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Problems of implementing sustainable tourism in Poland

Abstract. The paper attempts to list problems according to the concept of sustainable tourism in Poland. This concept must be discussed both in terms of the precision of definitions and the criteria to be met by specific forms of tourism that is not only economically viable, but also friendly to the environment (natural, social, and cultural). The second aim of this paper is to show a pragmatic aspect of the analysis and to identify problems facing all those in Poland who become involved in developing tourism compatible with the principles of sustainable development. The article presents sustainable tourism in the light of the Polish legislation, tasks of local governments and lists real problems of implementing sustainable tourism in Poland.

Keywords: Sustainable development, alternative and sustainable tourism, ecologically positive development.

JEL codes: M19.

The term "sustainable tourism" is inseparably connected with the concept of sustainable development understood as a "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (Żabińska 2000). The importance and popularity of sustainable development arises from the concern about preserving biological, cultural, and social environments on Earth. Thanks to the efforts of the United Nations Organisation, the concept has been popularised and put into practice in many countries. In Poland, sustainable development has been written into the Constitution as a guideline for the development of the State (Environment Protection and Development Act. Article 3. Journal of Laws No 133/97). Leaving aside disputes about definitions, we can quote the description of sustainable development as it has been phrased in the Environment Protection and Development Act, amended on 29 August 1997, currently in force in Poland. According to the Act, sustainable development is "a socio-economic development in which in order to ensure that societies and their citizens – both the present and future generations – have equal access to the environment, a process of integrating political, economic, and social efforts is initiated to ensure the preservation of natural balances and the permanence of fundamental biological processes" (Article 3. Journal of Laws 133/97).

Consistent with the state policy, all sectors of the economy must adopt relevant guidelines of sustainable development. With respect to the tourism economy, the guidelines concern the concept of tourism that is not only economically viable, but also friendly to the environment (natural, social, and cultural). Different ideas and definitions have been put forward which highlight the qualities of environmentally friendly tourism. Among those the most important is the concept of **sustainable tourism**. This concept must be discussed both in terms of the precision of definitions and the scope of notions used in literature. However, the pragmatic aspect of the analysis must be taken into account, and therefore it is important to identify problems facing all those in Poland who become involved in developing tourism compatible with the principles of sustainable development. The present paper attempts to list and discuss those problems.

1. Sustainable tourism – definition aspects

In the Polish specialist literature there is no agreement as to the definitions of key terms relating to environmentally benign tourism. Such terms include (Jędrzejczyk 1995; Majewski, Lane 2001, Zaręba 2000):

- green emphasising protection of the natural environment;
- soft as opposed to ecologically harmful "hard tourism";
- responsible highlighting responsibility for the effects of tourism development, especially socio-cultural impacts of tourism;
- environmentally friendly a concept in which the emphasis is placed not only on the biological environment but also on the social and cultural environments embracing all areas and sectors of tourism (both "green" areas, such as rural and protected places, as well as mass tourism destinations);
- agrotourism a form of rural tourism based on agricultural farms which both provide lodgings and are in themselves the main attraction for the tourist;
- alternative as opposed to mass tourism, this concept emerged in defiance of industrial civilisation and consumerism which abuse the natural environment and disturb authentic human relations;
- ecotourism a form of active and profound travel-learn experience that involves visiting destinations where the flora, fauna and cultural heritage are of utmost quality, a tourism that does not damage the fragile balances of biological ecosystems, sustains the cultural integrity of local people, and finally, provides financial means to uphold the preservation of all those features;
- sustainable epitomises permanence through long term development objectives

and through efforts to achieve balances (right proportions) between the economy and the protection of the broadly understood environment.

This diversity of definitions produces a certain chaos in their interpretation. Certainly, providing definitions and terminology must not be the sole objective of considerations on sustainable tourism in Poland. Nevertheless, to implement the concept of sustainable tourism we must understand what it actually means.

As a starting point for the discussion we can choose the aforementioned concept of **alternative tourism** related to the social phenomena of the nineteen-sixties that saw the emergence of the hippie subculture in the USA. This alternative tourism was intended to become a new style of travelling, counterbalancing the fast-growing and expansive mass tourism. Many young tourists rejected the "tourist behaviour of city-dwellers engaging in incessant pursuit of ease, comfort, and tinsel" (Jędrzejczyk 1995). The new tourists were determined to avoid crowded tourist destinations and were looking for a personal contact with local people. Often their motivation for moving around came from the need for travel-learn experience. The present understanding of alternative tourism causes certain confusion in the subject terminology. Some people maintain that this is any type of "small-scale" tourism as opposed to mass tourism. Thus, anything alternative is good, and anything mass is bad or negative (Zaręba 2000). Yet mass tourism can also have a positive impact on the development of certain areas. Such misunderstanding arises from the fact that mass tourism can be construed in terms of both quantity and quality.

In the quantitative aspect, tourism is indeed a mass phenomenon because it involves broad and socially diversified participants. It does not mean that by definition mass tourism is not compatible with sustainable development. Well-planned and matching the reception capacity limits of the host region, mass tourism can be environmentally friendly. The negative overtone of the term "mass tourism" relates to the qualitative aspect of this type of mass vacationing that involves a consumptive style of living and travelling, "scoring" tourism attractions, exploiting the environment, missing out on the personal contact with local populations, and acquainting oneself with the culture of visited places in a merely superficial way.

It should be noted that "small-scale" tourism is not the alternative to mass tourism. This is an "elite" form of travelling whose characteristics relate both to the tourist's motivation and the way the travel is organised. Such tourism does not have the stamp of environmental friendliness by definition. Like mass tourism, it must be implemented in compliance with the principles of sustainable development of tourist destinations and undergo the process of ecological adjustment.

The above difficulty in terminology interpretation appears to be resolved in the concept of soft tourism as opposed to hard tourism. Unlike the "hard" variety, soft tourism recognises social, ecological and aesthetic needs of the tourist destination.

The principles of sustainable tourism must be construed against the background of the concept of sustainable development. The related literature presents different, sometimes contradictory views on the idea (Żabińska 2000). This is because sustainable tourism is treated either as an instrument of sustainable development, or as a development instrument of tourism itself. The idea of sustainable tourism is based on the model of sustainable development. According to the definition put forward by the Federation of Nature and National Parks of Europe, sustainable tourism includes "all forms of tourism development, management and tourism activities that support ecological, social, and economic integrity of areas, and preserve their natural and cultural resources". Hence, the concept of sustainable tourism is based upon the harmony between the needs of tourists and the needs of the natural environment and local communities.

To bring the tourism economy closer to the principles of sustainable tourism, the following major objectives should be considered (Zaręba 2000):

- tourism should promote a healthy and productive model of life in harmony with nature, it should bring together people of different nationalities, and promote openness and tolerance;
- tourism development must contribute to preservation of natural resources and to protection of indigenous cultures;
- tourism development in host regions should involve local people already at the planning stage; it should also provide new quality employment to local residents;
- tourism enterprises should minimize waste, energy consumption and water usage, and should eliminate from use substances harmful to the environment, as well as motivate their employees, customers and local communities to pro-ecological behaviours;
- countries should promote the policy of open market in tourism and free exchange of tourist services, subordinated to the principles of sustainable development, and respecting international environmental protection laws.

Sustainable tourism is thus an idea which entirely encompasses the principles of sustainable development relevant to the tourism industry. In the analysis of issues related to the implementation of sustainable development in Poland, sustainable tourism – reflecting the development trends in contemporary tourism – must be given its proper place. To develop tourism supply in destinations, the guidelines of sustainable tourism must be taken into account.

To summarize our discussion about definitions, we can list the criteria that should be met by specific forms of tourism in order to be included in the concept of sustainable tourism. These criteria are (Mirowski 2002):

- compatibility with nature: preservation of landscapes, waters, green areas, flora and fauna, and the biological environment as a whole;
- compatibility with health requirements: caring about the health of both people and animals, provision of food cultivated by ecological methods, assuring high quality of relaxation and recreation for individual tourists and the whole society;

- compatibility with social requirements: respect for local moral codes, customs, tradition, and concern about preserving local social structures and family hierarchy;
- compatibility with economic requirements: providing economic growth in tourist destinations, equitable distribution of costs and benefits, financial support for small and medium-sized businesses, development directed towards activating diverse tourism phenomena;
- compatibility with technical and material conditions: planning of infrastructure that will be able to gradually accommodate the growing number of tourists while maintaining the capacity measures of facilities at allowable levels, accepting the physical and spatial limitations of the destination in the planning process to avoid encroaching upon the rights of local residents.

It must be understood that sustainable tourism is not anti-mass and it does not aim at reducing the number of travellers in the world. On the contrary, assuming a growing demand for tourist services, sustainable tourism provides a framework for any type of tourism friendly to the environment and having regard to sustainable socio-economic development. In the contemporary world there is a need for tourism development understood in such a way.

However, we must take a critical look at the state of awareness and possibilities of developing sustainable tourism in Poland. Here we can quote the words of a well-known ecologist, J. Kamieniecka: "For the time being tourism is perceived as a field of activity severely encroaching upon the natural environment, intensively utilising the assets of landscape. It is regarded as the chief destroyer of protected areas" (Kamieniecka 1998).

On the other hand, the Polish legislation highlights the obvious necessity to abide by the rules of sustainable development. Then, what is the true situation regarding the implementation of sustainable tourism in Poland?

2. Sustainable tourism in the light of Polish legislation

The role of the government administration is to develop concepts and formulate development programmes for individual sectors of the economy. The guidelines that are set forth are based on analyses and studies of specific fields of interest. With respect to tourism, on 21 April 2001 the government issued a paper entitled "*Tourism development strategy for the years 2001–2006. Government support programme for tourism development for the period 2001–2006*". According to this document, the main objective of the government policy is to improve competitiveness of the Polish tourism, both in the domestic and international markets. Poland places great hopes on the strong economic growth due to tourism in specific regions and the country as

a whole. Tourism can facilitate the implementation of important government policies, in particular job creation programmes, structural reform in the economy, programmes stimulating modern types of business activity involving information technology and laying the foundation for the information society, thus enabling the development and satisfying the needs and aspirations of all Polish residents. However, it has to be remembered that uncontrolled tourism development can disturb processes based on the concept of sustainable development. Tourism is a heterogeneous discipline whose development depends on the relations with other sectors of the economy. For the tourism economy to fulfil its role as the main stimulant of growth, it must take into account the needs of other sectors: agriculture, forestry, industry and services in such a way as to create a multifunctional and ecologically conditioned economic system linking all sectors of the economy in a relation of interdependence. Tourism is not just a sector of the economy, but also a social phenomenon, having reference to social, economic, spatial, and ecological relations. It can be seen that these relations are strongly connected with the idea of sustainable development, hence its principles should be reflected in the development of tourism. In January 2003 the European Commission was presented with the National Development Plan for the period 2004–2006 The strategic goal of the Plan is the construction of a modern economy based on knowledge, able to generate continuous sustainable development and create new permanent jobs in competitive regions. The main principles of NPR include pro-innovation, pro-employment policies, sustainable development, and equal opportunities for women and men. The blueprint for tourism development has been drawn up in the detailed Integrated Operational Programme for Regional Development. The scope of this programme includes:

- 1. Development of brand tourism products.
- 2. Promotion of brand tourism products.
- 3. Specialist training for employees in the tourist services sector.
- 4. Development of information and distribution network for tourist services, with special mention of internet-based services.
- 5. Development of statistical surveys and research instruments supporting management processes in tourism.
- 6. Development of tourist infrastructure, specifically:
 - infrastructure for active forms of tourism,
 - · investments within protected areas and in their proximity,
 - investments whose purpose is to adjust cultural heritage sites to the needs of tourism,
 - infrastructure of health resort communes to meet the needs of tourism.

The brand tourism product categories identified by the tourin ii programme include:

- urban and culture tourism,
- recreation, active and specialist tourism,

- rural tourism,
- cross-border and in-transit tourism.

Development of such products provides the opportunity to realise the potential lying in the natural environment, anthropogenic features, and general conditions of Poland. It has to be remembered that the programmes only provide a framework, a general outline of concepts. For development to be carried out in agreement with ecological, social and spatial conditions, the concept of sustainable development must come into play. The above-mentioned documents, based on professional assessments and analyses, envisage the creation of a system that will combine the protection of national heritage embracing the most precious biological and cultural resources with the development of tourist infrastructure.

The effective protection of both natural features and cultural heritage assets depends on skilful spatial planning. The relevant legislation currently in force gives priority to sustainable development¹. It is apparent that the concept of sustainable development has been written into the guidelines for the development of the country. Nevertheless, the detailed solutions for tourism provided in government policies deserve some reflection.

The policy documents emphasise the importance of brand tourism products development as well as tourism and communal infrastructure development with a view to increase the volume of tourism. The development of infrastructure and brand tourism products are the priorities mentioned both in the development strategies and the statutes of various organisations and associations active in the field of tourism. It must be remembered, however, that treating the influx of tourists as a remedy for economic problems is a mistake. Tourism development should be based on the principles of sustainable development. Otherwise we might end up with inferior - in terms of quality - mass tourism. The tourism product development must not be limited to selected, expansively developed brand products. Whereas such brand products must emphasise the special qualities of Poland, individual host regions must identify the forms of tourism best suited to the local conditions, and decide whether it should be ecotourism centred on the educated observation of nature, agrotourism providing not only the recreation, but also enabling participation in the farm life and observation of the countryside, or should it be active tourism with elements of travel-learn experience compatible with the principles of sustainable tourism: walking, cycling, kayaking, motoring. Choosing the right product from a diverse range of tourism forms, one that would be compatible with the conditions of the destination and will ensure the preservation of its natural and social environments, is a difficult task. It requires skills to see things in a broader perspective. In this regard, ecological awareness of both the society as a whole,

¹ The Prime Minister's Announcement of 26.07.2001: About the promulgation of Poland's spatial development policy. Monitor Polski Nr 26, item 432. Environmental Protection Act of 27.04.2001, Journal of Laws, Nr 62.

and tourism professionals in particular, is essential. A special role is vested in the Local Government as the host of the smallest territorial units of the country. But here we have a problem: to what extent the local authorities understand and are able to implement the principles of sustainable tourism as set forth in legal acts. Development of tourism, as should be remembered, is by law the responsibility of communal, county and provincial self-governments. Since 2001 tourism matters have been designated as the tasks of communal self-governments (Gordon 2003). On the other hand, the basic objective of communal self-governments is to satisfy the needs of the community. Such needs might include the desire on the part of the local population to participate in tourism as customers. The role of self-governments in this respect is to provide conditions for tourist activities and, broadly speaking, recreation for their local citizens. To this end the law-makers have specifically mentioned the provision of recreation grounds and sports facilities. On the other hand, tourism development can meet the needs of local people as representatives of the supply side, providing economic benefits to the community. The role of self-governments in this scope relates to the issue of hotel accommodation (as interpreted by the parliamentary act on tourist services), the issue of agrotourism, procurement of finances from SAPARD funds, support for local businesses in the field of tourism, and finally – an issue particularly emphasised by the Polish Tourism Organisation - dissemination of tourist information and promotion of the host region both in and outside the country.

As can be seen, the role of local governments in the development of tourism can hardly be overestimated. The interdisciplinary character of the tourism economy makes it possible for the communal infrastructure (such as telecommunications, water and sewage, etc.) to be utilised by tourists, and – likewise – facilities provided for visitors (such as swimming pools, restaurants, etc.) can be used by local residents.

Based on the criteria of sustainable development, tourism development must be ecologically positive in the long term, economically viable, and ethically and socially beneficial to local populations. Tourism draws a variety of benefits from local economies, and returns the favour by contributing to the development of local communities.

Among the many tasks of local governments in the scope of sustainable tourism is to (Zaręba 2000):

- formulate and implement regional plans for the development of sustainable tourism, based on the stock of biological, cultural and infrastructural resources and on estimated indicators of natural capacity and ability to accommodate volumes of tourists;
- appoint an organisational unit responsible for the implementation of the tourism strategy, embracing representatives from various social groups that have a vested interest in tourism;

- establish local ecological certification procedures and formulate the principles for national classification of tourism products and services produced or provided in an environmentally friendly way;
- carry out the right policy with regard to issuing planning permissions so that tourism projects harmful to the environment and incompatible with traditional infrastructure are not allowed to proceed;
- determine allowable limits of pollution;
- put in place mechanisms of monitoring the impacts of tourism on the environment;
- issue loan guarantees for businesses embarking on pro-ecological projects, so that they can obtain finances on preferential terms;
- invest in tourist routes and trails, information and education centres, waste disposal infrastructure, energy saving projects;
- raise ecological awareness of the population through education and sound and credible information;
- provide conditions for the establishment of an interdisciplinary pressure group promoting sustainable tourism.

Only such actions on the part of local authorities make a destination an attractive place for the tourist, characterised by clean environment and untouched nature. It guarantees returned visits by satisfied customers.

Here it would be appropriate to mention the conclusions of surveys conducted by our University's Department of Tourism². In the selected communes the possibility of tourism development was correctly assessed, identifying tourism as the main industry for the surveyed area. The surveys, on the other hand, revealed a low level of awareness of the sustainable development's role, a shortcoming requiring proper attention in the way of providing more information and knowledge on the subject.

3. Problems of sustainable tourism development

A review of literature on the subject of sustainable development reveals a growing interest in the issue. Yet, although there is a substantial bibliography relating to eco-development (sustainable development), the written output on sustainable tourism is relatively small. There is also a shortage of synthetic methodological works that would provide universal guidelines for implementing the principles of eco-development in the field (Kamieniecka 1998). In tourism itself, there appears to be a confusion as to which instruments of sustainable development can be di-

 $^{^2}$ The surveys were conducted in selected communes in 2002 within the framework of a statutory research entitled "Tourism and sustainable development of a destination".

rectly applied, and whether new instruments have to be created in order that the economic functions of tourism do not surpass the ecological and health-promoting function of the environment. In Poland knowledge on the subject is still not sufficiently widespread and remains in the scope of interest of a relatively small group of professionals.

We should, therefore, give a thought to the real problems of implementing the principles of sustainable tourism in the current economic environment in Poland.

In this respect the declarations expressed in various policies must at last be put into practice.

There are two groups of issues that we must consider:

- general development issues relating to systemic solutions and to the state of the country and society;
- specific issues concerning tourism development based on the principles of sustainable development.

Among the general considerations, the first problem relates to the planning process and the issue of government policy cohesion. The policy of sustainable development, as applied to spatial planning and tourism, can and should be a synthesis of policies of various government departments. For many people in Poland the very idea of planning brings the memories of the long-gone and negatively perceived political system of central planning, hence the role of correctly constructed development plans and strategies might not be properly appreciated. And yet sustainable development relies on a long-term perspective, hence it requires a strategy looking ahead 10 to 15 years. Frequent staff rotation at ministerial positions and alternation of government coalitions are responsible for the lack of cohesion in strategic policies. The problem also extends to lower levels of state administration, including local governments.

To achieve cohesion in the guidelines and decisions at different levels of administration and management, the issue of sustainable development must be clearly understood by all players, and this requires proper communication channels.

Spatial planning is an example of a conflict area. For instance, planning permissions issued with respect to lake shores frequently elicit claims by the locals and generate conflicts as they violate the planning guidelines adopted in state zoning policies. As a result, tourists arriving at a Polish lake encounter holiday homes lined up along the lake shores, obviously attractive to their owners, but generally causing spatial chaos and violating the principles of eco-development. Another well-known problem concerns the introduction of designs foreign to the local environment. The most prominent example of such are architectural designs clashing with the patterns characteristic of the local culture. The local culture plays an important role in the creation of the image of a tourist destination, and it is the image of the place that attracts tourists.

Thus the stability in policy-making and policy implementation at various levels of management is of paramount importance. Setting forth the principles of development, formulation of strategies, and implementation of policies should be coordinated at all levels of decision-making. Tourism needs an **integration of actions** by all players contributing to the creation of a tourism product. The heterogeneous nature of tourism requires a full cooperation between authorities, business people, and professionals representing various fields involved in the development of culturally sensitive and environmentally friendly tourism.

Many writers postulate that there is an urgent need to compile, evaluate and exchange experiences in the field of sustainable tourism. Poland also needs a strong lobby that would press for ecologically and culturally friendly policies. The tasks of such a pressure group would be to support education about sustainable development (and sustainable tourism), and coordinate efforts in the process of policy-making and policy implementation. In conclusion, to put the principles of sustainable development into practice, Poland needs a holistic approach involving organisational, legal, political, and mentality changes.

Another problem is a low ecological awareness in Polish society. This is due to the lack of perception, knowledge and understanding of the subject, underestimation of its importance, and simply old habits and customs. Sustainable development is usually associated with preservation of the environment and various restrictions resulting from it. It seems that mass media recognise the need for ecological education of the society to a greater extent than regular institutions of learning. Ecoeducation is primarily a domain of various organisations acting in the field of environmental protection. Hence, there is an overriding perception that the concept of sustainable tourism, or eco-tourism, relates strictly to the biological environment, and has little to do with socio-economic issues. Eco-education should be included in nation-wide education programmes to reach the whole society. The role of proecological associations, foundations and non-governmental organisations in the process of education cannot be overestimated.

Sustainable tourism (eco-tourism) is still associated with a passing trend and snobbery rather than a policy of the state or tourism sector strategy. Entrepreneurial activity based on the observance of eco-development principles is still seen as incompatible with normal, profit generating business. Another problem is the spontaneity of economic and social processes in the times of economic transformation. Particularly dangerous is a get-rich-quick philosophy of some businesses, an attitude greatly contributing to a degradation of the natural environment.

As mentioned before, the existing concepts of tourism development focus on economic objectives of the tourism product. Still underestimated is the role of principles and objectives of sustainable development despite the fact that preservation of precious biological and cultural assets is key to the process of developing competitive tourism products. Ecological awareness should characterise both decision--makers and people or organisations involved in the process of developing tourism products, not to mention residents of tourist destinations. A concern about the preservation of natural assets should be universal across the whole society whose own constitution prescribes the need for sustainable development.

The concept of sustainable tourism is about maintaining a rational balance between the interest of people and that of the environment. Residents of tourist destinations must be aware that natural assets will remain valuable if left untouched by aggressive development. It has to be shown that pro-ecology behaviour works, and benefits everyone. To the locals, the presence of tourists means both economic benefits and violation of their privacy. It seems obvious that tourists will be accepted more easily if local residents can see an improvement in their material well-being. In the long term, the conflicting interests of tourism and local communities can be brought together only through the application of sustainable tourism principles.

To raise the level of ecological consciousness we need better education in this area. Pro-ecology education should be included in school syllabuses and training programmes for administration staff, and the relevant knowledge should be popularised by mass media.

For tourism itself, ecological consciousness can be analysed in two dimensions: demand and supply. On the demand side, it is apparent that still not too many tourists appreciate the recreational advantages that nature offers. Aggressive mass tourism continues to be in vogue, with eco-tourists perceived as an exception to the rule.

On the supply side, there is a need for effective marketing efforts to popularise tourism forms compatible with the principles of sustainable development. In other words, instead of waiting for tourists to change their preferences and adjust the tourism offer when the demand is well and truly in place, we should "create" demand by actively encouraging people to spend their vacations in harmony with the requirements of sustainable development.

The principles of sustainable tourism should apply universally to the whole tourism sector. It would be wrong to set apart eco-tourism as this could only deepen the differences between popular forms of tourism and elite activities largely compatible with sustainable tourism criteria.

On the Polish market where mass tourism still dominates, eco-tourism is usually associated with high prices characteristic of extravagant and snobbish offers. Polish travel agencies, preoccupied mainly with outbound tourism, do not propose sustainable tourism forms usually associated with less popular domestic propositions. The "alternative" tourists can hardly find suitable "off-the-peg" packages, hence they often organise their holidays themselves. Very few tourism organisers, mainly those specialising in eco-tourism, believe that tourism products compatible with criteria of sustainable development can be profitable. Tourism organisers and service providers should break the mental barrier which makes them believe that sustainable tourism is incompatible with a profitable business activity. Both ecophiles and eco-sceptics should know that sustainable tourism "pays off". This antagonism between business and the principle of preserving both the natural and social environments is most evident in protected areas. On the one hand, for the tourist these are the most attractive destinations, on the other hand, uncontrolled influx of visitors can contribute to the destruction of the precious resources. It is apt to quote the words of Jost Krippendorf who said that "tourism destroys tourism".

Raising the ecological awareness and popularising the principles of sustainable development are thus the main tasks to be undertaken in order that qualities rendering tourism products unique and attractive could be preserved. We can say that it is in the tourism sector's own interest to reform into an economy truly friendly to the environment in which it operates. The conditions necessary for this are: popularisation of knowledge about sustainable tourism, development of tourism products in compliance with the principles of sustainable development, and effective nationwide, regional and local marketing.

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