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A Conference on Country Tourism in Latvia

March 11, 2009, Maritime Hotel, Slokas Street 1, Rīga

Minutes

251 people attended the conference.

The conference was opened by the parliamentary secretary of the Latvian Environmental Ministry, Mārtiņš Jirgens:

- The operating declaration of the new government emphasises tourism – facilitating the development of tourism, increasing the number of tourists, and simplifying the guest declaration system in Latvia;
- The crisis is a good time to get rid of excessive elements in the fields of tourism and the environment. The ministry will no longer deal with issues that are not of essential importance, and there are plans to reorganise those institutions which deal with environmental protection;
- The priority is to preserve ERDF funding for Natura 2000 territories, but not all sectoral ministries understand how important these issues are, asking that the money be spent for other purposes. This conference should make clear the importance of Natura 2000.

European Parliament member Aldis Kušķis (EPP-ED)

The presentation “European Traveller Without European Renovations”

Question: What can we ourselves do in favour of tourism?

- There has to be an offer – the green forest, the water, meadows, or anything else from our country's natural treasures. Europeans would love to travel to Latvia if health tourism were more part of the mix;
- The second thing is authentic countryside goodies;
- The third category is buyers of luxury products and services. This demands a designer approach. If you invest a million, you'll get 100 million back.

The conclusion: You can tempt foreign tourists with authenticity, nature and activities.

Question: What can Parliament and local governments do on behalf of tourism?

- We're not expecting money from the state, but the state can do a lot to make work easier by resolving issues of bureaucracy. As always, Latvian bureaucracy has taken recommendations in English and either made them excessively mandatory or doubled them.
- Latvia has several official homepages. The Latvian Institute must be merged with the State Tourism Development Agency so as to merge human resources.

Question: What can the EU do to facilitate country tourism?

- Tourism is not an EU issue, and the EU does not regulate money. Without regulations, there is also no money. There are several secondary areas, however, which the EU does regulate. It is, among other things, the leading consumer protection organisation.





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The main prerequisites for competitive country tourism offers at the European level:

- Co-operation (you won't reach Europe alone – you need the help of the association)
- The E-environment (the European tourist lives in the E-environment)
- Specialisation (birds, fog therapy, Nordic walking)

Asnāte Ziemele, president of the Country Traveller association

The presentation “Review of Country Tourism Development in Latvia in 2008 and Prospects for the Future”

- Estonian tourism hosts have lowered prices, but most hosts in Latvia have not. Prices at country homes in Europe are lower than in Latvia, which means that we are quite expensive. Can we be more expensive if quality is lower? The time is right to think about this. We have things that Europe no longer has. We need to state prices and sell our services in a professional way. The European traveller will not stop travelling, but he will travel to closer and less expensive locations.
- Seaside guesthouses in Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia cost more or less the same, but the seaside of Kurzeme is less known among tourists than is the Saaremaa Island in Estonia and the resort town of Nida in Lithuania. The flow of tourism should be developed, and offers should be improved.
- Inland guesthouses tend to be more expensive, on average, than is the case in Lithuania and Estonia. This needs to be considered.
- According to Country Traveller Statistics, the number of tourists to the Baltic States has declined only a little bit, but the number of travellers has decreased the most specifically in Latvia. Lithuania and Estonia are our biggest competitors. We need a broader offer when it comes to accommodations.
- Country Traveller has, for the first time, joined a working group made up of people from other tourism organisations (hoteliers, guides, etc.), the aim being to defend the sector and to fight for reduced bureaucratic requirements.
- Interpretation of VAT-related norms is a problem. The attitude which the State Revenue Services takes toward guesthouse owners is also a problem.
- Country Traveller is involved in several projects:
 - One financed by the European Economic Zone and Norway which will finance the publication of a water tourism guide next month;
 - The Leonardo da Vinci programme, dealing with the quality of European country tourism;
 - The EU Life+ programme, together with the Slītere National Park, dealing with Natura 2000 territories;
 - An EU Interreg IVB project, “Baltic Green Band,” dealing with the Soviet-era military heritage in the Baltic States
 - An EU Interreg IVB project “Parks&Benefits” dealing with socio-economic effects by a sustainable management of protected areas for the benefit of their regions
- Several printed materials are being prepared as part of these projects, and they will also be made available on the Internet.





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Uldis Vītoliņš, director, State Tourism Development Agency

The presentation “State Marketing Activities, Events and Plans in the Area of Tourism”

As the national budget has been cut, there are two remaining activities for the State Tourism Development Agency:

1) An Internet portal – 32% of those who have visited Latvia (1.8 million people in all) have used information from the Internet;

2) Articles in newspapers, magazines and on TV – information, not advertising. The agency will increase the budget for visits by journalists.

The presentation of the new Internet page:

1) In 14 languages, with special content for each market;

2) Room for companies which “sell” Latvia (banner exchange);

3) Articles, censorship of negative articles, a dynamic section;

4) News together with www.eiropa.lv;

5) Views from tourism experts as to objects which are worth visiting, with comments from visitors to the homepage.

Companies in the area of country tourism need to specialise, because the homepage has information about 3,100 accommodations, while only 40 are listed as offering horseback riding.

Andris Klepers, Latvian Nature Fund, expert for the EEZ/NO FI project No. LV0052,

“Sustainable Use and Management of Natural Resources in Natura 2000 Territories: Popular and Potential Tourist Destinations”, and lector at the Vidzeme University College

The presentation “Planning of Tourism Development and Products in Natural Territories”

Country Traveller and the Latvian Nature Fund are working on a joint project aimed at preparing tourism development plans for five NATURA 2000 territories that are tourist destinations. The project is based on experience and the win-win concept, which is based on the idea that if a local person is involved and interested in protecting a specially protected territory while also gaining economic benefits from it, then the territory will not be destroyed.

This is a knowledge-based product, and the limits of risk need to be identified.

There are three characteristics of an optimal destination:

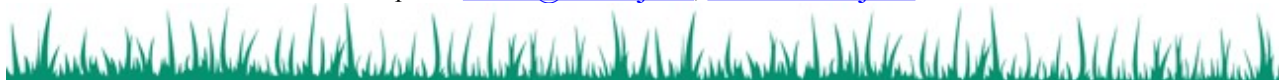
1) Attraction of tourists;

2) The infrastructure;

3) Accessibility.

Conclusions:

- Tourists don't care about the institutional framework of a territory, it is a unified territory. This requires co-operation among institutions in the relevant territory.
- A destination is not just a product, people live there. Territories serve different goals.
- Most people want to do something while they're travelling.
- Nature tourism is a good resource.
- Prices need to be in line with quality and content.
- There is a purpose to planning in the area of tourism.
- Take the best from others and add our own.
- Local marketing instruments.





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- Economic return must be calculated on events such as the Wine Festival in Sabile.
- Sharing knowledge.
- Regional competitiveness – competing not with the neighbours, but with other and different tourism products.

Juris Smalinskis, expert for the EU LIFE+ project “Proposals for Environmental Policy and Governance Based on Demonstration of Environmental, Social and Economic Benefits From Tourism in the Slītere National Park - a NATURA 2000 Territory”

The presentation “Examples of Good Practice in the Use of Resources in Specially Protected Natural Territories and Natura 2000 Territories in Latvia’s Countryside”

Keywords: Specialisation, Web marketing, Natura 2000

Here’s what’s positive:

- Between 20 and 25% of all households in Latvia are in Natura 2000 territories;
- That means added value;
- It may be that specially protected natural territories are exclusive and that people will find that it is worth paying for visits to them.

The Country Traveller databases have information about Natura 2000 territories. There are few country tourism facilities in Latvia which accent their location in such a territory or make use of this fact in their offer.

The problem here is that we do not emphasise the benefits of being in these territories sufficiently. There is insufficient co-operation between administrative structures and country homes, and the owners of such homes are not public monitors.

Advantages: The unique environment, a WTO study showing that nature tourism is the most highly demanded form of tourism. Also, Latvia has four seasons, which is an advantage.

About the EU LIFE+ project Polprop-Natura (LIFE07 ENV/LV/000981): The Slītere National Park used to be a prohibited zone, but we are planning five new products there. We’ll change the content of information stands. We will register visitor numbers. We will prepare a tour guide to Baltic national parks, complete with information about species of plants. This is based on the need for a sustainable tourism model. We will also prepare proposals for policy authors.

Valērijs Seilis and Andris Soms, Northern Vidzeme Biosphere Reserve

The presentation “The Northern Vidzeme Biosphere Reserve as a Tourism Resource: Infrastructure, Co-operation With Businesses, Innovation in Nature”

The aim of this presentation is to sketch out the role of the Northern Vidzeme Biosphere Reserve in the environmental protection system. It is the largest such territory in Latvia and part of a major network in the world. The reserve has no land holdings of its own. Everything is based on co-operation.

To a certain extent, we limit things. We protect landscapes and observe the Natura 2000 rules. These are all functions which are recorded in Latvia’s normative acts.

So what kind of development can there be in a limited territory? Tourism is most often cited as an opportunity for development. There are major water resources in the reserve, and lamprey eel



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fishing is a traditional process. Swamps are good for environmental tourism. There are lots of opportunities.

What is the state's role in justifying the existence of such services in a protected area and making sure that everyone accepts them?

- 1) The establishment of an infrastructure for natural tourism;
- 2) Environmental information via information centres, information materials, and innovative things such as outdoor concert halls, organised tours, participation in annual tourism fairs;
- 3) Implementation of various projects.

The work here involves other institutions in these territories, and in institutional terms, this is not an area in which there has been much organisation. There is not much of a relationship between what we are doing and what local governments are doing, to say nothing of what businesses expect from us. We need to demonstrate an institutionally positive model. Tourism information centres also engage in different functions.

Financing is an issue – we have to find sources of financing. Forums, public-private partnership.

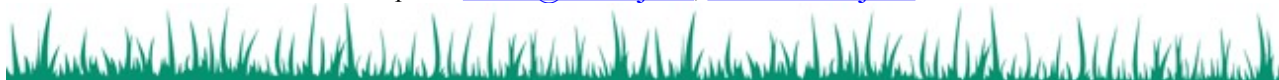
Andris Soms

On visual identity

- All signs in Natura 2000 territories require approval.
- A unified style has been established for specially protected territories.
- Each specially protected territory has its own style and design (orange, green and white for the Gauja National Park, for instance). These styles can be merged.
- The Northern Vidzeme Biosphere Reserve has its own visual presentation style. It includes three elements as leitmotifs for the visual style. This style is used throughout the territory. Partnership has led to the installation of stands at several country tourism homes – Korķi, Adzelvieši, and others.
- A guide to nature trails is being prepared.

“Jūras laivas” (Sea Boats) – water tourism products in the Ancient Abava Valley nature park

- Water tourism has been going on for centuries.
- A water tourist is an active tourist.
- The company spends its revenue on the creation of new products.
- We offer 1,250 different products for sale and 81 for rental – we have things for leisure boating, smooth water, etc.
- Our target audience determines our offer.
- We offer training for boaters.
- A family company – everyone works, everyone gets wet.
- A water tourist route – the Kolka lighthouse.
- Environmental protection – we offer bonuses to boaters who clean up the environment while boating.
- Our marketing is classic – an active homepage, a chat group, a booklet, we attend the tourism fairs “Balttour” and “Leisure and Sports”, as well as boat shows. We have a store.





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- Problems: Information on rivers. Boaters are given maps. They make their own infrastructure – places to stop and put up a tent. There is partnership with homeowners along the routes.
- We ensure the safety of boaters and know where they can be evacuated.
- We have good co-operation with the Lithuanians.
- We also offer trips to Estonia, France and other locations outside of Latvia, bringing along our own boats.

The Nītaures Dzirnavas guesthouse – co-operation with local companies

- A two-day route in the central part of Vidzeme;
- We work with local companies, including small businesses;
- We have environmental games (Search for a Million, six hours with teams of drivers);
- Our main clients are corporate clients;
- We personify the offer for each client. That's a good thing, and it's exactly what clients want.

The Piekūni holiday house – nature trails, routes at Vestiena and the Gaiziņkalns Hill

Our philosophy is based on the principle of wandering trails, which is the most successful form of management in environmental territories. We watch the processes of nature, and environmental guides interpret them. These are trails with no beginning and no end, and they are different each and every day. We offer accents – walking planks, bridges, seats, and gravel trails that are 80 cm wide. These are trails for every season, but our emphasis is on the summer.

Natural treasures at Piekūni: We are between two of Latvia's highest hills – Gaiziņkalns and Sirdskalns. We have 200 hectares of green meadows with some livestock, but there are rich meadows in which we have done nothing for the last 10 to 15 years. We cut down bushes in the meadows. There are wild gladiolas and other flowers. There is energy from streams and rocks such as the Stream of Gold. We have environmental guides. We have put up some signs on the trails, but our conclusion is that trails should not be marked in protected areas – better just to draw a map on paper. We are preparing a map for orienteering.

This offer has only pluses – we are busy, as is the environmental guide, the routes are flexible in accordance with needs, the costs are fairly low, we talk about clothing that is appropriate for the weather, and we emphasise the word “nature,” not the word “park.”

We don't try to sell our trails, we sell other products such as the services of the environmental guide. The wandering trails offer an additional motivation for people to come back for a repeat visit.

The Ludza Crafts Centre: Traditional Crafts as a Tourism Offer

The Crafts Centre began to put up a building for craftsmen. Sales are difficult. We started with the spiritual values and ancient laws of the Baltic nations. We were craftsmen and sold things. Tourists asked why they were so expensive. The answer was that Baltic people prepared the crafts, not slaves.

The history of the Ludza Crafts Centre: There were lots of accommodations in the area, but few activities for tourists. After looking at our resources, we thought about the craftspeople. We





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contacted local craftspeople who know how to make rope or shoe a horse – some 100 in all. Now people demonstrate these various skills. Some cook porridge with bacon on an open fire, others sew folk costumes, others offer tourists a chance to make their own rope.

We started to think about marketing. Water doesn't flow under a rock. Green markets, co-operation with biological farms and folklore groups. Green markets are held on the second Saturday of each month. We have postcards. We meet with journalists and are planning a homepage on the Internet. There are lots of things that we can do without any expectations. We have various special projects such as the "Route of Golden Hands" and various competitions. We have to work together and make use of all of the opportunities which life affords us.

We have thematic events at the Summer Solstice. In May, we have a fashion show featuring the latest linen designs. Many craftspeople have personal exhibitions.

A new offer is for weddings. The Great Lettigalian Market will be held on June 20 and 21 on the Ludza Castle Hill.

