local culture through its economic attractiveness for the local community, also responds to the demand for sustainable development. An asset that is only a tourist resource if it remains intact and is preserved for future generations fits in with the philosophy of local groups, including ‘Heather Land’.

Finally, a sustainable approach to rural tourism can also be spoken of in terms of the information distributed about tourism assets and, more broadly, the tourism activities of rural operators. A correlation can be drawn between the development of tourism, including rural tourism, and the use of new technologies [152–155]. The role of this tool has been noticed and appreciated in rural environments where tourism has developed. Both ‘Heather Land’ as well as Educational Homesteads recognize this means of communication as the most effective way of meeting the potential recipient of their offer.

6. Conclusions

A sustainable approach to tourism development in rural areas is expressed in an appropriate approach to the resources available to the rural environment including both natural and cultural assets. For resources used in the rural environment in Poland an emphasis is placed on the protection of both types. One idea for this protection is sustainable sharing, which assumes rational use to an extent that would not affect these assets but at the same time could benefit the local community. Both assets are used in different ways; however, each time, in addition to their purely recreational value, their educational value is important. This stems from the belief that only what is known and liked is easier to protect, as it stems from an awareness of their uniqueness, fragility, and transience if they are subjected to the mass pressure that usually accompanies mass tourism. Further, it is not only about natural value. It might even be asked which type is more threatened: Is it the natural, which is now more and more strictly and formally protected, and where the

law provides clear and strong tools to stand up for it? Or is it perhaps the cultural ones? Culture being a community feature is perhaps even more difficult to defend, especially in an era of globalization and over-tourism, as it is often not protected by specific laws designed to preserve the traditions or customs of a region. Culture depends on the strength of a community that is aware of its traditions and appreciates their value, which results in a positive attitude and pride about such customs and traditions. This is the first step towards preserving and promoting this kind of asset, and this philosophy seems to be the one most often implemented nowadays for the development of tourism in rural areas in Poland.

An excellent tool in the battle to maintain and disseminate cultural resources is education. Knowledge is the first and necessary step in the struggle to preserve values. Knowledge needs to be passed on in various ways so that both host and visitor communities approach the visited environment in a sustainable manner. The local communities living in rural areas in Poland do not consider which should be cared for as they use a holistic approach (natural and cultural) to their protection in the education process. One of the most important tools in this education process is the tourist offer in the rural environment, as can be seen from the example of Educational Homesteads; this is a concept that has been present in the rural environment of Poland for at least two decades and is based on teaching to think outside the box. Instead of classrooms, there is the countryside, homesteads and meadows, and forests and lakes; instead of teachers, there are their hosts who share their skills, knowledge, and daily life; instead of a lecture, there is interaction, in which each participant feels part of the environment. The offer of Educational Homesteads is practically never only about cultural values or only natural values.

It is worth stressing the role of rural tourism in Poland in the context of its functioning, which is typical for world trends where the economy counts as much as ecology, local community participation, and sustainability. At present, in Poland, smaller-scale rural tourism is promoted, which uses environmental resources to advocate both ‘get to know’ and ‘not to harm’. Rural tourism in Poland uses the internet. Its use, which is emphasized, is optimal for many reasons. This is a trend in which basically the whole world of contemporary information and its distribution is already globally sustainable. In conclusion, one can risk stating that the success of sustainable rural tourism development lies in the following:

- The description and proper utilization of the natural and cultural value of an area emphasizing its uniqueness;
- A local community that is aware of and actively shapes the image of tourism in its area;
- An appropriate presentation of the potential of using the latest technology and its ability to shape and modify information in real time.

It is worth adding that the whole offer based on sustainable rural tourism is a knowledge-based endeavor resulting from the appropriate education of both the local community and those using its potential. This has multi-dimensional significance for tourists, the area’s inhabitants, and the natural environment, and only appropriate management of these assets can positively influence the natural resources of a tourist region.

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