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OPPORTUNITIES AND THREATS TO SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN ENVIRONMENTALLY SENSITIVE AREAS IN THE OPINION OF LOCAL COMMUNITIES

ZRÓWNOWAŻONY ROZWÓJ OBSZARÓW WRAŻLIWYCH PRZYRODNICZO – SZANSE I ZAGROŻENIA WEDŁUG OPINII SPOŁECZNOŚCI LOKALNYCH

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Streszczenie. Idea zrównoważonego rozwoju społeczno-gospodarczego i środowiskowego stanowi propozycję jakościowo nowej formy świadomego, odpowiedzialnego życia, uwzględniającego zarówno oczekiwania społeczności lokalnych, jak i istniejące ograniczenia ekologiczne. Rodzi to potrzebę ciągłego prowadzenia badań nad różnymi aspektami rozwoju, tj. ekonomicznymi, społecznymi i środowiskowymi, w celu uzyskania odpowiedzi na pytanie, jak pogodzić intensywny rozwój gospodarczy z ideą ochrony środowiska naturalnego oraz wypracować kompromis w sytuacjach coraz częściej pojawiającego się konfliktu w tym zakresie. W pracy podjęto próbę rozpoznania stanu wiedzy społeczności lokalnych na temat form ochrony przyrody występujących na zamieszkiwanych przez nich obszarach, a także poznania ich opinii dotyczących najważniejszych korzyści i problemów wynikających z wprowadzenia obszarów wrażliwych przyrodniczo.

Key words: environmentally sensitive areas, local communities, sustainable development, communes, Lesser Poland Province.

Słowa kluczowe: obszary wrażliwe przyrodniczo, społeczności lokalne, zrównoważony rozwój, gminy, województwo małopolskie.

INTRODUCTION

The extensive interdisciplinary discussion that has been on-going for four decades, along with the activities of international, national and regional institutions and the contribution of science to development and promotion of the concept of sustainable growth has translated into continuously more perceivable changes in the management system of local government units on various levels of administration in Poland. This is expressed not only by the high rank of the sustainability issue in national and Community legislation, but mainly through creation of intensive economic growth, which is accompanied by activities that improve the sustainability of local resources in social and environmental terms (Mazur-Wierzbicka 2006; Paluch 2013).

The concept of sustainable growth is a proposal for a brand new quality of conscious and responsible existence, in an individual and collective perspective, taking into account the environmental limitations and social expectations (Płaczek 2012). However, the economic

aspect of growth relies on the assumption that the other two components, namely the society and the environment, will not inhibit but rather stimulate progress through technology advancements, improving the level of education in the society, enhanced community participation in decision-making and accountability for such decisions, creation of new jobs, growth of proactive and entrepreneurial attitudes and increased efficiency of resources, materials and labor (Zuzek 2007; Paluch and Płonka 2011).

Creation and implementation of new legal arrangements aimed at maintaining, sustaining, or protecting of natural habitats is more and more frequently perceived by local administrators and communities as a factor that strongly restricts or hinders business and investment activities, which translates into intense social conflicts locally (Zuzek and Mickiewicz 2012). The presence of legally protected areas within a territory administered by local authorities enforces various parties to change their attitudes and methods of managing natural resources; an example of such change is the requirement to carry out environmental impact assessments for most investment projects, even minor ones, before commencement thereof. The main objection here is the non-existence of efficient systematic arrangements that would take into account unique environmental aspects of a given region comprising an environmentally sensitive area (ESA). It is also important to identify the needs of the local population and to set directions for activities that would compensate for the consequences of the applicable restrictions, i.e. to define alternative sources of gainful employment or forms of financial aid for entities operating in such circumstances (Kłodziński 2011a).

Thus, in order to build an efficient system of managing local government resources based on the rules of information flow in the field of logistics management, higher participation by local communities is necessary in the decision-making process which used to be determined mainly by the local authorities and their institutional environment. The presence of areas with special natural assets within the boundaries of a commune, powiat or voivodeship does not have to be associated with such negative epithets as "barrier" or "concern". Apart from restrictions, operators functioning within local government territories characterized by a high proportion of Natura 2000 Programme areas may count on certain advantages and the "eco label" assigned to them may significantly facilitate achievement of such benefits (Kłodziński 2011).

This goal involves the need for continuous research on various aspects of growth, namely the economic, social and economic aspects, to answer the questions about how to reconcile intensive economic growth with the idea of protecting the natural environment and how to reach a compromise in cases of more and more frequent conflicts in this area.

METHODOLOGY

The paper attempts to identify the level of knowledge of local communities about the forms of nature occurring in the areas inhabited by them and getting to know their opinions on the most important benefits and problems arising from the introduction of environmentally sensitive areas. The analysis was based on the opinions and expectations of representatives of various groups inhabiting selected local government territories, and regarding the following three problem areas:

- recognition of the state of knowledge and opinions about the benefits, problems and limitations arising from the introduction of environmentally sensitive areas,
- understanding the needs for rules and procedures to be followed by local government units responsible for managing environmentally sensitive areas,
- identification of local community expectations with regard to the provision of certain logistic activities q by local authorities serving the purpose of socio-economic growth and the institutional environment in environmentally sensitive areas.

To meet the research objectives, the case study method was used as one of the diagnostic methods. The primary reasons for using this method were to identify concepts worth copying, and to facilitate the drawing of general conclusions and the description of certain situations or events that occurred in the studied realities (Hurrell et al. 2010).

The research project (of which only a portion is presented in this paper) was conducted in four selected communes located in the Lesser Poland Province (voivodeship), namely: Krynica Zdrój, Łabowa, Muszyna and Piwniczna Zdrój. The main tool used in the study, conducted in 2014–2015, was an interview questionnaire. The questionnaire was used to acquire information and empirical data, with a set of questions divided into various categories, and posed to 400 respondents. The respondents represent four local population groups: landowners (23.0%), local business operators (37.1%), local government representatives (15.3%) and members of environmental protection organizations and institutions (24.6%).

RESULTS

One of the key issues revealed by the research was the determination of the level of awareness of commune inhabitants with respect to the types of natural protection existing in their area of residence. The results show that an average of 83% of respondents said they were aware of the natural resources occurring in the ESA, especially of the ones embraced by the Natura 2000 Programme (Fig. 1).

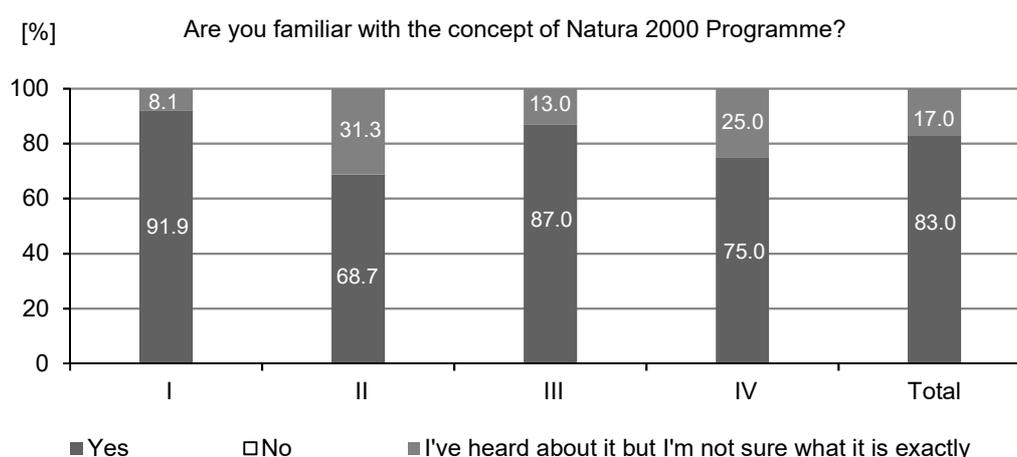


Fig. 1. Awareness of the natural resources occurring (it focuses on the concept of Natura 2000 Programme) in environmentally sensitive areas as evaluated by respondents. I – landowners, II – local business operators, III – representatives of local governments, IV – members of organizations and institutions involved in environmental protection

The remaining 17% heard about the programme, but were not sure what it entailed. According to a classification of responses given by representatives of each group, the group with the highest awareness of the concept behind the Natura 2000 Programme were landowners (92%), followed by representatives of local governments (87%), then members of organizations and institutions involved in protecting the environment (83%) and finally by local business operators (69%). It should be noted that no one answered that they did not know or had never heard about this form of nature protection.

Other conclusions that can be drawn from the questionnaire are that around 43% of all respondents would opt for the promotion of unique nature and landscape assets of the region as the best way to introduce protected areas to the wide public. Furthermore, 31% believe that the establishment of a protected area has strongly contributed to growth of tourism, agritourism, eco-tourism and related activities. Representatives of all four surveyed groups expressed a similar opinion. The answer chosen by fewest respondents, both in the entire population (4.8%) and within specific groups (3.1% to 7.0%), concerned the improvement of the condition and quality of municipal infrastructure. Furthermore, one should note that 10.9% of all survey subjects pointed to sustainable development of forest management as an advantage; this response was most frequently chosen by members of organizations and institutions involved in environmental protection (11.3%) and by landowners (over 20%) – Fig. 2.

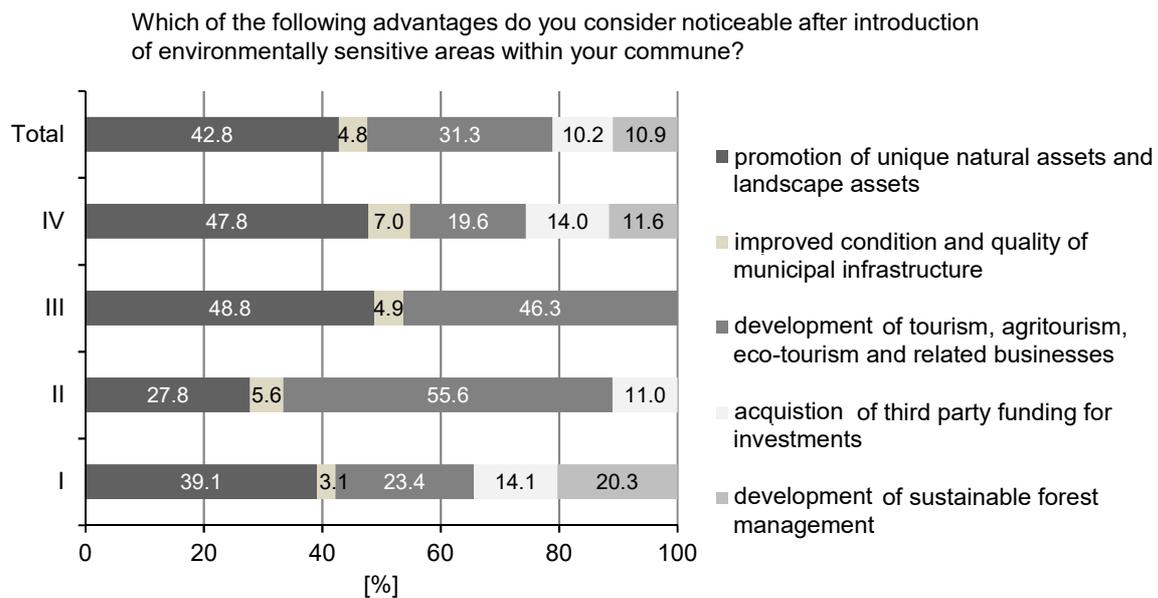


Fig. 2. Benefits of introducing environmentally sensitive areas as perceived by respondents. I – landowners, II – local business operators, III – representatives of local governments, IV – members of organizations and institutions involved in environmental protection

The most commonly mentioned disadvantage of introducing protected areas within the commune's boundaries was significant limitation of the area designated for infrastructure, business, and service/commercial investment projects (39.8%). Such answers were most frequently given by local business operators (56.5%). However, a similar opinion was expressed by representatives of other population groups including 37.7% of the landowners group, 33.3% of local government respondents, and 42.2% of members of organizations and institutions involved in environmental protection.

The option of closing of enterprises and small businesses elicited the fewest responses (3.1%), followed by lower incomes of the commune and its inhabitants (6.6%), and lower number of farms (6.1%). In these cases, neither the overall group of respondents nor representatives of specific groups would consider these among the key disadvantages associated with the introduction of protected areas in their communes. An exception to this rule was the landowner group in which 10.4% of respondents believe that the process of rural people discontinuing their farming activities is noticeable since the proportion of protected areas was increased (Fig. 3).

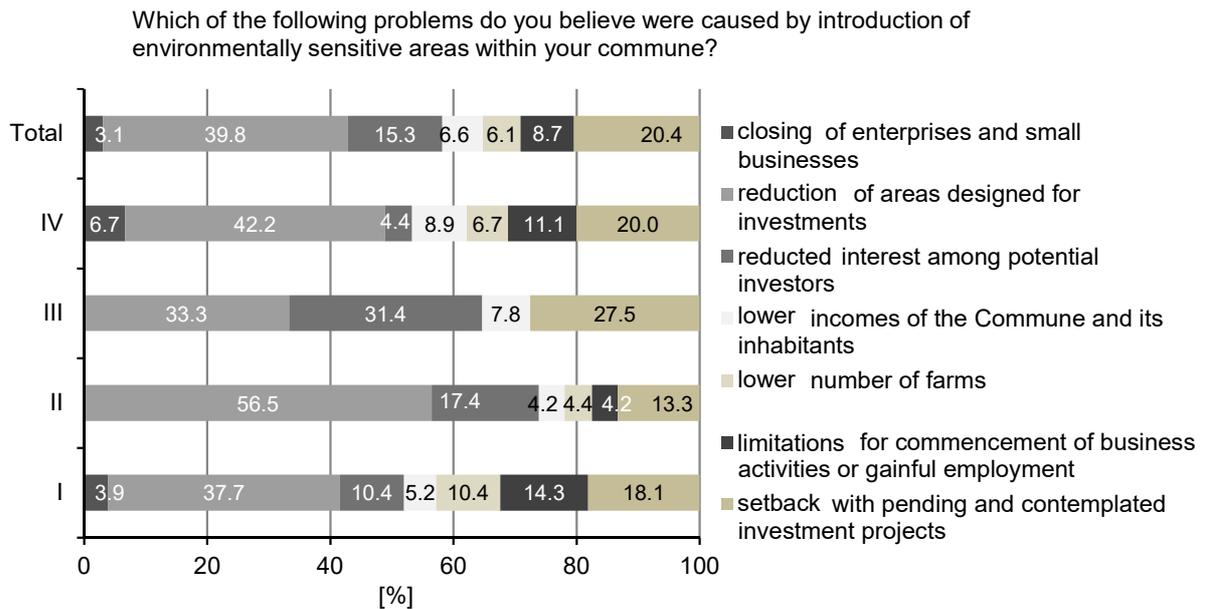


Fig. 3. Problems arising from introduction of environmentally sensitive areas as perceived by the respondents. I – landowners, II – local business operators, III – representatives of local governments, IV – members of organizations and institutions involved in environmental protection.

The issue of withholding scheduled investments in the region, which could result in reduced interest among potential investors, was a very important point for respondents asked about disadvantages of introducing a protected area. About 20% of respondents claimed that implementation of the nature protection programme would hinder execution of projected infrastructural investments in the region, while more than 15% of respondents believe that this situation could significantly lower potential investors’ interest in the future.

Over 8% respondents were concerned about limited options to commence business activities and obtain gainful employment. The problems which are most commonly reported with regard to business activities in regions where many protected areas are located are procedural and administrative difficulties (34.2%). The distribution of answers given by the different groups was fairly similar, with the exception of local business operators who believe that procedural and administrative complications are the main inconvenience to business activity (48.4%) – Fig. 4.

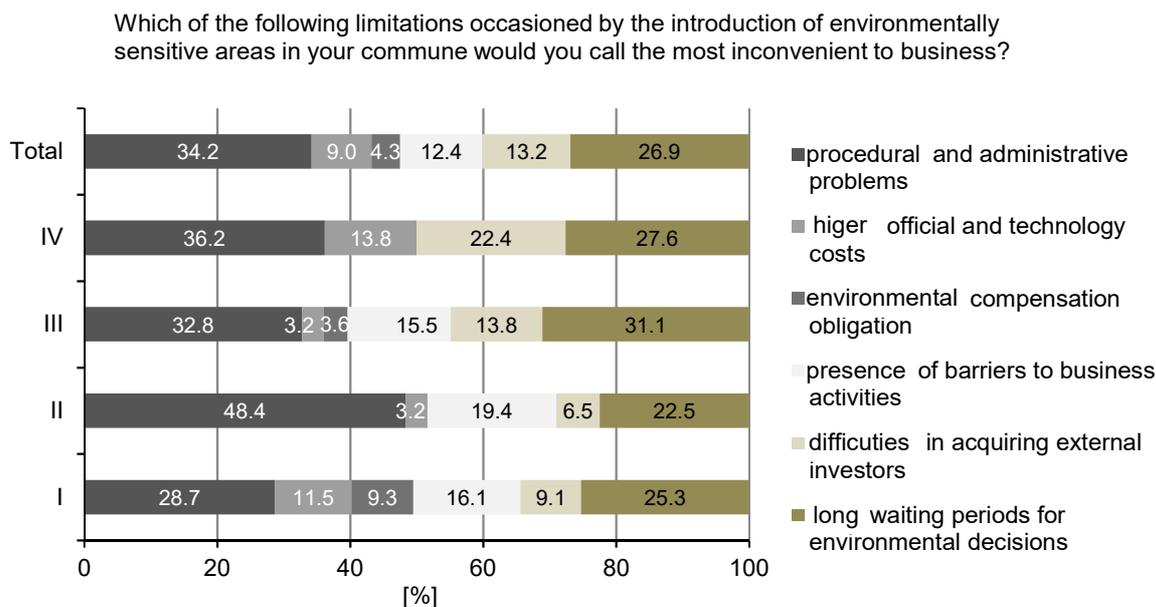


Fig. 4. Limitations for business activities, caused by the presence of environmentally sensitive areas, as perceived by respondents. I – landowners, II – local business operators, III – representatives of local governments, IV – members of organizations and institutions involved in environmental protection

According to the respondents, the issue of long waiting time for environmental decisions is seen as one of the most important difficulty hindering the growth of entrepreneurship. About 28% of respondents said that the time to issue these decisions was too long, and leads to loss of funding and assets involved in an investment project. The reason for that they attribute to the overly ambiguous attitude of institutions in charge of administration of legally protected areas. They also claim that the precautionary approach prevailing in the process, with regard to any kind of interference with the natural environment, is derived only from recognition of potential or theoretical risks (25.2%). A third of all respondents stated that administrative decisions often fail to take into account the actual economic needs of the region (33.6%). This opinion has high response rate among all the groups of groups of respondents (Table 1).

Table 1. Evaluation of the administrative decision procedure with regard to nature protection, according to respondents [%]

What is your opinion about administrative decisions related to nature protection in cases you are aware of?	Groups				Total
	I	II	III	IV	
They are based on thorough analysis of the natural conditions and economic needs of the sub-region	2.7	5.9	21.7	20.7	12.2
They are mostly governed by precautionary approach to interference with the natural environment	18.2	–	33.5	–	17.8
They are mostly governed by precautionary approach to interference with the natural environment, derived mainly from recognition of potential, theoretical risks	18.6	58.8	27.2	6.9	25.2
These decisions quite often fail to take into account the actual economic needs of the region	60.5	35.3	17.6	44.8	33.6
The issued decisions permit project execution without protecting the environment fully	–	–	–	27.6	11.2

I – landowners, II – local business operators, III – representatives of local governments, IV – members of organizations and institutions involved in environmental protection, (–) – no answer.

The respondents' attitudes to limitations of business activities arising from the presence of ESA in their area of residence are supported by their evaluation of the actions taken by local authorities and the institutional environment. 38% of all respondents claim that these actions are limited and fail to fully protect the natural assets, while 35% believe these actions are incidental or occasional, taken mainly as a consequence of obligations imposed by law (Fig. 5).

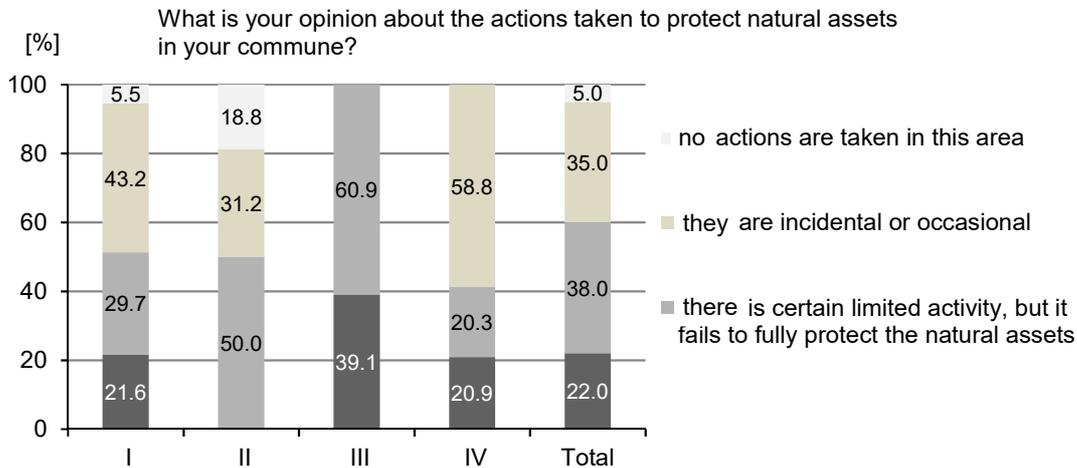


Fig. 5. Evaluation of nature protection activities of local authorities and their institutional environment as perceived by respondents. I – landowners, II – local business operators, III – representatives of local governments, IV – members of organizations and institutions involved in environmental protection.

An important aspect of this research was to get to know the respondents' opinions about the changes they expected regarding procedures related to business activities in protected areas. Most groups of respondents expressed the need to make the bureaucratic and formal requirements simpler or more flexible so that they can better account for the region's economic needs (Fig. 6).

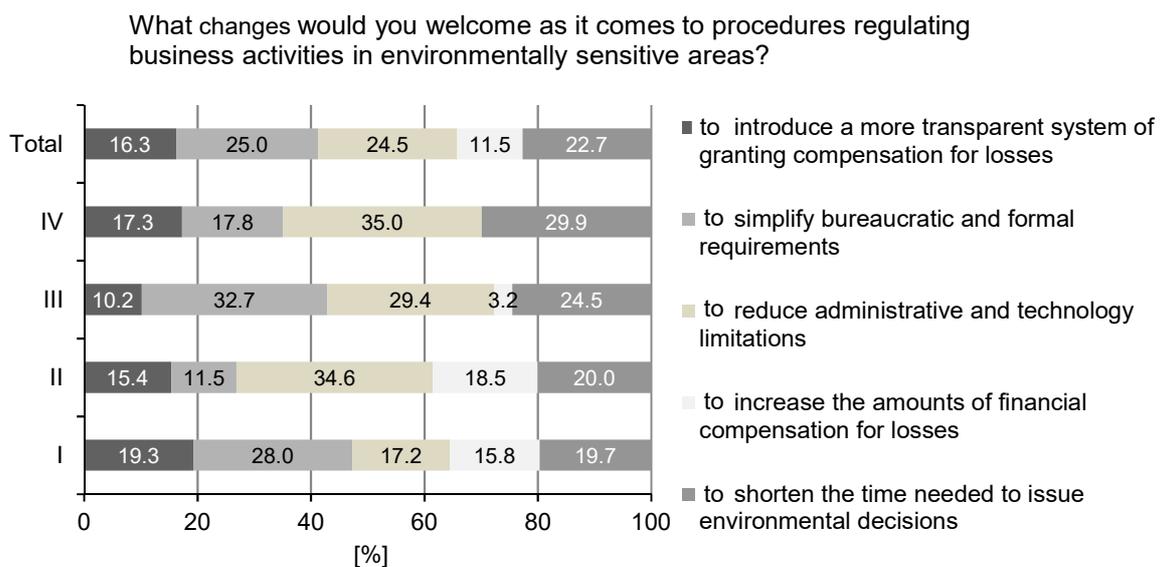


Fig. 6. Expected changes in procedures related to business activities in environmentally sensitive areas, as perceived by respondents. I – landowners, II – local business operators, III – representatives of local governments, IV – members of organizations and institutions involved in environmental protection

Another important issue was the lessening of administrative and technological limitations for manufacturing and service activities (24.5%) and the shortening of time needed to obtain environmental decisions (22.7%). The pattern of answers is similar across the groups indicating that they have similar expectations in this regard.

CONCLUSIONS

Although the concept of "environmentally sensitive area" is currently an obvious component of Poland's socio-economic growth policy, the need to balance rapid growth with environment protection is still a challenge. According to this research, there are many reasons behind this situation. One of them is the fact that a public information campaign has long been missing in the process of defining protected nature areas. Therefore, the approach of local governments and communities is more of a concern than of positive connotations.

The conditions of economic management in environmentally sensitive areas are usually rather disadvantageous and, in result, the most common proposal for these regions is limited to promoting tourism or its alternative versions (including promotion of eco-production). At the same time, considering the shortness of the tourist season, poorly developed infrastructure and the relatively low demand for green produce (mainly due to higher prices), these types of activities are unable to secure sufficient incomes for the inhabitants of the region concerned. In addition, the requirement to carry out environmental impact assessment for foreseen investment projects, irrespective of their type and size, often discourages potential investors from execution of projects capable of generating large economic benefits for the local community. Even disregarding the fact that the costs of producing such an assessment are borne by the investor, economic benefits do not guarantee a positive opinion from the Regional Directorate of Environmental Protection.

Another inconvenience associated with investing in environmentally sensitive areas is the obligation to fully inform the public about the project planned. This often extends the time needed to reach a decision and leads to protests by groups of people who would naturally be reluctant to have this or any other investment project in their neighborhood. In addition, the precautionary principle followed in the process of issuing permits for implementation of business projects strongly discourages potential investors. Hence, these situations often give rise to strong objections on the part of specific groups (local business operators, local authorities, landowners, etc.), who often claim that this arrangement inhibits growth in their communes. They also believe that certain prohibitions and precepts have gone too far, and their form and range in Poland is the outcome of an excessively precautionary or even equivocal approach of public administration to issues relating to nature protection. This is even more the case considering the fact that the European Union directives only set certain general requirements on how to avoid the deterioration of natural habitats and the habitats of species.

Thus, in order to avoid the perception that the national programme of nature protection is a system of continuous bans and prescriptions, each problem should be resolved individually by listening to all parties' arguments and seeking mutually satisfactory compromises. In order to achieve this goal, involvement is required from all interested parties and local communities in the growth and development planning process. An example of this approach and an incentive

for entrepreneurship growth would be to offer professional advice in setting up businesses whilst making good, responsible use of the region's natural capital. However, this approach would require continuous interaction between interest groups, as well as development of a comprehensive list of permitted business activities, taking into account the possibilities and limitations arising from the unique local conditions. This solution would also have to be backed up by a relevant logistic system based on special enterprise development programmes in the so-called marginal areas.

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Summary. The concept of sustainable growth is a proposal for a brand new quality of conscious and responsible existence, in an individual and collective perspective, taking into account environmental limitations and social expectations. Therefore, this goal involves the need of continuous research of various aspects of growth, namely the economic, social and economic aspect, which would answer the question about how to reconcile intensive economic growth with the idea of protecting the natural environment and how to reach a compromise in cases of more and more frequent conflicts in this area. The paper attempts to identify the level of knowledge of

local communities about the types of nature occurring in the areas inhabited by them and eliciting their opinions on the most important benefits and problems arising from the introduction of environmentally sensitive areas (ESA).

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