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THE MAIN ASPECTS OF INVOLVING THE POPULATION OF THE REGION IN ECOLOGICAL TOURISM (THE CASE OF BELGOROD REGION)

Abstract. Improving the effectiveness of the ecotourism development is a significant task of regional development today. In world practice, ecological tourism is understood as responsible travel across the territory of a particular ecotourist destination, which gives an idea of its natural and cultural-ethnographic features, does not violate the integrity of ecosystems and contributes to the well-being of the local population. The development of ecological tourism in Belgorod region will lead to the achievement of socio-cultural, infrastructural, environmental and financial-economic effects. To investigate consumer preferences and consider the index of involvement in ecotourism at the regional level the authors conducted a survey among residents of Belgorod region, reflecting its results in the article. The problems of state regulation of the ecotourism development include the insufficient level of identification of this concept, the insufficient development of ecotourism classifications, the absence of a methodology for assessing the effectiveness of its development, the imperfection of the regulating mechanism for the ecotourism development in the Russian Federation.

Keywords: ecological tourism; specially protected natural territories; nature reserves; national parks; tourist services



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**ОСНОВНЫЕ АСПЕКТЫ ВОВЛЕЧЕННОСТИ НАСЕЛЕНИЯ РЕГИОНА
В ЭКОЛОГИЧЕСКИЙ ТУРИЗМ (НА ПРИМЕРЕ БЕЛГОРОДСКОЙ ОБЛАСТИ)**

Повышение эффективности развития экологического туризма является сегодня значимой задачей регионального развития. В мировой практике под экологическим туризмом понимаются ответственные путешествия по территории конкретной экотуристской дестинации, которые дают представление о её природных и культурно-этнографических особенностях, не нарушают целостности экосистем и способствуют повышению благосостояния местного населения. Развитие на территории Белгородской области такого направления туристической деятельности, как экологический туризм, приведёт к достижению социокультурного, инфраструктурного, экологического и финансово-экономического эффектов. С целью исследовать потребительские предпочтения развития экологического туризма на региональном уровне был проведён опрос. На основании ответов был рассчитан индекс вовлеченности в экологический туризм – это комплексный показатель, отражающий отношение к экологическому туризму. К проблемам государственного регулирования развития экологического туризма относятся недостаточный уровень идентификации этого понятия, недостаточная развитость классификаций экотуризма, отсутствие методики оценки эффективности его развития, несовершенство механизма регулирования развитием экотуризма в РФ.

Ключевые слова: *экологический туризм, особо охраняемые природные территории, природные заповедники, национальные парки, туристские услуги*



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Introduction

Ecotourism has a significant impact on the region, expressed in the growth of ecological awareness of the population, increased attention to the conservation of the ecosystem of the region and the biodiversity of the natural environment, the growth of employment, the development of "green" technologies, a positive impact on the image of the region, etc. Improving the effectiveness of ecotourism development at the regional level is a significant, but not yet sufficiently implemented task by the authorities.

Taking into account, that the main natural resource of the regions is concentrated in specially protected natural territories (SPNT), improving the effectiveness of the development of ecological tourism in SPNT (where this type of activity is allowed) is one of the priorities of regional development. The development of such a direction of tourist activity as ecological tourism in the Belgorod region will lead to the achievement of sociocultural, infrastructural, environmental and financial-economic effects. For the region, the development of ecotourism can become one of their promising areas and will contribute to: the development of small businesses; the creation of new jobs; attracting investments to the region; the inflow of tax revenues to the regional budget; the development of the region's infrastructure; environmental education of the population; preservation of national cultural heritage, the maintenance of cultural traditions and folk ideas; assistance environmental protection; support and promotion of regional tourism brands.

The analysis of scientific publications indicates an insufficient level of development of ecological tourism in most regions of the Russian Federation and the absence of an information database, as well as an insufficient level of scientific and methodological support for the development of integrated regional ecological tourism products.

The aim of the work

The purpose of the work is to investigate consumer preferences for the development of

ecotourism at the regional level.

Materials and methods. In order to investigate consumer preferences for the development of ecotourism at the regional level, a survey was conducted. The questionnaire questions were focused on identifying:

- the degree of the respondents' ecological culture, their theoretical knowledge in the field of ecology;
- the level of respondents' knowledge of information about environmental problems;
- the level of interest of respondents in solving environmental problems, as well as the desire to participate in ongoing environmental activities.

Results and Discussion

There are several interpretations of the definition of "ecotourism". For the first time it began to be distinguished in the 1980s. The term was introduced by the Mexican economist-ecologist G. Ceballos-Lascurain in the early 80s of the twentieth century, defining it as a journey through relatively untouched and unpolluted natural territories in order to study, admire and enjoy the landscape, its wild plants and animals, as well as any existing cultural manifestations (both past and present) found in these territories.

The World Tourism Organization (United Nations World Tourism Organization, UNWTO) considers ecotourism as "a tourist activity in nature that brings profit to preserve the most natural environment and at the same time contributes to improving the living standards of the local population.

There is no normatively approved concept of "ecological tourism" in Russia yet. In federal legislation, it is used in the Federal Laws "On the development of small and medium-sized enterprises in the Russian Federation" and "On the animal world", but the concept itself is not disclosed in them.

In world practice, there is a Model law "On ecological Tourism", in which ecological tourism (ecotourism) is understood as "responsible travel through the territory of a specific ecotourist destination, which give an idea of its natural and cul-

tural-ethnographic features, do not violate the integrity of ecosystems and contribute to the well-being of the local population"¹.

E. V. Zenkina, E. S. Belova define ecotourism as "a journey into natural territories for the purpose of deeper study and understanding of local and natural culture, without breaking the integrity of ecosystems and protecting natural resources" [5].

Models of ecotourism development in the leading countries and trends in the development of ecotourism in the world are presented in detail in the work of A. V. Afanasieva, environmental aspects of tax regulation are studied by E. S. Tsepilova, T. V. Voronina, the development of ecotourism in China is studied by E. V. Zenkina, E. S. Belova [1, 4].

In our opinion, the potential of ecotourism development in Russia is provided by:

- a favorable and various ecological environment;
- valuable natural and ethno-cultural resources;
- preserved national traditions and customs;
- developed folk crafts;
- positive Russian experience of ecological tourist routes;
- the absence of the need to develop expensive infrastructure (it is much less tied to it).

Certainly, the main goal of ecotourism is the process of communicating with nature itself, provided that the load on ecological systems is minimal.

The main regions forming demand in the international ecotourism market are the countries of Western Europe and North America². Germany is the leading country in the number of ecotourists per year (more than 22%). Also, in

the top five are France, Spain, the United States and the United Kingdom, in which the share of ecotourists exceeds the global average of 15%. Russia ranks only 14th in the ranking of countries for traveling in the wild (2019), behind even such small states as Poland, Slovakia and Venezuela³. And in the ranking of countries' competitiveness in the tourism sector, Russia ranks 39th [6].

Let us note that Russia occupies a leading position in terms of the absolute area of specially protected natural territories, which are objects of national and world heritage [13]. In the structure of SPNT of regional significance, nature reserves occupy 55.7 million hectares (about 47% of the area of protected areas), in which it is also possible to engage in recreational activities. At the same time, there are more than ten thousand protected natural territories at the regional level in the Russian Federation, which are also potentially promising for the organization of ecological tourism, but, with rare exceptions, their condition, absence of special infrastructure and trained guides do not allow them to be actively involved in the tourist process.

About 40% of the Russian population lives within a radius of 30 kilometers from the nearest federal protected area. At the same time, only 12% of citizens of the Russian Federation in 2017-2019 visited specially protected natural territories of the country, this can confirm the fact that there is no active development of the ecotourism industry in Russia. 49% of the citizens of the Russian Federation have never been to the national parks of Russia [7].

The total number of tourist sites located in state nature reserves and national parks in the Russian Federation has increased by more than 2.93 times since 2001 (from 682 in 2001 to 2000 in 2021). The largest share belongs to ecological trails and routes – in nature reserves, their 71.42% in the total volume of tourist sites in na-

¹ World Tourism Organization (2017), 10YFP Sustainable Tourism Programme Annual Magazine 2016/2017: Advancing towards a clear North, UNWTO, Madrid. DOI: 10.18111/9789284419203.

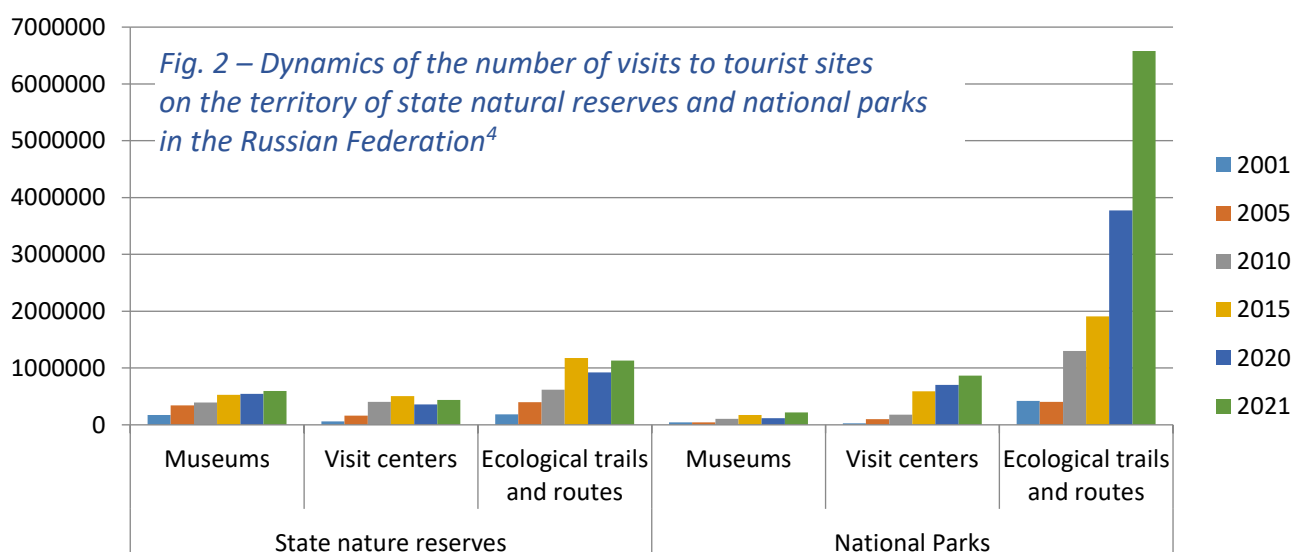
² Economic Impact of Global Wildlife Tourism. World Travel & Tourism Council, 2019. URL: <https://www.wttc.org/priorities/sustainable-growth/illegal-wildlife-trade/> (Accessed on: 05.12.2022).

³ UN General Assembly: Ecotourism key to eradicating poverty and protecting environment (2012). UNWTO. URL: <https://www.unwto.org/archive/global/press-release/2013-01-03/un-general-assembly-ecotourism-key-eradicating-poverty-and-protecting-envir> (Accessed on: 17.11.2022).

tional reserves and 82.29% in national parks, respectively (Fig. 1).

The total number of people who have traveled in nature reserves or national parks along ecological trails or tourist routes, who have also visited museums and visitor centers on their ter-

ritory has increased more than tenfold since 2001. The largest share belongs to ecological trails and routes – in nature reserves, 52.19% of them in the total volume of visits in national reserves and 85.89% in national parks, respectively (Fig. 2).



In general, we see a significant increase in tourists on the schedule, especially in national parks. Here, the number of visitors who walked along specially equipped ecological trails or routes reached 9820.68 thousand people in 2021. It should be noted that state nature reserves account for 22% of visitors (or 2128.48 thousand people) and national parks 78% (or

7658.2 thousand people).

It should also be noted that museums in nature reserves were visited by 28% of the total number of tourists who visited nature reserves, only 3% of the total number of visitors to national parks visited museums in national parks. Ecological trails are visited by a large proportion of visitors in nature reserves – 52% or 1128,814 thousand people, and in national parks – 86% or 6577,674 thousand people.

In the Russian Federation, the number of visitors to specially protected natural areas are

⁴ Figures 1 and 2 source: Environment. Federal State Statistics Service. URL: <https://rosstat.gov.ru/folder/11194> (Accessed on: 05.11.2022).

very insignificant in comparison with the attendance of protected natural objects in other countries.

Consider the structure of SPNT in the Belgorod region, which are located on an area of 301106.92 hectares, including [9]:

- 11 natural parks on an area of 15926.5625 hectares;
- 178 state nature reserves on an area of 26135.0367 hectares;
- 107 natural monuments on an area of 190.6789 hectares;
- 2 arboretum parks on an area of 4,141 hectares;
- 1 botanical garden on an area of 71 hectares;
- 15 state natural complex (landscape) nature reserves on an area of 258779.52 hectares.

tures.

Let's consider the dynamics of search requests in a search engine wordstat.yandex.ru according to certain words. The analysis of the history of impressions makes it possible to determine the popularity of ecotourism, while the analysis of data in different time periods allows us to identify trends in demand changes in dynamics [10, 11].

The study presents the results of the analysis of requests on the phrase "ecological tourism" for the two-year period from 1.06.2020 to 1.06.2022. Note that Yandex has about 34 million active users among residents of the Russian Federation³.

To the search engine Yandex.ru according to the keywords "ecotourism", an average of 17,879 requests are received per month (Fig. 3).

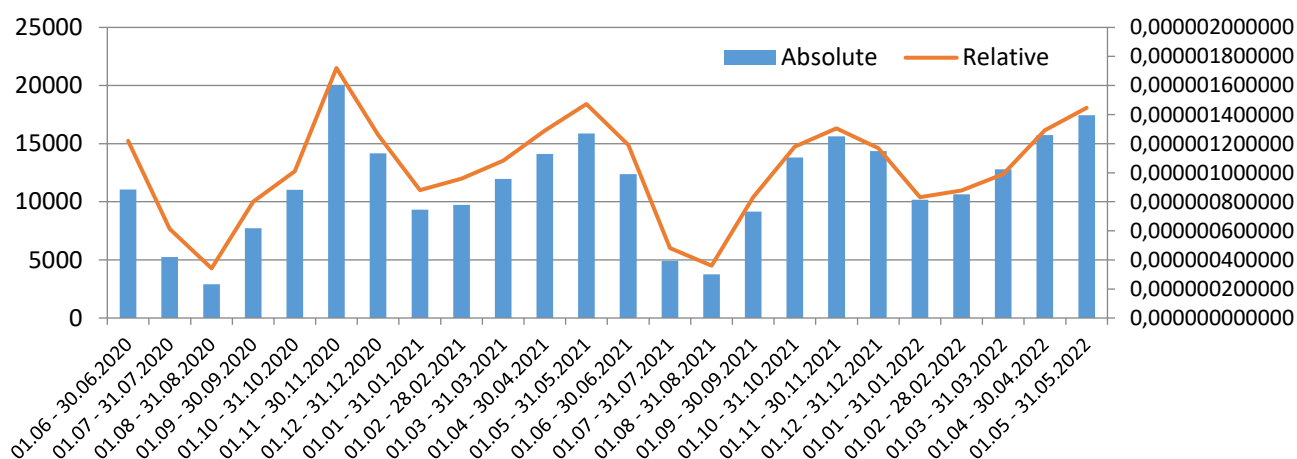


Fig. 3 – The history of impressions for the phrase "ecological tourism" in "Yandex Wordstat" for the period 06.01.2020 to 06.01.2022

Analysis of the history of requests for the phrase "ecotourism" shows a fall in the interest of potential tourists during the New Year period and summer months, and an increase in the number of requests in autumn and spring. This may be due to the search for alternative holiday destinations in the off-season - a vacation at the sea becomes irrelevant, and short-term tourist trips to the nearest regions become in demand.

The conducted selective sociological research allowed us to analyze consumer preferences in ecological tourism among residents and guests of the town of Belgorod. Three focus

groups of respondents were selected as the target audience of the study: employees of the tourism sector (specialists); residents of the town of Belgorod (citizens); guests of the town of Belgorod (guests).

Twenty respondents of different ages and status participated in the survey in each of the selected groups. The developed questionnaire included questions about the preferences in ecotourism and the interests of respondents. Based on the responses, the index of involvement in ecotourism was calculated – this is a comprehensive indicator reflecting the attitude to ecotour-

ism. It represents the sum of the answers to the questions about ecotourism. The answers to the questions were evaluated on a scale from 1 to 3 points, where 1 step corresponds to 1 point. 1 point means the minimum value, 3 points – the maximum value.

To calculate the index of involvement in ecotourism, the answers to the following questions were considered:

- do you show interest in environmental problems;
- how do you assess the level of your ecological culture;
- is nature the main purpose of your tourist trips;
- have you ever heard of such a term as "ecotourism";
- have you ever taken part in an environmental tour at least once;
- how important is the environmental friendliness of the tour and compliance with the rules of nature conservation for you;
- what types of ecotourism are most interesting to you;
- what is the planned duration of the ecological tour;
- would you agree to provide any assistance to the visited territory during the ecotour;
- how much money per year are you willing to spend on an environmental tour.

Analyzing the answers, it can be concluded that the majority of respondents are aware of the importance of the development of ecotourism. More than half of the respondents, until the moment of the survey, had not traveled to the Belgorod region as an ecotourist. According to the majority of respondents, a 3-day ecotour on the territory of the Belgorod region is optimal in duration. The most preferred time of year for ecotourism is spring. More than half of the respondents can afford to spend from 10.0 to 20.0 thousand rubles in ecotourism. It is important to note that the respondents are interested in such types of services in an ecological tour as the opportunity to see natural monuments, the opportunity to see animals in their natural habitat, ex-

cursions along ecological trails, etc.

The conducted survey allows us to conclude that in the Belgorod region it is necessary to popularize and develop ecotourism among young people. Based on the respondents' responses, the index of involvement in ecotourism was calculated – this is a complex indicator reflecting the attitude to ecotourism (Fig. 4).

It should be noted that according to the level of involvement in ecotourism, two groups of respondents are distinguished – these are guests and professionals of the tourism sector (38.2 and 37.8, respectively). Residents of the town of Belgorod show less interest in environmental problems in general and ecological tourism in particular.

The processes that took place within the framework of antiviral measures in the conditions of the spread of COVID-19 led to the isolation of the population, the transition to remote access to work duties, a sharp decrease in the overall level of health and well-being, which caused an increase in the popularity of spending time in open ecologically friendly areas. The demand for ecotourism has grown significantly during the COVID-19 pandemic, when a new format of life away from civilization with its overpopulation, high rhythm and unsafe epidemiological situation has emerged.

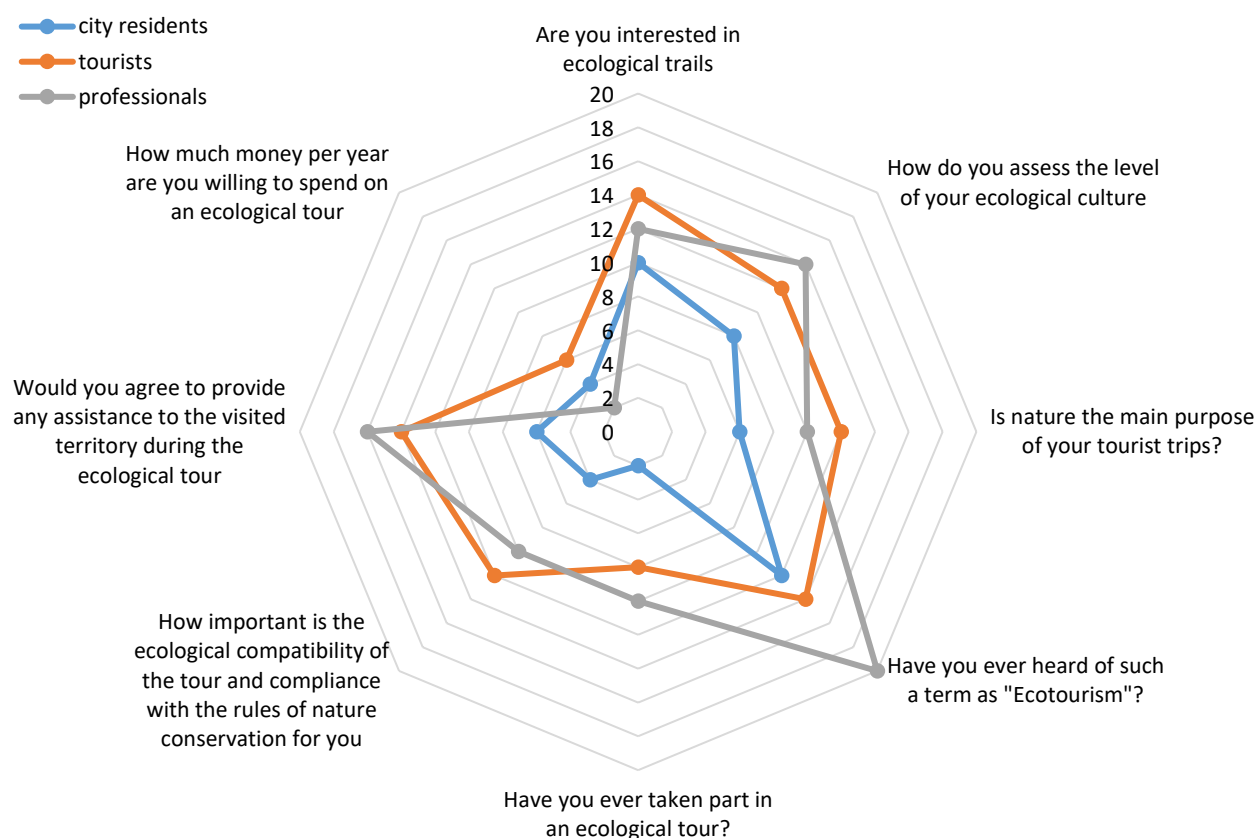
The problems of state regulation of the development of ecotourism include the insufficient level of identification of this concept, the insufficient development of ecotourism classifications, the lack of a methodology for assessing the effectiveness of its development, the imperfection of the mechanism for regulating the development of ecotourism in the Russian Federation [2].

When developing a strategy for the development of eco-tourism in each specific region, it is necessary to analyze the conditions affecting the formation of the tourism services market, such as natural and climatic, cultural and historical, organizational and economic, socio-economic. Such an analysis is important in order to really assess the development opportunities of a particular tourist product, its competitive-

ness and profitability.

The strategy should consider the performance of such functions of ecological tourism as recreational, educational, environmental and economic. An important condition for achieving sustainable development of ecotourism is the development of a system of targets and indicators, monitoring the achievement of which will help to assess the effects obtained

from the implementation of the strategy⁵ [9]. Thus, the competent organization of ecological tourism is of great importance both for the socio-economic development of the region and for the preservation of the natural environment, its individual elements, and will also contribute to the environmental education of tourists and the quality of life of the local population.



*Fig. 4 – Index of involvement in ecological tourism
(compiled by the author on the basis of the conducted research)*

The development of ecological tourism will allow solving the following tasks:

- to attract financial resources for the sustainable functioning of SPNT;
- to promote the development of interest in natural monuments of national and world history, culture;
- to contribute to the formation of an envi-

ronmentally oriented consciousness and behavior of the population and business;

- promote "green" technologies in the service of visitors to SPNT;
- to increase attention to environmental protection, preservation of a favorable ecological situation and natural biodiversity;
- diversify the regional economy through the introduction of new forms of service for visitors to SPNT;
- to create new basic and additional jobs at enterprises of the tourism industry and in

⁵ The Russian Federation has risen to 39th place in the global tourism competitiveness ranking. URL: https://tourism.interfax.ru/ru/analytics/market_overview/62288/ (Accessed on: 05.12.2022).

SPNT;

- to contribute to increasing the income level of the population living near SPNT, thanks to the service of tourists, which will overcome the spatial heterogeneity of socio-economic development of municipalities in the regions;
- to increase the positive image of the region, lay the foundations for eco-branding of the territory and solve a number of other tasks.
- However, the organization of ecotourism can also have a negative impact on the re-

gional environment and the sustainable functioning of SPNT, which is expressed in the following:

- in the loss of part of natural and recreational resources when exceeding the maximum permissible anthropogenic load;
- contamination of the territory adjacent to the SPNT with household waste;
- conflicts with the local population;
- violation of silence and habitual environment for wildlife in connection with the development of tourist infrastructure in the territories adjacent to SPNT, etc.

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