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## THE VISTULA RIVER AS ONE OF POLAND'S SYMBOLS AND ITS PERCEPTION BY HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS FROM VISTULA TOWNS

**Abstract:** This paper presents the perception of the Vistula river, the most important of Poland's rivers, by high-school students from selected Vistula towns and cities. The study of the perception of this river, conducted in 2006-2007, concerned, among other things, the symbolism of the Vistula, its role in nature and landscape of Poland, as well as the course of the river flowing through Poland. It was ascertained that most students perceive the Vistula as a symbol of Poland or the longest river in Poland, but they do not notice, for instance, its ecological role, although they are aware of its role in the landscape of Poland. The results of the study determine the direction and the topics of the geographic education concerning the Vistula river in Polish schools.

**Key words:** the Vistula river; Poland's landscapes; Poland's symbols; perception; geographical education

### INTRODUCTION

The Vistula river is the longest river in Poland. It flows out of the mountainside of the Barania Góra in the Beskid Śląski Mountains, in the south of Poland, and flows into the Baltic Sea (into the Gdańsk Bay) in the north of Poland. Its average flow is ca.  $1000 \text{ m}^3\text{s}^{-1}$ . The river is 1068 km long, from the sources to the outlet; it flows through the territory of Poland only; the surface of its catchments area is ca. 170 000  $\text{km}^2$ , which constitutes about 55% of the surface area of Poland.

It flows through several geographical regions (mountains, uplands and lowlands) and through many cities, including the old capital of the country (Cracow) and the current capital (Warsaw). Its valley is a natural corridor. For many people, the Vistula river is regarded as one of the last wild rivers of Europe, while for others it is an example of a river ran wild due to lack of funds for its comprehensive management. It is also a specific characteristic sign on the physical map of Europe, thanks to which it is easy to find Poland on the map. Polish students associate it with the “letter S on the map of Poland”. We sing of the Vistula in our national anthem and in many songs.

Of interest is the question: How do students perceive the Vistula river? What does it mean for them? What do they associate it with? Does it exist in their “minds and hearts”? Does the Vistula river still remain a symbol of Poland for the young generation, as it did for their ancestors? Do they see their various roles, including the natural role and its role in the landscape?

#### VISTULA RESEARCH – PROBLEMS, LOCATIONS OF RESEARCH, RESEARCH METHODS AND TOOLS

To answer these questions, in the years 2006–2007 the author conducted a study in senior high schools, located in selected Vistula river cities and towns. These were, counting with the river flow: Cracow (757 000 inhabitants in 2005), Kazimierz Dolny (3 500), Warsaw (1 700 000), Włocławek (120 000), Solec Kujawski (5 000), and Tczew (61 000). Each of these towns has certain characteristic features, also with respect to the Vistula river:

- Cracow – the town of the kings, with Castle of Polish kings, Wawel, located on a hill and reflected in the river;
- Kazimierz Dolny – in the past an important river harbour with still extant granaries on the river banks, nowadays an artist and tourist town;
- Warsaw – the capital where until recently (1960s) the inhabitants used the beaches, bathing in and boating on the river; nowadays a city “with its back turned to the river”;
- Włocławek – an industrial town, with the largest reservoir on the Vistula river and a dam built in 1970; since the 16th century an important harbour;

- Solec Kujawski – whose name goes back to the 16th century and comes from the transport of salt along the river;
- Tczew – with an old truss bridge and the Vistula Museum.

The study was conducted in 2006–2007 among 17-year-old high-school students, as part of a larger-scale project. The students wrote a few sentences on the topic “The Vistula river and your life” and then, if they observed a connection, they explained its nature. If no such connection was observed, the students gave the reason of this.

A diagnostic survey was the principal part of the research. In the questionnaire there were closed, half-open and open questions, such as: What does Vistula mean for the Poles?, What does it mean for the students of the high school in Vistula cities?, What role does it play in the landscape of Poland (in their opinion)?, Is it important from the ecological point of view? The semantic differential was also used, in order to discover the extent to which the assessments of the Vistula river, from the landscape point of view, vary.

## RESULTS

What does the Vistula river mean for the Poles? This was an open question. For the students from four Vistula cities: Cracow, Warsaw, Włocławek and Tczew, the Vistula river is the main symbol of the country, it is related to the history of Poland, they are proud of it. This was the opinion of more than half of students from Warsaw, almost half of students from Cracow, over 40% from Włocławek and almost the same percentage from Tczew. Students from Kazimierz Dolny and Solec Kujawski are of the opinion that for the Poles, the river is, above all, the longest river in Poland, and the “queen” of the rivers of Poland. This answer was given by ca. 18-25% of students from those towns. It is worth noting that over 40% of students from Solec Kujawski and almost as many from Kazimierz Dolny have no opinion on this topic.

To see the variety of the opinions presented, it is interesting to compare the responses from the category of “other responses”. Thus the Vistula river is, for example: the river that divides our country, the frontier between eastern and western Poland, the river that connects the Poles, a bond, the geographic axis of the country, the “business card” of Poland, its legend and its pride, recollection of Poland’s past glory,

natural and cultural good, something exceptional, a characteristic sign, an unexploited heritage, the hometown river, a tradition, a hydrological resource, a flood problem, a source of pollution of the Baltic Sea.

What does the Vistula river mean for students from the Vistula town schools? The participating students had to complete the following sentence: "The Vistula river, flowing through Poland, is ...". The completed sentences regarded either the features of the river itself, or the students' personal attitude to it. The results of the study are presented in Fig. 1. They are quite surprising as regards the students from Kazimierz Dolny: ca. 40% of them don't know what the river means to them, and are unable to define its characteristic (20% of students from this town have never seen the river outside their hometown). Those who have seen it outside their hometown, usually saw it either nearby or in Warsaw or Cracow. It is also interesting that ca. 20% of students from Cracow also responded "don't know" to this question, which testifies to their lack of knowledge or else to the inability to precisely define any description of the "global" perception of the river. In this case, the percentage of no responses or the "don't know" responses is similar to the percentage of the responses regarding the attitude of the Poles to the Vistula river.

For the largest group of students from Warsaw and Włocławek (over 35%) and Tczew (over 20%), the Vistula river is a symbol of Poland, a witness to our country's history, and our pride. This is, however, not a large percentage. It is also surprising that for students from Cracow, the Vistula is mainly an "ordinary river" (this does not regard the section of the river flowing through Cracow, but the Vistula as an "all-Polish" river).

Since the question from the questionnaire didn't give the students the opportunity to expand on the Vistula topic, they were asked for a brief description of their connections between the river and their lives.

The sample response quoted below show that the Vistula is perceived as a symbol of Poland, Poland's history and Poland's nature. One can also see that some students are worried about the conditions of the river: their cleanness and the lack of the proper management of its banks.

*Linked to the Vistula river and to its landscape are: my childhood, summer vacation at my grandparents; also hiking through the mountains and my observations of this beautiful river; the landscape, changing together with the seasons, plants, insects – the whole beauty. I can't imagine Poland without the Vistula (Tczew).*

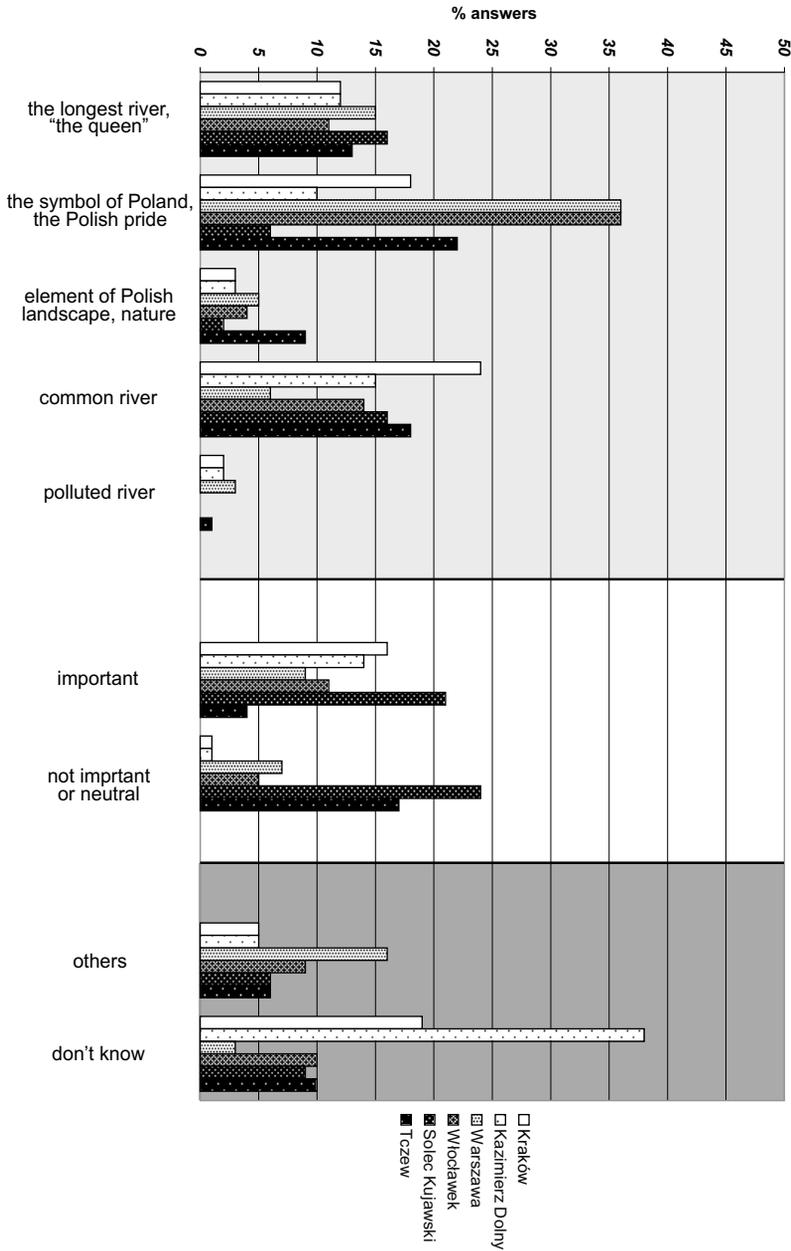


Fig. 1. What does the Vistula river mean for high school's students from the Vistula towns?

*It's hard to tell what influence the Vistula has on my life. Actually, it's only a river on the banks of which I go for walk. It does have, however, a symbolic value – for us, Poles, it is associated with the Fatherland (Tczew).*

*I often walk along the river. The history of our nation is linked with it. In the past, it was an important trade route, and now? It flows, but there is a sort of void here; no life can be seen here (Solec Kujawski).*

*The Vistula exists in my life. It is an excellent place for getting together with friends. We like being on its banks a lot. Moreover, it flows through our country and is our pride (Kazimierz Dolny).*

*For me, the Vistula is the symbol of Poland – it is a blue band on the map, which I always associate with our country (Warsaw).*

*I associate it with my Fatherland, it is its symbol, but I have no everyday contact with it (Cracow).*

What is the role of the Vistula river in Poland's landscape? When the students were asked to describe what the Vistula river means for the Poles, rarely did they associate it with an important element or even a symbol of Poland's landscape (the largest group of such responses, ca. 10%, was among the students from Tczew). When they were asked to directly define the role of the Vistula in Poland's landscape, their responses were different. The largest number of students from Solec Kujawski, Włocławek, Cracow and Warsaw estimated its role as fairly important. The statement that its role in the landscape is neutral dominated among the students from Kazimierz Dolny, which is puzzling, because the Vistula, as a river flowing through their town and its environs, is a tourist attraction. In all the responses, however, there are more positive than negative assessments.

Is the Vistula river important from the ecological point of view? Much is being said about the natural value of the Vistula river, and the middle section of the river (hydrologically speaking, the section from the confluence of the San river to the confluence of the Narew river) is regarded as a phenomenon on European scale. The Vistula river valley, with ... constitutes a bird sanctuary (NATURA 2000). Do the students see this value of the Vistula? The question was: Is the Vistula river important from the ecological point of view? The largest number of affirmative answers came from the students from Włocławek (60%). This can be explained by the opportunity to watch numerous birds living around the Włocławek Reservoir. Over 70% of students from Solec Kujawski and over 50% of those from Cracow,

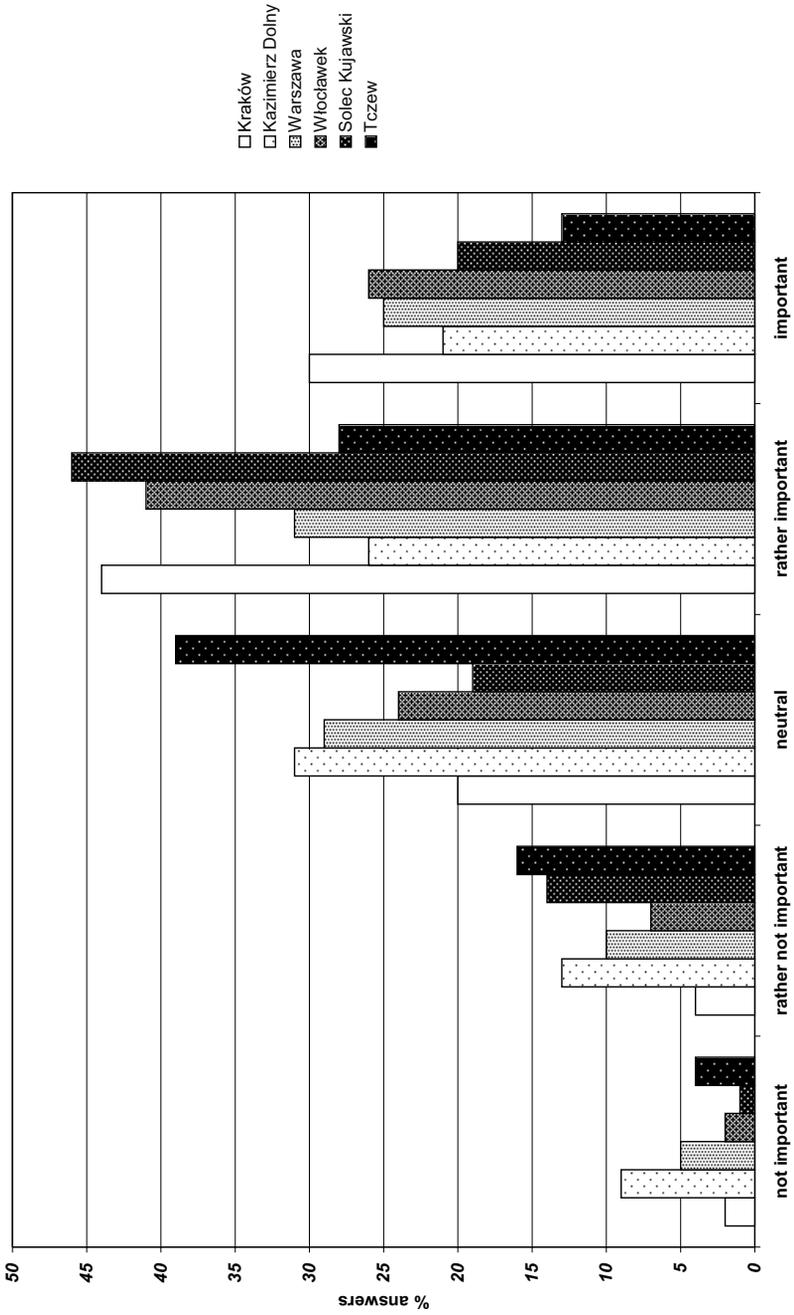


Fig. 2. The role of Vistula river in Poland's landscape for high school's students from Vistula towns

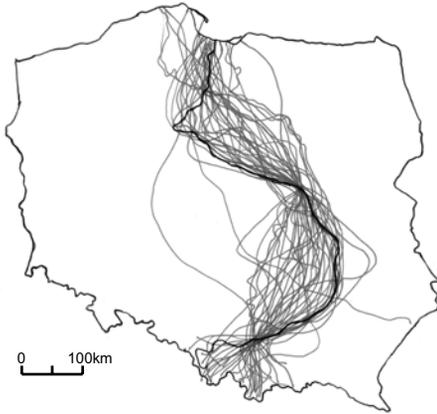
Kazimierz Dolny and Tczew knows nothings on this topic! This indicates large lacunae in ecological education of young people, including the knowledge of the NATURA 2000 regions.

The course of the Vistula on the map of Poland. Some students perceived the Vistula river as a characteristic line on the map of Poland, the sign "S" on the map, and so on. It was decided to test to what degree this sign and symbol is drawn correctly by the students on the map. Students were given photocopies with selected large cities and borders of administrative district marked on them. They were asked to draw the Vistula river on the administrative map of Poland (scale 1:4 500 000).

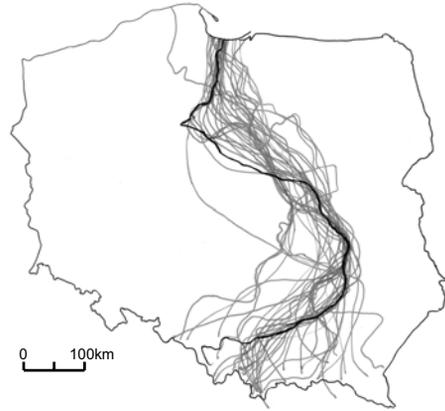
The results of students' work are presented on Fig. 3, with the students' drawings (grey lines) overlaying the actual course of the river (black line). The smallest deviations were observed in the work of the students from Warsaw, while the largest, in that of the students from Solec Kujawski. In general, the correct line was drawn only for about 20-30 km of the river section in the vicinity of the students' hometown. Even in this case, we encounter deviations of ca. 100 km. Only 32% of students from this town drew the Vistula as flowing through Warsaw and 49%, as flowing through Cracow. About 17% of students correctly localized the sources of the Vistula. Some students localized the sources in Bieszczady Mts. (which are ca. 200 km away from the Vistula sources), others in Tatra Mts. (Poland's highest mountains). Somewhat better results (except for isolated examples) were obtained by students from Tczew, Warsaw and Cracow.

In the case of the middle section of the Vistula, the shift is as large as over 200 km to the west. As regards the correct localization of the Vistula river mouth, the best results were obtained by students from Warsaw (64% of them gave correct answers), and, next, by those from Tczew. As early as in primary school, students should know that the course of the Vistula river resembles the letter „S” and that this is the „characteristic sign” of the river. For about 30% of students from Solec Kujawski this association „doesn't work”. Over half of the students in the schools under investigations don't know that Włocławek is located on the banks of the Vistula. About 90% of students from Cracow drew the Vistula as flowing through Cracow, and about 95% of students from Warsaw as flowing through Warsaw. The question arises: do the remaining students not know that the river flows through their cities, or are they unable to localize their cities on the map and

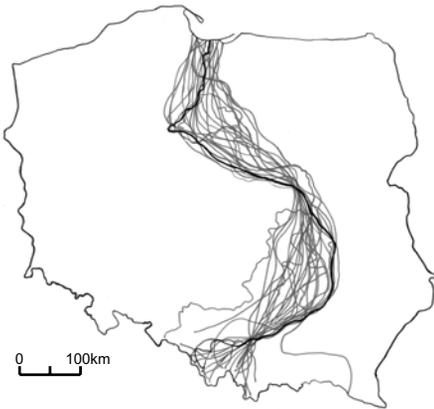
therefore they draw the river flowing, for instance, through the name of city as written on the map? To what extent is the students' lack of knowledge vs. their sloppiness to blame? Around 30% of the students from Cracow did not draw the Vistula flowing through the Poland's capital; in Kazimierz Dolny, there were ca. 50% of such students and in Solec Kujawski, 78%.



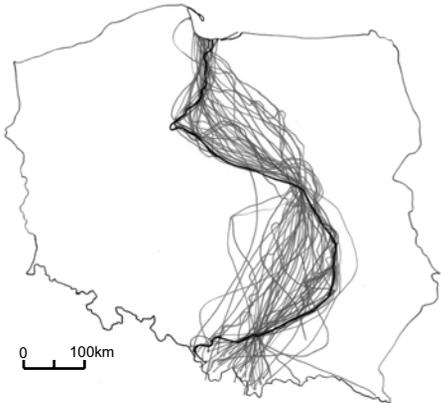
for students from Kraków



for students from Kazimierz Dolny



for students from Warsaw



for students from Tczew

Fig. 3. The course of the Vistula river on the map of Poland

## GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

For the largest group of students, the Vistula river is the symbol of Poland, the witness to its history and the 'queen of Poland's rivers'. In general, the students know best the course of the river in their hometown and in its vicinity. The farther from their hometown, the more often the river's localization is wrong. The vast majority of all the students questioned (from 80% in Warsaw to 97% in Kazimierz Dolny) are unable to correctly draw the Vistula's sources on the map of Poland; many of them think that the longest river in Poland has sources in the highest Polish mountains. In general, students are unaware of the ecological importance of the Vistula river.

## SUMMARY AND EDUCATIONAL CONCLUSIONS

The Vistula river is not only one of Poland's rivers, but is also a river of particular importance for Poland and the Poles. High-school students should know more about it than that it is the longest river in Poland or the „queen of Polish rivers”, since the Vistula is one of the symbols of Poland. High-school geography teachers assume that the students have acquired the basic knowledge about the Vistula river in their home, primary school or junior high school. The results of the study show that this assumption is incorrect. For instance, over half of the students participating in the study don't know that the Vistula is of great ecological importance. The students have also serious problems with correct drawing of the river's course on the map of Poland. These are, thus, topics and tasks which have to be tackled on geography lessons; it is best if this happens at the earliest stages of school education.

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## GEOGRAPHICAL PATHS AS AN AUXILIARY DIDACTIC RESOURCE – A STUDY PROPOSAL

**Abstract:** Didactic paths play a very important part in modern education, on the primary school level as well as at universities. Beside other things, they let students compare book knowledge with the real world. Unfortunately, there are only a few geographical didactic paths, as opposed to those in history or science.

The new offer for preparing methodological geographical paths begins with an analysis of documents as a curriculum model or a syllabus with chosen items to be taught which can be discussed during outdoor lessons and finally examines the area which fulfils a large number of requirements.

It is possible that in this way of preparing methodological geographical paths the boring, monotonous area will give many possibilities to discuss teaching items.

**Key words:** didactic paths, curriculum model, program basis, teaching syllabus, teaching content.

Objective didactic paths perform an essential part in present education. No wonder they are a didactic resource considered by teachers to be indispensable in the teaching process. Classes conducted in terrain make it possible for pupils to confront textbook knowledge with reality and they motivate them to attentive observation of the surrounding scenery and acquiring certain practical skills, such as taking measurements or readings. Outside the classroom, the teacher has the possibility of steering the observations made by pupils, that is planned and conscious perception of objects, phenomena and processes set in the surrounding scenery as well as helping in inter-