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The Potential for Sustainable Tourism Development in Small-Scale Regions: A Case Study of Sulejów Municipality

Waldemar CUDNY

Faculty of Geographical Sciences, University of Lodz
Institute of Urban Geography, Tourism Studies, and Geoinformation, Poland

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3259-6086>

Corresponding author: waldemar.cudny@geo.uni.lodz.pl

Justyna PALUCH

Faculty of Geographical Sciences, University of Lodz
Institute of Urban Geography, Tourism Studies, and Geoinformation, Poland

justyna.paluch@edu.uni.lodz.pl

Abstract: The article addresses the critical intersection of tourism potential and sustainable tourism, focusing on a case study of the Sulejów commune, a small municipality located in central Poland. The study analyzes Sulejów's natural and cultural attractions and other elements of tourism potential and assesses their relevance for sustainable tourism development. The research employed field observations, an intercept questionnaire survey, and SWOT analysis to evaluate tourism potential, the perspectives for sustainable tourism and identify areas for improvement. The results highlight Sulejów's significant tourism potential, with key natural attractions such as the Sulejów Landscape Park, the Pilica River, and the Sulejów Reservoir, alongside cultural historical landmarks like the Cistercian Abbey. While respondents rated tourism potential highly, challenges include inadequate accessibility, weak eco-awareness and promotion and limited support from local institutions. The study proposes a framework emphasizing pro-ecological education, sustainable infrastructure improvements, better promotion, and the use of modern technologies to market the region sustainably. The findings contribute to the understanding of sustainable tourism in smaller communities and provide a basis for broader comparisons in future research.

Keywords: sustainable tourism; tourism potential; small communities; Sulejów; Poland.

JEL Classification: Z32; Q56; Q01; R11.

Introduction

The concept of tourism potential is important from a scientific viewpoint, as it encompasses a destination's ability to attract and accommodate tourists (Yan *et al.* 2017). Studying tourism potential deepens the understanding of the factors influencing tourism development, including tourist attractions, infrastructure, and socio-economic elements (Kaczmarek *et al.* 2010). From a practical perspective, such analysis helps planners and decision-makers manage resources effectively and develop tourism responsibly. It also assists in identifying high-value areas for tourism, which is crucial for local economic growth (Zajadacz and Śniadek 2009b). Moreover, understanding the limitations and barriers of tourism potential can help minimize tourism's negative impacts, thereby promoting sustainable tourism (Butler 1999; Zaręba 2010; Harris *et al.* 2012).

In the pursuit of sustainable tourism development, analyzing tourism potential across various territorial contexts emerges as a pivotal research endeavor (Niezgoda 2006; Datta and Banerji 2015; Trukhachev 2015; Cetin 2018; Crăciun *et al.* 2022). This analysis plays a key role in formulating strategies for sustainable tourism, a critical response to socio-economic and environmental challenges. As regions and cities worldwide grapple with issues such as overtourism, environmental degradation, income inequality, and the domination of large international corporations, the importance of sustainability has become increasingly pronounced in tourism (Dodds and Butler 2019; Sharpley 2020). This growing awareness has led to a stronger focus on integrating UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into the tourism sector. These goals emphasize the need to promote responsible economic growth, conserve ecosystems, encourage sustainable consumption, and take climate

action (Cudny and Dajer 2024). However, sustainable tourism is not only about protecting the environment but also about supporting local businesses and products. It offers a holistic approach to leveraging natural and cultural attractions in ways that foster responsible tourism while respecting and preserving local identities and resources (Farrell 1999; Zareba 2010; Włodarczyk and Cudny 2022).

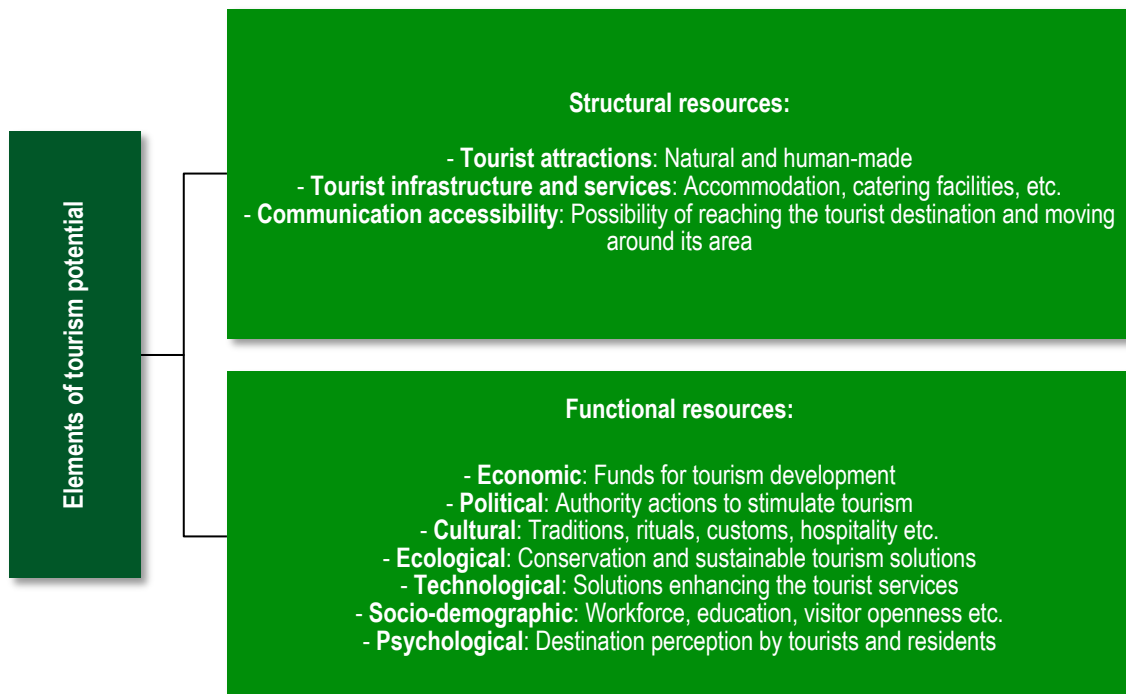
In this context, the main aim of our article was to evaluate the tourism potential of Sulejów, a small municipality in central Poland known for its natural beauty and cultural heritage. The objective of our study was to thoroughly analyze the region's natural and man-made tourist attractions, infrastructure and other critical components of its tourism potential, as well as their capacity to support sustainable tourism development. By exploring the feasibility of integrating these elements within sustainable tourism frameworks, we also aimed to develop a strategic framework for leveraging Sulejów's tourism resources in a sustainable manner. The study draws on field observation, questionnaire surveys, in-depth interviews, literature, and online resources. It contributes to the scientific discussion around sustainable tourism in smaller regions and provides a basis for future comparisons and broader conclusions.

1. Literature Review

1.1. The Concept of Tourism Potential

Tourism potential includes various factors that enhance tourism in a region, such as natural, cultural, historical, and socio-economic elements (Zajadacz and Śniadek 2009b). Yan *et al.* (2017, p. 355) described potential as a community's resources - ranging from natural and cultural attractions to infrastructure and services - vital for attracting tourists and creating tourism products. The importance of assessing tourist attractions, infrastructure, and tourist traffic when evaluating tourism potential was highlighted by Butowski (1996). Bellinger (1994) and Zajadacz and Śniadek (2009a) emphasized the role of natural conditions, infrastructure, and social factors in generating tourist traffic. Mukatova *et al.* (2022) viewed tourism potential as encompassing cultural and natural resources, infrastructural facilities, and recreational activities, all of which enhance tourist experiences and promote sustainable tourism growth. Kaczmarek *et al.* (2010) described tourism potential as a combination of structural and functional resources crucial for tourism development in a destination (Figure 1).

Figure 1. The structure of resources constituting tourism potential.



Source: Authors compilation based on Kaczmarek *et al.* (2010).

1.2. Tourist Attractions and Tourism Infrastructure as the Main Elements of Tourism Potential

Attractions are essential to tourism potential, captivating visitors with their unique features (Kruczek 2011). Lew (1987) described them as elements outside one's usual environment that attract travelers, offering landscapes, activities, and experiences. According to Richards (1996), attractions - whether natural, cultural, historical, or recreational - draw visitors seeking unique experiences and require proper infrastructure and commercialization. Urry and Larsen (2011) view attractions as focal points within a destination that captivate visitors.

The term 'tourist attractions,' prevalent in English-language literature, often encompasses not only natural and cultural elements but also associated services, pricing, and infrastructure. In Polish literature, the term 'tourist values' is often used (Kruczek 2011). Tourist values refer to all natural and man-made elements that directly attract tourists, according to Kurek (2012). These values are categorized into natural and human-made (cultural or anthropogenic), with further classifications based on travel motives (recreational, sightseeing, specialized), materiality (material or non-material), and type (place-based or event-based values) (Kaczmarek *et al.* 2010).

Tourist infrastructure is considered another of the main components of tourism potential (Kaczmarek *et al.* 2010). The term encompasses both the process of equipping an area with facilities for tourists and the resulting infrastructure or material base present in a specific area (Kowalczyk 2001). It includes the facilities and services that support tourists in a region (Kowalczyk and Derek 2010). Szwichtenberg (2000) identifies the following main types of tourism infrastructure:

- Accommodation base: Hotels, motels, guesthouses, hostels, guest rooms, camping sites, and similar lodging facilities.
- Gastronomic base: Independent eateries and those within accommodation facilities, such as restaurants, pubs, pizzerias, and fast-food outlets.
- Supplementary base: Facilities catering to the cultural, entertainment, sports, recreation, shopping, and health needs of tourists.
- Transportation base: Infrastructure facilitating access to and movement within tourist destinations.

Tourist infrastructure is developed to protect and adapt attractions, ensure access, and provide essential living conditions for tourists (Rogalewski 1977). It consists of both tourist and para-tourist facilities, with the former primarily serving tourists and the latter also serving the local population (Kowalczyk 2001).

1.3. Tourism Potential as a Research Topic

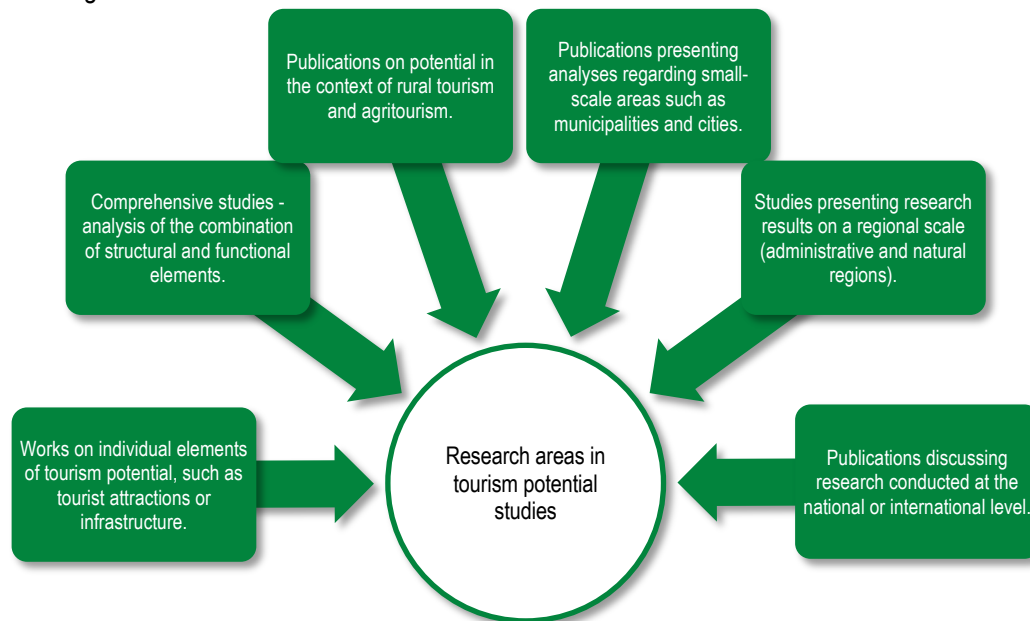
Tourism potential, a significant research topic, encompasses diverse aspects, including studies on individual elements such as natural attractions (terrain, climate), cultural features (heritage, sacred sites, events), or infrastructure. Comprehensive research examines both the structural (attractions, infrastructure) and functional (social, economic, psychological) dimensions (Figure 2). The scope of research ranges from rural and agritourism to spatial scales that include municipalities, cities, provinces, natural regions, and even national and international levels (Figure 2).

Examples of studies on tourism potential's individual elements include Pralong (2005) on Mont Blanc's terrain, Martín (2004) on Catalonia's climate, and Valjarević *et al.* (2017) on hot springs as attractions. Cetin *et al.* (2018) analyzed Yesilyuva Nature Park in Turkey for its natural and cultural values, while Sun *et al.* (2011) assessed rural China's cultural heritage. Kartal *et al.* (2015) explored religious tourism in Manisa, Turkey, Mukatova *et al.* (2022) studied Ethno-Tourism in Kazakhstan's Ulytau region, Szczęsna and Gawrysiak (2009) examined Lublin region's man-made (anthropogenic) values, and Calderón *et al.* (2020) investigated regional tourism and cultural heritage attractions as part of potential.

Comprehensive analyses covered attractions, infrastructure, and accessibility, focusing on areas from municipalities and counties (Brzezińska-Wójcik and Skowronek 2009; Skrzypczak and Chmielewska 2009; Ungureanu *et al.* 2014) to cities (Jazienicka and Skulimowska-Rzeźwicka 2009; Kociuba and Kociuba 2009; Evstratova *et al.* 2020). Regional analysis included Polish Gryfino County (Głabiński and Duda 2017), Lublin region (Tucki 2009), West Pomeranian Voivodeship (Kubicki 2009), Kashubian Lakeland (Witkiewicz 2009), Podlasie (Godlewski and Zalech 2009), and Leszno region (Zajadacz and Śniadek 2009a).

Research in rural areas encompasses Trukhachev's (2015) sustainable tourism studies, Baum's (2011) work in Poland, and focused analyses on agritourism (Amirov *et al.* 2020) and rural tourism (Seken *et al.* 2019; Crăciun *et al.* 2022), examining attractions, infrastructure, and services.

Figure 2. Overview of the Main Research Areas in Tourism Potential Studies



Source: Own elaboration.

Internationally and nationally, studies varied. For instance, Ankomah and Crompton (1990) discussed tourist resource use and barriers in Sub-Saharan Africa. Olimovich (2015) studied Uzbekistan's tourism potential, focusing on attractions and infrastructure. Krzemińska *et al.* (2018) analyzed European megalithic monuments' role in tourism potential. Boiko *et al.* (2018) evaluated Ukraine's tourism post-crisis, considering sustainable development. Borysova *et al.* (2020) investigated religious tourism potential in Ukraine. Frolova and Rogach (2023) researched religious tourism in Russian regions.

Methodologically, tourism potential studies vary widely. Zajadacz and Śniadek (2009b) noted that data are gathered through observations (e.g., Evstratova *et al.* 2020; Krzemińska *et al.* 2018), interviews, surveys, and social consultations (e.g., Witkiewicz 2009; Głabiński and Duda 2017; Cudny and Dajer 2024), as well as inventories, document analysis, and literature reviews. Analytical methods included indicator analysis (see Tucki 2009; Calderón *et al.* 2020), SWOT analysis, and graphical presentations like tables, charts, and maps.

1.4. Sustainable Tourism

Understanding tourism potential is essential for sustainable tourism research, as it highlights resources that contribute to long-term conservation and community benefits (Trukhachev 2015; Mukatova *et al.*, 2022). Sustainable development balances economic, social, and environmental aspects to ensure viability (Kowalczyk 2010b). The Club of Rome's report *The Limits to Growth* (1972) underscored the dangers of uncontrolled growth, leading to the global prioritization of sustainable development. The Brundtland Report (1987) defined sustainable development as meeting current needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own. Key global initiatives such as Agenda 21 (1992), the Kyoto Protocol (1997), the Millennium Development Goals (2000), and the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015, which include 17 objectives like poverty reduction, inclusivity, and climate action, reflected this commitment (<https://sdgs.un.org/goals>).

Sustainable tourism, according to The World Tourism Organization, considers economic, social, and environmental impacts, benefiting visitors, the tourism industry, and host communities (<https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/topics/sustainabletourism>). It contributes to several SDGs, particularly goals 8, 12, and 14, by promoting inclusive economic growth, sustainable consumption, and responsible use of land and marine resources (<https://www.unwto.org/tourism-in-2030-agenda>). Sustainable tourism, widely discussed by scholars (see: Butler 1999; Swarbrooke 1999; Kowalczyk 2010a, 2010b; Grabara and Bajdor 2013; Edgell 2019; Fennell and Cooper 2020), requires balancing the needs of the environment, tourists, local communities, and service providers, with the aim of minimizing environmental impact and maximizing community benefits (Kowalczyk 2010b). It addresses challenges such as environmental degradation, overtourism, and the dominance of large corporations over local businesses (Mika 2015).

Sustainable tourism promotes eco-friendly practices essential for protecting ecosystems, preserving biodiversity, and safeguarding local cultures. It emphasizes respect for traditions, preventing cultural erosion, and ensuring that visitors experience authentic local cultures (Swarbrooke 1999; Zaręba 2010). Economically, sustainable tourism creates opportunities for local businesses through responsible practices, increasing community income and reducing poverty and unemployment (Weaver 2007). By adhering to sustainability's three pillars - environmental, social, and economic - sustainable tourism prevents ecological damage, maintains cultural integrity, and enhances community prosperity (Farrell 1999; Purvis *et al.* 2019).

2. Materials and Methods

This article employs several research methods to identify the tourism potential of the Sulejów municipality, assess its elements, and evaluate its suitability for the broader development of sustainable tourism. Field observation was used to identify and describe the main tourist attractions and assess transportation accessibility, infrastructure, and other components of tourism potential. Additionally, a questionnaire survey was conducted among residents and visitors to Sulejów. The survey utilized a printed questionnaire distributed to respondents in public places within the municipality.

A questionnaire survey is a research method used to gather information from respondents through structured questions. These questions are typically presented in written form, either on paper or digitally, and can include closed-ended options (e.g., multiple choice, yes/no) or open-ended questions allowing for detailed responses. An intercept survey, a specific type of survey, was conducted where respondents were selected on the spot, often in public places like shopping centers, parks, or tourist attractions. In this technique, researchers 'intercept' individuals during their regular activities and invite them to participate, enabling quick data collection from people conveniently available in a location. Although non-representative, this approach is frequently used in tourism-related research (Veal 2017). Ultimately, 103 correctly completed questionnaires were obtained and used in further analysis. Moreover, two in-depth interviews were conducted. An in-depth interview is a conversation between an interviewer and a respondent, designed to obtain information relevant to the research objectives and gain a deeper understanding of a specific topic. The interview is guided by a list of questions focused on a particular research issue for which the respondent has valuable knowledge (Babbie 2001). These interviews were conducted with the Deputy Director of the Łódź Voivodeship Landscape Parks Team and the Head of the Promotion, Development, and External Funds Department of the Sulejów Municipal Office. The interviews were aimed at obtaining data about the commune and information on its tourist attractions, infrastructure and other elements of tourist potential. Additionally, SWOT analysis and desk research were utilized, involving data from observations, questionnaire survey results, and reviews of internet sources and academic literature.

3. The Study Area

The Sulejów Municipality is an urban-rural area located in central Poland, within the Łódź Voivodeship (Figure 3). The municipality's capital is the town of Sulejów, home to approximately 6,100 residents. The municipality covers an area of ca 189 km² and has a population of around 16,600 inhabitants (https://www.polskawliczbach.pl/gmina_Sulejow). Most of the municipality lies on the lowlands of the Piotrków Plain, with higher elevations in the eastern part, which belongs to the Opoczno Hills region (Kondracki 2002).

Figure 3. Location of Sulejów Municipality on the map of Poland and Łódź voivodship.



Source: Authors elaboration.

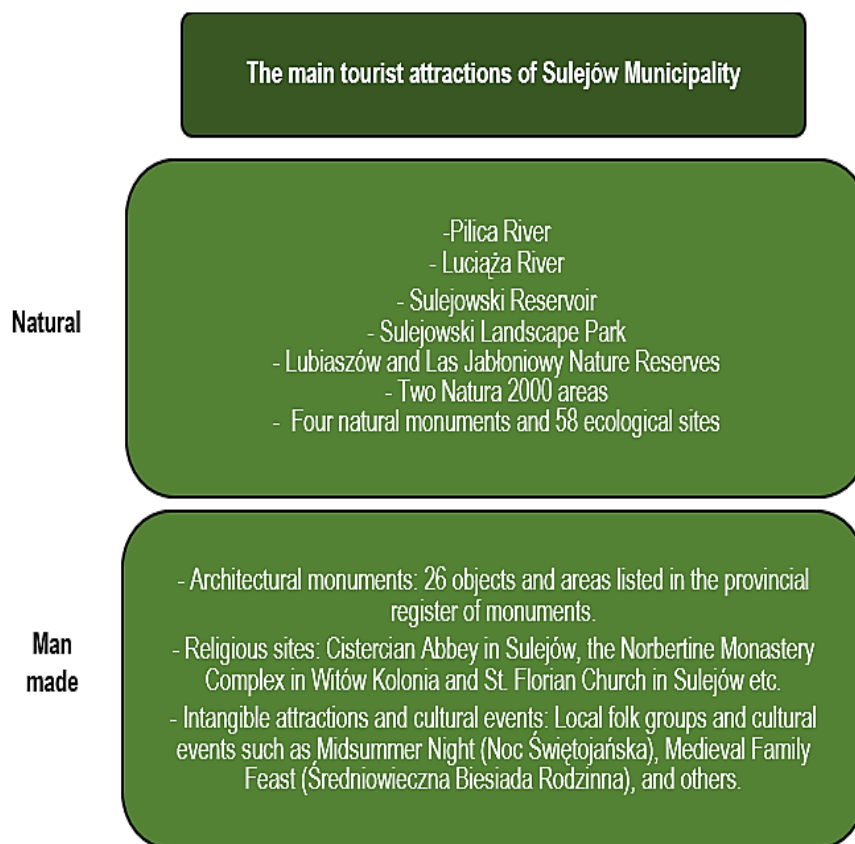
Sulejów municipality is one of the most forested areas in the Łódź Voivodeship. In 2022, forests covered ca 43% of the area. Additionally, a portion of the Sulejów Landscape Park is located within its borders. The main river in the municipality is the Pilica River, a tributary of the Vistula and one of the key rivers in the Łódź voivodship (<https://www.sulejow.pl/asp/start>).

4. Research Results

4.1. Tourist Attractions

The Sulejów municipality is renowned for its natural tourist attractions (Figure 4). One of its main attractions is the Pilica River, a major left-bank tributary of the Vistula. Stretching 319 km, the Pilica River's valley has preserved its natural character, making it a popular recreational area, especially for kayaking. In Sulejów, two kayak harbors and a kayak station have been established on the Pilica River. Another notable river is the Luciąża River, the longest left-bank tributary of the Pilica, spanning about 50 km. It also serves as a recreational and tourist area.

Figure 4. The most important tourist attractions of Sulejów municipality.



Source: Authors' elaboration.

One of the most important attractions in the studied commune is the Sulejów Reservoir (Photo 1), an artificial lake created between 1969 and 1974 by damming the natural course of the Pilica River. The reservoir covers 27 km², with a 58 km shoreline. It serves functions including water retention, energy generation, flood protection, and recreation, offering opportunities for water sports such as sailing, kayaking, and windsurfing.

Photo 1. Sulejów Reservoir.



Source: Authors' elaboration.

The most valuable protected natural site in the municipality is the Sulejów Landscape Park, with about 31% of its 17,030 ha area located within the municipality. Established in 1994, the park protects the natural Pilica valley and features valuable forest communities, including pine forests, mixed woods, and riparian forests. It is also home to rare water, reed, and meadow ecosystems, as well as many protected plant species.

Within the Sulejów Municipality, there are two nature reserves: Lubiaszów and Las Jabłoniowy, along with two areas under the European Natura 2000 protection system. Additionally, the municipality contains individual natural monuments, including four protected groups of trees, and 58 ecological sites that preserve ecosystems important for biodiversity conservation.

The Sulejów municipality is also home to significant man-made tourist attractions (Figure 3), the most notable of which are in Sulejów. These include the neo-Gothic St. Florian Church (built in 1903), the hospital church, and remnants of a narrow-gauge railway. The municipality also features historic spatial layouts in Sulejów and nearby villages. The most valuable monument is the Cistercian Abbey complex in Sulejów, which comprises the church, monastic buildings, fortifications, and former garden areas (Photo 2). This abbey, one of Poland's most significant monuments, retains its historical structure and cultural landscape. The monastic church has preserved its original form as a three-nave basilica, with the adjoining monastery. The entire complex is surrounded by a ring of late-Gothic fortifications, with part of the complex adapted for use as a four-star hotel.

Photo 2. Cistercian Abbey complex in Sulejów



Source: Authors' elaboration.

Another important religious site is the Norbertine Monastery complex in Witów-Kolonia, situated in the village center. The centerpiece of this site is the Church of St. Margaret and St. Augustine. Two significant cultural routes pass through the municipality: the Cistercian Route, which highlights medieval sacred architecture in Cistercian monasteries across Europe, and the Romanesque Route, which connects valuable Romanesque architecture, including the Cistercian Abbey in Sulejów. Sulejów is also rich in intangible cultural heritage,

reflected in regional identity through folk groups like the 'Piliczenie' folk ensemble, founded in 2018. This cultural identity is further expressed through local crafts and products and reinforced by cultural and folk events such as St. John's Night, Sulejów Days, and the Medieval Family Feast.

4.2. Tourist Infrastructure, Accessibility, and the Functional Resources of Tourism Potential

The official data indicated 24 accommodation facilities in Sulejów Municipality, including 2 hotels in 2022. The number of available beds has fluctuated in recent years, showing a downward trend. For example, in 2022, statistics reported 560 beds, compared to 794 in 2019, marking a decrease of approximately 30%, mostly due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Most facilities are in Sulejów and Barkowice, particularly near the Sulejów Reservoir.

According to data from the Sulejów Municipality Office, there are 17 food establishments in the region. However, the variety is limited, dominated by pizzerias, bars, and restaurants. There is only one café in the area, located in Sulejów. A significant downside of the municipality's gastronomic offer is its lack of diversity, with most venues being bars without a unique culinary experience.

Transportation infrastructure is a key factor in choosing a vacation destination, as it determines the ability of tourists to reach the destination and explore the area (Kaczmarek *et al.* 2020). Despite its attractive central location in Poland, reaching Sulejów is difficult due to the lack of a railway line. Access is only possible by car or bus, which is inconvenient for non-motorized visitors and significantly reduces the sustainability of tourism in the area. However, the situation is slightly improved by the municipality's 5.4 km of bike paths and tourist trails, enhancing accessibility for cyclists and pedestrians. Three tourist trails run through the Sulejów municipality: the Zygmunt Goliat bike path and two hiking trails, the Hubal partisan trail and the Pilica River trail.

As for the supplementary infrastructure, according to data from the Sulejów Municipality Office, there are 12 sports equipment rental services in the area. They offer equipment for kayaking, cycling, and other activities related to local tourist attractions. The municipality also provides information boards for tourists and rest areas along popular hiking trails. In 2022, Sulejów had 18 sports facilities, primarily outdoor gyms, sports halls, and swimming pools. Additionally, the town hosts the Municipal Cultural Center and a public library. In 2023, the largest share of businesses in the municipality were classified under Wholesale and Retail Trade; Repair of Motor Vehicles, with 316 entities, including shops serving both tourists and residents (<https://www.sulejow.pl/asp/start>).

Functional resources, including economic, socio-demographic, and technological factors (see Figure 1), also contribute to the tourism potential of the Sulejów municipality. Key economic drivers include small and medium-sized enterprises offering services like accommodation, dining, and entertainment. However, the limited number of investors and businesses slow the sector's growth. Political support, such as local authority programs and tourism-friendly regulations could strengthen the tourism sector, though specialized tourism institutions and development strategies are lacking. Cultural resources, including historical sites like the Cistercian Abbey, attract tourists, but the limited cultural organizations hinder full potential. Technological resources, such as internet access and online booking systems, are improving but still face limitations, especially regarding the local applications. Socio-demographic factors are unfavorable due to the aging population and lack of specialized education for tourism. Psychological factors, such as the positive attitudes of residents toward tourists, create a welcoming atmosphere in Sulejów Commune. Ecological resources, including protected areas, promote sustainable tourism, but limited environmental awareness among the community and funding challenge further development. Sulejów's functional resources offer significant potential for sustainable tourism, but further investment, promotion and specialized support are needed to fully realize this potential.

4.3. The Results of Questionnaire Survey

The questionnaire survey included 103 participants, with 44.66% who identified themselves as women and 55.34% as men. Of the respondents, 61.17% were visitors to the municipality, while the rest were residents. Most respondents fell into the following age groups: 31-36 years (25.24%), 37-42 years (14.56%), 43-48 years (18.45%). The largest educational group had higher education (43.69%), followed by those with secondary education (39.81%) (Figure 5).

Figure 5. The age and educational structure of the respondents

The profile of respondents in the survey

Age structure		Educational structure	
Age group	%	Level of education	%
18-24	7,77	Elementary	0,00
25-30	10,68	Vocational	13,59
31-36	25,24	Junior	0,00
37-42	14,56	Secondary	39,81
43-48	18,45	Post-Secondary	2,91
49-54	14,56	Higher	43,69
55-60	2,91	Together	100,00
61-65	0,00		
66 and more	5,83		
Together	100,00		

Source: Authors' elaboration.

The first question asked to the respondents concerned the assessment of the tourist potential of the Sulejów municipality on a scale from 1 to 10. The average rating was quite high, at 6.11 points. Most respondents (19.4%) rated the municipality's potential at 8 points, while the lowest rating, 1 point, was given by the fewest respondents (0.97%) (Table 1).

Table 1. The respondents' evaluation of the tourism potential of the Sulejów municipality

Assessment of the tourist potential in the studied region	
Score	%
1	0,97
2	2,91
3	7,77
4	14,56
5	16,50
6	12,62
7	12,62
8	19,42
9	5,83
10	6,80
Together	100,00
Average score	6,11

Source: Authors' elaboration.

The next question asked respondents to identify which of the listed aspects have the greatest impact on the tourism potential of the municipality. Respondents evaluated them using a Likert scale, with the following response options: strongly disagree, rather disagree, neither agree nor disagree, rather agree, and strongly agree. The highest-rated aspect of Sulejów's tourism potential was its natural attractions. Man-made (anthropogenic) attractions, tourist infrastructure, were also rated very positively. However, the influence of local institutions and authorities on tourism potential was rated lower with neither agree nor disagree option dominating the structure of responses (Table 2).

Table 2. The dominant opinions regarding the elements determining the tourism potential in the Sulejów Municipality.

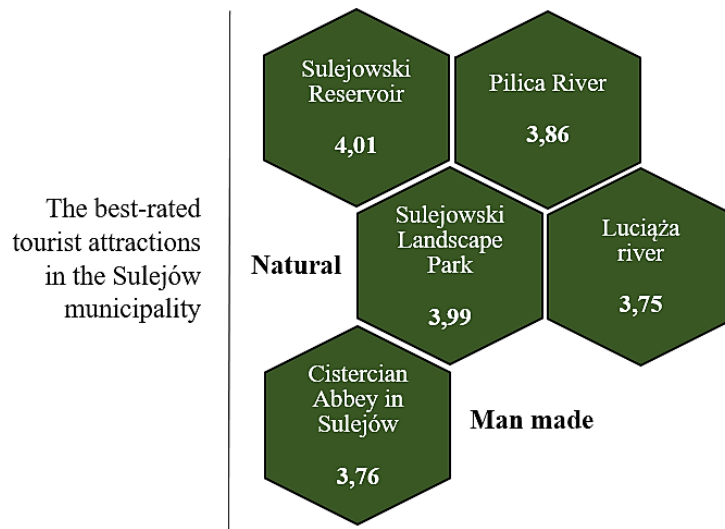
Elements that are determining tourism potential in the research area	The response most frequently chosen by respondents
Rich natural tourist attractions	I strongly agree (44,66%)
Rich anthropogenic tourist attractions	I rather agree (42,72%)
Well-developed tourist infrastructure	I rather agree (41,75%)
Favorable communication accessibility	I rather agree (31,07%)
Interesting regional and local culture and traditions	I rather agree (29,13%)

Elements that are determining tourism potential in the research area	The response most frequently chosen by respondents
Tourism related activities of local institutions	Neither agree nor disagree (36,89%)
Tourism related activities of local authorities	Neither agree nor disagree (47,57%)

Source: Authors' elaboration.

The next question involved rating most important attractions in the Sulejów municipality on a scale of 1 to 5. The best-rated attraction was the Sulejów Reservoir, with an average score of 4.01. Other highly rated attractions were mainly natural sites, such as the Sulejów Landscape Park, the valleys of the Pilica and Luciąża Rivers, as well as a man-made site - the Cistercian Abbey in Sulejów (Figure 6).

Figure 6. The breakdown of respondents' ratings of the most important attractions in the Sulejów municipality.



Source: Authors' elaboration.

In the next question, respondents were asked to indicate what actions should be taken to increase the potential of the Sulejów Municipality. This was a multiple-choice question, and 183 responses were collected. The most common answers were greater support for tourism development and the development of a sustainable tourism infrastructure, both receiving 27.32% of the responses. Improved promotional efforts were chosen by 25.68% of respondents, while 14.75% pointed to greater support from local authorities for the tourism sector in the municipality.

The next question asked respondents to identify the dominant type of tourism in the Sulejów Municipality. Both tourists and residents agreed that active tourism is the most prevalent in the area (like kayaking, cycling, hiking), with 50.89% of responses indicating this option. It is important that these forms of tourism are often considered as sustainable (see Cudny and Dajer 2024). Leisure tourism ranked second (34.82%), followed by sightseeing tourism in third place (12.50%).

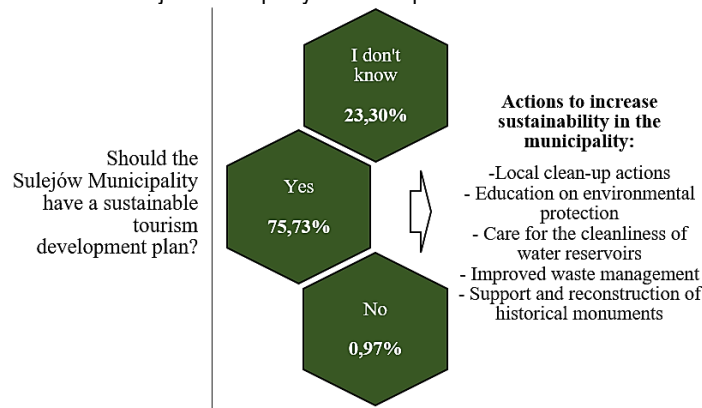
In the following question, respondents were asked whether, in general, efforts should be made to develop sustainable tourism. A total of 50.49% of respondents had no opinion on whether sustainable tourism in general should be developed, however 49.51% believed it should. They justified their positive responses by referring to environmental concerns, such as the benefits to the environment, increased awareness of nature conservation, and the fact that sustainable tourism helps maintain environmental balance. Notably, none of the respondents selected 'No' as an answer to this question. Therefore, rejecting those who had no opinion, everyone answered this question positively.

In the next question, respondents were asked to answer the following: Should the Sulejów municipality have a sustainable tourism development plan? Most respondents agree that the municipality should have such a plan – over 75% of respondents. More than 23% of those surveyed had no opinion on the matter, while only one person believed that the municipality should not have a sustainable tourism development plan.

Respondents were also asked to suggest actions that should be implemented to increase sustainability in the Sulejów municipality. The most frequently mentioned suggestions included organizing neighborhood cleanup campaigns, educating tourists and residents about environmental protection, maintaining the cleanliness

of water bodies, improving waste management, supporting local environment friendly businesses, and restoring historical sites and heritage buildings in the municipality to preserve its heritage for the future (Figure 7).

Figure 7. Responses on whether the Sulejów municipality should implement a sustainable tourism development plan.



Source: Authors' elaboration.

4.4. Sustainable Tourism a Framework

In addition to analyzing tourism potential, the article aimed to present a framework for better utilizing Sulejów's potential to develop sustainable tourism. First, the potential is summarized using a SWOT analysis, followed by the presentation of the framework. SWOT analysis is a strategic tool used to identify and evaluate the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats of an organization, project, or region. It aids in understanding internal factors (strengths and weaknesses) and external factors (opportunities and threats), providing insights for decision-making and strategic planning in businesses as well as in territorial development (Kaczmarek *et al.* 2010). Based on the research results, Sulejów possesses strong tourism potential, with rich natural and cultural assets such as the Pilica River, Sulejów Reservoir, and historic sites. Its location, environment and biodiversity provide ideal conditions for water tourism and ecotourism. However, challenges include poor accessibility, limited promotion, seasonal tourism flow, and low environmental awareness. Opportunities lie in the growing interest in ecotourism, availability of EU funding, and regional collaboration to enhance sustainable tourism. Nevertheless, threats such as environmental issues, economic crises, and rising costs may hinder sustainable tourism development (Figure 8).

Figure 8. SWOT Analysis of tourism potential and sustainable tourism development in Sulejów municipality

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Rich natural attractions like the Pilica River, Sulejów Reservoir, nature reserves, supplemented by cultural attractions like the Cistercian Abbey are core of tourism potential. ➤ High potential for water tourism: especially kayaking which is perceived as sustainable form of tourism. ➤ Strategic central location. ➤ Biodiversity and tourist trails: ideal for eco and sustainable tourism activities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Poor communication infrastructure limits tourist access. ➤ Insufficient promotion lowers region's visibility as a destination. ➤ Seasonality in tourism and limited environmental awareness and education as weaknesses.
Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Rising interest in sustainable tourism appeals to responsible tourists seeking authentic, nature-based experiences. ➤ Availability of EU funding and new technology - supports infrastructure and promotion. ➤ Possible regional collaboration and tourist trails development enhances attractiveness for sustainable, active tourism. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Environmental and economic risks (pollution, climate change, global crises) and competition from other destinations pose a threat for the destination. ➤ Rising costs, higher energy and resource prices negatively impact development.

Source: Authors' compilation.

The development of sustainable tourism in the Sulejów commune requires support through a framework designed to maximize the region's tourism potential while adhering to the principles of sustainability. This approach aims to deliver long-term benefits for both the local community and visitors (Figure 9).

The first framework objective is to raise ecological awareness among residents and tourists through actions such as organizing eco-festivals, open days on sustainable tourism, and social media campaigns with educational content. Carbon emissions reduction strategies, including promoting cycling infrastructure and public transportation, are also essential. This will help strengthen the eco-awareness in the community and should develop environment and heritage protection.

The second objective focuses on improving the accessibility, sustainability and quality of tourism infrastructure. Expanding and modernizing cycling paths and transport connections, improving road accessibility, and adapting facilities for people with disabilities will enhance the lacking access to attractions. Developing eco-friendly accommodations, such as energy-efficient eco-hotels with recycling systems, should also become a priority.

It's worth mentioning that these efforts (Figure 9) align with UN Agenda 2030 goals, including lifelong learning (Goal 4), sustainable consumption and production (Goal 12), and climate action (Goals 13, 14, 15).

The third framework objective focuses on supporting sustainable economic development by implementing training programs for local businesses to adopt eco-friendly practices, to create inclusive tourist spaces, inclusive and just economy and enabling better utilization and protection of tourist attractions. This should help to rise the local tourism sector, strengthen the regional economy and help adhere the EU funds. Promoting active nature-based tourism and agritourism and certifying eco-friendly facilities will provide authentic, high-quality tourism experiences, boost the local business sector, and strengthen local institutions' efforts toward sustainability.

The fourth objective is to promote regional attractions and Sulejów as a sustainable tourism destination. Marketing campaigns, partnerships with influencers, and leveraging modern technologies, such as social media and mobile apps, will enhance the region's visibility and tourist engagement.

Third and fourth objectives will also be a chance for improving the activity of local institutions and authorities towards sustainable tourism development.

Finally, the fifth objective is to enhance local community involvement in sustainable tourism through workshops, community meetings with different local groups, and cross-sector collaboration. This integrated approach fosters stronger inclusivity and community bonds, ensures effective tourism development, and further supports local institutions' sustainability efforts.

These actions (Figure 9) align with different SDGs, including responsible production and consumption (Goal 12), inclusivity and equality (Goal 5), decent work (Goal 8), and sustainable communities (Goal 11). Implementing this framework will enable the Sulejów Municipality to maximize its tourism potential while preserving the environment and promoting community well-being.

Figure 9. Framework for sustainable tourism development.



Source: Authors' compilation.

5. Discussion

Issues related to tourism potential are an important element of contemporary tourism research (Kaczmarek *et al.* 2010; Yan *et al.* 2017). Tourism potential also serves as the foundation for the development of sustainable tourism, which is now considered a paradigm for shaping tourism in many areas (Nieżgoda 2006; Trukhachev 2015; Crăciun *et al.* 2022; Cudny and Dajer 2024).

Studies on tourism potential are common in scientific analyses at local (Brzezińska-Wójcik and Skowronek 2009; Skrzypczak and Chmielewska 2009; Ungureanu *et al.* 2014), regional (Kubicki 2009; Zajadacz and Śniadek 2009a; Głabiński and Duda 2017), national (Borysova *et al.* 2020), and international levels (Ankomah and Crompton 1990), as well as in research on individual elements (Pralong 2005; Calderón Puerta *et al.* 2020) and comprehensive perspectives of potential (Kociuba and Kociuba 2009). However, there are still too few analyses exploring the connections between tourism potential and sustainable tourism, especially at local level (Cudny and Dajer 2024). This research gap is what the present article seeks to address. It serves as a case study analyzing the potential of a small community and its relevance for the development of sustainable tourism. In the authors' opinion, this analysis provides a basis for further comparisons and the development of more general conclusions in future studies.

The analysis revealed that the Sulejów commune has significant tourism potential, distinguished by its rich natural resources, including the Sulejów Landscape Park, the Sulejów Reservoir, and the Pilica River. These natural attractions are complemented by cultural landmarks such as the Cistercian Abbey. While the tourism infrastructure is quite well-developed in terms of accommodation and gastronomy, improvements in communication accessibility are necessary. The influence of tourism promotion and local institutions and authorities on tourism potential was assessed less positively. These findings were supported by field observations interviews and a questionnaire survey result.

Although the respondents rated the municipality's tourism potential rather high (6,11 points) they highlighted that the tourism sector should be strengthened through greater support for its development and further responsible enhancement of tourism infrastructure and through leveraging the social awareness. They identified active tourism (e.g. kayaking, hiking, cycling) as the most prevalent form of tourism in the area, followed by leisure tourism and sightseeing tourism. Moreover, there was broad agreement among respondents that the Sulejów municipality would benefit from a sustainable tourism development framework.

The framework for Sulejów focuses on maximizing the region's potential, reducing weaknesses and threats, while preserving the environment and benefiting the local community. Key actions include raising eco-awareness, improving sustainable tourism infrastructure, promoting responsible tourism, and leveraging modern technologies to market the area as a sustainable destination. These initiatives align with several of the UN Agenda 2030 goals, fostering a balanced approach to tourism that integrates economic growth, environmental protection, and community engagement.

6. Conclusion and Further Research

The article demonstrated that the Sulejów municipality has significant tourist potential, which, however, requires further action to fully utilize it, especially in the development of sustainable tourism. The analysis also indicated that the municipality has real chances to develop as an attractive destination for sustainable tourism, which should contribute to improving the quality of life of residents and protecting the natural environment.

Research limitations include the article focus on a case study of one small municipality. As a result, broader implications and generalizations can only be drawn through comparisons with additional case studies. The research included results from non-representative intercept survey studies. Although these are valuable and commonly used in tourism research (Veal 2017), they cannot be fully generalized to reflect the opinions of the entire community.

Future studies should explore the relationship between tourism potential and sustainable tourism development across different areas, considering variations in location and scale. Research should incorporate diverse methods, including analyses of opinions from both local populations, decision makers and tourists, to build a broader base for comparisons. Once a larger body of data is collected, efforts should focus on formulating generalizations regarding tourism potential theory and its elements, such as attractions and infrastructure. Additionally, the findings should address the pillars and goals of sustainable development (SDGs).

Credit Authorship Contribution Statement

Waldemar Cudny: Conceptualization, Software, Investigation, Formal Analysis, Methodology, Writing - original draft, Writing – review and editing, Project administration, Supervision, Visualization.

Justyna Paluch: Conceptualization, Software, Data curation, Investigation, Formal Analysis, Methodology, Writing - original draft.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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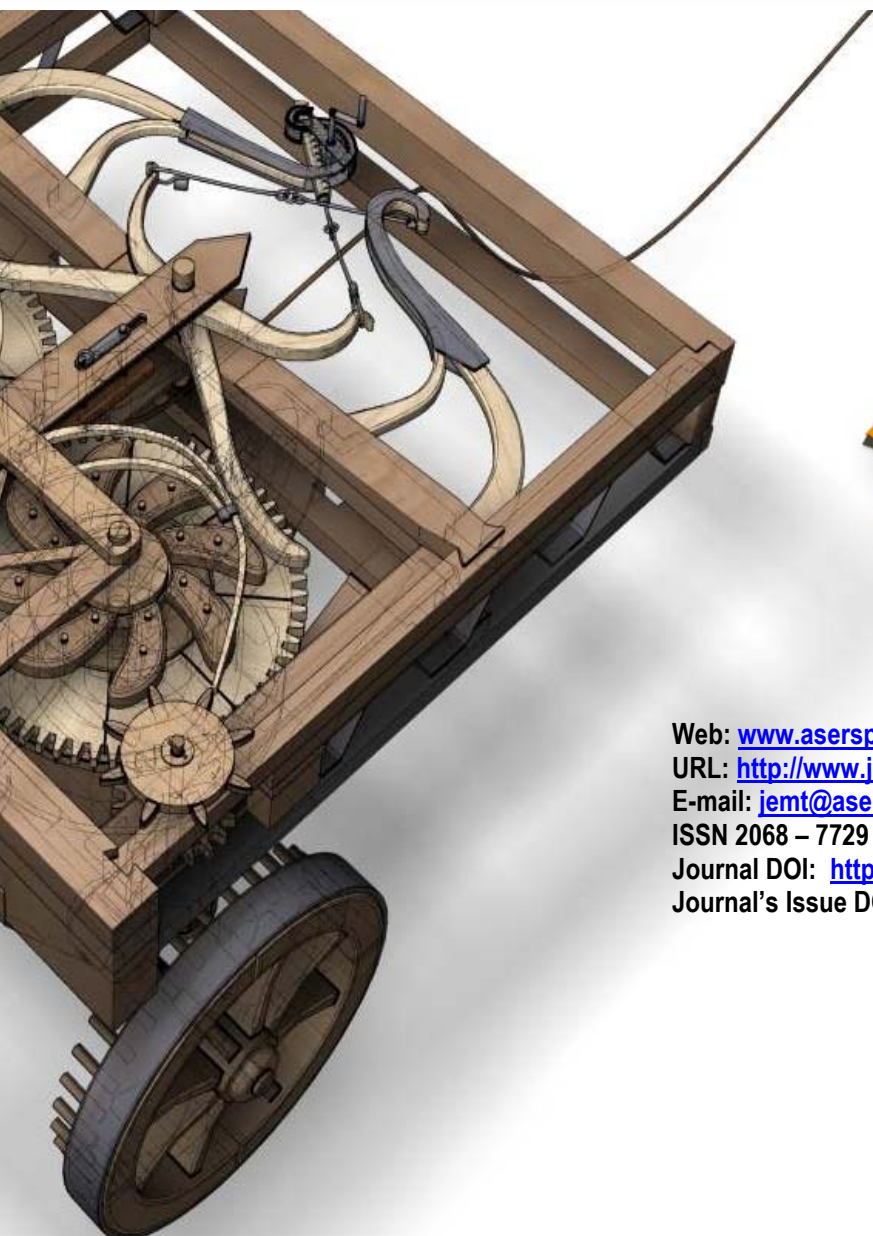
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