



Basic principles for
**ENVIRONMENTALLY FRIENDLY
AND SUSTAINABLE**
nature tourism activities and product
development in nature areas

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BASIC PRINCIPLES FOR SUSTAINABLE AND ENVIRONMENTALLY FRIENDLY NATURE WATCHING

1



Photo: J.Smaļinskis

The following basic principles for environmentally friendly and sustainable nature watching are formulated based on site inspections of over 80 protected nature areas and Natura 2000 sites identifying at least 100 positive and 100 negative examples of using nature resources.

During inspection visits it was not infrequently observed that popular nature attraction objects have suffered, have been degraded or even partly destroyed from too high visitor flows. Sometimes it was due to unsparing and ill-intentioned visitor behaviour, however, most frequently problems are caused by visitors' lack of awareness. Tourism promotional publications and media in Latvia often draw visitor attention to such nature objects (also species, biotopes and other unique nature values), which can be destroyed already in the nearest future if exposed to visitors.

The above conditions do not facilitate the development of ecotourism and sustainable, environment friendly tourism, especially because protected nature areas and Natura 2000 sites are among the most popular tourist destinations outside Riga.

The following basic principles (recommendations) have been derived from the above considerations as guidelines for development of new touring routes and products.



NATURA 2000 is a network of protected areas across the EU



ANIMAL WATCHING

2



Photo: J.Smaļinskis, V.Skuja

There is considerable density of animals (mammals) in Latvia, however, due to their cautious behaviour animals cannot be easily spotted. This difficulty makes animal watching especially exciting since the goal (experiencing the animal) cannot be guaranteed. Specialised local nature guides who know behaviour and habits of animals living in particular locations can help visitors.

- Remember that animal watching is a time consuming activity requiring patience and determination. Usually animal watchers use hides, lookout towers, etc. They wear outfits in modest colours that do not make rustling sounds. Animal watchers avoid making noise.
- A nature guide has to know the locations where the animals are likely to be seen (e.g., feeding grounds, mating spots, etc.), has to be able to notice and show animal traces (footprints, "bathrooms", excrements, etc.). The guide should share exciting stories about animal life.
- The guide makes sure that animal watching activities do not disturb the animals and do not make them leave the area. Thus, the guide has to "assess" the visitors and decide to what extent the habitat or actual location ought to be visited on each particular tour.
- Animal watching can be organised only in small groups (few participants).
- Animal watchers should not disturb animals in their dens .
- Returning from animal watching, only positive emotions and photos should be taken along. **Respect all living creatures!**
- Make a list of animals which can be seen in the vicinity of your tourist facility and add the best.



BIRD WATCHING

3



Photo: J.Smajinskis, D.Jansons, M.Strazds

Bird watching is one of the most popular nature watching activities attracting kids as well as adults. Bird species which are rare or even extinct in Europe can be observed in Latvia comparatively frequently. Any season is suitable for bird watching. ***The greatest variety of bird species can be observed during spring and autumn migrations as well as during nesting.***

- Do not show nesting sites of rare and protected bird species.
- Learn to recognise birds not only by their looks but also by their singing. Use available recordings of bird songs and take them along on your bird watching tours.
- Collect exciting stories about birds and share them with visitors.
- Make a list of bird species which can be seen in the vicinity of your tourist facility and put the list on your web site.
- Make thematic bird watching tours; birds living

in meadows, in forests, by inland waters and seacoast, in marshes, and about bird life in different seasons of a year.

- Always keep in mind that bird interests are the priority. Avoid disturbing their life and habitat.
- Use bird watching towers or other platforms to overlook larger areas and spot more bird species.
- In winter, put out bird tables to attract birds with some food. In spring, install bird houses of different types and sizes. Make an owl house!



INSECT WATCHING

4



Photo: J.Smaļinskis

Insects are the most multiform group of organisms in the world with nearly a million species known at present. ***Also in Latvia insects represent the highest number of species.*** They are all around us and they can be seen any time, except winter, when comparatively few species can be observed. Insects play a significant role in human life therefore it is worth getting to know them closer!

- Capture insects without doing harm. Use a sweep-net, a strainer, light in the evening or night.
- Invite entomologists to join your insect watching sessions. The experts will tell lots of stories about our tiny, little-known neighbours.
- Insects can be best watched in open areas, meadows, forests, by waters and in water, on trees and inside trees, in residential areas, etc. The largest numbers and variety of insects can be observed on warm and sunny days.
- Make a list of insect species observed in the

surroundings and make a photo gallery.

- While “hunting” for insects, do not damage or change their habitat.
- Insect watching does not mean collecting them. Take only good memories and photos with you.



PLANT WATCHING

5



Photo: J.Smaļinskis, E.Kalēja

There are over 5500 plant species in Latvia. How many plants can we tell? Learn to identify the most widespread species of algae, lichen, moss, club-moss, horsetail fern and flowering plants. If you live outside the city, ***hundreds of plant species can certainly be found in your surroundings!***

- Base your plant watching tours mainly on species which are widespread and found all around.
- If you reveal and show habitats of rare and protected plant species, make sure that their future existence is not threatened.
- Tell a captivating story about each plant species you show – where people use it, what is its role in human life. May be it is even related to some historical events.
- Make a list of plant species and put it on your web site.
- Make a plant finder folder with photos of the most widespread plants in the vicinity.
- Make thematic nature tours about plants growing in meadows, forests, by waters, in marshes, and about how plants look, adapt and survive in different seasons of a year – in winter, spring, summer and autumn.
- At the end of your nature tour, treat your guests with a tasty local herb tea



MUSHROOM “HUNTING”

6



Photo: J.Smaļinskis

More than 4000 mushroom species are found in Latvia while only about 1% of them are regarded as edible. Mushrooms are unusual organisms, and their role is significant because many of them, like polypore, disintegrate wood and take part in substance circulation. There is great variety of shapes and colours of mushrooms, that's why it is exciting to explore them.

- Learn about mushroom species found in your surroundings. Ask people who know mushrooms to help you identify the species you have found. They will be able to tell interesting facts about mushrooms.
- Try to find an interesting and captivating story about each of the mushroom species.
- Collect local recipes of mushroom dishes.
- Make your mushroom finder folder with photos of the most widespread mushrooms in the vicinity.
- Make thematic nature tours about mushrooms

growing in different seasons – in winter, spring, summer and autumn, about poisonous and edible mushrooms, etc.

- Offer to your guests the mushroom finder leaflet, a magnifying glass and a place where they can arrange and examine the mushrooms they have picked.
- If you wish to pick a mushroom in order to taste it or to identify, cut it carefully using your knife without damaging mycelium.
- If you are not sure if the mushrooms are poisonous or not, leave them in the forest.
- At the end of the tour, offer some tasty dish from well known, local, edible mushrooms.



SECULAR TREES

outstanding, unusual
and historic trees

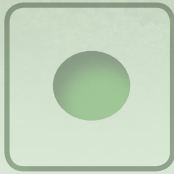
7



Photo: J.Smaļinskis

An old tree represents a whole miniature world of biological diversity. Hundreds of plants, mushroom and animal species can live on it. ***The older the tree is, the more valuable it is for nature.*** Latvian traditions and rituals are linked with particular tree species. There are trees – “witnesses” of historical events.

- Make an information plate for the tree: its name, dimensions, a captivating story, historical photos, describe the tree’s “inhabitants” – lichen, moss, mushrooms, birds, insects, etc.
- Mention the protection status of the tree, if it is a nature monument or a cultural monument.
- If the tree has large, open hollows, cover them with natural material to prevent wind and snow getting inside. Otherwise the tree will decay and die.
- Make a fence around the tree in the width of its crown. It will protect the trees’ roots from farm animals and agricultural machinery.
- If necessary, prop up the largest branches to prevent them from breaking.
- Install an owl house on an old oak tree. This way you will attract new bird species to your area.
- Develop codes of conduct for visitors coming to the tree



ROCK OUTCROPPES, CAVES

8



Photo: J.Smaļinskis, E. Kalēja

The sandstone and dolomite in Latvia was formed in the Devonian period, more than 300 million years ago. Outcrops of these sedimentary rocks are important habitats for algae, moss, lichen, insects, and some bird species. Caves in these outcrops are unique habitats for very particular populations of plants and living creatures. Several bat species hibernate in caves.

- To learn about a rock outcrop, visitors do not need to get up and walk on it.
- Do not damage rock outcrops and do not try to search for fossils in them.
- Caves in Latvia are too small to take visitors. Besides, they represent highly sensitive biotopes, especially during hibernation of bats.



MAKING ACTIVE AND NATURE TOURING ROUTES -10 basic steps

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Photo: J.Smaļinskis

The present methodology is developed and tested when making hiking, boating and cycling routes in the national parks of Slītere, Ķemeri and Rāzna as well as in other protected nature areas/Natura 2000 sites in Latvia. The routes are meant mainly for independent travellers. Animal and plant watching tours can be organised with or without an expert nature guide. The 10 steps described below will help in structuring and optimising your work when planning and describing hiking, boating and cycling routes for independent travellers.

1. Concept of the route

To develop an active tourism route, first you need a brilliant idea and a vision. What area will the route cross, where are the starting and end points? What is the theme of the route (nature, landscape, birds, insects, other)? How will travellers get to the starting point and how will they depart at the end (or how will they return to the starting point)?

2. Exploring maps and reference literature

Once you have the concept, start checking all available information. Use maps of different scale, travel guides, information brochures, web sites, etc. The main aim of this step is to discover or un-

derstand actual or potentially attractive tourism resources and supporting infrastructure (accommodations, nature trails, bird watching towers, food services, shops, attraction sites, camping sites) that already exist in the territory of your route.

3. Drafting the route

Mark your route on the map, linking the the previously mentioned tourist attraction sites/nature watching spots. Preferably use maps of the following scale: 1: 200 000 (mainly for cycling routes crossing large areas and following main roads), 1: 100 000 (shorter routes within one region and following minor roads) or 1: 50 000 (local and short routes following small roads, incl. forest roads, trails, etc.). The last two scales are suitable for nature watching routes as nature watchers usually prefer to stay in the same area.

4. Testing the route in different seasons of the year

After the route is marked on the map, it has to be tested on site to understand its strengths and weaknesses, as well as to see the conditions which cannot be predicted during the deskwork process. It is advisable to test your active tourism



MAKING ACTIVE AND NATURE TOURING ROUTES -10 basic steps

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Photo: J.Smaļinskis, E. Kalēja

route in spring (April – May when you are able to assess the condition of gravel and sandy roads after winter), in summer and in early autumn (when there is rich vegetation).

Examining the route in different seasons will provide valuable extra information to be included in the technical description of the route (see below). If the tour focuses on particular groups of plants or animals, you should be aware what can be found in the area during different months of a year. You will be able to see particular species of insects, plants, mushrooms and birds only in particular months.

5. Modifications

Usually, after you have done the first on site testing, you get new ideas for improvements, changes and alternatives. At this stage you will develop the 1st draft of the technical route description.

6. Testing the route with potential tourists

After the first five steps, it is recommendable to test the route in a group of people with different fitness levels, including children. Each participant will give suggestions (also regarding the attraction sites, species, etc.), objective or subjective

criticism. It is worth listening and, if necessary, to make corrections with or along the route or in its written description.

7. Itinerary – technical description

The next step is writing the technical description. It is a practical information sheet which can easily be sent by e-mail, put on a web site, in social network sites, or printed. Use the following structure for the description:

Route: brief characteristic of the route stressing its „unique selling point”;

Recommended season: the most suitable time of the year or the best months to enjoy the route;

Level of difficulty: *easy* – suitable for all fitness levels. Usually crosses relatively flat terrain, does not require orienteering skills; *medium* – longer routes, more difficult terrain; *hard* – longer routes in hilly terrain, by steep and high riverbanks, etc., requiring certain fitness levels;

Duration: approximate length in hours or days in which an “average” tourist can cover the route;



MAKING ACTIVE AND NATURE TOURING ROUTES -10 basic steps

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Photo: J. Smałajnskis

Road surface: the road base on which you walk, ride or drive. Possibilities for wheel chairs and prams? Mark approximate % of paved and unpaved road surface en route.

Start/end point: name and mark the starting and finishing points of the route;

Marking: tell if the route is marked and describe the marking signs;

Route itinerary: list the most significant villages/towns and distances between them, as well as give the total length of the route;

Useful services: shops, cash dispensers, places where one can get drinking water, etc.;

Alternatives: suggestions of modified versions of the route, attractions and places of interest around the route, etc.;

Logistics: How to return from the end point to the starting point, if relevant;

Sites of interest: nature, culture and historical

sites worth seeing en route;

Maps of relevant scale and photos from the sites en route.

Good to know! Useful tips and recommendations for travellers.

If it is a nature watching tour, the descriptions should name and briefly characterise the plant and animal species which, at appropriate conditions, can be spotted „for guarantee”. It means that a List of Species and Green Advise can be added to the route description.

How to design a route description sheet? You can produce visually attractive, clear and practical route description using open source software (available as free download in the Internet). The advantage is that you can make any necessary changes yourself quickly, easily and with no extra costs, without buying services of IT specialists, designers, etc.

8. Involving other businesses and stakeholders

If it is a hiking, boating or cycling route crossing several regions, the route description should be sent to eventual partners – businesses, tourist in-



MAKING ACTIVE AND NATURE TOURING ROUTES -10 basic steps

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Photo: J.Smaļinskis, V. Skuja

formation centres, municipalities, administrations of protected nature areas and other stakeholders to review the route, comment on it and provide information on the services they can provide to visitors (food service, accommodation, tasting of countryside produce, attraction sites, craft shops, etc.). Use the recommendations that are practical and useful in the route description. When the route description is ready, send the final version to your cooperation partners. They can put it in their web sites, print out and offer to their visitors/guests. It is worth to involve providers of services in the process of planning your nature watching routes.

9. Marking the route

Routes for independent travellers crossing wooded areas can be marked with paint on trees. This should be approved with the owner or manager of the land. In case of protected nature areas and Natura 2000 sites marking has to be approved with the Nature Conservation Agency. After marking, it is worth to test the route again to check if the marking is sufficient and, if necessary, improve it.

10. Maintenance of the route and updating of information

If you advertise a particular route or take visitors on it, you have to check it several times during the

season to be aware of the road condition and other circumstances. If necessary, fallen tree trunks and branches should be removed from the road, marking shall be renewed, or other maintenance works done as required. Involve the most active local people in maintaining the route.

This model of how to make touring routes has been proven in practice. Of course, if you are well experienced in developing touring routes, you can leave out some of the steps. In any case, the most important is to check the route on site and involve local stakeholders in the route development and maintenance process.



SOME RELEVANT PUBLICATIONS

13



Photo: J.Smaļinskis

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