

Press information

“BALTIC GREEN BELT” Project Launched

The Latvian rural tourism association Country Traveller has become involved in an Interreg IV B Programme project called “Baltic Green Belt.” It is being organised by the University of Kiel in Germany, and it is aimed at preparing new military heritage and natural tourism products in partnership with the Slītere National Park. Military heritage is an important tourism resource which has not been used very much in Latvia even though it is in much demand. The Liepāja Military Port and the Līgatne bunker are successful examples, but there could be many more. It is worth looking at the experience of neighbouring countries. Objects which are used for tourism purposes include lighthouses on the Hiiumaa island in Estonia. Another popular “monument” to the Soviet era is the Grūtu Park in Lithuania. Many of the resources of the military heritage in Latvia have been lost, but this project offers an opportunity to identify, maintain and popularise the use of those elements which are still in place, activating co-operation among local businesspeople, rural tourism accommodations, local governments, and other involved parties.



Given the economic changes which are occurring in Latvia at this time, each project of this type makes it possible to diversify and make more competitive the tourism offers of various regions. First of all, the people of Latvia can be encouraged to travel around their own country, but this will also be interesting for foreign travellers, thus improving the ability of countryside tourism accommodations to attract visitors and bringing back to life the small saloons and shops of the countryside. The only convincing argument in support of the idea that people should spend their holidays in Latvia and not abroad is that there must be local offers that are of sufficient interest and quality – routes, objects of interest, accommodations and other services which can be created by all interested parties working together.

In geographic terms, the Baltic Green Belt was the boundary of the Iron Curtain of the Soviet era, and nature in this area remains untouched and unique. The project is part of the European Green Belt programme, which has established a network of protected natural territories along and across the previous boundary between Europe and the Soviet Union. The co-ordinating agency is the World Conservation Union, which supports regional development initiatives in the area of environmental preservation.

The aim of the Baltic Green Belt project is to preserve natural territories of high ecological value and to improve the ecological situation in the shoreline Iron Curtain zone along the Baltic Sea. The project will be implemented over the course of three years (2009-2012). It involves 25 partners, each of which is implementing a specific pilot project in its territory.

Major pilot project activities and results for Country Traveller:



- **Examination of military heritage and natural values, preparing a database on same.** Project organisers will examine elements of the military heritage and evaluate their possible use in the establishment and development of new tourism projects. The examination began in May 2009, with specialists visiting natural territories in which the military heritage is found, identifying ecological values, noting GPS co-ordinates, taking photographs,

and writing down local information about elements of the military heritage. On the basis of this information, there will be a publicly available database of potential tourist destinations at www.celotajs.lv



LAUKU CEĻOTĀJS

- **Recommendations on the sustainable use of objects of the military heritage in the Natura 2000 and other protected natural territories** will be drafted on the basis of the accessibility of each object, its location, its attractiveness to tourists (both as objects of military heritage and as objects of environmental value), the necessary investments, ecological issues, and other aspects. The recommendations will be prepared by specialists in the areas of tourism and environmental protection, and they will be made freely available to all who are interested.
- **Involving local governments, landowners and owners of former military objects in a discussion about how the military heritage can be used for tourism and to activate mutual co-operation.** The result of these discussions will be increased local co-operation with the goal of creating an attractive tourism offer that is based on the military heritage and the related environmental values. The first meeting for project participants and other interested parties occurred on May 11 at the “Laumu Nature Park” guesthouse in the Talsi District, and it focused on the potential for attracting tourists who are interested in environmental values and the military heritage. Participants included businesspeople and tourism specialists, as well as organisers from the Tourism Information Centre, the relevant local governments, etc. Participants learned about project goals, the expected results, the involvement of Country Traveller and the Slītere National Park in the project, as well as various ideas and proposals as to how to use the military heritage in Latvia, to prepare tourism offers and ensure involvement in active and environmental tourism projects.



- **Competitive tourism projects and services.** Routes for hikers, bicyclers and drivers will be identified in the Baltic States, including information about elements of military heritage, as well as protected natural territories. A map of military heritage objects in Latvia will be prepared. All tourism products and services will also be available on the Internet – www.celotajs.lv.

- **An environmental tourism conference for participating countries** will be held in the spring of 2011 to discuss the project and its results in Latvia, the Baltic States and Europe.

What is the Green Belt?

The European Green Belt is an initiative that is being co-ordinated by the World Conservation Union. It brings together national parks, nature parks, biosphere reserves and transfrontier protected territories, as well as unprotected environmental territories along and across the borders, also supporting regional developmental initiatives aimed at preserving nature. The Green Belt stretches through 23 countries and is approximately 8,500 kilometres long. It starts at the northernmost part of Europe, crossing Central Europe along the borders of Slovenia, Hungary and Croatia all the way to the Black Sea, the Aegean Sea, the Ionian Sea, and the Adriatic Sea, then ending along the borders of Albania, Macedonia, Romania, Serbia, Montenegro and Turkey. The area includes 3,272 protected natural territories that are part of a 25-kilometre buffer zone on each side of the Green Belt.

The European Green Belt organisation is an important marketing instrument for existing and future protected territories in regions and initiatives which seek to create strategic synergy with





LAUKU CEĻOTĀJS

important economic goals such as tourism. More information can be found at www.europeangreenbelt.org.

The Baltic Green Belt project will attach territories in the East of Germany and in the former territory of the Soviet Union to European Green Belt activities.



Financing has been received from the Baltic Sea Region Programme of the European Union.

