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Global Business Transformation in a Turbulent Era

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Yaakov Weber,
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Global Business Transformation in a Turbulent Era

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OPPORTUNITIES FOR DEVELOPMENT OF SLOW TOURISM IN POĽANA BIOSPHERE RESERVE

Sýkorová, Katarína; Vaňová, Anna

Faculty of Economics, Matej Bel University, Banská Bystrica, Slovakia

ABSTRACT

Biosphere reserves are a specific type of protected area found around the world. Unlike other protected areas, they allow for socio-economic activities to take place within their valuable and unique natural conditions. The philosophy of UNESCO states that biosphere reserves are places for sustainable development. This paper focuses on the slow development (slow city) in the Poľana biosphere reserve in the Slovak Republic as a suitable approach to strengthen its development while protecting the unique environment.

This paper aims to identify opportunities for the development of slow tourism in the Poľana biosphere reserve in the Slovak Republic through analysis of the territory, relevant sources, statistical data, and practices of foreign biosphere reserves. We believe that the gradual progress through slow tourism can help address not only the socio-economic issues of the area, but also facilitate the transition of the regional economy towards sustainable and resilient development. The primary research has identified that the Poľana biosphere reserve has a rich potential for the development of slow tourism. The region provides a wide range of exceptional products and experiences, but it requires assistance not only from local and regional stakeholders such as government officials, entrepreneurs, and citizens, but also from the central government. The paper presents partial results of the project APVV-20-0108 Implementation of Agenda 2030 through biosphere reserves in the Slovak Republic and VEGA 1/0343/23 Modern approaches to the development of cities and regions.

Keywords: slow tourism, biosphere reserve, nature protection, development, regional quality mark, local traditions

INTRODUCTION

Climate change and other current global as well as local challenges emphasize the need to use limited resources responsibly to ensure a healthy environment and sustainable development for future generations (Vaňová, 2021). Nature protection and conservation of biodiversity is one of the Sustainable Goals in Agenda 2030. To carry out the goals inducted in Agenda 2030 it is necessary to concentrate on those social, economic and environmental activities that are environmentally oriented,

sustainable, resilient and inclusive and based on participation of all important stakeholders from different sectors in the region. The biosphere reserve is a place that can help achieve these goals by allowing people to live in harmony with nature.

Biosphere reserves are one form of protected areas in the world. According to the philosophy of UNESCO, they are 'learning places for sustainable development'. They are sites for testing interdisciplinary approaches to understanding and managing changes and interactions between social and ecological systems, including conflict prevention and management of biodiversity. They are places that provide local solutions to global challenges (UNESCO, 2023).

In the paper we pay attention to the slow development (Tranter, Tolley, 2020; Yurtseven, Kayas, 2011) via slow tourism in Poľana biosphere reserve in the Slovak Republic as a suitable and resilient way how to strengthen its development in accordance with the protection of unique environment.

Slow tourism is one of the fastest-growing niche markets and is viewed as a form of sustainable tourism (Manthiou, Klaus, Luong, 2022; Le Busque, Mingoia, Litchfield, 2021; Serdane, Maccarrone-Eaglen, Sharifi, 2020; Husemann, Eckhardt, 2019; etc). Despite increasing popularity of slow tourism, no single or common definition of this approach can be found either in academic or practitioner literature. The concept of slow tourism is a conceptual framework drawing on ideas from the "slow food" movement, that comprises tourist, who travelled slower and nearer to home whereby they stay longer in target destinations. Tourists utilize sustainable and local forms of tourism, transport and prefer local food consumption specific for visited place or region. The slow tourism is a significant reaction to mass tourism, a modification of the travel concept, and the use of leisure time as well as a reflection of the crisis of modernity with its lack of time, offering more authentic experiences that take particular care of the environment (Manthiou, Klaus, Luong, 2022; Clancy, 2017; Dickinson, Lumsdon, 2010). Slow tourism can be seen as "time savouring" options, whereas fast tourism may be treated as "time saving" options. (Dickinson & Peeters, 2014, In: Klarin et al. 2023).

Some authors, for example Guyver, McGrath and Torkington (2016), argue that the ideas of slow tourism are nothing new, because millions of people spend annually their vacations camping, staying in caravans, rented accommodation, with friends and relations or perhaps in a second home, who immerse themselves in their holiday environment, eat local food, drink local wine and walk or cycle around the area (In: Et. al. 2020).

Černá (2016) states that slow tourism is focused on acquiring new experiences as a traveler, finding joy in staying in beautiful places, and feeling the thrill of immersing oneself in a different culture in a selected destination or region. The concept of slow tourism brings the ability to assure long term benefits to the local environment, community, and economy. According to Dall'Aglio et al. (2011) slow tourism is a kind of tourism that "sensitizes demand and supply of ethical values, allows to get

possession of time again, relieves anxiety and stress caused by hectic paces, allows the guests to be back in tune with themselves and whatever surrounds them, creates a new form of awareness thanks to a deeper and involving experience and thus emphasizes sustainability, responsibility and eco-friendliness" of all the stakeholders involved. (In: Et al. 2020).

The philosophy of deceleration offers way of providing tourism with specific guidelines, such as tourists taking the time to visit, reducing their carbon footprint, having an ecological and ethical vision, focusing on local contacts and nearby sights, consuming local products and discovering heritage, conserving the locals' quality of life, and ensuring a high-quality tourism experience (Manthiou, Klaus, Luong, 2022; Valls, Mota, Vieira, Santos, 2019; Yurtseven, Kayas, 2011).

However, Černá (2016) argues that slow tourism and ecotourism partially overlap, and stresses that slow tourism focuses on relaxation, knowing genius loci (picturesque places in nature, historic architecture etc.), extraordinary and unusual experience, while ecotourism is oriented mostly on protection of sensible and unique environmental conditions in biosphere reserves.

The object of our research is Poľana biosphere reserve. The paper aims to identify the potential for the development of slow tourism in the Poľana biosphere reserve through an analysis of its territory, statistical data, and best practices from foreign regions. It consists of introduction, three chapters and conclusions. The first chapter defines slow tourism as a suitable approach to contribute to sustainable development in biosphere reserves based on theoretical foundations. The second chapter outlines the methodology used. Thereafter, the third chapter presents the research findings in the form of a case study focusing on the Poľana biosphere reserve and its potential for slow tourism activities. It also includes recommendations for the development of the Poľana biosphere reserve based on the slow tourism approach and best practices from other relevant biosphere reserves.

1. BIOSPHERE RESERVE AS AN OBJECT OF SLOW TOURISM

Biosphere reserves are seen as an instrument how to achieve the well-being of human and nature. It is a place where nature and people should both benefit. A characteristic feature of a biosphere reserve is the involvement of local communities and all stakeholders in the planning and management of its development. At the territory of each biosphere reserves three main functions are integrated. Every biosphere reserve is oriented on conservation of biodiversity and cultural diversity, economic development that is socio-culturally and environmentally sustainable and logistic support, underpinning development through research, monitoring, education, and training (UNESCO, 2023, Sýkorová, 2023).

Each biosphere reserve contains 3 zones: core zone, buffer zone and transition zone. A typical characteristic of a core zone is the protection of unique natural values, including the conservation of

landscapes, ecosystems, species, and genetic variation. Buffer zone surrounds or adjoins the core area(s) and serves as a corridor between the core and transition area. Activities carried out in this zone are compatible with ecological practices, scientific research, monitoring, training, and education. The transition area, or the cooperation zone, is a place for communities to foster socio-economic development and environmentally friendly activities including slow tourism. They can contribute to effect of all functions of biosphere reserves, that means to conserve biodiversity and cultural heritage, sustainable development, and logistic support (UNESCO, 2024).

It is clear, that biosphere reserves are a very specific kind of protected area with valuable and unique conditions, fauna, and flora. They offer specific products and mass tourism is not needed in these territories to protect and maintain this offer. From this point of view, slow tourism is a suitable way how to utilize and develop the territories of biosphere reserves. According to the opinion of Med Pearls (2020), for slow tourism is typical to create deeper relationship to local environment; to get used to traditions, values, culture, and history of local community; to slow spending time, that enables deeper experiencing of unexpected, surprises and simple pleasures and utilisation of traditional conveyance transports such as bike, walking, ship, local transportation etc. All these characteristics are consistent with the protection of unique environment and development of the biosphere reserves.

Other authors (Et al., 2020) allege that the philosophy of slow tourism is expressed by concrete activities within for different but interconnected areas. As seen in Table 1, those areas are transport, leisure, accommodation, and gastronomy and are transformed into activities and services according to philosophy of slow tourism that represent the supply side of slow tourism and could be applied in biosphere reserve.

Klarin et al. (2023) speak about outcomes connected with slow tourism that have become increasingly central to the slow tourism literature. To the identified slow tourism outcomes belong changed behavior, authentic and natural experiences, increased environmental consciousness, future revisit intentions and future referral intentions largely from a consumer behaviour perspective. For instance, in destinations, tourists can immerse themselves in the local culture, enjoy the natural and built heritage and interact more with the locals.

For slow tourism each zone of biosphere reserve represents different opportunities of development. The core area is a source of extraordinary experience as it represents the unique natural values, the buffer and transitions zones take advantage of it and complete the offer of the territory by others appropriate tourism services. The slow tourism activities in biosphere reserve require a high level of knowledge and preparation from both leaders and participants, that will give to the slow tourists enough time to establish a deeper relationship with the environment and enjoy the genius loci of the place so they will take henceforth an active personal responsibility towards the natural environment.

Area	Philosophy	Activities and services
Transport	Flexible and paces. Allow travelers to enjoy the landscape with all senses.	Walking, trekking, cycling, motorhome, sailing, canoeing, ballooning
Leisure	Provide enough time for travelers to establish a deeper relationship with the environment, the different locations and the people they meet along the journey. Make room for introspection, reflection, and personal development	Nature watching, birdwatching, cultural tours, creativity experiences, learning experiences, wellness, introspection
Accommodation	Look for establishments where the traveler can stop time. Space and service should be carefully designed.	Small family hotels and B&B, rural accommodation, private homes and apartments, camping, eco-lodging
Gastronomy	Offer local, traditional food that makes use of local produce. Make travellers appreciate the fact that food has been prepared with love and care, and thus requires time to savour and experience. Menus should appeal to all senses	Fresh food, organic & local groceries, tasting of local products, small traditional restaurants, organic restaurant

Table 1. *Activities and services within slow tourism*

From the biosphere reserve point of view, the slow tourism promotes and fosters environmentally conscious behaviour of visitors. It does not interfere negatively with the environment. The unique selling point of the slow tourism product is based on the exceptional value of nature and culture within the territory. Additional services are a complementary part of the product. The experience of slow tourists is authentic, in the real environment, biocentric, which means that it accepts the environment without possibilities of modification. It assumes that the visitors will be educated, and their expectation will be associated with new knowledge or appreciation (Butler, 1990, In: Vitališová et al., 2023).

Slow tourism may contribute to the economic development of biosphere reserves in various aspects. As Gardner, 2009 (In Klarin et al. 2023) claimed, at the micro level, slow tourism may create additional values for local communities. The local economy may benefit from slow tourism, as slow travellers tend to choose ridesharing, apartment-sharing, guesthouses etc. to connect with locals in the biosphere reserves. Moreover, compared with conventional tourists, slow tourists may spend more time exploring the local culture and food (for example, visiting local festivals, restaurants, craft boutiques, learning handicrafts typical for biosphere reserve etc.) boosting the local economy. However, these economic consequences need further deeper research.

From a wider point of view, at the macro level, the slow tourism may have various social consequences, such as changes in social trends, social norms, and values. Specifically, new social trends and social norms will emerge when more people are engaged in slow tourism (not only in biosphere reserves). This topic might be a considerable research gap that should be addresses in further studies (Klarin et al. 2023).

The relationship between slow tourism and travel and macro-level outcomes can be indirect as it stimulates individuals' environmental awareness and subsequent practices (Dickinson, Lumsdon, 2010

In: Klarin, 2023). It is thus anticipated that when individuals form or strengthen their pro-environmental beliefs as a micro-level outcome during slow tourism and travel, in a broader context they tend to disseminate these environmental-friendly attitudes, values and practices to their social reference groups. Collective pro-environmental beliefs can be further developed, as an important part of macro-level outcomes.

Klarin et al. (2023) state that slow tourism and travel have a lingering effect on society, economy, and environment; in which it motivates individuals and wider societies to engage in greener and more sustainable behaviours which collectively through slow tourism and travel, can bring about more positive environmental changes and reduce negative environmental and societal impacts on us at a macro level.

2. METHODOLOGY

The primary source of data are statistical data on the tourism collected by the Slovak Statistical Office and the official information published on the websites of the Poľana biosphere reserves, municipalities belonging to its territory, State nature protection of the Slovak Republic and UNESCO. All data collected was utilized to evaluate the potential of the biosphere reserve area for the advancement of slow tourism activities. In order to enhance readability, we have presented the data in tables and figure. Another source of information is knowledge obtained through primary research in the territory of the Poľana biosphere reserve in the segment of tourists, residents and local government management (Vaňová et al., 2023; Sýkorová, 2023; Vitálišová, Vaňová, Rojíková, 2022; Rojíková, et al., 2021). We apply this knowledge through empiricism when evaluating statistical data and making proposals. Based on the results of our analysis, we formulate recommendations how to strengthen slow tourism in Poľana biosphere reserve. The examples of good practice information is derived from our secondary research or empirical evidence gathered during research trips to the destinations mentioned.

3. POTENTIAL FOR DEVELOPMENT OF SLOW TOURISM IN POĽANA BIOSPHERE RESERVE

The territory of Slovakia is rich in beautiful and protected areas. There are four biosphere reserves located in the Slovak Republic, namely: Poľana biosphere reserve in the central part, Tatra biosphere reserve in the north, Slovak karst biosphere reserve in the south-east and East Carpathians biosphere reserve in the north-east of Slovakia. The object of our research is Poľana biosphere reserve, which it is the oldest and the smallest biosphere reserve in the Slovak Republic and is characteristic by the lowest number inhabitants with permanent address.

The Poľana Biosphere Reserve is situated in the central part of Slovakia. It is one of the greatest former European volcanoes (approximately 2500 m above sea level) and it is the highest volcanic mountain range in Slovakia. The volcanic origin and the resulting geomorphological structure caused the creation of a unique wealth of surface shapes, e.g. rock walls, lava flows, boulders, rock places, stone seas, rock towers, waterfalls. The main attractions of the territory represent numerous rock formations such as Veporské skalky, Melichova skala, Kalamárka, Jánošíkova skala or a 15 metres tall waterfall in the valley Bystré (UNESCO, 2024)

Forest covers almost 85% of the Poľana with the slight majority being coniferous forests, the rest being deciduous one. Many of them have a character of primeval forest. The forest system is very diverse from oak forests to spruce forests growing on andesites.

There are about 1220 species of higher plants in the area, and it is also rich in lichens and mosses. Out of which 80 species are in categories of protection, threat and rareness. The variety and species-richness of the fauna in the Poľana reflect its environmental diversity. There are many biogeographically outstanding and biosociologically significant animal species, whose rare populations are often endangered and thus strictly protected. There are 174 species of birds in the area. In consideration of occurrence of endangered and rare bird species, the Poľana has been recognised as Important Birds Area of Slovakia. From the administrative point of view, the territory covers partially the districts of Banská Bystrica, Zvolen, Brezno and Detva. For the territory of BR is typical rare settlement and only very few people have their permanent address there.

The core zone of biosphere reserves consists of six scattered territories that are not regulated, just preserved, and aimed at research. The buffer zone is primarily focused on forest management and agriculture to preserve unique fauna and flora. In the transition zone, all economic activities are realized in line with the interests of nature protections (Vitališová et al., 2023). The zones of Poľana biosphere reserve are illustrated on Figure 1.

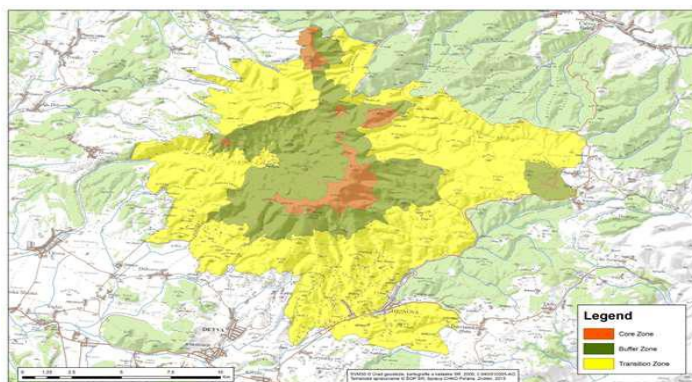


Figure 1 Zones of Poľana biosphere reserve

The landscape of the biosphere reserve is unique, exceptional, and perfect for slow tourism. There are mosaics of small-block strip plowing, alternating with meadows and pastures on former fields,

spanned by borders, in places overgrown with willows, brambles, and wild cherries. The area is typical of the agricultural activities realized by the traditional way (e. g. mowing with a hand scythe, sheep grazing). From the ethnological point of view, traditional settlements were made from wood and constructed in specific composition – house, haylofts, potato cellars, farm buildings. The unrepeatable character of the landscape is formed by the wooden painted crosses and preserved folk art traditions. It is closely connected with the specific folklore, traditions and habits of local community. This is also reflected in the characteristic form of settlements called “lazy”, the scattered settlements alone or in small groups in rural zone with agricultural and animal production for their own purposes. At the territory of biosphere reserves there are only three settlements, one recreation centre, several farm and forest houses. (Beňušková, 2017, Vaňová et al., 2023).

Poľana biosphere belongs to the least urbanized territories in the Slovak Republic (less than 2 inhabitants per km²). The average age of inhabitants is quite high, the majority of them are retired. Lack of appropriate work possibilities causes that people commute to towns, mainly to district towns (Detva, Zvolen, Brezno). Nowadays, approximately 3900 inhabitants have their permanent address in the transition area. According to the primary research conducted through guided interviews with representatives of the local government, residents, and management of the biosphere reserve, the younger generation has been leaving the region due to a lack of appealing job opportunities. Most of them are moving to the western part of Slovakia or abroad (Vaňová et. al., 2023).

The territory of biosphere reserve is famous for unique and specific culture traditions represented by many folklore groups and beautiful local garb. Culture traditions are sources for unique experiences not only for many visitors, but for locals as well. The international festival called Folklore Festival Poľana has long tradition and has been organised since 1966. At festivals, people remember their historical roots and historic garbs express their adherence to home region. In the biosphere reserve there are several museums, located in different parts of the region, those remind the rich traditions and history. In Očová, there is a form of craft yard, Podpolianske museum in Detva, House of Arts Arteska in Detva, Forestry OpenAir Museum in Vydrovo etc. The biosphere offers wide range of cultural activities for tourists.

In this region, horses and traditional agricultural tools are still used for agricultural work. The specific architecture and culture of the territory is formed by the traditional wooden houses, haylofts, potato cellars, wooden painted crosses. The agriculture in Poľana is represented mainly by self-employed farmers, engaged in both plant and animal production. Most agricultural land is permanent grassland used for cattle breeding by self-employed farmers as well as agricultural cooperatives. However, the traditional agricultural practices disappeared due to inhabitants' withdrawal (Action plan of biosphere reserve Poľana, 2014; Fabirciusová et al., 2015). Because of this trend, the share of grass land in the

territory has decreased twice during the last 50 years which is reflected also in increasing number of endangered spaces in fauna and flora (Gallayová, 2008).

The territory of Poľana biosphere reserve is a hiking and cycling destination. There are more than 300 km of cycle round and many hiking destinations. There are a few places that are very popular for rock climbing e. g. Kalamárka. The biosphere reserve is rich in wild animals and offers wild animals watching and some hunting grounds for red deer and large beasts. For fans of fishing, local pure springs offer great opportunities to catch salmon-trout fishes (Vitališová et al., 2023).

For the future development of slow tourism in the biosphere reserve, it is crucial to discover innovative ways to showcase its unique and diverse natural and cultural features while also ensuring the continued conservation and sustainability of its specific natural conditions. In this region, the biosphere reserve management conducts numerous engaging and successful marketing initiatives (Vaňová et al., 2023; Rojíková, et al., 2021). The development of tourism, according to ideas of slow tourism, could contribute to solve the problem with insufficient and unattractive job offers for young generation, raising awareness of the local territory, agricultural land management, improve the offer of services for visitors as well as for local inhabitants, improve the skills of local people within offered services and finally raise the standard of living of local community.

The first step is to build or rebuild the tourism infrastructure. Since the borders of the biosphere reserve are natural and statistical data is only available for administrative units, we used data collected at the municipal level along with data collected at the district level. The data collected for districts only partially map the situation, as the biosphere reserve only covers a portion of four districts.

The accessibility of the territory, mainly cities, is relatively good by car, bus or even train. The problem is frequency of connections to the villages as well as to the starting points for tourists which should be fostered or strengthened at least during the seasons by shuttle busses or special tourist busses.

Table 2 provides statistical data from Statistical office of the Slovak Republic about number of available accommodation establishments that are located in the Poľana biosphere reserve. Generally, 37 accommodation establishments are deployed in Poľana biosphere reserve with the total capacity of 937 beds including camping grounds, although, accommodation facilities are not situated in each municipality. Most of the accommodation facilities are situated in district Brezno, but the biggest capacity of beds is deployed in district Detva. Besides officially published data, it is possible to identify many private owners of apartments and cottages that offer short-term renting with(out) official registration.

Indicator	Year						
	2023	2022	2021	2020	2019	2018	2017
District Banská Bystrica							
Number of available accommodation establishment	4	4	5	4	4	4	3
Capacity of accommodation establishments including camping grounds	125	121	131	121	123	123	113
District Brezno							
Number of available accommodation establishment	19	13	13	10	12	9	9
Capacity of accommodation establishments including camping grounds	370	235	184	146	221	250	141
District Detva							
Number of available accommodation establishment	14	13	12	15	13	11	8
Capacity of accommodation establishments including camping grounds	442	283	268	544	464	410	368
Total							
Number of available accommodation establishment	37	30	30	29	29	24	20
Capacity of accommodation establishments including camping grounds	937	639	583	811	808	783	622

Table 2. Chosen indicators of tourism in Poľana biosphere reserve

As our comparative research showed, the prices of accommodation facilities are highly acceptable compared to other competing territories. The highest average prices for accommodation are in district Banská Bystrica, and the lowest prices are in district Brezno (Table 3).

District	Year						
	2023	2022	2021	2020	2019	2018	2017
Banská Bystrica	41,1	35,2	31,1	31,4	28,6	27,7	24,1
Brezno	19,6	16,3	N/A	N/A	12,2	11,4	13,1
Detva	33,7	N/A	N/A	N/A	19,8	N/A	N/A
Zvolen	47,6	42,3	N/A	N/A	33,5	36,2	41,3

Table 3. Average price for accommodation (in EUR) in the territory of Poľana biosphere reserve

In accordance with the principles of slow tourism, the focus should be on types of accommodation that allow for an understanding of the local environment, traditions, and values. Attention should be given to promoting the development of camping sites, the rental of rural houses, or the utilization of unused cottages, which can create new sources of income for local communities. A great opportunity for residents is to offer accommodations to tourists. Poľana is characterized by scattered settlements made up of a few distant buildings. Due to the decline in agricultural production, many of them are no longer used. They could be reconstructed to the plain accommodation premises with some unique features or experience, such as sleeping on hay or sleeping "off" without electricity and mobile connections etc.

Similar tourism infrastructure is developed in Altai, in Russia in a form of camp consisting of small cottages with common toilets and bathrooms for hiking tourists (Vitališová et al., 2023)

The area of biosphere reserve is well known and rich in local handmade crafts products and food products made from honey, pork and beef meat, sheep and cow milk and bakery products. With the aim to support local producers of crafts, food and services, local action group established in 2011 regional quality mark "Podpoľanie" for products and services made within biosphere reserve. Nowadays the regional quality mark obtained 27 craftsmen, 8 food producers, 3 restaurants serving traditional meals in municipality of Kriváň and Detva and 3 providers of accommodation (Regionálny product Podpoľanie, 2024). The regional quality mark is a guarantee of originality and quality of provides services or products. Understanding and promoting the philosophy of regional products can help the region to develop according to the features of slow tourism, specifically it can help the visitors the understand the local culture, traditions and habits. According to Sýkorová (2023) regional quality mark could be source of competitive advantage of a region.

The development of slow tourism should contribute to support of local producers (farmers, craftsmen) and local providers of services (accommodation, gastronomy, guided tours etc.). In Poľana biosphere reserve there is sufficient area of agriculture land but insufficient number of skilled workers and lack of regional markets. One of solution could be cooperation between municipalities and local farmers. For example, in Bosnia and Herzegovina a project called the Herzog House located in Trebinje, helps farmers to produce, sell and earn more, without spending time on markets. The city sells the farmers' products through shops under the label of Herzog House. Herzog house has won 'Green Destinations top 100 sustainable stories' competition as the shortest supply chain from the farm to the customer (Scholz et al., 2024). Similar solution could be found in Switzerland in Entlebuch biosphere reserves, where local stakeholders established local company (Biosphere Markt AG) responsible for promotion of local product produced in the biosphere reserve under the regional quality mark called "Echt Entlebuch".

Moreover, close to the territory of Poľana, there are at least 2 high schools that deliver the study programmes in agriculture (Banská Bystrica, Rimavská Sobota) and based on the principles of dual education the students could be trained by self-employed farmers and agricultural cooperatives (UNESCO, 2023).

Despite the great natural potential, the Poľana biosphere reserve is not adequately promoted, few visitors spend there their vacations. The employees of the Protected Landscape Area Poľana perform promotional activities more or less as voluntary ones, which is reflected in the scope of activities. The educational promotion activities are also in the hands of the Protected Landscape Area Poľana in a

form of workshops, conferences, special lessons for children at very high professional level (Vaňová et al., 2023).

Information on the territory is available to visitors in several info centres – directly in the territory of biosphere reserve in municipality of Hriňová, others in the district cities of Zvolen, Detva, Banská Bystrica, Brezno. In smaller municipalities, the tasks of info centres are usually realized by the municipal office. The possibilities of tourism as well as their promotion are mainly supported by the employees of the Protected Landscape Area Poľana through many events for the public and educational events for children and young people. There is no specific portal geared towards the promotion of Poľana as a (slow) tourism destination and the recognition of the title “biosphere reserve” is relatively low by residents as well as by tourists (Vaňová et al., 2023; Vitálišová, Vaňová, Rojíková, 2023). Advances in social media allow tourists to share any information about their travel, personal experiences and opinions on social media. Social networks can thus be an excellent tool for promoting the offer of the territory and at the same time a tool through which the target audience can be educated (Rojíková et al., 2021).

A good example of raising awareness of the importance of nature conservation could be Geopark Karawanken (Austria/Slovenia): The Geopark strives to make its areas accessible to the general public by establishing and managing interpretational-informative infrastructure for visitors. Situated in front of protected areas of the park, the interpretation points not only inform the visitors, but also encourage them to connect with the outstanding geological, natural and cultural heritage of the area. Through gamifications and story-telling, the visitors can learn about the significance of nature conservation, geo- and biodiversity across the Austrian-Slovenian border. Over the past years, two main Geopark visitor centres have been established, namely the ‘Podzemlje Pece’ in Slovenia and the Geo.Dom on Petzen Mountain in Austria. Numerous interpretational points are strategically located throughout the Geopark Karawanken area. Examples include ‘Smrekovec - an extinct volcano’ and ‘St. Hema Mountain - a 1,500-year-old pilgrimage site’ (Scholz et al., 2024). Another example is Julian Alps biosphere reserve. The premises of the centres are used for various educational activities, workshops, local community activities. They include also a souvenir and gift shop with local products. During the summer, tourists can buy here a Bohinj Card that includes free transport by bus as well as free entrance tickets to various cultural attractions as churches, museums and other discounts. All discounts are provided with the aim to eliminate the carbon footprint and support public transport modes; to promote local producers and local cultural heritage (Vitálišová, et al 2023). The promotion of the biosphere reserve as slow tourism destination should be done more systematically in cooperation and partnership with other local stakeholders, municipalities and Central Slovakia destination management organization.

Representatives from the Protected Landscape Area Poľana are very important coordinators of cooperation among local stakeholders. They implement the participative management approach in the development of biosphere reserve based on regular meetings and projects with representatives of local municipalities, entrepreneurs, NGOs and citizens (Vitališová et al, 2022).

CONCLUSIONS

This study investigates the potential of Poľana Biosphere Reserve in Slovakia in terms of slow tourism development. Based on academic and scientific literature as well as a survey carried out in the Biosphere Reserve Poľana, it investigates the potential of Biosphere Reserves for promoting slow tourism, given their emphasis on sustainable development and engagement with local communities.

The analysis, based on primary and secondary data sources, identifies numerous challenges facing the Poľana Biosphere Reserve. These challenges include a decreasing youth population due to limited job opportunities, waning interest in traditional agricultural practices, and a resulting decline in population. Despite these challenges, the research identifies a wealth of potential for slow tourism development within the reserve. Poľana Biosphere Reserve boasts exceptional natural beauty, rich cultural heritage, and unique products and experiences. However, as highlighted in previous studies (Vaňová et al., 2023; Vitališová et al., 2022), the region suffers from a deficit in tourist infrastructure and integrated promotional efforts. Effective planning and development in Poľana Biosphere Reserve necessitate a participatory management approach, as evidenced by prior research. This collaborative strategy should encompass local and regional stakeholders, including government entities, entrepreneurs, and citizens, alongside national level actors.

The development of slow tourism in Poľana Biosphere Reserve should prioritize the protection of its unique natural resources while concurrently generating new employment and income opportunities for local residents. Integration of the slow tourism philosophy into the local development strategy hinges on broad community acceptance from all stakeholders. The study proposes that slow tourism development in Poľana Biosphere Reserve could yield a multitude of benefits. Potential outcomes include the creation of new job opportunities for younger generations, increased awareness of the local area, improved quality of life for residents, and the promotion of traditional crafts and agricultural products under a local brand.

Based on the research findings, the study recommends a multi-pronged approach to developing slow tourism in Poľana Biosphere Reserve. Firstly, it advocates for the construction, renovation, and promotion of tourism infrastructure, aiming to provide tourists with a unique experience steeped in the natural and historical character of the region. Secondly, the study underscores the importance of supporting local food and craft producers from an economic development perspective. To achieve

these goals, the study emphasizes the need for enhanced marketing and promotional efforts, particularly through social media platforms. Additionally, intensified collaboration among local stakeholders is deemed essential for the creation of a more cohesive tourism experience.

By implementing these recommendations, Poľana Biosphere Reserve has the potential to evolve into a more alluring destination for slow tourists seeking natural beauty, cultural immersion, and authentic experiences.

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