

Perspectives of Sustainable Tourism Development in the Region – Case Study



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Abstract Tourism development can be defined as the process of creating strategies and plans to increase, support, and promote tourism in a destination. A tourism region is a destination with primary and secondary offer in which the visitor has the opportunity to experience tourism activities. In our paper, we focus on tourism development the selected region, which is the High Tatras—Foothills, as one of the most visited regions in Slovakia. The aim of the paper is to propose further options for the sustainable development of tourism in the region on the basis of the analysis and evaluation of the current state of tourism in the region. The intention is to examine and analyze the tourism offer in the region, to find out what is the demand for tourism in the region and to identify the perspectives for the development of sustainable tourism in the region. The economic principle and securing income from tourism are one of the decisive factors, but at the same time, the main emphasis in the development should be placed on preserving the natural environment, i.e., respecting the environmental principle, and at the same time, also the local population should benefit from the development of tourism, i.e., the social principle. The result of this strategy is to satisfy all stakeholders and increase the region’s competitive position on the international tourism market, in line with respect for the protection of natural and cultural resources.

Keywords Destination · Region · Sustainability · Tourism

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1 Introduction

Tourism development is an impulse for destination development. At a basic level, tourism development can be defined as the process of developing strategies and plans to support and promote tourism in a particular destination. In tourism development,

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it is necessary to examine the demand and supply of tourism and the perspectives for its development. Tourism development is a subject of interest of various tourism organizations and subjects.

In this paper, we discuss the perspectives of tourism development using the example of the Slovak region of High Tatras—Foothills. Visitors to the Tatra region mainly perceive resorts directly in the High Tatras and explore nowadays the foothills of the High Tatras. The High Tatras are overcrowded in some resorts, and the foothills of the High Tatras offer the beauty of the Tatra region without the crowds of visitors and are a space for the development of sustainable tourism. The region is not industrially oriented, and tourism is a great opportunity for its overall economic development. In this paper, we focus on the region perspectives, how it could exploit its potential and increase visitor numbers and competitiveness under the principle of sustainability. The destination management organization plays an important role in the development of sustainable tourism in the region.

2 Literature Review

A number of authors have addressed the theoretical knowledge of examining tourism development in a destination. They theoretically define tourism development, analyze tourism supply and demand, and address what are the perspectives for tourism development. They define the tourism destination and the organizations that coordinate tourism development in the territory. The focus is on its sustainability. Peace and a favorable international climate are essential conditions for tourism development. Its development is also influenced by natural, ecological, technical, demographic, economic, professional, administrative, and other factors.

Tourism development is the process of creating and sustaining a tourism industry in a locality. At a basic level, tourism development can be defined as the process of developing strategies and plans to increase, further develop, and promote tourism in a particular destination (Abir & Khan, 2022).

Oliveira (2022) refers to tourism development as a strategy of cultural, economic, social, and environmental development to meet the needs of visitors and residents. Saner-Yiu et al. (2015) describe tourism development as the activity of planning and implementing strategies to develop the industry.

In the global economy, tourism is one of the most prominent and growing industries (Buhalis, 2000). This sector plays an important role in supporting the national economy. Increasing the flow of tourism can bring positive economic outcomes to nations, especially in gross domestic product (GDP) and employment opportunities (Manzoor et al., 2019).

The focus is on the destination. The authors define destination as follows. Oliveira (2022) as a place that has a set of cultural and natural heritage resources, infrastructure, and services that attracts tourism visitors. According to Demir et al. (2021), a destination place is a place that is visited when traveling or on a trip. Ramos et al. (2019) refer to a destination as an area that relies heavily on the primary tourism

supply to generate income. Gómez-Suárez and Martínez-Ruiz (2016) refer to a destination as a geographic area consisting of a set of resources and attractions that are visited by tourism visitors.

Destinations are strongly influenced by globalization and high competition in the tourism market, which implies a competitive struggle for the destination (Valeri, 2021). As a consequence of the high competition, small operators have a harder chance to succeed, and mergers are occurring. Pooling of operators is characteristic mainly for small destinations that cannot compete with fully developed destinations. The creation of a destination, with a view to increasing competitiveness at the same time, should be in line with the principles of sustainable tourism development. This method also follows the intentions of the state tourism policy, which emphasizes increasing competitiveness, sustainable development, employment development, regional development, unified presentation, and promotion of Slovakia (Strategy of sustainable tourism development to the year 2030, 2020).

Issues of tourism sustainability and urban development have become top priorities for public policy makers around the world (Keller, 2015). Today, perhaps more than ever, there is a need to manage sustainable tourism development, which cannot be achieved without taking into account environmental issues and their global dimension. The various problems and demands of society and urban development can be addressed by transforming cities into attractive tourism destinations (Zamfir & Corbos, 2015).

In defining sustainable development, the UNWTO defined three basic prerequisites for sustainable tourism. The first is the optimal use of environmental resources, which forms a key element in tourism development, maintaining essential ecological processes and helping to protect natural heritage and biodiversity. The second is to respect the sociocultural authenticity of host communities, to protect their cultural heritage and traditional values, and to contribute to intercultural understanding and tolerance. The third prerequisite for sustainable tourism is ensuring viable, long-term economic operations, providing socio-economic benefits to all stakeholders that are equitably distributed, including stable employment and income-generating opportunities and the use of social services for host communities, and contributing to poverty alleviation (www.unwto.org, 2022a, 2022b).

Janusz and Bajdor (2013) revealed the essence of sustainable tourism and described the main framework of sustainable tourism which consists of twelve elements—economic capacity, local prosperity, employment quality, social balance, visitor satisfaction, local control, local community satisfaction, cultural richness, physical integration, biodiversity, resource efficiency, and clean environment.

Another model of sustainable tourism was also limited to present key elements—carrying capacity, local community, experience, destination management organization, seasonal management, demand management, and smart destinations (Adillon, 2019).

Ryglóvá et al. (2011) divide the preconditions for tourism development into three main categories, namely selective (incentive) factors, locational, and implementation conditions. The first category, which includes selective factors, is intended to stimulate the emergence and development of tourism, which is linked to consumer

behavior. Selective factors are further divided into objective and subjective factors. Objective factors include political and economic factors, demographic realities, and administrative conditions. Subjective factors mainly include psychological factors that influence consumer behavior. This includes, for example, advertising, promotions, and trends. The second category is locational conditions, which are determined by the territory. We divide locational conditions into natural conditions, which include, for example, climate and terrain and social attractions, which include customs, traditions, monuments, etc. The third category is implementation factors, which enable visitors to access and use services in the destination, and these include transport, accommodation, and food services.

Sustainability is the perspective of long-term tourism development. Given the need for sustainable development of tourism destinations, it has become critical to design destinations in a way that mutually facilitates experiences to enhance the perceived value of the visitor experience and the sustainability of the destination. However, it is only recently that tourism research has turned its attention to sustainable experiences as a potential means of gaining competitive advantage while enhancing destination sustainability and perceived experience value (Poudel & Nyaupane, 2013).

Sustainable development represents a meeting point for environmentalists and developers. In other words, sustainable development can be seen as a combination of two processes, development, and sustainability (Dresner, 2008).

Actions toward the development of a region's tourism should be implemented taking into account the global trends that shape the future of tourism and the local conditions and specificities that determine the current and potential state of development. Today, new trends in tourism are emerging in the aftermath of the blockage caused by the COVID-19 pandemic (Ianioglo & Risannen, 2020).

Tourism destination managers need to understand what visitors perceive as engaging, intense, and memorable. However, they also need to be mindful of how residents perceive local tourism development and how it affects their community. This is one of the fundamental aspects of tourism development, as host communities that support tourism development tend to be more hospitable to visitors, which influences visitor satisfaction and loyalty. In addition, interaction with host community residents is a key component of the quality of the experience that contributes to the long-term success and sustainability of destinations (Pinto & Guerreiro, 2020). Slovakia has rich natural and cultural potential, which are prerequisites for tourism development. This wealth of the country combined with the activities of tourism entities creates real preconditions for the prospective development of this sector.

Therefore, the creation of a tourism product with a view to its sustainability is an important task for the entities involved in the development of tourism in a destination. According to the UNWTO definition, a tourism product is a combination of tangible and intangible elements such as natural, cultural, and man-made resources, attractions, facilities, services, and activities around a specific center of interest that form the core of the destination's marketing mix and creates the overall visitor experience, including the emotional aspects for potential visitors. The tourism product is valued and sold through distribution channels and has a life cycle (www.unwto.org, 2022a, b).

For a destination to be successful and attract visitors, it needs to create a full-fledged tourism organization. The success of a destination requires balanced tourism development and combines understanding with research and concerted efforts to sustain desired tourism initiatives and maintain competitiveness. Destination management ensures the optimal allocation and utilization of resources for the best use and in the most sustainable manner (Varghese, 2021).

Nowadays, destination management organization should consider social media as one of the main tools to improve their competitiveness, for example, by engaging with visitors and thus understanding visitor behavior and needs (Carvalho et al., 2021).

Magas (2010) discusses tourism trends and new challenges such as sociocultural aspects, consumption changes, and technological aspects, along with integral tourism product planning, toward a tourism experience. Destination management organization can thus be the strategic leader and developer of the destination, facilitating partnership and collaboration in line with the shared vision of the destination. To ensure the quality of services and facilities at the destination, it is critical to develop destination management organization that can monitor the quality aspects of the resources at the destination.

Destination marketing requires strategic planning, decision-making, and organization. Effective positioning will result in a strong brand that develops an emotional and productive two-way relationship. Regardless, destination managers should have relevant knowledge and understanding of traditional and current marketing channels to better reach potential visitors (Camilleri, 2018).

Tourism consumers are becoming more discerning and are seeking to base their travel decision-making process on relevant and credible tourism information. In recent years, user-generated content on social media, travel bloggers' opinions, and entertainment programs in the media have influenced the public's travel buying behavior and act as a driving force for the development of tourism products. On the other hand, tourism organizations and destination management organizations face major challenges in communicating tourism product attributes as they cannot be experienced before consumption. Therefore, they need to know their visitors and know-how and through what means or platforms of communication they can inform potential visitors (Dinis et al., 2021).

3 Methodology

The subject of the paper is sustainable development of tourism, and the object of study is a selected tourism region, namely the High Tatras—Foothills region in Slovakia. The aim of the paper is to define further perspectives of sustainable tourism development in the High Tatras—Foothills region on the basis of the analysis and evaluation of the current state of tourism in the region. The main objective has been divided into the following sub-objectives:

- O1: Examine the tourism offer in the region.
- O2: Find out what is the demand for tourism in the region.
- O3: Indicate the prospects for sustainable tourism development in the region.

In the article, we use a combination of theoretical and empirical research methods, analysis and synthesis, and induction and deduction. As a tool of information gathering, we use the method of questioning. The questionnaire was distributed electronically to visitors to the region. The survey was conducted in the months of March–April 2022. 287 respondents participated in the survey. The collected data were evaluated. The questionnaire consisted of 15 questions, the structure of which was designed to identify the visitor and their preferences in the region, while giving room for their own opinions and suggestions. 11 questions were focused on the High Tatras—Foothills region, and 4 questions were focused on the personal profile of the respondent. To evaluate the questionnaires, we used mathematical-statistical methods, namely the method of arithmetic mean. We have also used graphical representation of the results of the questionnaire survey by means of tables and graphs, which we will use for the concrete presentation of the data obtained from the processing of the questionnaires. In the text, we present numerical data in relative or absolute terms.

For the proposal of further development of sustainable tourism in the region, we assess the current situation with SWOT analysis. The SWOT analysis assesses the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats that exist in the market. The importance of tourism in the region can be determined through various indicators, we will focus on the tourism function in the High Tatras—Foothills region. The tourist function, the so-called Baretjes and Defert index, captures the number of inhabitants in the region and the number of beds in accommodation facilities. We calculate the tourist function and then the density of beds.

We use primary and secondary sources to process the work. Secondary sources include domestic and foreign literature sources, internal documents of the regional tourism organization High Tatras—Foothills, and data drawn from the Internet. Primary data were obtained through the evaluation of questionnaires.

4 Results

High Tatras—Foothills are a tourism destination located in the north of Slovakia near the highest mountain of the country, the High Tatras. Slovakia has a total of 21 tourism regions, the territory of the High Tatras—Foothills falls under the Tatra Tourism Region. The Tatra Region is the most touristically interesting region in Slovakia. It consists of the sub-regions of the Tatra Mountains and Northern Spiš. The region includes the districts of Poprad, Kežmarok, and Stará Ľubovňa.

The High Tatras—Foothills region is characterized by its rich nature, its territory extends in the Poprad and Hornád basins, and it extends into the Tatra National Park, the Low Tatras National Park, and the Slovak Paradise National Park. The Čierny Váh flows through the area, and the Hornád River rises near the village of

Liptovská Teplička. The tourism offer in the High Tatras—Foothills region consists of 9 villages and their natural and cultural-historical potential. In a small area, visitors to the region are offered an aquapark and a thermal swimming pool, a golf course, campsites, wellness centers, monumental reserves of folk architecture, relax hotels, congress and conference hotels and facilities. In winter, it offers excellent conditions for cross-country skiing, ski mountaineering, winter hiking, winter adrenaline activities, and events in ski resorts, of which there are several in the region. In summer, it is an ideal place for hiking, mountain hiking, cycling, stays in rural homesteads, farms and guesthouses, combined with economic activities, folk traditions, regional gastronomy, and folklore events. In terms of social events, modern and folklore festivals, as well as gastronomic events, are organized in the region. The wide natural wealth, extensive meadows and pastures, also create suitable conditions for farmers who produce and sell their products in organic quality.

The importance of tourism in the region can be determined through various indicators, and we focus on the tourist function in the High Tatras—Foothills region. The tourist function captures the number of inhabitants in the region and the number of beds in accommodation establishments in the region, which gives us a picture of the region's accommodation capacity, which is essential for residential tourism (Table 1).

The calculation of the tourism function provided us with data on how many beds are per 1,000 inhabitants of a region or state. The tourist function of the High Tatras—Foothills region results in 46 beds per 1,000 inhabitants. To better interpret the result of the region's tourism function, we calculated the tourism function of Slovakia in the same way, which is approximately 34 beds per 1,000 inhabitants in 2020. Based on these calculations, we can compare the High Tatras—Foothills region with Slovakia and conclude that the tourist function in the region is 37.19% higher than the average tourist function in Slovakia.

The index of the tourist function can also be supplemented by the employment indicator, which assesses employment in a particular industry or sector in relation to the population of the region or the state. Due to the lack of information on the exact number of people employed in tourism in the High Tatras—Foothills region, we have omitted this indicator because the interpreted data would not have the correct predictive value.

Table 1 Tourist function of the region in 2020

Destination	Number of the inhabitants	Capacity of accommodation facilities (beds)
High Tatras—Foothills	14,319	6,714
Slovak Republic	5,459,000	181,588

Source Own elaboration to datacube.statistics.sk, 2022

Calculation of tourism function (Tf):

High Tatras—Foothills = $(6,714)/(14,319) \cdot 1,000 = 46,89$

Slovak Republic = $(186,588)/(5,459,000) \cdot 1,000 = 34,18$

Table 2 Bed density in 2020

Destination	Area (100 km ²)	Capacity of accommodation (beds)	Bed density (beds/100 km ²)
High Tatras—Foothills	2,23	6,714	3,010
Slovak Republic	490,35	181,588	370

Source Own elaboration based on data from datacube.statistics.sk, 2022

Calculation of bed density:

High Tatras—Foothills = $6\,714/2,23 = 3\,010$

Slovak Republic = $181\,588/490,35 = 370$

Another indicator that we looked at is bed density. This indicator provides data on the number of beds in accommodation per 100 km²; in layman's terms, it shows how many beds are per 100 km² (Table 2).

The average number of beds per 100 km² in Slovakia in 2020 was approximately 370 beds. In the High Tatras—Foothills region, it was 3 010 beds per 100 km², which is more than 8 times higher than in Slovakia. On this basis, we can conclude that there is a really high concentration of beds per 100 km² in the region, which is well above the Slovak average.

From the point of view of visitors, the region is mainly aimed at the segment of families with children. Accommodation facilities are adapted to this type of visitor, and families with children are the predominant clientele in both the winter and summer seasons. There are a sufficient number of facilities for tourism visitors in the region.

Visitors to the region are mainly families with children and people traveling for sightseeing and tourism. Visitors are mostly from Slovakia, followed by visitors from Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Germany. The largest number of foreign visitors is from Poland, which is only 35 km away from Vel'ká Lomnica, and from the Czech Republic, where the High Tatras are considered to be one of the most popular holiday destinations for Czech inhabitants. According to the Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic, the region was visited by more than 355,000 visitors between 2017 and 2021, of which 25.61% were foreign visitors, representing more than 90,000 visitors. The average figures speak of about 27% of foreign visitors in the current year. Between 2017 and 2019, the number of visitors to the region showed an upward trend. The highest number of visitors was recorded in 2019 at 101,505 visitors. The number of visitors in 2020, due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, decreased significantly. Accommodation establishments, but also other tourism service providers, had to significantly limit their activities for more than 6 months. Due to the very short winter season and the inter-season, the number of visitors in 2020 was 65 057. The pandemic affected tourism in 2021 to an even greater extent than in 2020. This year, accommodation establishments and other tourism service providers, had to limit their activities for more than 5 months, even during the top seasons, which include the Easter and Christmas holidays and the New Year's Eve to Three Kings Day. In 2021, only 34,109 visitors to the region were recorded as a result of these developments. The number of domestic and international

and also the total number of visitors to the region in each year, from 2017 to 2021, are shown in Table 3.

The number of domestic and international overnight stays as well as the total number of overnight visitors in the region in each year, from 2017 to 2021, are shown in Table 4.

The demand and attitude of visitors to tourism products and services in the High Tatras—Foothills region were surveyed by means of a structured questionnaire. The structure of respondents in terms of gender consisted of 181 women (63.07%) and 106 men (36.93%). The largest group of respondents, in terms of age, was the category of respondents aged between 41 and 50 years (36.59%). The age categories 21–30 years (18.47%), 31–40 years (17.77%), and 51–60 years (16.38%) were approximately equally represented. For the employment status, most respondents gave the answer employee (67.25%).

At the beginning of the questionnaire survey, we asked the respondents whether they had ever visited the High Tatras—Foothills region. Out of a total of 287 respondents, 280 (97.56%) answered yes to this question, which means that they have already visited the region and 7 respondents answered no, that they have not visited the region yet. The aim of this question was to divide the respondents into existing and potential visitors.

We also asked respondents how often they visit the High Tatras—Foothills region. The aim of the question was to find out whether regular or occasional and infrequent visitors predominate in the region. The higher the frequency of visits, the more objectively the respondents can evaluate how the level of tourism development in the region is increasing over time and recommend further opportunities for improvement. The

Table 3 Number of visitors in the region High Tatras—Foothills

Year	Domestic visitors	International visitors	Total
2017	52,366	19,986	72,352
2018	59,672	22,319	81,991
2019	73,939	27,569	101,508
2020	49,375	15,682	65,057
2021	28,731	5,378	34,109

Source Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic (2022a, b)

Table 4 Number of overnight stays in the region High Tatras—Foothills

Year	Domestic visitors	International visitors	Total
2017	129,266	64,839	194,105
2018	138,235	71,180	209,415
2019	181,130	85,646	266,776
2020	135,616	48,009	183,625
2021	81,257	15,748	97,005

Source Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic (2022a, b)

largest group is made up of regular visitors, with exactly 50.36% of the respondents. 35.71% of the respondents visit the region occasionally and only 12.86% of them rarely. When it comes to visiting the region, only 1.07% of the respondents said that they do not visit the region anymore. They justified their choice of this option by dissatisfaction with services and lack of free time to visit. Considering the data obtained, we can conclude that the region is dominated by regular visitors.

In the next question, existing visitors we were interested in the motive for visiting the High Tatras—Foothills region. Respondents were given a choice of several options, and they also had the opportunity to indicate more than one answer. The main purpose of visiting the region was recreation, which was indicated by 47.14% of the respondents. Right after recreation, the second most frequently indicated answer was tourism with 37.5%, and the third most frequently indicated answer was visiting relatives with 32.14%. A significant part of the respondents indicated that they visit the region for the purpose of attending various events (18.21%), in the wintertime for the purpose of skiing (29.64%) and in the summertime for the purpose of cycling (16.07%). 9.64% of the respondents indicated that they visit the region for the purpose of health and use of wellness services. Only 5.36% of the respondents travel to the region for the work purpose. 5.71% of the respondents indicated the other option. On the basis of the obtained data, we can evaluate that the region needs to develop mainly recreational and sports tourism.

Regarding the length of stay, most of the respondents, up to 34.64%, indicated that they will stay in the region for 2–3 days during their visit, mainly for weekend stays. This means that with this length of stay, visitors are likely to make use of accommodation, catering, and also other tourism services during their stay. In second place were day trippers with a percentage of 22.86%. In third place, by not much difference to day trippers (22.14%), were visitors who spend 3 days or more in the region. Similar to visitors who stay for 2–3 days, visitors who come to the region for 3 or more days represent the largest tourism revenue for the region, and the ambition in developing tourism in the region should be to attract as many visitors as possible who spend 3 or more days in the region. The remaining 20.36% of respondents indicated the option of being locals.

Tourism demand is influenced by various factors, and respondents were given the opportunity to rate the different criteria and express their satisfaction with the services in the High Tatras—Foothills region. Visitors rated the criteria on a scale from 1 (best) to 5 (worst), if they did not know how to rate a criterion, they could mark option N (do not know how to rate). Table 5 captures the results in absolute value.

Respondents rated a total of 9 criteria. The best rated criterion was location and environment, with an average score of 1.56. We consider this criterion to be one of the strongest points of the High Tatras—Foothills region, its territory is located in several national parks, and we see the greatest potential for tourism development in the region. In second place, with an average mark of 1.85, it was the respondents' satisfaction with the quality of accommodation services. Quality accommodation services determine the length of a visitor's stay in the region, so we take this rating as positive. In third place with an average score of 1.87, visitors rated satisfaction with

Table 5 Visitors' evaluation of the region High Tatras—Foothills

Criteria	Evaluation						
	1	2	3	4	5	N	Average
Location and environment	201	34	21	7	15	2	1,56
Quality of accommodation services	135	65	38	13	11	18	1,85
Marking of hiking trails	121	68	43	12	7	29	1,87
Sports facilities	132	76	36	19	11	6	1,91
Cycle routes	73	88	47	13	5	54	2,07
Quality of catering services	116	68	51	20	15	10	2,07
Cultural events	83	71	56	31	5	34	2,20
Transport accessibility	70	104	72	18	6	10	2,21
Museums and expositions	45	73	77	27	11	47	2,51

Source Own elaboration, 2022

the marking of hiking trails, and close behind with a score of 1.90 was the criterion of the possibility of sports activities. The criterion of cycle paths received a rating of 2.07. Only 80.71% of the surveyed respondents commented on the evaluation of the cycle routes, the remaining respondents apparently do not use the cycle routes and thus cannot assess their level. The quality of catering services was rated 2.07, cultural events 2.20, and transport accessibility 2.21. The worst rated criterion was museum and exhibition, which was rated with an average mark of 2.51. In terms of the number and quality of museums and expositions, the High Tatras—Foothills region really lags behind, with most museums in the region being small and with irregular opening hours. Also the promotion of museums and expositions is very poor, 16.79% of the respondents said that they could not assess this criterion, which may be due to the fact that they do not register museums and expositions in the region.

We further investigated whether the visit to the region met visitors' expectations, with the majority of visitors being very satisfied (62.86%) and satisfied (29.64%). Visitors also perceive the region competitive to other larger tourism regions. 60.36% perceived the activities of the Destination Management Organization High Tatras—Foothills mainly in the area of marketing and promotion and rated them as beneficial for the development of the region.

As already mentioned, the development of tourism in the area is the responsibility of the Destination Management Organization High Tatras—Foothills. The main objective of the organization was to link the services and attractions in the High Tatras—Foothills area into a more coherent whole and thus create a more interesting tourism offer. They saw the greatest potential in the development of local and regional cooperation, which can better promote local attractions, exploit the potential of agrotourism, and offer space for even the smallest service providers to promote their services and products in the region.

In order to propose the further development and perspectives of sustainable tourism in the region, it is necessary to assess the current situation. A SWOT analysis

assesses the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats that exist in the market. The SWOT analysis method was also used in the study of the High Tatras—Foothills region in terms of sustainable tourism development. The Table 6 shows the findings.

We found that the region has more strengths than weaknesses. Among its strengths, we include its large area, which is 222,609 km². Another strength associated with the size is that the region is spread over the territory of up to three national parks—NAPANT, TANAP, and the Slovak Paradise National Park. The combination of the vast location and the national parks makes the region a great place for hiking. National parks are protected areas where certain rules apply to protect nature, which may restrict visitors in some ways—for example, a ban on fishing—but the role of these restrictions is to preserve a clean environment, which is another strength of the region. The High Tatras—Foothills region is located within the Tatra region, which is characterized by overcrowding in some resorts, especially directly in the town of High Tatras and its surroundings, despite the overcrowding one of the most sought-after regions of Slovakia. The Foothills of the High Tatras offer the beauty of the Tatra region without the crowds of visitors. Another advantage that could make the High Tatras—Foothills region compete with larger regions is the ski resorts, which offer groomed ski trails of all difficulty levels, from easy to moderate to difficult, and cross-country ski trails. There are even two ski resorts in the village of Liptovská Teplica, and another ski resort in the region is located in the village

Table 6 SWOT analysis of the tourism development in the region

Strengths	Opportunities
Large area of the region	Suitable conditions for the development of agrotourism
Protected area of NAPANT, TANAP, and Slovak Paradise National Park	Potential of the area for recreation Extension of cycling routes and winter cross-country skiing trails
Excellent location within the Tatra	Year-round usable offer
Region	Development of a tourist center
Numerous accommodation facilities	Improvement of marketing and promotion
Clean environment	
Ski resorts	
Weaknesses	Threats
Irregular opening hours of monuments	COVID-19 pandemic
Transport accessibility of the region	Shortage of skilled labor
Quality of roads	Competition from larger regions
Lack of contact between the local population and visitors	Environmental pollution
Absence of tourism services in the evening	Disappearance of crafts and traditions after the death of elders

Source Own elaboration, 2022

of Vernár. There are several cross-country skiing trails in the region, for example, in the winter months, the Black Stork Golf Resort turns into a 10 km long cross-country skiing trail. Traditional events are held in the region all year round in an effort to preserve customs and traditions. Some of the villages also have their own folklore groups and organize folklore festivals. The Websites of the municipalities and destination management organization regularly inform about the events and all those who want to experience the atmosphere of the former village life are invited. Traditional agriculture has also been preserved in the villages, with agricultural cooperatives still farming the surrounding pastures and selling their products. By offering accommodation facilities, the region can appeal to a wide range of visitors, whether families with children seeking the services of hotels and guesthouses, or adventurers camping in a campsite.

Despite the numerous strengths, we should focus more on the weaknesses and eliminate them. Cultural opportunities in the form of visits to museums, galleries, and open-air museums are unfortunately not widely represented in the region. The offer of these facilities is limited, and another disadvantage associated with this is that they do not have regular opening hours. The region is accessible by bus and train, but unfortunately, the train service does not cover all the villages in the region, and the frequency of bus services is insufficient. Weak transport accessibility makes the region less attractive, especially for environmentally oriented visitors who exclusively use public transport when traveling. The rules of the protected area and the difficult natural conditions result in an underdeveloped technical infrastructure. The strict measures do not affect the whole region, but in some parts, for example, there is a ban on winter salting of roads, and the poor condition of the roads is also due to the difficulty of road maintenance, as the rules do not allow frequent intervention by machinery. Another obstacle to tourism development is the reluctance of the local population to engage with visitors and thus add value to their experience and impression of the region. In the absence of tourism service provision in the evening, it is mostly catering services, with restaurants closing too early, leaving the visitor severely constrained.

Opportunities for tourism development derive from the region's strengths. The municipalities of the High Tatras—Foothills region have excellent conditions for the establishment and development of agrotourism. Mutual cooperation of accommodation facilities with agricultural cooperatives, and the creation of agrotourism products is one of the greatest opportunities for the region. The offer of activities in the region is not only seasonal, but active leisure is also offered in every season, and this is followed by the opportunity to extend cycling routes and winter cross-country skiing trails. The more activities a region offers, the more interesting it is and the more visitors it can attract, and possibly contribute to visitors spending more time in the region. For example, a visitor can combine a skiing holiday with a visit to an organized event and spend more days in the region. On the other hand, the lack of marketing and promotion, which could be seen as a negative, gives the region room for development. Proper marketing and promotion can reach more visitors than the product of the region itself. The High Tatras—Foothills region lacks an information

center, and we see its completion as another opportunity to improve the overall visitor impression of the region.

The biggest threat to tourism, as shown in 2020, is the COVID-19 pandemic. Tourism revenues were at their highest level in decades when travel was almost completely halted by the pandemic. Tourism is an industry that will not disappear, but the impact of the pandemic on its operations has been fatal, and further, similar events could be destructive for the industry. There was already a shortage of skilled labor in the tourism industry before the pandemic, and this situation has only exacerbated it. Unskilled staff can mean a reduced quality of service and therefore a reduced overall visitor impression of the region. Another threat to the region is competition from larger regions. State funding of regions also depends on their size; the High Tatras—Foothills region is small and poorly funded, so it has difficulty competing with large regions such as the High Tatras or Liptov, which are heavily funded by the state and also generate large tourism revenues. The development of tourism is also linked to the construction of new facilities such as hotels and restaurants, the construction of which has a negative impact on the environment. The key to sustainable tourism is to strike a balance between construction and maintaining a clean environment. The threat that most directly affects the High Tatras—Foothills region is the disappearance of crafts and traditions after the death of older inhabitants. The region presents itself and creates the image of a traditional region, focused on traditions, their disappearance would mean that the region would lose its authenticity. The solution is to pass on traditions to the next generation.

5 Conclusion

The development of tourism in the region does not only have a positive impact on this sector, thanks to the multiplier effect, it has an impact on the overall economic development of the region. Through tourism development, the region can also meet objectives such as economic growth and sustainable development.

The paper dealt with the perspectives of tourism development in the High Tatras—Foothills region. In the paper, we fulfilled the main objective, which was to present the perspectives of sustainable tourism development in the region based on the analysis and evaluation of the current state of tourism in the High Tatras—Foothills region. We fulfilled the main objective as well as the sub-objectives, which were to examine the tourism offer in the region, to find out what is the demand for tourism in the region, and to indicate the perspectives of sustainable development of tourism in the region. We calculated the tourism function of the region. We conducted an analysis of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, which yielded interesting facts. We have emphasized the important role of the regional tourism organization in the development of sustainable tourism in the region. Priority is given to the cooperation of stakeholders in sustainable tourism development and the creation of a comprehensive product that will increase visitation and competitiveness of the region.

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