

SKI TOURISM IN THE POLISH CARPATHIANS – PRESENT STATE AND ISSUES OF DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract: *The development of ski resorts is presently one of the most dynamic tourism processes in the Polish Carpathians. It is taking place not only in mountainous areas but also in suburban zones. The main factor for this process is constantly growing demand for ski tourism form on the Polish national market. The conditions of competition with Slovak and Czech resorts forces modernizations of Polish resorts, improvement of its service quality and specialization. The ski tourism development in Polish Carpathians is affected by many legal, proprietary, functional and natural barriers.*

Key words: *Polish Carpathians, ski tourism, resorts development*

INTRODUCTION

The Carpathian Mountains belong to the most important tourism regions in Poland due to their high natural and cultural values that enable many forms of tourism through the whole year (Warszyńska 1985, 1995; Kurek 2008). Traditionally, this region was used for long stay holidays, but nowadays tourism here is strongly influenced by agglomerations located at the foot of the Carpathians: the ones of Upper Silesia, Krakow, and Rzeszów. This influence involves short-stay tourism forms.

A great social interest and fashion trend towards winter sports have contributed to the increase of winter tourism flow at traditional ski resorts. The Polish society's increasing activeness in the field of winter recreation has generated favourable conditions for mountain towns previously little visited by tourists or lacking skiing infrastructure to develop their tourism function. Presently, the interest in skiing and in the satisfaction of broadly defined health needs form one of the most important factors for modernization and innovation in the tourism sector of tourist resorts in the Polish Carpathians and Sudetes.

SKIING TRADITIONS IN THE POLISH CARPATHIANS

Traditions of skiing in Poland date back to the interwar period and they are related to the popularization of Nordic skiing. The development of alpine skiing started at the turn of the 50's and the 60's of the 20th century, and it grew up to mass scale in the 70's of the 20th century. The first ski lifts have been established in the Polish Tatras during the 60's of the 20th century.

The highest numbers of skiing investments have been carried out in the 70's and 80's of the 20th century in the Silesian and Żywiec Beskids as well as in the area of Zakopane, accompanying the development of company's social recreational centres. At that time, the

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ski run system in Szczyrk has been established, the town called then the “Polish skiing capital” (Mika 2004). Also the infrastructure on the slopes of Pilsko in Korbielów has been developed, as well as ski lifts and ski runs networks in Wisła and Zakopane. By the end of the 80’s of the 20th century, the best developed ski region was the area of Silesian Beskid Mountains with 65 functional ski lifts and 76.9 km of ski runs. Before 1989, there were about 200 ski lifts in total in the Carpathians, most of them of low quality, located mainly in the Tatra Mountains region as well as in the western part of the Beskids Mountains (Kurek 2008). The first half of the 90’s of the 20th century has been the time of property status transformation and of the beginning of modernisation in most ski resorts.

THE PRESENT STATE OF DEVELOPMENT OF SKIING INFRASTRUCTURE

The development of ski resorts is now one of the most dynamic tourism processes in the Polish part of the Carpathians. According to the stocktaking conducted by the end of 2008, the infrastructure for downhill skiing in the Polish Carpathians includes 557 ski lifts and 587 ski runs with total length of 370.9 km (tab.1). It means that since the beginning of the 90’s of the 20th century the skiing infrastructure, regarding the number of ski lifts, has increased by three times. From the technical point of view, surface lifts are most common (T-bar lifts and platter pulls) – 509 establishments (91.4%) and two funicular railways (in Zakopane on Gubałówka and in Międzybrodzie Bialskie on Góra Żar); the other lifts are chairlifts (43), two gondola lifts (to Szyndzielnia Mountain in Silesian Beskids and to Jaworzyna Krynicka in Sądecki Beskids) and one aerial tramway (to Kasprowy Wierch Mt. in the Tatras).

Among all Carpathian tourism regions, the most developed skiing infrastructure can be found in the area of Zakopane (the Tatras and Subtatra region) as well as in the Silesian Beskid Mountains. However, with regard to skiing equipment infrastructure, the importance of Sądecki Beskid Mountains has significantly increased because of intensive investments carried out in the recent years.

Tab.1. *Ski tourism infrastructure in tourist regions of the Polish Carpathians*

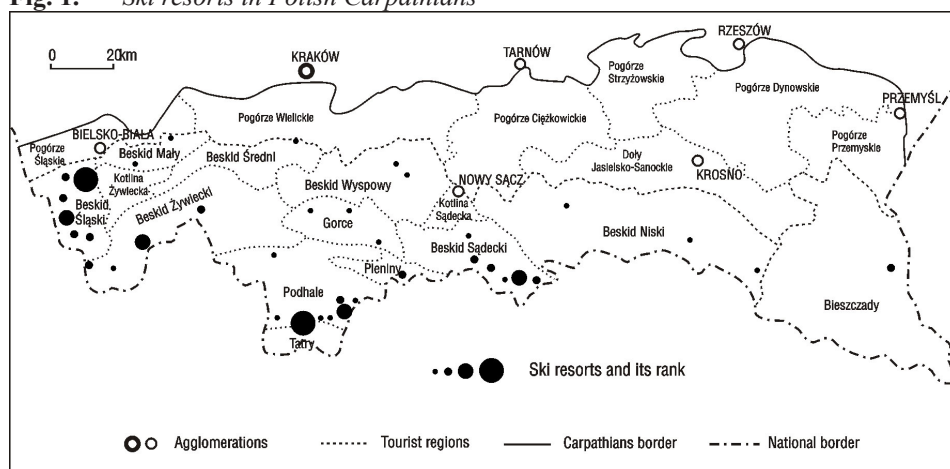
Tourist regions	Number of ski lifts	The length of ski lifts (km)	Number of ski runs	The length of ski runs (km)
Carpathian Foothills (Pogórze)	31	10,1	31	11,7
Żywiec Basin (Kotlina Żywiecka)	1	0,3	1	0,3
Silesian Beskids (Beskid Śląski)	110	53,7	108	88,1
Żywiec Beskids (Beskid Żywiecki)	58	28,7	69	51,0
Little Beskids (Beskid Mały)	12	4,7	14	7,3
Maków Beskids (Beskid Średni)	6	3,9	6	4,3
Island Beskids (Beskid Wyspowy)	11	6,3	10	8,1
Gorce Mts. (Gorce)	26	10,7	28	16,8
Sądecki Beskids (Beskid Sądecki)	87	40,0	94	47,7
Lower Beskids (Beskid Niski)	28	12,1	31	21,7
Bieszczady Mts. (Bieszczady)	29	15,4	35	21,6
Pieniny Mts. (Pieniny)	13	5,0	15	9,9
Tatras and Podhale (Tatry i Podhale)	145	59,8	145	82,3
Total	557	250,7	587	370,9

Source: own study.

Since the beginning of the 90's of the 20th century, numerous establishments of skiing infrastructure have been created in the Carpathians. Concurrently to developing new areas, the already existing infrastructure has been modernised. Along with the development of such infrastructure the rank of some resorts has changed and new resorts have emerged. The biggest newly established ski resorts in the Polish part of the Carpathians are located in the Sądecki Beskid Mountains. It is the „Jaworzyna Krynicka” resort (gondola lift, 10 ski lifts, 7.5 km of ski runs) and the „Two Valleys Muszyna-Wierchomla” (10 ski lifts, 15 km of ski runs). Smaller new resorts have been opened in Szczawnica, Kluszkowce near Czorsztyn, in Białka Tatrzańska, in Limanowa, Laskowa near Limanowa and in Jurgów. Some small resorts have opened in the Bieszczady and Lower Beskids Mountains. In the recent years, a network of small ski lifts in the Carpathian Foothills region (31) has been developed, located mainly in suburban zones of cities at the foot of the Carpathians. The development and maintenance of ski slopes beyond mountainous areas are enabled by the widespread use of snowmaking devices of high efficiency.

In the Polish Carpathians, ski lifts can be found in 133 locations, only 37 of which can be described as a ski resort. These resorts have different ranks, depending on the stage of development of their skiing infrastructure and accommodation facilities. The leading resorts are Zakopane and Szczyrk, since the 70's of the 20th century offering the best skiing infrastructure. It is worth emphasizing that the ski areas in the Tatras are the only areas in Poland offering alpine conditions, where the snow cover enables skiing activities from October till the end of April. Due to the relatively high incoming tourism flow from Russia and Ukraine, these resorts have gained on importance from the 90's of the 20th century and became international ski resorts.

Fig. 1. Ski resorts in Polish Carpathians



Source: own study.

A highly developed skiing infrastructure can be found also in Wisła (Silesian Beskids), Korbiefów (Żywiec Beskids), Krynica (Sądecki Beskids) and Bukowina Tatrzańska (Podhale region). These towns can be considered the main regional ski centres of national importance and a serious competition to Szczyrk and Zakopane. With regard to tourism,

Wisła and Krynica are multifunctional. The development and modernisation of skiing infrastructure in the 90's of the 20th century have significantly contributed to the increase of tourism flow during winter season and to the more efficient usage of accommodation facilities and thus to the growing economic benefits from tourism development.

Important positions in the system of the Carpathian ski resorts belong also to Brenna, Istebna, Koniaków, Ustróż, Zwardoń, Zawoja, Piwniczna, Tylicz, Wierchomla, Szczawnica, Białka Tatrzańska and Ustrzyki Dolne. The ski tourism development in these locations is limited by orography, climate, transportation or other local conditions such as nature protection areas (Zawoja).

Complementary to the above mentioned resorts, the following 19 locations have usually several ski lifts each: Myślenice, Laskowa, Spytkowice, Rycerka Dolna, Międzybrodzie Żywieckie, Rzyki, Limanowa, Kluszkowce, Niedźwiedź, Rabka Zdrój, Rytro, Szczawnik, Chyrowa, Karlików, Małastów, Jurgów, Małe Ciche, Murzasichle and Witów. Their skiing offer is local or regional, for inhabitants and visitors of the neighbouring towns; they can also profit from the neighbourhood of bigger ski resorts, i.e. in the Podhale region.

The vast majority of all locations with ski lifts (72%) offers only a limited service, mainly for local societies. They have one or two devices to transport the skiers up the slope, mainly T-bar lifts.

MAIN ISSUES OF SKI TOURISM DEVELOPMENT

Factors and development directions

Along with the development of skiing devices and resorts' quantity, their function and quality also undergoes a process of transformation. From all spatial, social and economic processes related to the development of skiing infrastructure in the Polish part of the Carpathian Mountains, the following affect the development's character, extend and directions:

- development of skiing infrastructure in new localities with no previous skiing traditions
- establishment of new ski lifts in suburban areas
- establishment of new high quality devices and modernisation of old devices for skiers' up slope transportation
- the prolongation of winter tourism season's peak, due to administrative decisions regarding the freedom of choice of the winter school holidays' time
- some of ski resorts functioning in competitive conditions to other national and international ski centres
- extending the offer of ski resorts by SPA services, some using geothermal water
- popularisation the usage of snowmaking devices on ski slopes
- ski tourism development being considered as the stimulus for economic activity in mountainous areas' small towns struggling with the effects of socio-economic transformation
- creating new ski resorts based on initiatives of local communities

The popularity of skiing and skiing is the reason why every year new localities develop areas for these recreation forms. Investing in downhill skiing infrastructure in Poland is taking place not only in mountainous areas with good orography and snow cover conditions but increasingly also in suburban areas or even within agglomerations (such

as Bytom, Warsaw, Poznań, Lublin). Such trends in investments' location, improving the accessibility of skiing areas for potential users, make all forms of active winter recreation even more popular and they change their time scheme – turning the weekend-and-holiday leisure into an every-day and after-work activity. This development direction is reinforced by the popularisation and usage of the snowmaking technology for “artificial snow cultivation and production”.

The property transformation process conducted in the 90's of the 20th century in ski resorts can be considered finished but the changes in the quality of skiing infrastructure are still under process. Modernisation is undertaken mainly for the depreciated, low quality T-bar lifts and platter pulls, in many cases replaced by their modern versions or by chairlifts capable of carrying many persons at one unit. The ski runs are being widened and joined, if possible; a system of season tickets is being introduced. An important factor contributing to the improvement of skiing facilities was the law regulation, enforced in 2003, regarding technical conditions of new ski lifts construction, where their high quality and safety of the users are made a priority. The second crucial stimulus for modernisation is the competition of other resorts. One of the greatest modernization investments of recent years was the redevelopment of the funicular railway from Zakopane (Kuźnice) to Kasprowy Wierch Mt.

The use of tourism infrastructure in ski resorts has been positively affected by the prolongation of winter school holidays' time. In the 90's of the 20th century, during winter season, two peaks of tourism flow could be observed. The first, relatively short period around the Christmas and New Year holiday, and the second related to winter school holidays in February. The possibility of choosing different time for winter holidays for children and school youth in individual voivodeships, enforced by the end of the 90's of the 20th century, has positively affected the usage of tourism infrastructure in terms of quantities and seasonality. Now, winter season lasts uninterruptedly from Christmas until the end of February, which means the peak of winter season has been prolonged up to 2.5 months.

Newly established skiing devices become seriously competitive to traditional resorts. Although the attractiveness of big and traditional ski resorts is the result of their varied and scenic ski runs, with diverse difficulty levels and of their well developed accommodation and dining facilities, the newly established resorts have the advantage of modern equipment, such as “snow parks” for snowboarders, as well as good accessibility, no crowds on the slopes and free parking spaces. In order to attract tourists, entrepreneurs in charge of the management of ski lifts have to conduct intensive marketing activities.

Nowadays, the issue of ski resorts functioning in the Polish part of the Carpathians, within the free-market competition, must be considered also in an international context. From this perspective, the issue of the highest importance is the question of competitiveness or complementarity of Slovak resorts' offer, where the modern skiing infrastructure is being developed and mainly intended to attract tourists from Poland (Klamár, Mika, Rosič, 2009). These issues have not been studied yet. Already a preliminary analysis indicates that an improvement of accessibility of Slovak resorts from Poland (shorter travel time) can cause the interception of a significant number of Polish skiers. However, with such accumulation and diversity of skiing infrastructure (133 localities in the Polish part of the Carpathians and circa 100 in the Slovak part) the demand behaviour of ski-tourists will

be influenced by many factors. Similar issues concern the Polish-Czech borderland in the Carpathians and in the Sudetes.

One of the methods of establishing a competitive predominance by a resort is to unite skiing offer with other recreation forms, mainly SPA&Wellness. This process fits into global trends of winter tourism development. Spa and wellness services are either offered as a supplement of the offer for skiers or recreation on snow is one of the elements of a health package (Mika, Pawlusiński 2006). Many resorts begin to specialise in this new sort of Ski&Spa offer, for example Szczyrk, Wisła, Wierchomla, Rytro, Krynica, Zakopane. From the beginning of the 21st century, geothermal waters are exploited to a higher extend in Poland. Easily accessible resources of geothermal waters can be found in Podhale and a growing number of tourist resorts in this region considers a union of skiing and geothermal water services the basis of their development (for example Zakopane, Bukowina Tatrzańska). Models of functioning Slovak resorts are of high importance for the development of similar Polish resorts.

Experiences from European ski resorts indicate that investments in alpine skiing infrastructure pay off relatively quick. The economic success of these investments makes them highly interesting for potential investors. Also local self-governments of communes in mountainous areas in Poland are visibly interested in these investments. Mass ski tourism is considered the stimulus for socio-economic development, increasing the income from tourism sector during winter season. According to one of ecological non-governmental organisations involved in monitoring local governments' activities regarding skiing infrastructure development in the Polish Carpathians, in 2006, new ski investments were planned in 50% of Carpathian communes.

The interest in investing in ski tourism as profitable tourism form, in recent years, has been taking shape of social initiatives by local communities. New ski resorts established by groups of local entrepreneurs have emerged mainly in Podhale, in Jurgów and Czarna Góra. However, these investments are not on a big scale; in Jurgów, the cost of an investment with 240 persons involved was 12 million PLN. As comparison, the value of all investments in skiing infrastructure in Zakopane from 1990 amounted to circa 450 million PLN, which is why there is always a need for investors capable of high expenditure and for the support of European Union's funds. The biggest private investment of recent years was the redevelopment of the ski resort Muszyna-Wierchomla in Sądecki Beskids with the value of 40 million PLN, where the share of European funding reached circa 33%.

Barriers for development

The development of skiing infrastructure could be much faster if not for many legal, proprietary, functional and natural barriers. To main limitations for the development of this tourism sector in the Carpathian region belong:

- development of the protection areas network Natura 2000,
- not enough financial resources in communities' budgets to invest in skiing and accompanying infrastructure,
- conflict situations regarding skiing in big resorts,
- no legal regulations organizing relations between land owners and skiing facilities' managers,
- instability of snow cover.

Areas Natura 2000 have been introduced in the Polish law as nature protection form in 2004. Till the end of 2008, 364 habitat areas have been approved, with a total area covering 8,1% of country's area, including a substantial part of the Polish Carpathians. Besides them, potential areas for protection have been listed (the so called „shadow list”) where protection procedures are also applied. As a result of the legal approval of this area protection form, several big skiing investments in the Silesian Beskids, Żywiec Beskids and Sądecki Beskids have been withheld or limited. In this context, one should indicate the high activity of ecological non-governmental organisations working against the expansion of the ski runs' and ski lifts' system in precious natural areas and their vicinity. A similar situation takes place in the Czech Beskids.

Traditional ski resorts often struggle with many unsolved problems that have been building up over years, which lowers their attractiveness in the eyes of tourists and which threatens the further development of ski tourism. In many cases, these take form of conflicts between land owners and the ski lifts management (Szczyrk, Zakopane-Gubałówka), as well as problems related to environmental restrictions for ski tourism investments, especially conflicts between the investors or local authorities and ecological organisations.

A good illustration of the problems, which ski resorts in the Polish Carpathians must face, is the situation in one of the biggest Polish ski resorts – Szczyrk (Mika, Krzesiwo, Krzesiwo 2007). In this resort, the management of two large skiing centres is responsible for service standards and functioning of the system in the area. Proper preparation and efficient operation of ski lifts belonging to those two entities condition the satisfaction of skiers and tourists and as the result – the income of other tourism facilities such as accommodation and dining facilities. In the recent years, the not regulated property status of skiing areas – the remnant of the past socio-economic system – negatively affects the ski development in Szczyrk. The solution for this social conflict regarding the legal and proprietary status of these areas is sought for by establishing new structures managing ski centres, in which the shareholders will be the owners of ski lifts' and ski runs' areas. No agreement and operational disturbances of these two ski centres make the image of Szczyrk as a ski resort worse; strengthen negative stereotypes in tourists' opinion and cause winter tourism flow moving to different localities – mainly to Korbiewów and Wisła. The image of the city among tourists is also negatively affected by several other controversial issues and spatial and functional conflicts relating skiing, such as:

- general bad conditions of internal and external accessibility for traffic,
- discrepancy between the capacity of ski lift devices and tourism flow rates,
- conflicts between skiers and snowboarders coexisting on the slopes and the issue of safety,
- degradation of natural environment on slopes.

Functional, spatial and organizational problems take different course of events and have different intensity in various tourism resorts. They largely depend on specific local conditions and on the role played by tourism in the functional structure of the resort. But they regard the vast majority of resorts with developed or developing skiing infrastructure in Poland. An important fault is the lacking political agreement regarding the so called mountain law or the so called snow act which could regulate the issues of using the lands for skiing purposes. The last public debate on this topic in Poland was held in 2006.

A serious obstacle and threat for further down-hill skiing development in the Polish Carpathians are changing climate conditions and the resulting instability of snow cover, as well as the lack of suitable slopes (with regard to their inclination and length). Most of investments in the Polish part of the mountain range are located under 1500 metres above the sea level where, in the recent years, problems with the snow cover durability are observed. Detailed climate studies on this subject have not been conducted yet. However, it seems that, considering the widespread use of artificial snowmaking devices on skiing slopes, climatic and orographic conditions for the temperature to stay under 0°C are much more important than the size of snowfall by itself. The instability of the weather and the cost of snowmaking affect the profitability of ski resorts and the level of cost for using skiing facilities by skiers.

CONCLUSION

In the system of European ski resorts, the Polish Carpathian locations will never be able to rival with skiing areas in the Alps and thereby they will have no significant meaning in the reception of international ski tourism. The development of skiing infrastructure in the Polish Carpathians will be still conducted mainly due to the constantly growing demand for this form of tourism on the national market. Therefore it can be assessed, that despite the new resorts growing at a fast rate, the development state of skiing infrastructure in the Carpathians is still unsatisfactory. The competition from Slovak and Czech ski resorts impels the construction of modern facilities and the modernization of old ones, as well as the introduction of innovative solutions such as connecting skiing with health tourism and the commercial use of ski areas during summer season, for example through constructing other sport – and recreation devices attractive for tourists such as summertime bobsled runs, opened year-round, or roller coasters, bicycle routes, motocross routes, view platforms, ropes courses etc. Such precursory establishments have been recently opened in Ustroń (the Silesian Beskids), in Międzybrodzie Bialskie (the Little Beskids), in Kluszkowce (the Gorce Mts.), as well as in the Slovak Kysucke Beskids (on Wielka Racza) and the Czech Silesian-Moravian Beskids (in Mosty k/Jablunkova) (Havrlant 2001, 2007; Mika 2008). They will be surely followed by other ski resorts.

It seems that despite many limitations and barriers, the further development of ski tourism in Poland will be mainly supported by its commercial importance and on a regional scale – its strong connections to other sectors of tourism and local economy as well as the economical and social benefits expected by local authorities. Whereas the situation of unavoidable competition with Slovak and Czech resorts, the result of the European integration, will force the management to conduct further modernization, contribute to an improvement of service quality and intensify the process of service specialization.

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TURYSTYKA NARCIARSKA W POLSKIEJ CZĘŚCI KARPAT – STAN OBECNY I WYBRANE PROBLEMY ROZWOJU

Streszczenie

Jednym z najbardziej dynamicznych zjawisk w polskiej części Karpat jest rozwój turystyki narciarskiej. Stan zagospodarowania dla narciarstwa, pod względem liczby wyciągów, w porównaniu do początku lat 90. XX w. wzrósł prawie trzykrotnie. W końcu 2008 r. obejmował on 557 wyciągów oraz 587 tras zjazdowych, o łącznej długości 370,9 km. Spośród karpaccich regionów turystycznych najlepiej rozwinięta infrastruktura narciarska występuje w regionie zakopiańskim (Tary i Podhale) oraz w Beskidzie Śląskim. Pod tym względem znacząco wzrosła ranga Beskidu Sądeckiego, gdzie od kilkunastu lat prowadzone są duże inwestycje narciarskie.

Wyciągi narciarskie zlokalizowane są w 133 miejscowościach karpaccich (górskich i pogórskich), z których jedynie 37 można przypisać charakter stacji narciarskiej. Stacje te, w zależności od poziomu rozwoju infrastruktury narciarskiej i noclegowej mają różną rangę. Pierwszoplanowe miejsce wśród nich zajmują Zakopane i Szczyrk, które od lat 70. XX w. dysponują najlepszą bazą dla uprawiania narciarstwa.

Oprócz rozwoju ilościowego urządzeń i ośrodków narciarskich następuje także proces ich transformacji funkcjonalnej i zmiany jakościowej. Z ogółu zjawisk przestrzennych, społecznych i gospodarczych związanych z obecnym rozwojem bazy narciarskiej w polskiej części Karpat można wskazać te, które decydują o jego charakterze, zakresie i kierunkach, są to:

- rozbudowa infrastruktury narciarskiej w nowych miejscowościach, bez tradycji narciarskich,
- lokalizacja nowych wyciągów w strefach podmiejskich miast,
- tworzenie nowych wysokiej jakości i modernizacja starych urządzeń do transportu narciarzy po stokach,
- wydłużenie szczytu turystycznego sezonu zimowego w wyniku administracyjnych decyzji o swobodzie wyboru terminu szkolnych ferii zimowych,
- funkcjonowanie części stacji narciarskich w warunkach konkurencji ze strony innych ośrodków krajowych i zagranicznych,
- rozszerzanie oferty ośrodków narciarskich o usługi odnowy biologicznej, m.in. z wykorzystaniem wód geotermalnych,
- upowszechnienie stosowania urządzeń do sztucznego dośnieżania tras narciarskich,
- upatrywanie w rozwoju turystyki narciarskiej czynnika pobudzenia aktywności gospodarczej w miejscowościach górskich borykających się ze skutkami transformacji społeczno-gospodarczej,
- tworzenie nowych ośrodków narciarskich na podstawie wspólnotowych inicjatyw lokalnych.

Tempo rozwoju bazy dla narciarstwa byłoby znacznie szybsze gdyby nie wiele barier o charakterze prawnym, własnościowym, funkcjonalnym i przyrodniczym. Wśród głównych ograniczeń rozwoju tego sektora turystyki w regionie karpaccim można wskazać:

- rozwój sieci obszarów chronionych Natura 2000,

- brak wystarczających środków finansowych w budżetach gmin na inwestycje w narciarstwo i infrastrukturę towarzyszącą,
- sytuacje konfliktowe wokół narciarstwa w dużych stacjach narciarskich,
- brak regulacji prawnych porządkujących relacje między właścicielami gruntów a gestorami urządzeń narciarskich
- niestabilność pokrywy śnieżnej.

Mimo ograniczeń i barier, rozwój bazy dla narciarstwa w Karpatach Polskich będzie nadal zachodził. Decydującą rolę w tym względzie będzie odgrywało komercyjne znaczenie turystyki narciarskiej, zaś w aspekcie regionalnym jej silne powiązania z innymi sektorami turystyki i gospodarki lokalnej oraz oczekiwane przez władze samorządowe korzyści gospodarcze i społeczne. Konkurencja ośrodków słowackich i czeskich, „wymusi” na gestorach dalsze zabiegi modernizacyjne, przyczyni się do podniesienia jakości oferowanych usług i zintensyfikuje proces ich specjalizacji.

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