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#### RURAL AND AGRO TOURISM IN CZECH REPUBLIC

#### Michal Motvcka

(Department of Spa, Gastronomy and Tourism, Faculty of Philosophy and Science, Silesian University in Opava)

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#### **ABSTRACT**

Under the former regime, it was a phenomenon to stay in the countryside during the weekend. People fled from cities to the country, back to nature so they could relax in the fresh air and get away from the bustle of the big city. After the Velvet Revolution in 1989, it was finally possible to travel abroad. Subsequently, the need for cottage getaways or countryside tourism was retreating. However, in recent years, Czechs have increasingly preferred rural accommodation once again, often linked to agro tourism. The main purpose is to learn about the life of farmers, to see traditional crafts, work and customs. Activities in typical rural conditions, such as hiking, offer people from cities a chance to return to a more natural way of life and nature itself. Frequent phenomenon is also the possibility of unpaid work in the production of agricultural products or animal care. Last but not least, visits to wine cellars can be considered as a part of the agro tourism as well. The objective of agro tourism is to maintain and expand cultural and social traditions.

Main target is to find out the current situation and trends in rural accommodation and agro tourism. The research question is what impact does the realization of accommodation activity in the countryside have, whether it is desirable for surroundings or not, and to provide a general definition of rural areas. For these purposes, comparative methods were used, especially for the processing of the theoretical starting points of the studied area, as well as the methods of analysis, sorting or generalization. Statistical methods from the research carried out in 2017 were also used. As a result it has been found that there was recently an extensive and intense increase in the number of rural facilities. In order to provide a necessary response to this increase, the state administration through the Ministry for Regional Development in cooperation with the Association of Rural Tourism and Agro tourism introduced the Official Uniform Classification of Private Accommodation and implemented other categories such as Farm Holidays, Rural Holidays and Rural Experiences.

This rise in the number of facilities is a concern for local citizens because they know it will have effect on their usual habits. On the other hand the positive impacts prevail, especially in the economic, employment and infrastructure area. However, it is necessary to keep in mind that this development should be controlled and regulated with respect to the surroundings and links to our ancestors. It is obligatory to preserve the typical character of our countryside with all its natural beauties and also maintain it for future generations.

Keyword: Accommodation. Agro tourism. Classification. Countryside. Hotel.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Although our inhabitants are increasingly settling in cities, usually for pragmatic reasons, most of them still dream of living in the countryside. Many Czechs fulfilled this dream by purchasing their own cottage or chalet. In addition to cottagers, a second form of rural tourism has recently experienced growth. This includes one-off stays in private homes, boarding houses, farms or small hotels. Hand in hand, this is associated with today's very popular agro tourism. However, what are the impacts of accommodation in the countryside and agro tourism on its surroundings? That is the aim of this article.

## 2. THEORETICAL BASIS

The need to spend the night away from home is almost as old as humanity itself. The first offers of accommodation appeared in Mesopotamia. The development of the hotel industry has always been connected with travel and movement of people. It is good to briefly get a closer look at the importance and history of the hotel industry to the present day.

The word hospitality, according to the Dictionary of the Literary Language of the Czech Academy of Sciences from 1971, defines the organization and activities of hotels. The term is derived from the word hotel, which we can define in several ways. Firstly, it expresses a company providing temporary accommodation to people staying away from home that also usually offers meals and refreshments. Secondly, the meaning of the word hotel can be connected with the aristocratic palace of the duke, cardinal or town hall. The Czech word derived from the French hôtel and from the Latin word hospit, also means a person providing hospitality or shelter to someone.

The words hotel and hotel industry can be described as meaningful not only in the Czech language, but also in other languages where they have the same or similar meaning. The words Gasthaus or Herberg have been known since the Middle Ages, and the term Inn is still used in English to describe a hotel establishment. In the Czech lands, a hotel was referred to as Formanka. The word hotel was not adopted by Europeans until the early 19th century. "Even throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, the accommodation standard improved slowly. Although travel began to occupy an important place in the nascent cosmopolitan society, coaching and accommodation inns remained low, essentially, at a medieval level. It was not until the beginning of the 19th century, in connection with the construction of the foundations of the road network and the introduction of regular postal and stagecoach lines that conditions improved, at least in large cities."

Even so, the capacity of establishments at that time allowed providing accommodation for only for a few dozen passengers. It was not until around the middle of the 19th century that large cities and spas were slowly giving birth to the type of hotel we know today with a separate dining room. Until then, the kitchen was connected to a tavern, guests sat at one table and the same meal was served to all. Only the washrooms were separate. In the countryside the guests were still washing by the well. "The needs for social contact and entertainment, enough money and the desire for knowledge have given rise to entirely new properties, such as cafes, patisseries, bars, wine bars, games rooms, restaurants, specialty canteens, supermarkets and cruise restaurants."

The emergence of the classic type of hotel was caused by the dynamically developing railway

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transport, which accelerated travel up to ten times and thus allowed people to stay even several days away from home. In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century accommodation related travel remained privilege of merchants and wealthy classes on the European continent.

The situation was completely different in the United States. Crowds of immigrants flocked there and often needed to stay for longer periods. That is why huge buildings with several hundred rooms began to be built in the large cities on the east and west coast, very often equipped with restaurants, hairdressers, tailors and other services. Companies that owned several hotels at once were established, so the first signs of a hotel network emerged. Guest houses, restaurant or sleeping cars started to gain popularity too. In Europe, on the other hand, developments have taken a different direction. Large hotels were generally not built until the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, except for those built near railway stations in city centres. Emphasis also began to be placed on hygiene. Observance was supervised by the municipal and trade licensing authorities. The operation of the accommodation facility at that time was a licensed trade, the holders of which were the only persons with moral and professional competence. Requirements for staff and their capability appear in the Official Journals. The composition of the drinks was also a subject to approval.

Hotels were divided into three classes and since 1900 have become the centre of social life. The architectural design of the hotels of this time was similar to the Art Nouveau railway station or baroque palace buildings. Gastronomy is gaining more and more importance, especially delivery and service of meals to guests directly in the room. The kitchens employ renowned chefs. Also in 1900, the French Michelin Guide was published for the first time, assessing the level of hotel services and assigning stars to individual accommodation. After the First World War, the Guide started publishing regularly, and thanks to that hoteliers strived for a better performance. Many national guides have continued its tradition. After the Second World War, hundreds of millions of people travel mainly for business, exploration purposes or they are part of congress tourism. The numbers of arrivals and departures are growing and of course, revenues from tourism are growing also.

There are many tourism and hotel organizations that want to defend the rights of their members. In the Czech Republic there are for example the Association of Hotels and Restaurants, the Association of Travel Agencies or the Confederation of Trade and Tourism of the Czech Republic and last but not least the Ministry of Regional Development and the CzechTourism Agency. By the end of the 20th century hotels are not just the prerogative of city centres, they are built in the mountains, on the sea coast, in the countryside or near some natural, cultural or historical attractions.

## **Definition of rural areas**

Nowadays, there are mainly 2 ways of delimitation used to define the rural area:

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<u>Size category of the municipality</u> (number of permanent residents) - the most common limit is 2,000 or 3,000 inhabitants.

<u>Population density</u> (or number of inhabitants per built-up area) - usually 100 or 150 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup>.

However, density indicators have their limitations due to the fact that they are influenced by the size of the municipality and the population living temporarily in the given cadastre (commuting or departing) is not taken into account. On the one hand, they are greatly influenced by the size of the cadastre of the municipality, but on the other hand, they do not take into account the temporary resident population and commuting.

Other ways of defining the countryside - the nature of settlements, land use, amenities of municipalities, polarization of space according to the degree of involvement in the national economy (according to the European Commission), rurality index and more.

The cultural and social features of the countryside, i.e. the character of the seat, are defined by human resources and the qualitative aspect of the environment. Thus, the possibilities of landscape maintenance and its overall use are significantly dependent on the nature of the settlement and the natural character of the landscape.

Another possible approach is the negative definition of the countryside as a non-urbanized landscape, as opposed to the city (in the sense that the countryside is not what a city is). However, the borderline degree of urbanization will remain a problem.

There are basically two ways to choose from when assessing the impact of public policies and activities of different actors on rural areas. The first option is to work with a more comprehensive definition of the countryside. In the second case (for existing various "rural areas" more suitable and effective) we can decompose the solved rural area into its individual features and values, work with them relatively independently and propose the resulting solution steps as a synergistic mix of tools related to individual features. It is necessary to take into account the risk of a situation where individual values and tools may not be compatible.

#### 3.2 Agro tourism

Agro tourism follows the tradition of the 1950s when working intelligence travelled (sometimes voluntarily) to help harvest crops or mine coal, and of the 1970s and 1980s when students travelled to harvest hops and learn about agriculture. An extreme example of agro tourism is China, where students devastated cities due to the left-wing extremism left these cities voluntarily or compulsorily to help backward agriculture as part of a cultural revolution. The foundations of agro tourism were laid by a change in human thinking in the 17th century, especially in Romanticism and the Romanticization of the countryside.

It is generally a form of rural tourism run by a private farmer. In the beginning, it is usually a secondary source of income, but if it is well accepted, it can become a major activity. This is tourism in typical rural conditions, where people from cities usually return in their free time to a more natural way of life and nature. The main purpose is to get to know the life of farmers, to see traditional crafts, work and customs. The possibility of unpaid work in the production of agricultural products or animal care is also a frequent phenomenon. The purpose is also to

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maintain and disseminate cultural and social traditions. Last but not least, a visit to wine cellars, a tour of vineyards associated with the explanation of the process of wine production and also its consumption can be considered as agro tourism.

Even though it is a meritorious activity with the aim of getting to know the way of life in the countryside, taking a break from the hustle and bustle of the city, getting to know the traditions and cultural heritage of our ancestors, it must be remembered that this activity has a significant impact to surroundings. Therefore, the following chapters offer an overview of the impacts of agro tourism and accommodation in the countryside on their immediate surroundings, as well as of the current state with the possibility of regulating the agro tourism in individual segments.

## 3. DATA AND METHODS

The aim is to find out the current situation and trends in rural accommodation and agro tourism in Czech Republic. The research question is what impacts the implementation of accommodation activities in the countryside have, and whether it is desirable for its surroundings or not.

Sub-objectives include:

- > elaboration of theoretical background within the field of hospitality;
- > options for the definition of rural areas;

## 3.1 Methodology

Research methods were used to prepare this article. An important phase of the theoretical research was data collection. Data (sources) are based on micro and macro systems and in their collection it is necessary to take into account various partial factors related to dynamics over time and work with soft data. Data acquisition is not just a mechanical activity - it is obligatory to understand and process it. Any methodological error leads to mistakes in terms of the processes that are hidden behind them.

Data to support the theoretical part were obtained using the following methods of comparison and the method of analogy. The method of analogy was followed in the work by the method of classification for further specification of the researched issues and division of objects and phenomena into groups.

Other used methods were method of analysis, method of synthesis, comparison and generalization. Statistical methods were also used in the research conducted in 2017.

# 4. CLASSIFICATION OF PRIVATE ACCOMMODATION AND IMPACTS ON THE ENVIRONMENT

It is quite clear that any human activity always has a certain influence and the associated direct or indirect impact on its surroundings. These impacts can be both positive and negative and can have different impact areas depending on the way and level of activity. The same is true for accommodation in the countryside and agro tourism.

## 4.1 Direct and indirect effects of rural tourism on the surroundings

#### Economic impacts

The initial idea of the implementation of private accommodation and agro tourism is to introduce

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the people of the city to the beauty of our countryside, farming methods, traditions and cultural heritage. However, in general, the capital purpose is the same, which defines microeconomics. Head business is to make a profit and of course grow the market value of the company. The realization of agro tourism and accommodation in the countryside has a fundamentally positive effect in the economic field. The main thing is doing business in a given location. For the municipal treasury, this benefits the local taxes (for example, from real estate or real estate transfer); local fees (bed nights, air fee, etc.). If the company has its registered office in the given municipality, there are also significant revenues from corporate taxes. Another positive is that the building can be saved, which would otherwise have collapsed under other circumstances. Often, existing owners do not have the money to maintain farms and the sale not only saves and improves the building, but also provides income for the seller, who can realize further visions or start a business in another area. If the given business plan is successful, it results in further expansion of the capacity of accommodation and additional services. Logically, this can then lead to further extensive and intensive expansion of animal and plant production. It is ideal to buy the increase and crop production from other local small farmers or locals. Last but not least, there is the fact that these projects are often financed from various subsidies and EU structural funds. This can be a guarantee that it will not be a short-lived project.

## <u>Infrastructure</u>

Hand in hand with the development of any business, the establishment of a new business is connected with infrastructure. As a rule, this should be the first thing that will allow the business to be created and further developed. First we will build transport infrastructure, energy security and then we can address potential investors, entrepreneurs with the fact that they have ideal conditions for the implementation of their plans. Unfortunately, in the Czech Republic it is usually the opposite, the company will be settled first, and then build and then we will catch up with investments in infrastructure with a delay so that the business can continue to develop. But even so, it still represents further development. Therefore, the construction, reconstruction or improvement of any infrastructure has a positive impact on the implementation of business in rural areas. Sooner or later, a new path will be built, new ones will be established or existing sidewalks will be revitalized or widened to the reconstructed farmhouse, boarding house, and farmhouse. There will be a need to build public lighting, sewerage and a connect wastewater treatment plant, etc. Which are certainly issues that will make your stay in the countryside more pleasant. Thanks to this development, it is also easier to obtain various finances through grant titles. On the other hand, like reconstruction or construction, it also has its negative effects. For certain time quiet of the village will be disrupted by construction. The same applies to the construction of sidewalks or sewers. These are investment units that can take several years. Therefore, it is necessary to communicate well with the local population and design everything so as to preserve the integrity of the village, its characteristic features, atmosphere and respect the countryside with the surrounding area.

## **Employment**

The biggest positive, which is also related to the above mentioned economic impact, is the increase in employment in the immediate surroundings of accommodation capacity. And of course already during its construction. It is desirable for the builder or investor to use mainly the

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local workforce. It is usually more affordable and local people can more easily accept the new construction and domestication of newcomers. They live better with the project. In the course of providing services, whether within the framework of mere accommodation, or even agro tourism and farming, the involvement of local citizens and persons from the surrounding area is an ideal solution for implementation. These people are also more grateful as unemployment in rural areas is usually higher than in cities, therefore, they value work more. They also undoubtedly have a very good knowledge of their surroundings, which is a great benefit for clients and operators. Thanks to this, the operator can also save on related costs, i. e. for travel or personal accommodation. Creating any job opportunities in rural areas is certainly a welcomed step for local citizens and thus a clear positive impact.

## Social impacts

Last but not least, it is necessary to mention social influences. The countryside and small agglomerations are known for the fact that, although there are friendly and kind people, they often form a closed community and take quite a bit of time before newcomers can accept them. Within human interaction, it is possible to perceive a positive impact related to the realization of rural and agro tourism in the possibility of the supply of new information and knowledge. Locals usually understand positively the economic reasons described above and the creation of new jobs. The benefit is also the implementation of new technologies, new infrastructure or the expansion of the range of services, for example, building a small restaurant in a country guesthouse or a hotel. On the other hand, people from the countryside are resisting new things. It is something that disrupts their established life standards and daily cycles. They are fully aware that sooner or later the movement of visitors will increase and their peaceful order will be disrupted. In particular, group and organized tourist tours often do not keep quiet at night, they are noisy and unruly. Especially in wine-growing areas, where in a formerly quiet wine village, wine tastings are held every weekend, visitors consume alcoholic beverages and cause disturbances in a subdued state. The citizens of the given locality are fully aware of all these factors and that is why their initial reactions, on the positive impacts in other areas, are restrained or even negative. Therefore, one of the most important steps in the business plan of accommodation in the countryside is to convince not only the municipality of given village but especially the citizens about the benefits and good intentions.

For the above reasons, the representatives of the municipal and regional management in cooperation with the local population should approach all projects very gently and cautiously. This does not mean creating unnecessary administrative obstructions, but respecting the nature of the landscape, surrounding buildings and the cadastre, also focusing on intensive growth with an emphasis on business intent and the quality of planned services provided. However, this does not end with the implementation of the business plan. Subsequent cooperation with the operator, mutual interaction and communication, which should lead to the satisfaction of both parties, is essential.

## 4.2 Classification and current state in the Czech Republic

Every sector, area or activity that is growing in importance and becoming more and more popular needs to always be positively influenced and regulated by their excessive and

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uncontrolled expansion. And precisely due to the growing popularity of agro tourism and the possibility of tourism in rural areas, the Ministry of Agriculture came to the conclusion that it is necessary to classify and categorize this area for reasons of protection not only operators themselves, but especially consumers.

The Ministry of Agriculture has established very close cooperation with the Association of Rural Tourism

and agro tourism and in cooperation with other organizations created the foundations for improving the quality of services and the perception of rural tourism and agro tourism in our country.

Based on this cooperation, the implementation of the standard of private accommodation was created. This standard is valid from 18 January 2017 and is the Official Standard Classification of Private Accommodation.



**Picture 1.** Private accommodation (Svazvta.cz, 2018)

This classification, as well as the standardized classification of hotels, serves as a nomenclature for the classification of private accommodation into individual classes according to the minimum set requirements. This is in order to improve the protection of consumers and guests but also travel agencies. The aim is also to increase transparency in the accommodation market and to improve the quality of private accommodation services.

Within this classification, private accommodation is specified as temporary short-term tourist accommodation in a minimum of 1 and a maximum of 4 accommodation units (rooms, apartments, studios) in a family house, apartment building or building for family recreation and temporary short-term tourist accommodation in a building for family recreation. The subjects of the classification, within private accommodation, are the following categories: guest room, guest apartment, recreational facility, small guest houses. One to four stars may be awarded in each category. Granting and renewal of certificates and classification marks is performed for its members and non-members by the Association of Rural Tourism and Agro tourism, z.s.. The validity of the granted certificate is 3 years.

Another activity is the introduction of new brands within the Categorization of agro tourism and rural tourism facilities in the Czech Republic:

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- Farm holidays
- Holidays in the countryside
- Rural experiences



**Picture 2.** Categorization of agro tourism facilities (Svazvta.cz, 2018)

The reason for the implementation of these brands is the extension of the Official Classification of Private Accommodation based on the nature of the accompanying services and to guarantee the scope and quality of services provided in the field of rural and agro tourism. Like the classic categorization of hotels, this one is not binding for facility operators. It is purely up to his individual decision whether or not he is interested in undergoing certification process. However, there is a difference compared to the classic hotel segment. Within the categorization of agro tourism and rural tourism facilities in the Czech Republic, classes indicating lower or higher quality of services are not awarded. The business either meets or does not meet the conditions of the individual categories. It simply gets the certificate or not.

## Current status

Agro tourism and accommodation in the countryside began to develop in our country following the example of the surrounding countries, especially according to Austria after the Velvet Revolution. Lot of self-employed people decided to farm privately in the agricultural segment. Many of them knew that the connection with accommodation and tourism could be an interesting source of income. Most of them did not have business experience, defined vision and mission of their company or the intention of their business. Therefore, they invested their funds in technologies for farming and agriculture. Unfortunately, they already lacked the funds for the subsequent implementation of the client sector, construction of accommodation. The boom came after 2004, when agro tourism was still in its infancy in terms of numbers, thanks to the Czech Republic's accession to the EU. Nowadays more and more people prefer accommodation in rural tourism. Domestic clients in particular are rediscovering the natural beauties of the Czech Republic. And thanks to changing accommodation preferences, impact is even more positive.

The number of people who are currently looking for this type of holiday is not exactly recorded in the statistics. It is possible to obtain some data from the Association of Rural Tourism, which today registers over 150 entrepreneurs in rural tourism. In their opinion, today we get to the number of about 800 thousands overnight stays, which generated over 350 thousands visitors

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both domestically and abroad. The majority of foreigners are mainly clients from the Netherlands, Germany, Austria and Belgium. The most popular region is South Bohemia.

The times when visitors set out into various remote places in our countryside with their self prepared food are certainly in rapid decline. It still has its charm but clients increasingly prefer stays with catered meals. Customers are also more often looking for better quality services in agro tourism and accommodation in the country and are willing to pay well for them. This should lead to further development and improvement of rural accommodation services. At the same time it must be kept in mind that it is necessary to maintain, even within the framework of constantly improving services, the overall vision of the accommodation in the countryside, cultural heritage and respect for nature and the environment.

## 5. DISCUSSION

As mentioned in the introduction, rural tourism has been developing again in our country since the 1990s. Although it has been almost 30 years, the potential offered by this area has certainly not been fully realized. Experts and specialists who work in this field and have been dealing with this issue for a long time point out the reasons that stand in the way of the development of rural tourism. There are mainly the following problems. In the field of tourism, including accommodation in the countryside, in private or agro tourism, there is a lack of uniform terminology and established concepts. On the other hand, providers of these services are overwhelmed by the amount of confusing legislation. According to the Association of Rural Tourism and Agro tourism: "Rural tourism is not yet statistically supported at the national or regional level." For this reason, there is a lack of data for the evaluation of trends and the effectiveness of invested funds. The randomness of marketing and educational activities in the field of rural tourism is only a consequence of the above. The causes and consequences of this situation form a seemingly endless and confusing entanglement, which negatively affects all involved. "For this reason, the Association of Rural Tourism and Agro tourism is the initiator of the Rural Tourism Development Strategy in the Czech Republic. At the same moment it has for a long time represented service providers in agro tourism and intensively develops cooperation between organizations and institutions in this segment.

Despite these shortcomings, it is possible to observe an extensive but also an intensive increase in facilities providing accommodation in the countryside or engaged in agro tourism. Logically, this is also related to the increase in the number of clients. This growth correlates with the general progress of domestic tourism.

Accommodation in the countryside and agro tourism is experiencing a real expansion today. However, for this reason, it is no longer easy for the client to decide in the short term and secure accommodation in these facilities. The so-called "booking window" has become significantly longer in domestic tourism, especially during the high season. From the original session between 14-30 days, today we are talking about 90-120 days according to the attractiveness of the device. Of course, this situation is not completely comfortable from the client's point of view, but abroad it is usual to plan family trips, weekends or holidays long time in advance. It is just a matter of changing and adapting consumer behavior. However, it definitely has a positive influence on operators, as they can better plan financial flows, various renovations and technical upgrades of their facilities. Last but not least, it of course has a positive impact on the national economy.

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## 6. CONCLUSION

The need to relax in the countryside, close to nature, has always been here. With the difference, that in the past this need was realized through tramping, private accommodation or camping. With today's hectic times and constant pressure for performance, this need is even greater. However, today's clients are not very satisfied with ordinary and simple accommodation, especially with a tent. They still have a desire to escape from the gray reality of the city, experience farm life, get to know cultural heritage and traditions, but their idea of implementing this tourism lies in accommodation in picturesque, traditional and regional farms, homesteads, small hotels or guesthouses that are clean and offer comfortable accommodation with a wide range of other additional services. The examples include traditional crafts, local gastronomy and agricultural production, horseback riding, fishing, or learning about winemaking. Operators reflect this, which is why there has been an expansion of accommodation options in the countryside and an increase in the number of eco-farms. The Ministry of Regional Development, together with the Association of Rural Tourism and Agro tourism, responded to this by creating a classification for these accommodations in order to protect consumers and honest entrepreneurs in the area. Citizens in the localities are concerned about this increase in the number of facilities in rural areas. They know that this activity will lead to some extent disrupt their established habits, but on the other hand, the positive effects prevail. Especially in the economic field, employment and also in the field of infrastructure. However, it is necessary to keep in mind that this development is controlled and regulated with respect to the environment and the legacies of our ancestors. It is essential to preserve the typical character of our countryside with its natural beauty for future generations.

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