



Baltic Nature Tourism conference, March 22-23, Riga

The conference brought together European practitioners in nature conservation and tourism. 258 participants from 18 countries attended the conference. The event was organised by the Latvian Country Tourism Association www.countryholidays.lv.

OPENING SPEECHES



The conference was opened by **Raimonds Vējonis**, the Latvian minister of Environmental Protection and Regional Development. He stressed that nature tourism is a strategic product promising good future prospects, and that the conference proves the cooperation potential of the Baltic Region states.



Wolf Born, representing the Priority Tourism of the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region, said the conference addresses the issues of balancing nature conservation with economic and social development. The conference was an important key event bringing together stakeholders from all over the Baltic region exchanging best practices and new approaches. He hoped it will lead to new partnerships between the Baltic states and between protectionists and those which look for economic development.

THE 1ST SESSION: “NATURE PROTECTION POLICIES – WAYS TO IMPACT AND PROPOSALS TO IMPROVE BASED ON EXPERIENCES IN GRASS-ROOT LEVEL”



The session was moderated by **Naut Kusters**, ECEAT, the Netherlands. The session discussed conflicts between nature conservation and tourism. Speakers representing Latvia, UK and Denmark – countries with different backgrounds and present situations – all stressed the importance of communication between all involved players: local residents and businesses, municipalities, nature conservation authorities, decision and policy makers. Poor or insufficient communication breeds conflicts. The speakers shared experience in communication practices and results and discussed to what extent protected area managers could and should take an active approach to promote (sustainable) economic development.



Juris Smalinskis, Latvian Country Tourism association, EU LIFE+ project POLPROP Natura, referred to project implementation experience in Slītere national park, Latvia. The project goal was to develop policy proposals based on a model of sustainable tourism destination. The process involved testing the theory in practice and adapting to life situation; building local acceptance and involvement, development of guidelines and proposals, submitting the proposals to policy makers and executive bodies, initiating changes in policy documents, addressing the relevant ministries (Ministry of Economics, Ministry of the Environmental protection and Regional Development, Ministry of Culture. A number of guideline documents were written, based on practical experience (on development of nature based products, marking the touring routes, coastal architecture, event organisation in protected nature areas). Conclusion: local communication and setting of common goals is the most important in conflict management. Involvement of a 3rd, neutral party helps to create a dialogue between conflicting parties.



Michael Pugh, Forest of Bowland, Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, UK stressed the importance of cooperation between state institutions, municipalities and private sector. The key task is to keep people in the countryside in protected nature areas. The Forest of Bowland will be distinguished by the way in which visitors' enjoyment, understanding and appreciation of the special qualities of the AONB are making a positive contribution to the local environment and to the economic and social well being of those who live and work there.



John Fredriksen, Danish Ministry of Environment, Nature Agency presented the Trilateral Wadden Sea Cooperation as a role model for linking tourism and conservation across borders where tourism organizations support nature conservation and have included it in their marketing strategy; good visitor management system (visitor guidance info centres) function. World Heritage Wadden Sea presents new opportunities for tourism and conservation through increase of support for nature conservation on all political levels; involvement of all stakeholders (awareness, commitment) and enhancement of international cooperation.

Key conclusion of the session: Building dialogue and involvement of all local stakeholders in decision-making and product development processes is the key to success.



THE 2ND SESSION: “NATURE BASED TOURISM PRODUCTS IN PROTECTED NATURE AREAS – MARKET DEMAND, PRODUCT, PROMOTION & MARKETING”.

The session looked at practical aspects of nature based tourism product development and their successful commercialisation. The session was moderated by **Lucy Galvin**, EUROPARC Consulting, UK.



Andris Klepers, project „Sustainable use and management of nature and resources in Natura2000 sites – popular and potential tourism destinations in Latvia”, shared his experience and conclusions in development of nature based tourism products. Such a product is a bundle of tangible and intangible components, based on activity at a nature destination and perceived by the tourist as an experience. Service character of the product is important, as well as time, value (price) and professional packaging. Wildlife tourism offers a world of opportunities in the Baltic countries as the quality and diversity of nature is excellent. In Latvia a variety of specialised nature tourism products are emerging, like watching birds, animals and insects, and gathering mushrooms, etc. The key approach is to present nature values in an attractive, customer friendly mode.



Maarika Toomel, Heritage Tours, Island of Saaremaa and Vilsandi National Park, Estonia referred to practical experience developing tourist services on Saaremaa island which has become a popular tourist destinations in recent years. In Estonia, nature tourism is regarded as means for development of rural areas, however, tourism is not possible without well developed rural infrastructure (roads, transportation, municipal services, etc.). Cultural history and identity should also be regarded as part of nature tourism product. Recognition from visitors helps to attract local support as people start to trust the product concept.



Odd Inge Vistad, NINA, Norway stressed that improved planning, cooperation and entrepreneurship are the main challenges in protected nature areas' management in Norway, where sustaining the ecosystems is the main management goal. The Norwegian approach to tourism and recreation in protected nature areas (most of them in the mountains) is somewhat different from many other countries – it is part of national culture (hiking, fishing, hunting etc) where people have enjoyed nature without modern tourist infrastructure. Nature itself is the destination and attraction, more than the national park. Within this context it is a challenge to develop commercial tourism products. Cooperation between active stakeholders emerges with the new management model in national parks. The management authorities must relate more actively to relevant stakeholders, including tourism actors. The protected areas and the adjacent land must be seen in connection. National, regional and local authorities must act more like a team. There is a need for better integration of resource and visitor management, in order to stimulate value creation.



Dieter Semmelroth, TUI, Germany stated that high environmental standards for accommodations and destinations are more and more regarded as a selling point for consumers. In the frame of their sustainability policies more and more tour operators will actively look for sustainable tourism providers. He recommended to build on existing strength, improve quality of product/travel, promote more thematic tours and target special groups (e.g. Golden agers

Key conclusions of the session: further development of nature based tourism products in the Baltic Sea region countries should concentrate on quality and reasonable commercialisation. At the same time, developing products that are attractive to conventional tourism industry and large tour operators is a controversial issue as it threatens the nature resources. In the Baltic countries, there is a threat from uncontrolled development, new rich, land development.

THE 3RD SESSION: “EUROPEAN CHARTER PARKS – TRENDS, STEPS, COOPERATION, CHALLENGES.

The session was moderated by **Romy Sommer**, Animare Tourism Project Management, Parks & Benefits project, Germany.



Olaf Osterman, Ministry for Agriculture, Environment and Consumer Protection in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, lead partner of the Parks & Benefits Project, Germany, introduced the “Parks&Benefits” project, implementing the European Charter for Sustainable Tourism in Protected Areas in the Baltic Sea Region.

Lasse Lovén, **Metsähallitus**, Finland, EUROPARC Working Group on Sustainable Tourism, presented trends, steps, cooperation and problems in European Charter Parks. In the context of growing importance of branding in nature based tourism, the European Charter represents a useful tool in product development and branding as its structure is flexible and allows to be adapted in different national and environmental contexts. The European Charter is a progress oriented management tool - the member parks start the certification process, based on their available resources and gradually achieve the highest level. Local involvement, acceptance and partnership are important requirements for European Charter parks as well as visitor monitoring. Certified Charter parks report high levels of visitor satisfaction. Still there is a need for fast progress. Co-operation with WWF’s PAN Parks project and other regional eco-labels, co-ordination with EU’s NATURA 2000 policy and, CBD ST guidelines is required. Monitoring tools and motivation models are needed.

Three examples of national parks were presented in the session.



Agnese Balandiņa, Kemerī national Park, Latvia. The park works on preparation for the charter process. Agnese Balandiņa shared experience of nature based product development in the park, involving the private sector. She stressed importance of personal contacts and building of trustful relationship. Local residents were involved in development and testing of cycling and skiing routes in the park. After testing trips, the feedback was used to finalise the products. Local people contribute with information and ideas. Invitation to participate ensures acceptance and motivation.



Martin Kaiser, Müritz National Park, Germany, presented his conclusions after the park underwent the first certification visit of the European Charter. From the initial quantitative approach, the park has transferred to development of quality. The development goals are derived from the problems. The implementation strategy is linked to particular time frame. The key conclusion is that the European Charter is a useful tool for new national parks.



Klaas van Ommeren, Dovrefjell Council, Norway. Dovrefjell is the first national park in Norway which is certified under the European Charter. It was stressed that good theories have to be practical, therefore it is better to learn from experiences of other practitioners. The Charter was implemented according to the strategy and implementation plan. The conclusion is that reliable indicators are required to really measure sustainable tourism benefits and impact.

Key conclusions: The Charter process is useful as it stimulates local involvement. European Charter certification process is especially recommendable for newly established nature protected areas. While the European Charter does not provide solutions to all issues, it is still worth taking the effort as it provides a number of opportunities and advantages in dealing with local processes, visitor impact monitoring and marketing.

THE 4TH SESSION: “EUROPEAN & BALTIC GREEN BELT – A PRODUCT, AN INITIATIVE OR EVEN A BRAND IN TOURISM?”

The session was moderated by **Wolfgang Günther**, Institute for Tourism (N.I.T) and **Stefanie Maack**, Kiel University, Germany. Presentations by: **Karin Ullrich**, German Federal Agency of Nature Conservation, Germany; **Asnāte Ziemeļe**, Latvian Country Tourism Association, Latvia; **Alois Lang**, Nationalpark Neusiedler See – Seewinkel, Austria; **Stanka Desnik**, Goricko National Park, Slovenia.



The session introduced the Green Belt initiative and its current activities by key actors from the initiative, namely the Green Belt Focal Points of Germany and Slovenia as well as the former international coordinator and a rather new Latvian supporter. The speakers presented and discussed opportunities of nature tourism and military heritage tourism in the Green Belt territories, e.g. in Austria, Germany, Latvia and Slovenia. While initially the Green Belt aimed at nature conservation only, tourism is regarded as an economic activity contributing to preservation of nature values. Since 1989, in several countries, the Green Belt has served as a generator of local development and projects.



Still, the understanding and support for the initiative is different in different European countries. Political support is necessary also in the Baltic Green Belt countries between Lübeck and St. Petersburg, e.g. by including the Green Belt into governmental programmes, following the example of Germany. Currently, a number of financial, administrative and technical organisation of the pan-European Green Belt is under review in order to assure for continuous, coordinated efforts all across Europe on the long term.

Key conclusion: The European Green Belt - being primarily a conservation initiative – has brought about a number of tourism products combining natural values with the common history of a now-united Europe and has the potential for a brand for unique tourism products revealing natural values and whole European history.

On March 23, the conference work continued in practical workshops addressing implementation of projects dealing with Green Belt, European Charter and EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region.

Conference presentations and contacts of the speakers
are available from the conference web site:

http://www.celotajs.lv/cont/conf/conference/110322-CNF/speakers_en.html