

ATTRACTIVENESS OF POLAND AS A TOURIST DESTINATION IN THE EYES OF CZECH STUDENTS OF PRIMARY SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

This study summarizes the analysis of perception of Poland as a tourist destination in the eyes of students of primary schools located in Prague and was created as part of a larger survey of the attractiveness of Poland for the people of the Czech Republic.

The data are based on a questionnaire survey done in April 2009. As a result, the author managed to receive 242 questionnaires filled out by students of seventh to ninth grade of primary schools. The students were to answer 29 mostly close-ended questions and six questions regarding their family background and sex.

Analysis of the questionnaires confirmed the thesis that Poland is not perceived as an attractive tourist destination and the majority of the involved students have very little knowledge about the country. Students emphasized the absence of promotion of Poland by the governmental organizations and the students actually recommended this as a major potential for an improvement for the Ministry of Sport and Tourism of the Republic of Poland.

Author of this article believes that a thorough analysis of this kind can be a useful source of information about the opinion of the Czech students (and also their parents) about Poland as a tourist destination and can serve as a basis for a modification of the syllabus that substantially lacks behind in this respect.

Keywords: tourist destination, analysis of perception, tourist attractiveness, tourist potential of Poland

1. Introduction

Geography of tourism is a multidisciplinary science and discipline of socioeconomic geography. Given its tight interconnection with other sectors (such as behavioral geography or geography of services) and other scientific disciplines (inter alia psychology, sociology, economy and others), geography exploits a broad spectrum of scientific methods.

The roots of geography of tourism reach to the half of the XIX century, when the main topics of the researches were various touristic sites. The term "tourism" itself was firstly used in 1905 by J. Strander (Kowalczyk, 2002). At the beginning, the science was progressing mostly in countries with most developed tourism such as Germany, France, Switzerland and the United States. Starting with the discovery of the socioeconomic impact of tourism, first statistical data, regional studies and definitions of tourism related terms were created.

After the World War II, larger emphasis was placed on the spatial, social and cultural-geographic approach to solving issues related to tourism.

The seventies brought a flood of publications relating to tourism. A lot of studies were gradually oriented upon finding of spatial models and structures. Among the main approaches is important to note the work on the spatial models like the Central Place Theory by Christaller, the Principle of Spatially Differentiated Distance Gradient

by von Turen and the Assessment of the Infrastructural Potential by D. C. Mercer.

Since then, the globalization and rapid development of information technologies brought even tighter interconnection of tourism and other disciplines, e.g. marketing and sociology (decision making processes), ecology (terms like sustainable development of tourism, touristification, "green tourism") and others.

The following research connects the approach of geography of tourism and the approach of behavioral geography with the aim to discover the behavior of people within a territory and the perception of space by individuals and groups of people. Author wanted to recognize the perceptual environment of Poland in the eyes of the Czech society. (According to Pásková, Zelenka 2002, perceptual environment is an environment that is created during the process of elaboration of sensum, previous experience and social behaviors.)

The author first considered the use of mental maps – as a way of illustration of perception of regions by people (Gould, White, 1986). Nevertheless a short survey revealed that the information about Poland within the targeted group is so scarce that even a large group of students was not able to create any reasonable mental map of Poland. Consequently, the author focused on the use of the apparatus usually applied in a sociologic research and its further statistical elaboration.

The forthcoming research can be treated as a pioneer work on a topic of mutual tourism related ties between Poland and the Czech Republic. One of the primary aims of the author is to increase the awareness and interest of the representatives of both countries about this problematic.

The study was prepared as a part of a larger research of the attractiveness of Poland as a tourist destination in the eyes of Czech society.

It was created based on earlier analysis of textbooks from primary and secondary schools. The outcome was a finding that the sole information included in the textbooks not accompanied by teaching of a well prepared and enthusiastic teacher cannot stimulate the interest of students about Poland.

A second study whose outcomes were used as a ground for the current study was dealing with the perception of the attractiveness of Poland as a tourist destination among the group of employees of travel agencies. Those employees can, based on the opinion of the author, substantially influence the clients in their choice of tourist destinations. This is based on the fact that Czechs relatively often use services of tourist agencies especially while organizing longer trips to foreign countries.

The analysis of perception of Poland as a tourist destination among the group of primary school students was a logical continuation of the earlier research. With its help, the author would like to answer the following questions:

1. If and by what means students travel to Poland and what is the major motivation behind their trips? How do they spend their time during the trips?
2. How do young people perceive the attractiveness of Poland as a tourist destination? Which elements of the offer do they rate as very good and which do they consider as immaterial or not interesting?

For the sake of better comparison, the author used some of the questions asked earlier during the research of travel agencies.

This analysis should be followed by another study of high school students to be conducted through a questionnaire in 2009/2010.

2. Basic Research Information

The questioning was done in April 2009 among the students of primary schools located in Prague. Approximately 900 questionnaires were distributed among students of didactics at the Charles University who then subsequently asked their pupils. As a result, the author managed to receive the total of 302 questionnaires back, out of which 242 were properly filled out. The research was conducted within a group of students in the seventh, eighth and ninth grade.

The students were to answer 29 mostly close-ended questions and six questions regarding their family background and sex.

The questionnaire was divided into three sections. The first section – called “My Travels” – described common motives and ways of travelling. The aim of the second section – called “My Trips to Poland” – was to find out information about specific experience of students who already travelled to Poland. The most interesting part of the questionnaire was the third one – named “What Do I Think about Poland as a Tourist Destination.”

This study presents the results of the second and third part of the questionnaire inquiry.

Basic characteristics of the explored group of students

From the 242 students that participated in the questionnaire and properly answered the questions, 55% were male (133 students) and 45% (109 students) were female. The largest group (49% of the total number of students, 118 people) consisted of students of the ninth grade, 31% (75 people) were students of the seventh grade and the smallest group consisted of students of the eighth grade (20%, 49 persons).

The level of education of parents of the questioned students presents the Table 1.

Tab. 1 Education of the parents (% of students)

<i>Level of education</i>	<i>Mother</i>	<i>Father</i>
Basic	7	11
Secondary	58	40
Tertiary	28	38
No answer	7	11

Tab. 2 Wealth status of the family

<i>Wealth status</i>	<i>No. of students</i>	<i>% of students</i>
We are a very rich family	12	5
We have all we need	99	41
Wealth of our family is average	91	38
We have enough money to cover basic needs	37	15
We are poor, sometimes we have problems with covering basic needs	3	1

Majority (89%) of students declared that their family owns a car, similar number of students (79%) stated that their parents own a cottage. The declared wealth status presents the Table 2.

The majority of students are satisfied with the wealth status of their family. 83% of students think that the wealth of their family is either average or above average, 15% of students state that the income of their family is sufficient to cover their basic needs and 1% of students

percept their living standards as poor. Interesting is the fact that even in the poorest group of students, there were some who stated that their family owns a cottage and a car.

3. Trips to Poland

The aim of the second part of the research was to gain a complex knowledge of the trips to Poland conducted by the group of questioned students.

This part of the questionnaire was answered only by those students who have visited Poland, which was 33% of the whole number of questioned students. The majority of those (89%) visited Poland in 2005 or later. 6% of those who have visited Poland travel there every year.

The length, seasonality and organization of the trips

Even though the answered length of stay varies between one and twelve days, the majority of the trips were very short and lasted only one day. The average length of the trips was around three days.

The biggest portion of the trips was done in summer (65%), the remaining 35% were evenly distributed around the rest of the year.

Up to 73% of the trips were organized by the travelers themselves, 16% of the trips were organized by a school which is not surprising given the fact that the targeted group comprises of students.

The means of travelling, boarding and accommodation

The most common way of travelling to Poland was by car (71% of answers) due to the short distance from the Czech Republic. Relatively large group of students went to Poland on foot, mainly during their near border/cross-border hiking.

The most common way of boarding was in restaurants. 30% of students brought their own food, which surely relates to the high number of one day trips. The number of answers stating a different way of boarding was negligible.

45% of students spent a night in the Czech Republic without any attempt to sleep in Poland. Those who have spent their night in Poland stayed in a hotel or a hostel (64%) or stayed with their family or in a friend's house.

The sources of information about Poland

The questionnaire shows a fact that only a negligible number of students attempted to gain any knowledge about their northern neighbor (16% of students). From those who have, the majority used internet or asked their family or friends for a recommendation (18%).

Most common motivation to visit Poland

One of the author's aims was to gain knowledge and information about student's motivation to visit Poland. Students were asked to choose from one to three factors that caused them to visit Poland. They had a choice of 15 predefined answers or were allowed to state their own answer. Detailed summary of the answers can be found in Table 3.

The majority of students chose one or two reasons why they visited Poland. Among the most common answers are: coincidence (which was given by 34% of students), geographical proximity (24% of students) and the desire to visit monuments, which was stated by 18% of students who have visited Poland. The author was surprised by the relatively low number of the choice "price" which was stated only by 12% of students.

Tab. 3 What was your motivation to travel to Poland? Pick up to 3 most important reasons

<i>Answer</i>	<i>No. of students</i>	<i>% of students</i>
Price	10	12
We wanted to do sightseeing in Poland	15	18
I have heard that there is an interesting nature in Poland	7	9
I wanted to learn about life in Poland	5	6
We found an interesting offer of trip to Poland in a tourist agency	2	2
I wanted to visit friends/family	0	0
It was just a coincidence that I went to Poland	28	34
I wanted to learn Polish language	1	1
I wanted to learn something new about our neighboring country	7	9
My friend recommended me Poland	4	5
It is close	20	24
I did there a part time job	0	0
I wanted to verify opinions I have heard about Poland	4	5
I believe Poland is a good place for relaxation	4	5
Other reasons (shopping 3, sports events 7, school 3, church 1)	21	26

The way of spending time during the trips to Poland

Another interesting question answered by the questionnaire was how young people spend their time during

their trips to Poland. The children picked 153 different answers (approximately 1.9 answers per student). The most frequent answer was “I was walking,” given by 46% of students. This can be caused by a large number of students who visited Poland during a short, one day trip. Up to 35% of students visited monuments during their trips, whereas similar number of students admired nature. Relatively small group of students stated that they spent their time actively. Detailed structure of answers is summarized in Table 4.

Tab. 4 Activities during students' latest stay in Poland

Activity	Number of students	% of students in Poland
I was visiting monuments	29	35
I was admiring nature	25	30
I was taking a tan	5	6
I was taking walks	38	46
I was reading books	3	4
I was watching TV	5	6
I was sleeping	10	12
I was swimming	11	13
I was dancing in a Disco	7	9
I was biking	3	4
I was canoeing	0	0
I was yachting	2	2
Other, what? (sports 6, shopping 8)	15	18

4. Poland as a tourist destination

The aim of the third part of the questionnaire called “What Do I Think about Poland as a Tourist Destination” was to get students' opinion about the attractiveness of Poland. Significantly higher number of open-ended questions was to leave the students with enough space to express their unbounded judgment about the destination. The students were supposed to answer seven differently formulated questions.

In the first question, the students were to express their opinion and on the scale from 1 to 10 (1 – minimum, 10 – maximum) to evaluate to what extent they agree with the hypothesis stated in all of the 17 points. Throughout this exercise, the author wanted to find out their basic knowledge about Poland. For that reason, some of the questions were to characterize Poland, such as “Poland is a country suitable for biking,” whereas the aim of other questions was to find out the personal opinion of students, for example how they agree with the sentence “Poland is a completely boring place.”

The average answers given by the students are represented by the Tables 5, 6 and 7. Based on a thorough analysis, it is possible to state that relatively large group of respondents have strong opinions about Poland – they either believe that Poland offers a wide spectrum of touristic possibilities or on the other hand generally have very negative opinion – the compounded result is however close to the mean.

Tab. 5 How do you feel about this sentence? – My view of Poland

Statement	Average valuation	Have been to Poland	Never been to Poland
Poland is country with heterogeneous landscape	4.59	4.86	4.56
Poland is country with monotonous landscape	4.41	4.2	4.51
There is a lot of thermal springs in Poland	4.45	4.26	4.54
There is a lot of animal species living in Poland	4.97	5	4.96
There is very interesting flora in Poland	5.34	5	5.51
There is a rainy weather in Poland all year round	4.09	4.33	3.95
There is a lot of snow in winter in Poland	5.25	5.26	5.24
There are four distinctive seasons in Poland	5.97	5.53	6.18
Polish sea is good for swimming	3.8	3.13	4.88
Poland is a place suitable for biking	5.82	6.07	5.7
Poland is a place suitable for in-land water sports	4.53	4.26	4.65
Poland is a good place for yachting	3.8	3.79	3.82
Poland is a good place for sea water sports	4.7	4.64	4.74
Poland is a good place for fishing	5	5.01	4.99
Poland is proper place for mountain climbing	4.69	4.94	4.58

Tab. 6 How do you feel about this sentence? – Poland is an absolutely uninteresting place

Group of students	Average valuation
Total	4.87
Students that have been to Poland	4.48
Students that have not been to Poland	5.04
7 th grade students	4.6
8 th grade students	5.1
9 th grade students	4.93
Boys	5.1
Girls	4.6

Tab. 7 How do you feel about this sentence? – I have never heard anything positive about Poland

Group of students	Average valuation
Total	4.6
Students that have been to Poland	4.64
Students that have not been to Poland	4.58
7 th grade students	4.3
8 th grade students	4.78
9 th grade students	4.69
Boys	4.9
Girls	4.2

Interesting is a comparison of opinion of those students who have visited Poland with those who have not and have their knowledge based only on secondary sources. It is without question that personal experience forms the opinion of respondents. Those children who have been to Poland better perceive the variety of landscape and the possibility of doing sports (biking, mountain climbing, fishing). Their ratings are substantially higher than of those students who have never visited Poland. On the other hand, pupils who had the opportunity to personally discover that the water temperature of the Baltic Sea is much lower than in the Mediterranean and that the thermal spas are not the biggest advantage of their northern neighbor rated those advantages of Poland much lower than the students that lack the experience.

It's interesting to analyze the assessment of the two controversial sentences stated below the calculation. The first one was "Poland is a completely boring country." Approximately 40% of students decided not to answer the question by placing either 0 which meant that they don't know the answer or by placing 5 which means a neutral answer. In case of this question, the answers are quite evenly split with slight concentration to negative answers. The evaluation 1 to 4 was given by 21.1% of students whereas the grade 7 to 10 was given by 33.5% of asked students. Almost a quarter of students (>22%) absolutely agreed with the statement that "Poland is a completely boring country" by giving the grades 9 and 10. The author believes that this is a worrying outcome.

Table 6 presents the level of agreement with the stated question. The group of students that have visited Poland rate Poland better than those who have not been there. Boys are much more critical (5.1) than girls (4.6). Younger students are also less critical than their older colleagues.

The second statement was supposed to be controversial and should have motivated children to their own assessment. The statement was – "I have never heard anything positive about Poland." The average evaluation of this sentence was slightly better at the level of 4.6, whereas the average agreement with the sentence "Poland is a completely boring country" was at the level of 4.9. The proportions of positive and negative answers are also opposite. Disagreement – the grades 1 to 4 – stated 31% of students whereas the agreement (grade 7–10) was given by 22.3% of students. Despite the fact that this assessment is slightly better, the result is still worrisome.

Table 7 presents the distribution of answers throughout different groups of students.

A part of the survey of attractiveness of Poland contained also three open ended questions. The first one asked the students to pretend that they are employees of a marketing agency and are supposed to create a slogan that would characterize their northern neighbor the best. The answer was given by 96 children. The most interesting slogans are shown in the Table 8.

Tab. 8 Slogans that characterize Poland as a tourist destination

Slogans
Poland – wrongfully unvisited country
Poland – go to see how people that survived concentration camps live
Poland – discover undiscovered
Poland - the cheapest of all European countries
Poland – beautiful country that would positively surprise you on every step
Poland – our pleasant neighbor
Poland – bikers paradise

Seven students stated a negative comment, such as "Poland is embarrassing, never go there," emphasized once more that they have never been there or stated that it's a boring country. The rest have taken this question seriously and tried to describe the key advantages of Poland.

Another task that aimed to learn the opinion of students was to name one positive and one negative idea that came to their mind when asked about Poland.

The students usually stated the following positives: short distance to Poland, vast diversity of flora and fauna and a large number of attractive cities and monuments. A lot of students also mentioned good food (sausages, candies and bread), understandable language and the

supply of cheap goods. Relatively surprising was a fact that some students mentioned the Polish-Czech popular singer Ewa Farna as one of the most positive things about Poland.

The list of negative thoughts emphasized by students is much wider. Students believe that Poland is full of garbage, filthiness and disorder. They describe Poland as an underdeveloped country with cold weather best described as the “middle of nowhere” without civilization (“the least developed European country”). The pupils describe the sea as cold, mountains as scarce and flat and the whole country looking like a big, flat and boring pancake. Bad conditions of infrastructure (roads) were mentioned as a good characteristic of Poland. The Poles are described as mean and fat people who confess from their sins in church only to steal later.

Other students used more general characteristics, e.g. “I hate Poland,” “Poland does not attract me at all,” “unknown country suffering from a lot of prejudice.” Many students emphasized that they don’t want to visit Poland. The author believes that such evaluation can negatively affect future cooperation of both countries in long term. The opinion of students is very likely based on opinions of their parents. These students will also once make decisions where to spend their vacations and/or place their investments.

The last open ended question was supposed to be creative. The questioned students were put in a position of an expert who was supposed to recommend the Polish Ministry of Sport and Tourism a way to bring more Czech tourists to Poland. This request was answered by roughly half of the students (113 persons). Almost half of the students that gave their answer stated the need to promote Poland as a tourist destination more intensively either by TV commercials, informative leaflets or PR articles published in popular magazines. The goals that the promotion should target should include “dispatching of negative prejudice about Poland that outlast in the Czech society” and also a “promotion of nature, cultural heritage and other advantages of Poland.”

Another way that students proposed to the minister was an improvement of the environment and the tourism supply. Several students emphasized the need to increase the quality of road conditions that are essential for international tourism. Another group suggested organizing tourist trips to answer individual needs of Czechs. Unfortunately even in these answers, some students expressed their negative feelings about Poland.

The assessment of primary and secondary offer of tourism in Poland

The author’s aim was to discover the opinion of students about the primary and secondary tourism supply in Poland and its subsequent comparison with the data obtained during the questionnaire research of the travel agencies done before.

Primary offer of tourism

According to “Marketing destinace cestovního ruchu” by A. Királová, the primary offer of tourism is composed of natural, cultural-historical and cultural-social potential of destinations. The author was interested in the two most easily identifiable elements – the natural and the cultural-historical attractiveness of Poland.

Similarly as in case of the survey done in the travel agencies, the author introduced two basic elements of the primary and seven elements of the secondary tourism supply to the students. The author asked for their assessment on the scale of 1 to 10 (1 the worst, 10 the best and 0 as I don’t know).

Both of these elements were rated relatively well by the students. Nature was rated slightly better (average rating of 6.04) than the cultural-historical attractiveness (average rating of 5.88).

In case of the secondary offer (by secondary offer, we understand the means that should enable the tourists to fulfill their expectations), the highest rating received the accessibility (6.32) and good communication (6.07). The lowest rating received the quality of infrastructure (5.21).

It’s interesting to see how the opinion of students that have visited Poland differs from the sample mean. As seen on the figure, with the exception of availability and quality of road infrastructure which probably negatively surprised students, the remaining elements of both primary and secondary selection were graded better by those who had the opportunity to visit Poland than by the sample mean.

Figure 1 represents the comparison of average evaluation of the tourism offer by the following groups of persons: all the asked students, only those students that have been to Poland and finally the employees of travel agencies whose results were part of the prior studies.

It’s clearly visible that the students are much more critical than the group of employees of travel agencies (the average grade of 6.88 against 5.77 given by students). The only exception is the assessment of the road conditions where the employees rating was very low (at 4.85) while the other elements were graded 6 and better. In case of the primary tourism offers, the employees prefer cultural and historic characteristics of Poland to natural characteristics.

The supplementary question whose aim was to find an opinion of even the least interested-in-travelling students was the following: “Your best friend who really likes to take pictures plans his trip to Poland. What do you expect to see on the pictures taken in Poland when he comes back?” The outcome was a finding that the majority of students (77%) expect to see historical sites, cities and monuments as well as castles (47% of respondents). The author finds surprising that 21% of respondents stated that they expect to see amusement parks.

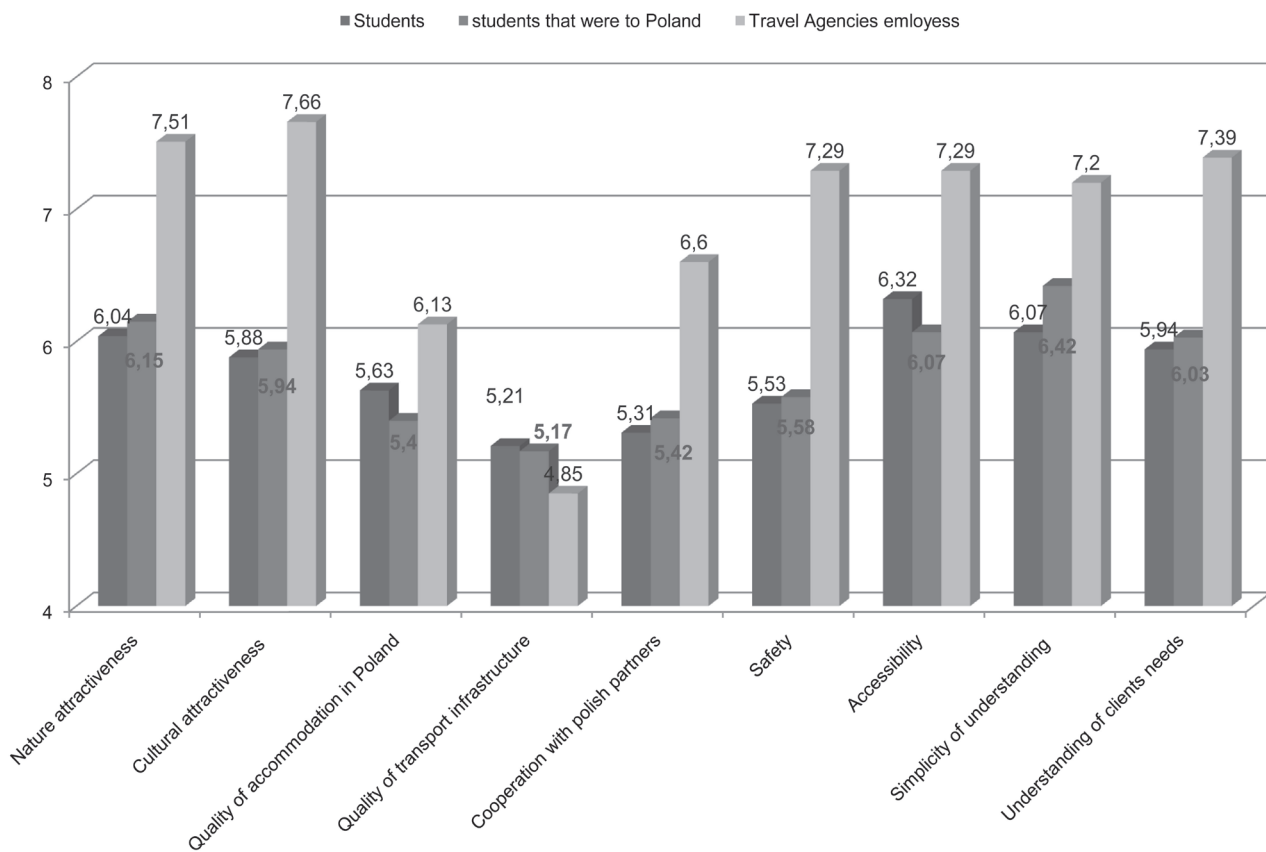


Fig. 1 The distribution of answers regarding attractiveness of Poland throughout different groups of students and travel agencies employees

5. Conclusion

In the European Union, the tourism industry creates approximately 11.5% of the GDP and employs 12.1% of people (<http://www.tur-info.pl/>). Similar situation is in Poland where tourism is among the most important industries. One of the natural sources of tourists in Poland could come from its neighbor – the Czech Republic. In order to be successful in the international competition for tourist destinations, the country has to conduct an active tourism-supportive policy and spend a lot of effort to advance the positive perception of Poland as a tourist destination by well prepared marketing and PR promotions and activities.

In this study, the author characterizes the trips to Poland and the perception of Poland by a small group of the Czech society, the students of primary schools.

Unfortunately, the perception is rather negative. Despite the fact that a large portion of the questioned students have visited Poland, the trips were usually short in time and were conducted without any prior preparation. The trips were very often only one day stays without any utilization of accommodation possibilities and therefore brought only very small revenues to Poland and its public finances.

And this is hardly surprising. Even such a young representation of the Czech society pointed to the lack of

information about Poland and the need to fight the prejudice as the most important factors for increasing the number of visits of Czechs to Poland. Their answers cited in the study very well illustrate the prejudice that is to be worked with and the positive things that need to be strengthened and promoted.

Of course, the answers from the group of primary school students in Prague cannot be considered as a representative sample of the whole Czech society but can serve as a strong opinion for further discussion that should be complemented by other studies among other groups of Czech population.

I believe that this research can serve as an inspiration for the authorities responsible for the perception of Poland as a tourist destination in the Czech Republic and for young scholars that can follow with other studies on similar topics.

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SUMMARY

The study described in the article named “Attractiveness of Poland as a tourist destination in the eyes of Czech students of primary schools” took place in April 2009 and was based on primary data collection and their analyses. The aim of the study was to find out how Poland is perceived as a tourist destination.

The article is divided into 5 parts. The first, theoretical part of the study – Introduction, is dedicated to discussion on the methodology and literature. Introduction defines the aim of the paper and its hypothesis. Second part of the paper contains information regarding the research itself: description of the construction of the questionnaire and basic characteristic of the explored group of students. In the next section of the paper, reader can find the characteristic of the trips to Poland conducted by the group of questioned students based on the primary data. The section contains information regarding the length, seasonality and organization of the trips and also boarding and accommodation. It also describes sources of information about Poland, the means of travelling, most common motivation for visits and the ways of spending time during the trips. The subsequent part of the article is considered to be crucial to accomplish its aims. It is dedicated to description of the student’s opinions regarding the attractiveness of Poland as the tourist destination. It contains high number of open-ended questions with the target to leave students enough space to express their feelings and unbounded judgments about of primary and secondary offer of tourism in Poland.

Most important conclusion of the paper is that the perception of Poland as a tourist destination in the eyes of Czech students is rather negative. Young people emphasize the lack of available information about their northern neighbor and the need to fight prejudice associated with Poland.