

## DEVELOPMENT OF NEW TOURISM PRODUCTS IN THE SLĪTERE NATIONAL PARK

The situation and problems in the Slītere national park was understood by LCTA “Lauku ceļotājs” at an early stage. Development of new tourism products was included as one of the activities in the project POLPROP-NATURA to build positive visitor attitude to Natura2000 sites and especially protected nature areas, including the project demonstration site – the Slītere national park. The Project activities aimed at developing new active tourism routes in the park:

- The Slītere national park was formed in 2000. Before it was a nature reservation and a closed military territory accessible only with special entrance permits. Consequently, there is a delusion in general public that the park is not open for visitors.
- Visitors associate the status of especially protected nature areas and Natura2000 with restrictions. This is shown by opinion survey data on the Slītere national park. The survey took place during one year. A fourth of all respondents said they associate the status of a national park with prohibitions and restrictions.
- Field visits to Slītere showed that there is a general lack of tourism products and services in the park. The existing offer is small and located in separate spots, focussing on stand-alone attraction objects. The capacity of the territory is underused. The fact was confirmed by the local community members when working together with the project staff on the document “Proposals for development of sustainable tourism in the Slītere national park”.

The **purpose** of the new tourism products was to keep visitors for longer time in the national park and vicinity, and to increase long term demand and use of local services and products.

5 tourist products were developed in the Slītere national park for hiking, cycling, boating, car driving and watching nature. The products are systematised in 9 itineraries and tours:

- Hiking route: “The Kolkasrags circle”;
- Hiking route “Along the seashore and coast”;
- Hiking route “Learn about Mazirbe”;
- Cycling route (also skiing) “Liv villages ”;
- Cycling route “The Slītere circle”;
- Car driving: “Around Slītere”;
- Boating tour: “Around the Kolka lighthouse”;
- Nature watching tour: “Birds at the Slītere”;
- Nature watching tour: “Animals in the Slītere”.

Route descriptions for downloading:

[http://www.celotajs.lv/cont/prof/proj/PolProp/PolProp\\_SNP\\_prod\\_en.html](http://www.celotajs.lv/cont/prof/proj/PolProp/PolProp_SNP_prod_en.html)



## 1. The basic principles of development of the tourism products – touring routes and guided tours – developed in this project:

- The first draft is developed by LCTA „Lauku ceļotājs” after inspection and testing on site;
- Descriptions of the routes are coordinated, improved and updated with participation of the local entrepreneurs, SNP specialists and the most active and interested community members;
- Brief and concentrated route descriptions are designed in A4, adding maps and illustrations, and are prepared in *pdf* and *jpg* format;
- The *pdf* documents are put online and are accessible as free downloads to any user of the Internet;
- Local service providers and the administration of the SNP can put the product files in their web sites;
- Local service providers can print out the route descriptions from the Internet and offer to their guests informing how and where they can go in the national park, what is there to see and do. This way, visitors can be kept longer time in the park and vicinity;
- Route descriptions are written according to the same algorithm;
- Route descriptions do not include information which can frequently change (prices of services, opening hours, names of the shops, etc.);
- Route descriptions include the contact information of service providers;
- Routes are approved with the administration of the Slītere national park of the Latvian Nature Conservation Agency.

## 2. 10 basic steps in developing active tourism routes:

These 10 basic steps<sup>1</sup> are formulated and tested in the field in the process of development of the hiking, boating and cycling routes in the Slītere national park and other especially protected nature sites/Natura2000 sites in Latvia.

### 1) The concept of a route.

To develop a route, first you need a brilliant idea and a vision regarding what geographical (or culture historical) territory the route will cross – where the route starts and where it ends, how the travellers get to the starting point and how they leave from the end point (or return to the starting point).

### 2) Investigation of maps and references.

After you have the concept, start checking the available information. Use maps of different scale, travel guides, information leaflets, web sites, etc. The main aim is to understand, what resources which are attractive to visitors, and what infrastructure supporting tourism, is there in the territory of the route you are planning.

<sup>1</sup> Juris Smaļinskis, LCTA „Lauku ceļotājs”, 2010.

### 3) Provisional mapping of the route.

Linking on the map the separate points – objects of tourist interest – you will get a visual depiction of the route concept. You can use different maps, depending on the length and particular location of the route. The preferred scales are: 1: 200 000 (long routes, crossing large areas and following main roads), 1: 100 000 (shorter routes within one administrative region and follow minor roads) or 1: 50 000 (local and short routes following small country roads, incl., through forests, on trails, etc.). The last two map scales will suite those service providers, developing itineraries for their guests to explore the vicinity of a guest house.

### 4) Testing of the route in different seasons of a year.

When the route is planned on paper and marked in a map, you will have to try it yourself to understand what is good and what is bad about it, as well as to see the conditions on site which are not impossible to predict during the deskwork process. It is advisable to test the route in springtime (April – May, when you can assess the road condition after winter and early spring), and in summer or towards autumn (when there is rich vegetation). Testing during different seasons will give you valuable information to be included in the technical description of the route (see below).

### 5) Alterations.

Usually, after the first field test, you get new ideas for improvements, alterations and alternatives. At this stage, you will develop the first draft of the route description.

### 6) Testing with the eventual tourists.

After these five steps are done, it is advised to try the route again together with other enthusiasts, representing different fitness levels, including children. Each testing participant will give suggestions and criticisms. It is worth listening and, if necessary, making corrections in the route or its description.

### 7) Preparing the route description sheet.

After step 6 you start preparing the technical description, according to the following recommended algorithm:

**Route:** brief characteristic of the route, highlighting the main “selling point”;

**The best time:** the most appropriate and relevant time of the year to enjoy the route;

**Difficulty level:**

. easy – suitable for all fitness levels. Easy routes follow relatively flat terrain, they do not require special orienteering skills;

.. medium – longer routes, more difficult terrain;

... hard – longer routes in steep and high riverbanks or other changing forms of relief and/or requiring certain levels of fitness;

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

**Road surface:** the road base on which you walk, ride or drive. Mark approximate % of paved and unpaved road surface en route.

**Star/end points:** describe where the route starts and where it ends;

**Marking:** describe presence and format of marking if it exists;

**Route itinerary:** list the most significant villages/towns and distances between them, as well as give the total length of the route. In practice, the total length of the route is longer than just added distances between villages and towns;

**Alternatives:** alternatives for some parts of the route, options to see and do in the vicinity;

**Good to know!** Useful practical advice worth listening and taking into account;

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

**Attraction sites:** nature and cultural and historical heritage sites worth seeing en route;



## Maps and photos from the sites en route.

### 8) Involving other service providers and interested players.

When the contents and layout of the route description is ready<sup>2</sup>, send it to cooperation partners – service providers, tourist information offices, the responsible municipality staff, the administrations of protected nature areas and others who might be interested in the becoming route product. They will give comments, suggestions and information about services they can provide (catering, accommodations, open farms with tasting of country foods, attraction sites, open craft shops, etc.). Use in the route description those recommendations which are practical and useful. 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.

### 9) Marking the route.

If the route leads through wooded areas, you can put marking on trees<sup>3</sup>. Note that this should be approved with the owner or manager of the land. In case of protected nature areas/Natura2000 approve with the Latvian Nature Conservation Agency.

### 10) Route maintenance and updating of the information.

If the route is in active use, its promoters have to inspect it at least twice in the season to check the condition of the road and objects. If necessary, fallen trees or branches shall be removed from trails, marking shall be renewed or other maintenance works done as required.

This is an optimum model of making a route. Those, which are well experienced in development of touring routes, can leave out some of the steps. However, especially essential are those actions related to on-site checking and involvement of cooperation partners.

## 3. Involvement of all stakeholders and cooperation ensures sustainability of the products developed.

In project experience, the development process was equally important as the routes themselves. Listening to and incorporation of all stakeholder interests is highly important in further development of the tourism products and their long term sustainability:

- 1) Cooperation of the specialists from the Slītere national park administration ensured that the new products are environment friendly, they do not cross sensitive nature areas. The cooperation also improved the image of the SNP administration – it becomes welcoming and friendly towards visitors.
- 2) Tourist service providers get complete information about the tourism resources and offer in the park. They maintain contacts, form new contacts, take care that their updated information is included in new product descriptions and promotion. Awareness of nature values in the park helps to prepare high quality and comprehensive tourist offer and improves competitiveness.
- 3) Tourist information office specialists provide information on tourist enquiries and interests in the park. They represent the service providers, incl., local shops, cafes and restaurants and others who are not directly involved in the process of developing touring routes. They have good local knowledge and can add to the descriptions of attraction sites en route.

<sup>2</sup> See the recommended format: [http://www.celotajs.lv/cont/prof/proj/PolProp/PolProp\\_SNP\\_prod\\_en.html](http://www.celotajs.lv/cont/prof/proj/PolProp/PolProp_SNP_prod_en.html)

<sup>3</sup> See the active tourism route marking guidelines by Lauku ceļotājs:

[http://www.celotajs.lv/cont/prof/proj/PolProp/Dokumenti/Vadlinijas\\_krasas\\_markejums\\_06.08.2010.pdf](http://www.celotajs.lv/cont/prof/proj/PolProp/Dokumenti/Vadlinijas_krasas_markejums_06.08.2010.pdf)



Involvement in common preparatory work make them highly knowledgeable about the new products, therefore they can give reliable information to tourists.

- 4) Local NGOs and residents in the park's territory had every opportunity to participate in the development of the new products. It gave them an opportunity to discuss and advance some local issues in the area where solutions were required.
- 5) At the tourism product development, LCTA initiated stakeholder meetings and summarised proposals for socio-economic development and nature friendly tourism development in the Slītere national park with the aim to disseminate the positive experience in all country. In the process of developing the new tourism products, LCTA provided the neutral, "outsider" view, helped to develop a competitive offer in the region. It was possible, based on the previous experience inspecting large numbers of nature territories in the Baltics.
- 6) The local government is informed about the activities in its territory, the needs for tourist infrastructure improvements. It is possible now to include in the current territorial planning the infrastructure which is necessary for visitors, like road access to the sea and parking lots in seaside villages. There is an opportunity now to address the local residents explaining the problems which exist in solution of these issues.

Involvement of all stakeholders and cooperation ensures sustainability of the products because they are developed, respecting nature values, initiating services, providing for timely updates of information and common interest in maintenance of the products.

#### 4. Cooperation for a common goal – reducing conflicts

At the moment when the new tourism products were started to develop, in the Slītere national park, like in other protected nature areas, a conflict exist between nature protection institutions and local residents. There are a number of reasons: the Slītere national park does not have a nature protection plan, the local municipality does not have a territorial planning. Consequently, there are no formal documents for territorial development. Lack of these, as well as the national legislation regarding coastal areas (the Protection Zone Law) puts a number of restrictions generating conflicts between the local municipality, the Slītere national park administration, local entrepreneurs and residents.

Cooperation initiative of LCTA as a third, neutral party, turned out to be acceptable to all stakeholders. The 17 years experience of the country tourism association, including, in development of nature tourism products, proves the competencies. The Association represents tourism service providers in negotiations with the national park administration. The restrictions and limitations set by the SNP administration are not always rational. At the same time, the Association explains nature protection regulations and their necessity to local residents in simple, friendly terms, speaking "their language".

Practical work with clear and simple task to develop the tourism products unites all players for a common goal. It is a key to minimisation of conflicts between the park administration, local municipality, entrepreneurs, NGO and local residents. The process is more important than the result. Triggering local cooperation and initiative steps out as the main goal in the process of development of the local tourism products.

#### 5. Product development process

- 1) We started on 11.05.2009. with a seminar to initiate local initiatives. The seminar was held in a neutral place – the guest house at the Laumu nature park, where we presented the project and invited all interested organisations and individuals to meet and discuss the



issues. The director of the Slītere national park presented sustainable tourism resources of the park. This was the first seminar to identify that, even if the capacity allows, the offer of tourist services in the park is small and, consequently, the visitor numbers are low.

- 2) The local initiative seminar on 4.08.2010. discussed the document „Proposals for sustainable tourism in the Slītere national park”. The concepts of the new routes were presented in the seminar. After the seminar, the Association specialists tested some versions of the route – part of the hiking route “Along the seashore and coast” between Košrags and Kolka, the hiking route „The Kolkasrags circle” and the cycling route “The Slītere circle” between Košrags and Dūmele.
- 3) In August – September of 2009, after a seminar, the specialists of Lauku ceļotājs develop the routes in detail, following the set algorithm. Draft versions are sent to local stakeholders for comments. Suggestions for improvements are received from the local entrepreneurs, from SNP administration and tourism specialists of the local municipality. Recommendations are integrated in the tour descriptions.
- 4) At the same time new unique nature based products are being developed – bird and animal watching. From the start, zoologists and ornithologists are involved in production of descriptions.
- 5) In the beginning of October photos of the objects included in the routes are selected. Good quality maps are prepared and A4 layout designed, the product leaflets to be printable form both sides. Internet download versions are being prepared.
- 6) On 10.11.2009. the local initiative group meets. The new product leaflets showing traveller-friendly and practical approach to information presentation are discussed. After the seminar, more stakeholder comments are received and incorporated.
- 7) The products developed at the end of 2009. and at the beginning of 2010. are translated into English, Russian and German languages and layout designed of all language versions.
- 8) Electronical versions of the routes are available as downloads from [www.celotajs.lv](http://www.celotajs.lv); [www.slitere.lv](http://www.slitere.lv), [www.kolkasrags.lv](http://www.kolkasrags.lv) and [www.ziemeļkurzeme.lv](http://www.ziemeļkurzeme.lv).
- 9) In May 2010., full versions of route descriptions are included in the “Slītere Traveller’s Guide”.
- 10) The routes “Learn about Mazirbe”, “Along the seashore and coast”, “The Kolkasrags circle”, “Liv villages” and the Bird watching tour are put on the new outdoor information stands in the Slītere national park.
- 11) On 12.06.2010. the “Travel Day to Slītere” takes place. The new routes and tours are offered to public at large for free, with the services of local guides. 433 visitors use this opportunity. The most popular routes are “The Kolkasrags circle” and “Along the seashore and coast” between Košrags – Pitrags – Košrags and the cycling route “Liv villages”.
- 12) The next step in development of the routes – marking the routes with colours in nature.

## 6. Innovative choice of IT

The route descriptions were developed in simple form aiming at simple and low cost updating possibilities and colourful, attractive design, educational contents, convenient format to a traveller. Innovation for Latvia is the structural format of the description.

The new tourism product leaflets for the Slītere national park were designed by a professional designer. Taking over the product development in the Ķemeri national park, the design was



made in-house to reduce the costs, choosing appropriate software. This approach is a good solution for local service providers who are able to use technologies and avoid high costs of promotional materials.

Instead of contracting professional designers, the product leaflets can be made using open source software, graphics and fonts:

- Layout design can be made with the open source program Scribus (<http://www.scribus.net/>);
- Graphic design can be made with the open source program (<http://fontforge.sourceforge.net/>), to easily make extra sheets;
- Simplified templates can be prepared enabling non-professionals to make layouts;
- Together with the product leaflet samples (printed or pdf downloads) a preparation template is available free of charge allowing to design new product leaflets.

As a result, an innovative set of tools is offered to local service providers, allowing them to produce professionally looking promotion materials without high costs of professional design services or software. Service providers can promote their products which are made following the principles of nature protection and sustainability, carefully elaborated and based on traveller feedback.

