

GO RURAL



Guidebook for Rural Lifestyle
destination and product development

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destination and product development**

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PREFACE

Rural tourism is one of the fastest growing tourism sectors largely due to increasing popularity of offers based on the values of nature, culture, food and more generally the rural lifestyle. Indeed, the opportunity to experience local lifestyle, the way of living, has been distinguished as a significant factor for contemporary tourists when making their travelling decisions (Travel Trends 2015, see <https://www.tourism-review.com/travelers-seek-authentic-experiences-news4696>). Tourism researchers describe this trend as a shift from tourists interested in community-based goods to travellers who “demand authentic, experientially oriented opportunities involving more meaningful interactions with locals” (Paulauskaite et al. 2017, p. 619). This shift underlies authenticity in the experience, exactly the kind of experiences rural lifestyle products offer. Rural lifestyle products can be defined as tourism products that aim to present the authentic rural experience.

In this booklet, we offer some practical guidelines for the development of rural tourism destinations based on authentic rural lifestyle products. According to WTO, a tourism destination is a unique place where a visitor spends at least one night and which exhibits tourism products such as attractions, support services, and tourism resources with defined management, physical and administrative boundaries, and a well-known image (UNWTO 2008 <https://www.unwto.org/glossary-tourism-terms>). In other words, a rural village, for example, can be a destination providing elements like cultural buildings, a picturesque village centre, rural lifestyle products matching the image of the village, local accommodation possibilities etc. On the other hand, a wider geographical area, such as a region, can also be seen as a destination - or even a whole nation or an area covering several countries. It is worth noticing, however, that a destination does not always follow the administrative borders of a geographical area, instead it is defined by a common image.

This guidebook was made during a cross-border tourism initiative: Rural Lifestyle — Creating attractive rural lifestyle destinations. The main aim of the Rural Lifestyle initiative was to combine rural lifestyles and tourism products and destinations of several countries to build sufficient quality provision for foreign markets. The project developed and compiled together Rural Life-

style products from Sweden, Åland, continental Finland, Estonia and Latvia (see: <https://gorural.countryholidays.info/en/region>).

The Rural Lifestyle – Creating attractive rural lifestyle destinations initiative was implemented between 2020-2022 among eight partners combining expertise from research and practice. The lead partner was the Estonian University of Life Sciences, Tartu, other partners being the University of Helsinki Ruralia Institute, City of Lohja, Företagsam Skärgård r.f., Söderhamn municipality, Estonian Rural Tourism Association, Gauja National Park Tourism Association and Latvian Country Tourism Association “Lauku celotājs”. The project was co-funded from Interreg Central Baltic 2014-2020 programme.

Since the literature describes many destination development models, it is relevant to question why a new one is needed. The approach presented in this guidebook is based on the lessons learnt in the Rural Lifestyle project and combines them with the existing literature on DMOs. The experiences of the Rural Lifestyle project showed us that often destination development in the rural lifestyle context is all about successfully combining elements from both tourism development and rural community development. When operating in the rural setting, companies are typically small, even part-time tourism companies. Additionally, the role of local communities in the tourism experience is much more significant than in cities and the social carrying capacity can be easily exceeded. Thus, local acceptance is critical for sustainable destination development.

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WHAT IS A RURAL LIFESTYLE PRODUCT?

Rural lifestyle products are based on authentic rural experiences. They allow tourists to get to know the past and particularly the modern life and people in the countryside by visiting destinations and specialised tourism sites with strong unique identities outside cities. Interaction with local people plays a key role in the products, and they are more about participating than just sight-seeing. Guests have an opportunity to experience life in small towns, farms and businesses with local people, watching or engaging in everyday life in a variety of areas such as gardening, modern design crafts, healthy food, innovative products, architecture, environment and green lifestyle. Even though rural lifestyle can be defined by attributes such as authentic and local, it is worthwhile to note that rural lifestyle products must also be planned and designed like any other tourism products to be saleable and successful in the market.

The role of storytelling, guiding and interpretation is often a significant component of rural lifestyle products. The further away the customers come from, the more interpretation is needed. The story is often related to the changes in the rural lifestyle and the traditional perceptions of the countryside. Thus, rural lifestyle products often create a new rural environment, combining traditional and modern values. The role of the guide is not only to provide interpreted visits and background information in one attraction, but they can also put together a package according to customers' expectations, thus combining visits, catering, accommodation, experiences, attractions, activities, stories and organise transport to the destination, which may be challenging via public transportation. Local guides know the rural people, history, stories and special places. In addition, local people trust them, which enables them to involve local people who are not tourism professionals in the visits.

From the Annex, you can find a checklist for the rural lifestyle product development. The checklist is made to help you to evaluate your potential and development needs in order to provide rural lifestyle products. The practical level tips presented are based on the studies and experiences collected together in Rural Lifestyle project. <http://database.centralbaltic.eu/project/132>

RURAL LIFESTYLE TOURISM PRODUCT

RURAL LIFESTYLE VALUES:

- QUALITY OF LIVING ENVIRONMENT
- QUALITY OF FOOD
- NATURE CONNECTEDNESS
- PRIVACY
- AWAY FROM CROWDS
- COMMUNITY SPIRIT
- FARMING BUSINESS
- COMBINE TRADITIONS AND MODERN LIFE

RURAL LIFESTYLE PACKAGES:

FOR WHOM:



PACKAGE TYPES:



SERVICES:

- guide/interpreter
- transfers
- visiting programs
- meals
- accommodation

Figure 1. Characteristics of Rural Lifestyle product (Ziemele, A. 2021 / Lauku Ceļotājs archive).



Figure 2. Examples of Rural Lifestyle offers (Ziemele, A. 2021 / Lauku Ceļotājs archive).

BASED ON AUTHENTIC RURAL ENVIRONMENTS AND ACTIVITIES – BUT MUST BE CREATED AS A TOURIST PRODUCT!

Even though Rural Lifestyle products aim at authenticity, they are, nevertheless, tourism products and must be designed as such. As defined by The World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO), a tourism product is “a combination of tangible and intangible elements, such as natural, cultural and man-made resources, attractions, facilities, services and activities around a specific centre of interest which represents the core of the destination marketing mix and creates an overall visitor experience including emotional aspects for the potential customers. A tourism product is priced and sold through distribution channels, and it has a life-cycle” (UNWTO, 2022). Therefore, it is vital to consider product development, not only to enable the commercialisation of a product, but also to provide the rural experience to the visitors. Naturally, in the product design some “polishing” of the authentic experiences is often required. The local lifestyle is presented in a favourable form and the most interesting parts of it are selected and combined as a tourism product.

A Rural Lifestyle destination, on the other hand, can be defined as an area or a site with a strong and visible identity. It combines several products under a unique identity, charm and character. Typically, it has a centre and surrounding rural lifestyle experiences and products that complement the destination. A rural lifestyle destination centre can be, for example, a small town, a village, a protected nature site, island(s), or any other place that is attractive for tourists, easy to access and provides tourism services. A destination focus is important, especially when the aim is to reach markets located further away, which is often the case concerning rural tourism. One product alone is rarely attractive enough to attract people to travel long distances. However, when several tourism products can be reached during the same trip, the threshold for travelling lowers.

Even though a Rural Lifestyle product offer can successfully combine small and micro businesses which are attractive even to long haul markets, there are some special challenges related to building such offers. Sometimes the most charming and authentic products are created by companies for whom the business of tourism may not be the primary business activity, such as farms

or local food producers. Thus, they are often not very interested in significantly investing in tourism development in terms of money or time.

Therefore, they may be in the tourism market only for the short term, trying it out, but, for example, in the case of lack of time or personnel, they will prioritise their core business. Often they are not tourism professionals themselves either and therefore may need for training. Many may also be so called “lifestyle entrepreneurs” and typically try to do everything by themselves, which may end up being problematic in relation to the product quality. At the destination level, all this can cause challenges in creating a common understanding about the destination or how to create a continuous process of destination development and commitment. In addition, especially when marketing to tour operators, a particular harmonised quality level is required.



Destination examples from Rural Lifestyle project

A destination can exist at different levels. For example, the whole Central Baltic region, covering several countries, can be seen as a single destination, especially when focusing on far markets. One of the participating countries in the Rural Lifestyle project was Finland which can also be seen as a destination, a single country destination. It can be further divided into smaller geographical destinations, such as Åland. Åland is a scenic, autonomous region in Finland with 6,700 named islands and a large number of smaller islands and islets. Furthermore, Åland can be divided into smaller destinations in a similar manner, like Kökar – an island municipality to the south-east of the Åland archipelago. At all destination levels, the unique selling points can be defined. For example, the characteristic that makes Kökar an intriguing rural tourism destination is the stunning landscape composed of barren rocks with pockets of lush forests, wild fields and protected bays for swimming. In Kökar, a tourist can visit Finland’s southernmost apple orchard, stay overnight at a sheep farm while taking part in farm activities or going bird watching or take in a unique rock formation created during the ice age.

DMO - DO YOU HAVE ONE?

In order for a tourism destination to be a coherent unit, it typically needs coordinated management of all the elements that make up the tourism destination. Typically, a destination management organisation (DMO) is established for this. Even though destination management calls for a coalition of many organisations working towards a common goal, ultimately, in order to ensure the competitiveness and sustainability of a tourism destination, someone has to lead and coordinate activities under a coherent strategy in pursuit of this common goal. A DMO can be, for example, a private company, an association, a municipality unit, or a coalition of local municipalities. Joint destination management can help to avoid overlapping functions and duplication of effort with, for example, promotion, visitor services, training, business support and identification of gaps in a customer's journey that are not being addressed. DMOs play a key role in tourists' journeys from inspiring campaigns to providing extensive and comprehensive information for planning trips, which includes links to experiences provided by local companies. While DMOs typically undertake joint marketing activities, according to current thinking there should also be strategic leadership in destination development, for example by providing support for the SMEs for product development and sales as well as influencing local policymakers in creating the best possible operational environment for the local tourism companies (UNWTO, 2022).

In the rural setting, this traditional approach to DMOs, developed for larger tourism destinations, may be rather difficult to achieve. It is sometimes difficult to identify a local DMO, or it may not, in fact, exist. Sometimes a DMO can be an informal coalition of local SMEs and, even if there is one it can be questioned whether it reaches the target markets set for the rural lifestyle destination or can support the development of rural lifestyle products within the destination. Therefore, one of the vital steps in developing tourism in the area may be the creation of a new DMO. However, instead of creating an organisation for the sake of it, it is important to think about the functionality: what particular tasks should the DMO organisation be undertaking in order to create an attractive rural lifestyle destination? Does the same organisation have to take care of all of them or can a rural lifestyle destination organisation share the marketing and image building and the practical product development and SME training between different organisations? Could a solution be

a kind of network-based approach, in which case, who does the important influencer work towards, for example, local politicians?

In general, DMOs as well as destinations themselves can be at different levels and they can exist in parallel to each other. Typically, they aim at different markets and perform slightly different tasks. The more grassroots development work is needed, the closer to the local level destination management has to be conducted. On the other hand, if the aim is to reach far markets, the destination marketing can happen at the national or even at cross-border level. In the rural setting, a locally based DMO, whatever kind of organisation it is, often does not have enough visibility in the markets. For practical development, the role of the local units is vital. And vice versa: marketing oriented DMOs covering large geographical areas rarely have an opportunity to take the strategic and operational leading role of local development. Thus, one should consider whether it would make sense to talk about destination management and destination marketing organisations separately, especially in the rural setting.

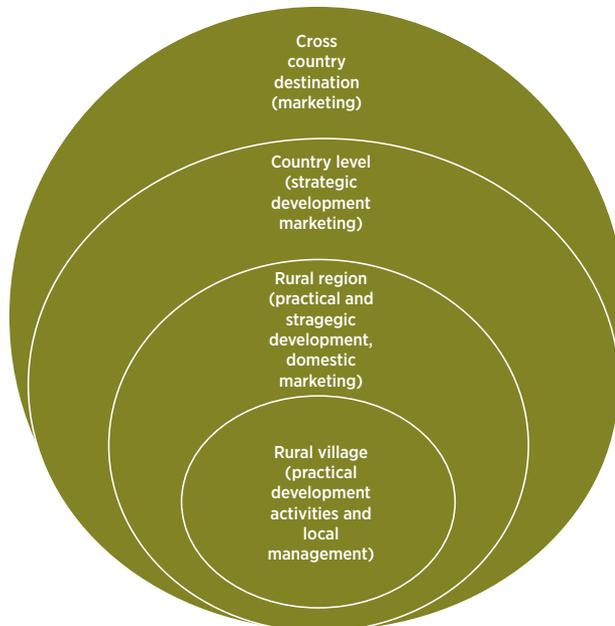


Figure 3. This figure presents different destination levels and how the tasks of DMOs at these levels may change. A rural tourism site can belong to several destination management organisations simultaneously. Typically, the more operational practical development is needed, the 'closer to home' the DMO should be.

DESTINATION DEVELOPMENT MODEL FOR RURAL LIFESTYLE DESTINATIONS

Below we present, based on the experiences of the project and previous literature, a model for rural lifestyle destination development, including the critical elements to be considered.

Where the development starts? – Someone has to take the initiative!

The first phase of the rural tourism destination development model is called “taking the initiative”. In order to manage any development, there needs to be a leader for the process and the start point is to identify a facilitator who will take the main responsibility for organising the whole destination development process and engaging with key people (stakeholders). Even though the initiative to develop the tourism sector may come from the rural community, external facilitators are often needed to coordinate the development plans (Haven-Tang and Jones 2012).

Examples of the initiators in the Rural Lifestyle project

In the Rural Lifestyle project, in two pilot regions the initiator for the rural lifestyle destination development was the municipality. In the cases of Söderham, Sweden or in Lohja, Finland, the local municipalities took an early and active role in tourism development and each a specialised unit to promote tourism development and marketing in the region and provide expertise for it. On the other hand, in some other regions, the initiator was a local association in co-operation with a national expert organisation, who provided expertise for the process. In Latvia, “Lauku Ceļotājs” (LC), a national association for rural tourism, provided expertise to develop the area of Gauja National Park, although the practical development work was performed by the local association, Gauja National Park Tourism Association under the guidance of LC. In Estonia, too, external facilitators were brought in to co-design the development plan in the Lahemaa National Park. The Estonian University of Life Sciences provided support to local SMEs and helped establish an association in the region to act as a DMO and guarantee the sustainability of the development work. As the examples of the project illustrate, there can be very different types of initiators for the development work and influences from outside can be the critical part for it. However, in all regions the role of local animators has been vital to create the local ownership for the development work.

Using the local strengths to create a rural lifestyle tourism vision

Creation of a rural lifestyle tourism vision is a process of engaging stakeholders to imagine what a rural tourism destination could be in the future, based on the detailed knowledge on the available resources and markets. Below, we will present each of these elements needed for a successful tourism vision creation in more detail.

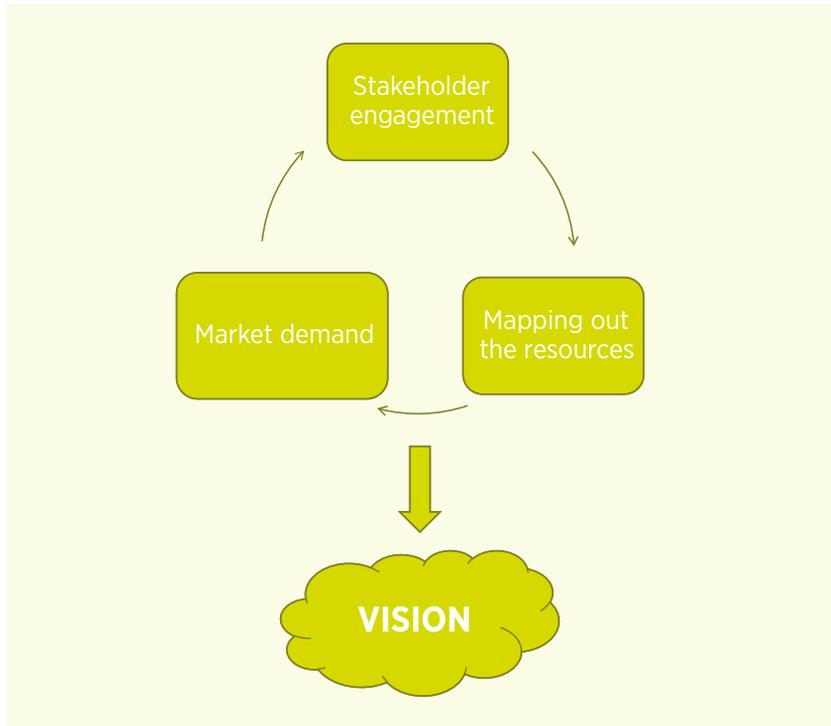


Figure 4. Elements needed for rural tourism vision

Stakeholder involvement - What kind of products are possible regarding social sustainability?

After taking the initiative, the first task of the facilitator is to identify and engage key stakeholders. Facilitators typically represent the actor who is behind the original initiative. In the organisational literature, a stakeholder usually refers to “any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organisation’s objectives” (Freeman 1984, p. 46). Accordingly, in rural destination development, stakeholder identification is a process in which those people, groups of people and organisations who are interested in and affected by the rural tourism development are contacted. Identification and engagement of key stakeholders is significant for the sustainability and success of a destination development not only to gain social acceptance to the process but also as it ensures the implementation of a stable destination identity (Dwyer and Kim 2003). Based on the experiences of the Rural Lifestyle project, the following groups were identified as stakeholders in rural tourism destination development:

Stakeholder group	Interest/stake
Rural tourism SMEs	Provide the tourism experience
Other local businesses	Support tourism by providing ancillary services
Local government	Provide local infrastructure and supporting services as well as local and regional level development plans. Support for local economic development
Local residents	Provide social legitimacy for tourism in the area
Education and training organisations/Business development organisations	Enhance the competencies and skills for tourism Provide marketing research
Tourism boards; tourism information centres; travel bloggers	Promote the destination
Tourism operators	Package together essential elements including accommodation, transport and transfer
Travel agents	Sell the product that the tour operator has produced
Infrastructure providers	Ensure access to the destination, such as transportation, booking
Tourists/visitors	The success and sustainability of the destination depends on fulfilling the visitors’ expectations and needs

In the rural setting, one should recognise that all the required stakeholders may not be geographically located in the area, which can make it difficult to analytically list down all the important stakeholders.

It is essential to remember that **the local community** plays an important and active role in creating the rural tourism experience as the tourists rarely stay only in one company and thus encounters with the locals, for example, at a petrol station and a village shop influence the tourism experience. Local community members may help tourists to 'discover' and enjoy a more intense experience of the place by sharing their knowledge of a region's history, culture and natural heritage, or offering opportunities for closer contact with their way of life (e.g. by receiving tourists in their homes) or with local products (e.g. by promoting, selling or letting them taste these products) (Kastenholz et al. 2012, p. 208). In this manner, local community members may help build bridges that decrease the distance between the tourists and the destination, thus allowing tourists an enhanced experience of the rural destination (Kastenholz et al. 2012, p. 208). On the other hand, if they have a negative approach to tourism, they can spoil the tourism experience or even harm it by disturbing tourists or behaving rudely. Another important issue to remember in rural communities is the lack of awareness about tourism, which can lead to unrealistic expectations towards tourism. It should be noted that when the expectations of local community are not matched with tangible benefits, the feelings of disappointment could easily develop which may further lead to resistance towards tourism development (Kokkranikal and Baum 2002, p. 65).

In addition to identifying the stakeholders and their interest or stake in the destination development, it is equally important to assess the potential influence and importance of each stakeholder. Accordingly, stakeholders can be divided into different categories based on their perceived importance in the development process. For example, Clarkson (1995) distinguishes stakeholders as being primary, if their participation is necessary for the survival of the system and secondary, if they influence and are influenced by the company's activities but are not involved in essential transactions for its existence. Another potential way to analyse and prioritise stakeholders is to distinguish their power and the urgency and legitimacy of their claims (Mitchell, Agle and Wood 1997). By adopting this categorisation, power refers to stakeholders' chances to influence the tourism destination operation, legitimacy to the

validity of their claims and urgency to the speed that their claims should be reacted to. Using this categorisation, the most salient stakeholder would have an urgent (time sensitive) claim on the destination, the power to enforce their will on the destination, and would be perceived as legitimate in exercising their power (Sheehan and Ritchie 2005).

Mapping out the resources: strengths and weaknesses of the destination

Rural tourism should be based on local strengths and possibilities since each destination has its own specific resources (endowed and/or created) and supporting factors that motivate inbound tourism (Dwyer et al. 2014). Thus, in order to form the basis for rural lifestyle products and a destination image, destinations should systematically analyse such resources and factors to acknowledge their strengths and weaknesses/needs. It should also be noted that it is not enough to map out the general strengths of the region, but more specifically the region should be able to find their unique selling points (USPs). In other words, the need to identify what makes their destination different. What makes a destination special enough to visit and why should their customers choose their offering over those of competitors? Pinpointing USPs often requires some creativity. You must think like your customers would think, which in turn highlights the need to understand the market and the demand for your destination and products.

Remember these when mapping out the existing and required resources for rural lifestyle tourism development!

- natural resources (e.g. scenery, natural environments like forests, lakes, sea, fields, natural reserves)
- cultural resources (e.g. culturally valuable buildings, places, customs, traditions)
- existing tourism resources (e.g. tourism attractions, existing products, need for their improvement, potential new products, need for investments)
- human resources (e.g. capabilities, workforce, voluntary work, local community attitude)
- infrastructure (e.g. accommodation & catering possibilities, roads, nature paths, ICT infrastructure)
- capital for investments needed for improvement and development

Some DMOs rely primarily on generic visitor information found for example, in phone or airport surveys, to guide their strategy. Often there is a temptation to interpret this data in a way that justifies providing something for everyone, i.e. for every segment of the population. This approach is, nevertheless, too broad. To focus on the individuality of your destination and to attract visitors who will appreciate the unique selling points, an improved focus is needed (<https://destinationthink.com/blog/destination-needs-find-unique-selling-proposition/>).

Often the best way to find your USP(s) is by working with your local community and businesses to build one from the bottom up. The local community already lives and breathes their USPs every day and these are the reasons they continue to inhabit and experience the destination. (<https://destinationthink.com/blog/destination-needs-find-unique-selling-proposition/>). However, sometimes they are too close to see what is special in their own community. In these cases, outside experts or consultants can help, especially if they possess a profound understanding about the target markets.

When mapping out the existing resources, one should think broadly, not only focusing on the existing or potential new lifestyle products. The tourism experience includes so much more than tourism products alone. The local scenery, accessibility and the community attitude are similarly important. One should not forget human resources and the potential need for the workforce or investments either.

Rarely can all the required resources be found in a small rural community. You should also realistically analyse your weaknesses and potential threat scenarios for the tourism destination development. Tools like SWOT analysis and PESTLE can help in this task. The main difference between these two tools is that while SWOT helps to particularly identify and categorise the factors internal to the development process, PESTLE focuses and helps in understanding external factors that are often outside your control. A short description of the differences between these two analysis tools and instruction on using them can be found in the following webpage: <https://ruralsehub.net/project/chapter-understanding-your-market-and-competitors/>

One sauna culture among all the others

A well-known rural tourism experience in the Baltic and Nordic countries is the sauna and numerous types of sauna can be found in these countries. Sauna has also been identified as interesting for several target markets. However, there is a need to differentiate an individual sauna product from all the others in order to find unique selling points. In Estonia, for example, a smoke sauna is an experience that provides a unique selling point for rural tourism, especially when it is complemented with local traditions and customs. After all, local customs are frequently different and often bound to particular places. You just need to describe them in a sufficiently concrete way. For example, if your marketing material mentions “traditional smoke sauna in which you can experience local culture and traditions”, it does not say anything to customers who are not familiar with smoke sauna or your local culture or traditions. You need to describe, how it is different and what kind of local traditions and sauna culture you are offering to be able to differentiate these from others. For example, in Vana-Võromaa the local community is particularly proud of their smoke sauna tradition, they have described it in detail, and it is inscribed on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (UNESCO). In addition to the customs of going to the sauna, it also includes knowledge about sauna treatment and meat smoking and the skills of heating the sauna, making body and facial care products that can be used in the sauna as well as the construction of the sauna building itself.



Market demand - select your target markets!

The development of a rural tourism destination requires a deep understanding of the market – particularly who the potential customers are and their expectations and needs. In other words, it is essential to identify what the target market for rural tourism is in the area. Having a well-defined target market is more important than ever as the number of tourists with differing values is increasing. A successful rural tourism destination cannot afford to target everyone. Accordingly, in order to reach the potential customers with effective marketing arguments, there is a need to divide the market into smaller distinct subsets of customers that behave in a similar manner and have similar needs. This process is called segmentation. Market segmentation helps rural tourism destination developers to better understand and meet customers' needs, and therefore enhance the profitability and competitiveness of the destination. Answering some of the following questions and relating them to the identified unique selling points, helps in the identification of the market segments with greatest potential:

- Which geographical areas you are targeting?
- What are the socio-demographic characteristics of your target group (e.g. age, gender, place of residence, income class, family situation, ethnicity, education)?
- What kind of experiences/products/activities are the customers seeking?
- How the customers travel: as families, couples, groups or solo travellers?
- How do your customers book and what language skills do they have?

For more information on segmentation, see for example: <https://blog.hubspot.com/service/customer-segmentation>

Towards the rural tourism destination vision

Stakeholder engagement, understanding the market demands and relating it to the available resources are a prerequisite for the creation of a shared rural tourism destination **vision**. A vision states the long-term goals and aspirations associated with the rural tourism destination as well as unites the actors for collaboration. The facilitator leads the visioning process by discussing the following two questions with the stakeholders:

SEGMENTATION OF JAPANESE TOURISTS INTERESTED IN RURAL TOURISM OFFERS

For example, the Japanese tourists interested in rural lifestyle can be divided into the following segments with different needs and expectations:

Young (female) travellers

Young female travellers (25-49 years) are used to travelling to different places and seeking new, authentic experiences. They are usually highly educated. They have good income and travel in a group of friends. They enjoy active, self-guided holidays, are price conscious and often have limited time to travel. They usually cope with English and know how to use online reservation systems.

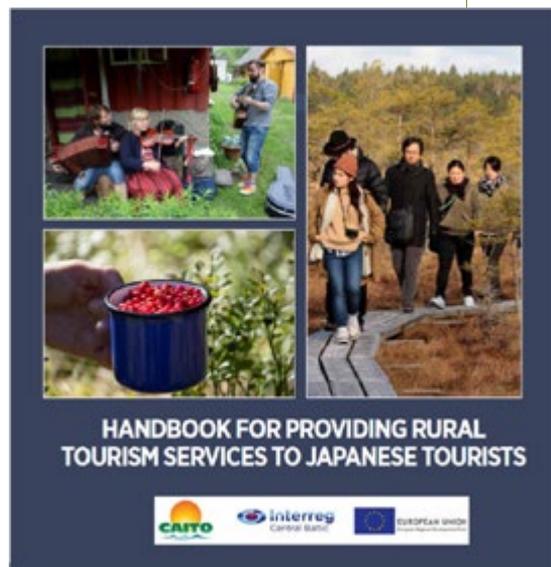
Families

Families (with children) enjoy nature and well-being and want to balance safety and fun. Families travelling together appreciate good facilities and accommodation is high in their priorities. They are typically quality and price conscious. They usually cope with English and know how to use online reservation systems. Travelling families can be reached using both online and traditional marketing channels.

Group travellers

Group travellers are usually older, often retired with free time and often more money than the other identified groups have. Group travellers value safety, routines and guidance. While looking for new experiences, they also value comfort, do not necessarily cope with English and therefore appreciate a native guide. They usually book their travel through a travel agency.

For more information on the segmentation of tourist groups, see “Handbook for providing rural tourism services to Japanese tourists”, <http://caitoproject.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Caito-handbook.pdf>.



- Where are we now? What is the current situation in tourism development in the area?
- Where do we want to be? What would be the ideal situation for tourism development?

Different stakeholders may have different views on the vision. In the end, it is the responsibility of the facilitator to synthesise these differing ideas into an all-embracing vision representative of the views of stakeholders. It is important to remember that a vision supports the “rural way of living without changing the countryside too much, or at least the control of economic, social and environmental changes should be local or a result of a collaborative decision-making process” (Saarinen 2007, p. 100).

The next phase in the tourism destination development is to decide on the steps required to reach the vision through **strategic and operative planning**. In this phase the central questions that need to be answered are:

- How do we get from here (current situation) to there (vision)?
- What steps are needed and in what order?

These steps form the basis for planning the actual development activities towards an attractive rural lifestyle destination.

Implementation phase: activities to reach the goals

In order to reach the set vision a number of key steps must be taken. They should be tailored to the needs of the rural lifestyle destination and respond to the ‘steps’ the destination needs to take. These activity steps are rarely straightforward nor follow each other in reality, thus some parallel activities are likely to be undertaken. Typically, more stakeholders should be engaged with when the actual grassroots work starts. One of the first tasks of the implementation phase is to ensure that all important stakeholders have been reached. As the aim is to develop a destination, not simply one product, several aspects should be considered simultaneously.

Adapted from published literature (e.g. Henderson 2008; Coban and Yildiz 2019) figure 5 presents a list of elements, the development of which is required in order to develop a rural lifestyle destination. The list is not exhaustive

but helps to highlight the most typical elements to be taken into consideration. It may be that some of these are already in place, but for others, more extensive development work is required.

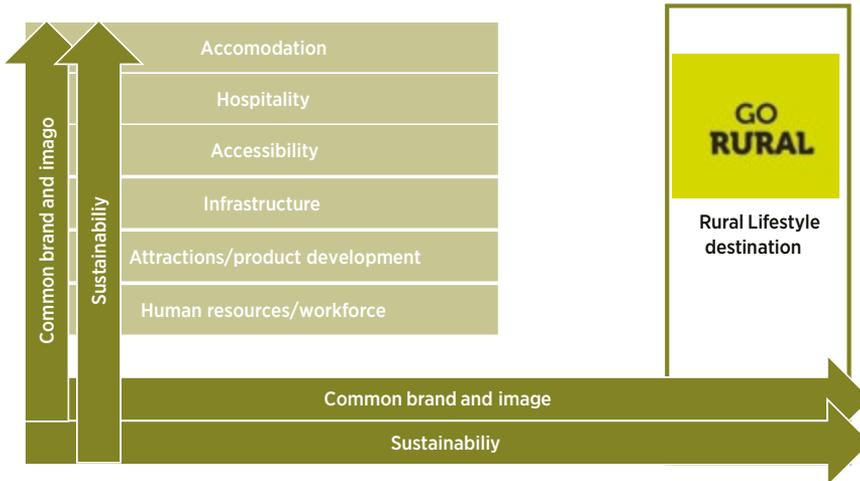


Figure 5. The typical components of a destination that need to be considered when developing a rural lifestyle destination. Destination development is a summary of developing different critical aspects related to tourism under the same common brand, aiming for a joint coherent destination image. Sustainability regarding all its dimensions (ecological, social, economic) is a cross-cutting topic for all development.

Accommodation is a central part of tourism, even a necessity. Overnight stays leave much more money in the areas than only day visits and often lead to spending more widely in the region. Thus, in developing rural lifestyle destinations, it is worthwhile considering how accommodation facilities might be developed, which would bring more income into the region. In practice this means that when developing a destination, one must focus on developing the accommodation capacity. In rural areas, not many hotels exist although there are often several other types of rural accommodation present including farm stays and cottages. It has been identified that rural travellers look for a wide variety of accommodation types across a broad price range from campsites to rural hotels. They typically like authentic, small-scale accommodation run by local people, preferably reflecting the authentic rural heritage of the area. (CBI 2018).

Often the quantity of available accommodation is one of the limiting factors in attracting tourists to a region. A complicating factor is that accommodation usually requires large-scale investments, which can be a risk to entrepreneurs, especially when rural tourism activities are only implemented on a seasonal basis. Thus, to make sensible investments a profound understanding of markets is needed. Frequently market segments have their special requirements concerning accommodation, some of which are difficult for entrepreneurs to know beforehand. To get an understanding of such quality requirements FAM visits of market representatives or tourism professionals are an excellent tool for finding such information. The marketer of the accommodation and destination as whole should have first-hand knowledge on the accommodation available and their quality levels.

Hospitality can be defined as a relationship between a guest and a host, wherein the host receives the guest with some amount of goodwill, including the reception and entertainment of guests or visitors. In other words, hospitality is how people treat others, that is the service of welcoming and receiving guests for example in hotels. Hospitality plays a fundamental role in augmenting or decreasing the volume of sales of an organisation. Furthermore, language skills play a central role in how welcome guests feel in a destination.

In rural areas, it is not only the hospitality provided by tourism SMEs that matters. Tourists' experiences include interaction with residents in local shops, cafés and for example along hiking routes. If locals make a bad impression, it inevitably impacts on the experience, especially as rural lifestyle tourists seek a connection with the locals as part of the product. This is naturally very difficult for an individual SME to control or influence while a destination management organisation can, on the other hand, try creating social accessibility for tourism in the region by different means. For example, it might publish news on the impact of tourism to local economy or organise PR events targeted at local people. Yet another aspect to consider is entrepreneur's skills related to hospitality, since rural lifestyle product providers may not be primarily in the tourism business, they may lack some hospitality skills and thus some training needs may exist.

Open café days in Latvia

For 1-2 days within a particular destination, farmyards and other places that are not always related to business and catering services on a daily basis, turn into pop-up cafés, locally known as home cafés. Within Open Café days each farmstead prepares its own special treat – a soup, a casserole, a cake, a bread, or a whole meal – and offers it to visitors together with coffee/tea. Each farm presents its home café name and the product offered is also presented with its cultural characteristics and story. In order to attract a wider community and families with children, various cultural activities are also organised, such as handicrafts, games, playing musical instruments, etc. In the Rural Lifestyle project, a structure and organisation of the open café days in Latvia was created. The project first trained a regional co-ordinator for each region to manage the activities and further provided the interested pop-up café personnel training in hospitality, food hygiene requirements and catering in order to provide high quality authentic rural experiences. For example in 2022, in total 40 regions and 496 cafés took part in the event. The organisation was built so that the activities would continue into 2023.

Accessibility refers here to both booking of the tourism product and physically travelling to the destination. Over recent decades new technologies have changed and diversified the ways tourists book their visits. Indeed, while increasing numbers of tourists prefer to book their travels online, it is important to consider whether, for example, small rural tourist operators need their own online store for bookings or it is possible for them to choose a hosted online shopping platform elsewhere, although payment methods and legislative requirements must be taken into account.

Accessibility in terms of transportation is particularly important to consider in rural tourism since rural attractions and tourism product providers are often scattered and distances in rural areas can be long. In rural areas travelling by public transport may often be a challenge due to the lack of bus or train services. Furthermore, instructions for public transport may only exist in national languages or are missing altogether, which can make it difficult for a tourist to arrive in the destination. If the tourists do not have this information

beforehand, there is a great risk that they do not select this particular tourism destination or product at all. Therefore, it is important to make sure that the tourists are provided with the up-to-date and clear information about how to reach the destination by public transport, and the tourism attractions and accommodation places are clearly and coherently signposted. Clear signposting is also important for those tourists arriving using their own transport while where a tourism business provides their own transport, it is important to ensure that this is clean and of sufficient quality and is safe, comfortable and appropriately insured for transporting paying guests.

Accessibility further refers to the extent to which tourist destinations are accessible to all. Characteristics of an accessible destination are that, in an ideal situation everyone can participate in the activities or enjoy the experiences, information on those activities/experiences is understandable and the environment is safe. A good checklist on accessibility for special target groups in rural and natural tourism settings can be found e.g. in the guidance provided by Destination British Columbia <https://www.destinationbc.ca/content/uploads/2021/10/DBC-Accessible-Attributes-Checklist-FINAL.pdf> .

Before advertising your facilities it is also worthwhile inviting representatives of your target groups to test the product, to ensure they are accessible to these special groups. It is only natural that all rural destinations and products



may not be accessible to all and cannot be made such. It is, however, vitally important to mention this clearly in the destination or product description.

Be SMART with the infrastructure

Infrastructure covers not only all the buildings and roads, but also, for example, hiking trails, fireplaces and facilities associated with them. Related to rural lifestyle products, this infrastructure can cause problems in product development as these may well be delivered in a farmer's garden or a local person's home. Since tourism may only be a part-time activity for some entrepreneurs, they may not be keen to invest significantly in the facilities or buildings. Nevertheless, in the search for authenticity, one must be able to provide sufficient facilities for these products. For some customer groups, the cleanliness of the place and garden is more important than for others, but in all products the facilities have to meet the destination's quality level and customer groups' requirements as well as the requirements of authorities. The weather can also be challenging when providing outdoor activities. Thus, a farmer, for example, might consider whether it makes sense to build facilities to provide e.g. apple tasting within their barn or other outdoor buildings. It is also possible to rent spaces from other entrepreneurs if the product can be better provided in these other facilities.

Online experiences in Gauja National Park

Destinations can also use online infrastructure to create experiences. Good examples of this are the online guided tours to Gauja National Park that were implemented during COVID-19 travel restrictions. The tours were scheduled beforehand and recorded so they were also available for viewing afterwards, even though live connection to the guides and entrepreneurs was only possible during the live tour. The tours were implemented using Facebook, which provided an easy and familiar platform for participants. The themes of the tours varied from virtual tours to Līgatne cellar, caves and cliffs to playing virtual football golf. Some of these tours were run in English and some in Latvian depending on the potential target market and were free of charge. Their main aim was to introduce Gauja National Park to the participants and ensure it remained on their minds until COVID-19 travel restrictions were lifted.

Infrastructure also includes Internet connectivity. These days tourists often require information beforehand on available online connections, e.g. in their accommodation and if none can be provided or the connection is poor, this information must be outlined in the product description. People also carry different kinds of SMART devices such as smartphones, phablets and tablets, smartwatches, smart bands, which can also require Internet connection.

Attractions and product development

A destination cannot exist unless there are **attractions or tourism products** that can be sold on the market. Depending on the size of the destination, there may be only a few attractions or products or dozens or even hundreds of them. A tourist attraction is a place of interest that tourists visit, typically for its inherent or an exhibited natural or cultural value, historical significance, natural or built beauty, offering leisure and amusement. They can be man-made (e.g. amusement park), cultural (e.g. old church or castle) or natural (e.g. waterfall, beach or old forest). Food and drink, i.e. catering, is an important part the tourism experience. Accordingly, catering refers to the business of providing food service and can in rural tourism destinations can take place in hotels, pubs, cafés, farms or private homes. By providing great food, tourists are far more likely to spend longer in an attraction and in rural



RIITTA LAINE HOME VISIT

One very interesting Rural Lifestyle product for foreign visitors is a home visit where tourists are invited to meet locals in their own home. However, as with any product, this needs to be properly designed and packaged. One good example is from Lohja and the visit to the Laine family home, which e.g. is sold to Far East markets. Here guests have the opportunity to join the Laine family for dinner made up of traditional dishes or spend Christmas with the family in a traditional manner etc. However, the whole visit and activities related to it are carefully planned and designed.



Guide: Riitta Laine

This one day package for groups from 8 to 16 persons includes:

- guided transportations
- home visit at Laine family
- walking by the Lake Lohjanjärvi to Liessaari
- picnic lunch in the forest or by the lake
- Laine family garden
- preparing mushroom soup and blueberry pie
- writing a postcard by the fireplace
- possibilities to have a sauna and swim in the lake
- meal at Laine family

PROGRAM:

Home visit at Laine family

Laine family home is located by the lake Lohjanjärvi. It's time to relax and enjoy the view and the atmosphere.

Walk by the lake and a picnic lunch

During the visit you will have a walk by the lake Lohjanjärvi to Liessaari and hear some stories about the beautiful Finnish nature. There is a lot of hazel nut trees and wild flower by the path. We will enjoy picnic lunch including salad and a roll with coffee or tea in the forest or by the lake.

Laine family garden

In our garden you will find many useful plants

such as hazel nut bushes, apple trees, berry bushes, salads, tomatoes, strawberries etc. Even plants that attract butterflies. There are places where you can sit and just enjoy the view to the lake Lohjanjärvi.

During harvest season we can pick fruits, berries and salad straight from our garden.

Preparing food together

We will prepare mushroom soup and blueberry pie together in our kitchen. Picking mushrooms and berries has been an important way of spending time in forest for generations.

Writing post cards

Then you can enjoy and sit by the fireplace and write post cards back home to your loved ones. We will take them to local post office to be send.

Sauna

During the day there's an option to have a sauna in our home and swim in the Lake Lohjanjärvi.

Meal at Laine family

At the evening it's time to enjoy a traditional Finnish meal and taste the food we prepared together earlier.

Dinner includes salad, different sorts of fish, potatoes, sauce. For dessert blueberry pie with whipped cream and coffee or tea.

Excursion facts:

Duration: 1 day, ca 9.30 am to 19.00 pm.

Location: Distance from Helsinki ca 55 km.

Group Size: for groups (min 8. - max.16)

Availability: spring, summer and autumn

Guided: Guidance languages Finnish and English

What's included: All transportations, guidings, home visit with walk by the lake and a picnic lunch, walk in the garden, preparing food together, writing post cards, sauna, towels and meal at Laine family.

Participants are advised to wear comfortable and warm clothing and hiking boots.

How to get there: The bus will pick you up from the Helsinki-Vantaa airport, harbor or from some hotel



tourism destinations, they are particularly seeking local and traditional food and sometimes the possibility to participate in local food preparation, which can forge an even stronger link to the destination.

A tourism product on the other hand is a designed combination of tourist attractions, facilities, services and activities around a specific element of interest that generates a comprehensive tourist experience (UNWTO). They are often based on the attractions but combine different kinds of services in them. Thus, an attraction alone is very rarely a saleable tourism product!

To be able to be marketed under a joint destination image, it is important that all the products meet certain minimum quality requirements. To be successful, the products also need to take the target groups' requirements into consideration. A farmer may have a particular basic facility or product characteristic, for example, an apple orchard, in which the product offering is based, however, the way in which it should be presented, and which elements should be included may considerably differ between customer groups. This highlights even more strongly the need to understand the customer demands. One way to do this is to gain information from consumer surveys and trends, another could be to use experts, familiar with the aimed customer group to evaluate the products. In addition, study visits to other product providers often give valuable insight and ideas for developing one's own product provision.

As with the whole destination, component products need their unique content and selling points too. One central element of a rural lifestyle product is experience and engaging with local people; thus, rural lifestyle products are more often connected with activities rather than sightseeing. The role of the local guide is also important in interpreting rural lifestyle to tourists.

Human resource development

The development of sustainable and competitive tourism destination requires the **skilled workforce**. In the rural context, the availability of such workforce may pose a challenge for destination development, as rural societies are unlikely to have a variety of educational institutions introducing tourism education and training and consequently skilled professional workforce suited to local needs. Thus, it is often very important for rural destination organisations to closely collaborate with educational institutions outside their area,

for example by providing trainee positions to secure the availability of the workforce. It is equally important that small tourism businesses acknowledge their own responsibilities in identifying the training and skills needs of their employees and investing in them so that they can perform their duties well. A reputation of a good employer who takes care of their employees, is also an important intangible business resource that increases the interest of potential new employees.

When considering rural lifestyle products, it may also be that entrepreneurs are not professionals in tourism business, or they may not even have an enterprise as such. Instead, they may be farmers, pensioners, handicraft enthusiasts or village association activists. Therefore, they may not have any tourism related education either, while at the same time they may offer unique authentic and high-quality tourism products that could have potential in the markets. In these cases, intermediaries, such as DMO representatives or tour operators, are needed to combine tourism professionalism with these authentic rural products. Good examples of sustainable rural tourism businesses and creative and entrepreneurial thinking can be found at www.skilltour.eu.

Supply channels

A supply channel refers to the process by which a product reaches the end consumer of goods and services. Without a working supply channel, the products cannot be sold. In the tourism context it includes, for example, the way tourists get information on products and especially the different ways in which they can be purchased (online shops, tour operators, travel agencies etc). Supply channel planning is one of the most important elements to be considered from the very beginning of the product and destination development. Often SMEs think that the intermediaries, like online platforms or tour operators, charge too large a proportion of the product price as a commission, e.g. 26-28% and by approaching the end customers directly would save this money for the company. This approach, however, does not take into consideration how expensive it is to reach end consumers and especially how difficult it is to gain the visibility needed in their target market. Sometimes intermediaries can also increase the customers' trust towards the products as a well-known intermediary 'guarantees' the quality with its own brand and standards.

The need for intermediaries often depends on the target market. For local markets or easily reached niche markets, marketing and selling directly can work well. However, the wider the target group is and the further away the target market is, the more difficult or even impossible, it is to reach for a small rural company or small destination.

The following table summarizes the above described implementation steps of the rural destination development as well as highlights their rural characteristics.

Dimension	Examples of Rural Lifestyle characteristics
Accommodation	Lack of them or lack of volume Need to harmonise the quality, but interesting unique offers are typical Lack of potential specific needs for foreign customer groups Potentially long distances between accommodation and attractions
Hospitality	Community involvement important – difficult to control Unique authentic personalities full of local character Lack of skills among the part-time entrepreneurs or locals taking part in the programmes
Accessibility	Needs special focus in rural areas: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Lack of public transport provision ■ Lack of information for customers ■ Internet connection not always stable or sufficient
Infrastructure	The economic viability of investments Quality variations
Attractions/product development	Small companies – skills for product development Product orientated approach instead of demand orientation Are the opportunities for authentic products recognised? Unharmonized quality Social sustainability, Barcelona effect

Dimension	Examples of Rural Lifestyle characteristics
Common destination brand & image and destination marketing	Unique selling points Marketing with co-operation partners, limited resources and visibility Destination marketing instead of company level marketing
Human resources	Interesting personas create part of the product Lack of workforce Role of voluntary work e.g. via village associations Language skills
Supply channels	Are there any channels specialising in rural lifestyle products? Existing DMO? Co-operation with tour operators Distance between the SME and target markets

Cross-cutting themes

Common branding is a **marketing** process aiming to help the customers, tourists identify a particular rural destination and shape their perceptions and opinions on the destination and its products. Accordingly, a successful brand can establish a valuable competitive edge for a destination over other tourism destinations. It has been suggested that branding of rural destinations is the process of developing a different identity and personality than a competitor destination has (Cai 2002). More specifically, tourism destination branding can be defined as follows:

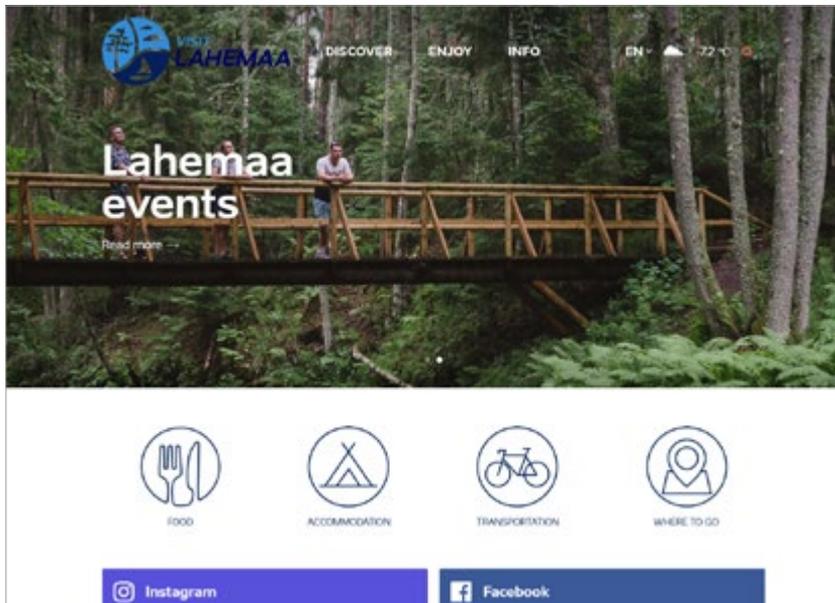
Destination branding is the set of marketing activities that

1. support the creation of a name, symbol, logo, word mark or other graphic that readily identifies and differentiates a destination
2. consistently convey the expectation of a memorable travel experience that is uniquely associated with the destination
3. serve to consolidate and reinforce the emotional connection between the visitor and the destination
4. reduce consumer search costs and perceived risk. Collectively, these activities serve to create a destination image that positively influences consumer destination choice.

Source: Blain, C., Levy, S.E. and Brent Ritchie, J.R. (2005)

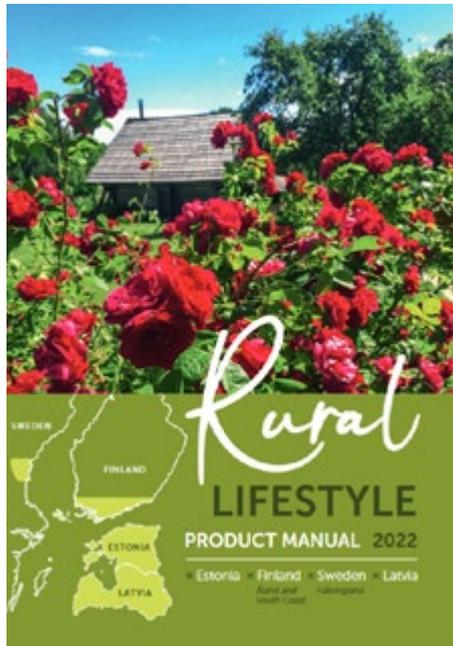
Branding can include logos as well as associated taglines. Ultimately, branding is about being recognisable and standing out from others. A common brand is the basis for destination marketing, which aims to attract visitors by increasing the awareness of the destination and successful destination marketing is based on the uniqueness of the destination. Destination marketing usually includes a destination website which showcases unique selling points and communicates directly with the target audience(s) by promoting the destination through images, videos and virtual reality tours. It should be remembered that social media marketing has become a more and more important part of the destination's marketing and includes the destination's own marketing channels, but also the travellers producing content on their own social media channels, like bloggers, YouTubers, TikTokers, and Instagram personalities. When marketing a common brand, it is important to keep in mind the identified target segments, since tailoring the marketing arguments accordingly is the key in successful destination promotion.

An example of rural destination marketing webpage:



Despite the growing importance of digital marketing and promotion of rural tourism destinations, investing only in digital marketing is not entirely sufficient. Nowadays marketing of any tourism destination needs to be multi-channel, i.e. utilising both online and offline marketing channels. Using both types of marketing channels does not mean separate marketing campaigns but rather a marketing mix where the offline marketing strategy is supported and complemented by the online marketing, and vice versa (Van Bruggen et al. 2010). Examples of offline marketing are participation in travel fairs and expos, newspapers and magazines, radio and television adverts and sponsorships. In order to exploit these offline channels, some marketing material, like brochures, booklets and PR-gifts, based on the common brand, are often required.

An example of a rural tourism destination brochure (<https://www.maaturism.ee/index.php>). Sometimes you can use the same brochure for both online and offline marketing.



Sustainability as a cross-cutting element

During the past five years, a focus on sustainable and responsible tourism has become mainstream. The topic is not only relevant for niche markets or 'sustainability enthusiasts' but has morphed into a basic expectation of customers as well as intermediaries. It has been stated that like digitalisation earlier, sustainability has become a 'must' in the tourism industry. Therefore, it can be predicted that in the future sustainability will also be a requirement for accessing different co-operation marketing and selling schemes.

Rural tourism and especially rural lifestyle products often create a sustainable image for the customers as they are typically small scale and are implemented in natural environments. In that sense it is easy to emphasise a sustainable image of these products in marketing. However, small scale tourism in the natural environment alone does not make the products sustainable and there is a risk that the customers' expectations for sustainability are not met in practice, which can cause severe image damage.



Sustainability covers ecological, social and economic pillars. Ecological solutions are often discussed, and since tourism as an activity can never have truly zero carbon emissions, different carbon compensation schemes have raised a lot of interest in tourism development. These also have potential in destination development, especially in rural areas. Some compensation methods, for example improving carbon sequestration in forests or fields, can provide local solutions instead of buying carbon compensations from global markets.

In rural settings, social sustainability is also extremely important, particularly where products are based on authenticity and local culture. If the cultural sustainability is spoilt, the unique selling points of the whole destination can be lost. Since the local community plays an important role in the tourism experience, maintaining social sustainability is also vital for the tourism product quality. Actors other than the actual tourism company help form the experience, thus a negative attitude of locals towards tourism can harm the product quality. Actually, the threshold for social sustainability violations can be lower in rural than in urban areas due to the lower amounts of services and infrastructure available. This can be especially true of rural lifestyle products, which aim to provide tourists with authentic experiences, i.e. engaging them with the everyday life of locals, and can be sensitive concerning social sustainability. For example, if the only road to the village centre often becomes blocked by tourist parking, it does not take too many cars or tourists to annoy the locals. Or if the tourists 'overtake' the local festivals. Thus, the social carrying capacity can be easily exceeded (so called Barcelona effect) even by a low level of tourism if there is not a collective positive attitude towards it. Understanding the limits of social carrying capacity is one of the more vital elements in rural lifestyle destination development.

Evaluation of the tourism destination

Finally, it is important to remember that regular evaluation is an important step in developing a sustainable tourism destination since it provides information fundamental to enhanced visitor experience, increased bottom-line and effective risk management, among others. Even though financial performance is often highlighted in the evaluation process, this is just one aspect of it. A focus on only economic figures provides a too simplistic and one-sided understanding about the real destination performance. Therefore, a more ho-

listic evaluation of a tourism destination is suggested, like the 4E framework that includes the evaluation of economy, efficiency, effectiveness, and equity of a tourism destination. More specifically, whereas economy refers to the extent of tourism's contribution to regional economic development, efficiency details the ratio between the inputs and outputs of tourism development, effectiveness of the quality of the tourism experience and equity refers to the welfare that tourism brings to destination communities and measures the extent to which residents benefit from tourism development (Luo 2018).

In practice, the evaluation of a tourism destination necessitates some commonly agreed indicators that are monitored. In order to get started with the evaluation, the European Commission has provided a toolkit for sustainable destinations. This toolkit includes 27 suggested core indicators divided into four sections, namely destination management, economic value, social and cultural impact and environmental impact. The toolkit can be found in: <https://ec.europa.eu/docsroom/documents/6657/attachments/1/translations/en/renditions/native>

When evaluating the economic impact of rural lifestyle tourism, it is important to measure, not only the amount of money tourists spend in tourism companies, but also their other spending in the region. In fact, it has been estimated that 2/3 of the tourist income is generated in a region by companies outside the tourism sector, such as petrol stations and grocery shops etc. In addition to this direct impact, one should also understand regional effects, i.e. how the increased income starts circulating in the region. This can be via increased consumption by locals' or as investments and their impacts further to the local economics. More on the economic effects of tourism, see e.g. The HUNTOUR guidebook for evaluating the economic impact of hunting tourism: <https://helda.helsinki.fi/bitstream/handle/10138/350974/Reports%20220.pdf?sequence=5>

TAKE-AWAY MESSAGES

- **Unique authentic product possibilities**, however, destination development is about comprehensive tourism and community development.
- **Rural settings** result in particular challenges – limited resources, focus on the accessibility
- **Rural lifestyle product lines** entail certain characteristics: authenticity, fragmented nature of tourism provision, small operators, lack of tourism professionalism.
- **Local communities** have a huge role, not only the entrepreneurs but the whole community influences the tourism experience → local social acceptance needed.
- **The role of the DMO** – destination management organisation is not necessarily the same as destination marketing organisation. One may not even exist in rural areas. Different levels of destinations and DMOs?
- Strong **original brand** identifies a destination.
- Market-oriented approach should be **matched with** the local resources.
- Development of a rural lifestyle destination **combines tourism development and rural community development**. Local community development has a significantly bigger role in the rural setting when compared to the urban one.



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ANNEX. CHECKLIST FOR RURAL LIFESTYLE PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT

This checklist is made to help you to evaluate your potential and development needs in order to provide rural lifestyle products.

The practical level tips presented here are based on the studies and experiences collected together in Rural Lifestyle project. This is not an exclusive list, but hopefully gives you an idea of this product category.



GOOD LUCK WITH YOUR PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT!

Rural lifestyle products are based on the **authentic rural experiences**: they allow tourists to get to know past and especially the modern life and people in the countryside by visiting destinations outside cities and with strong unique identities. Rural lifestyle products are based on the **authentic rural experiences**: they allow tourists to get to know past and especially the modern life and people in the countryside by visiting destinations outside cities and with strong unique identities. **Interaction** with local people plays a key role in these products and they are more about participating than merely sightseeing.

The guests have an opportunity to experience life in small towns, farms and businesses with the local people, observing or engaging in everyday life in areas such as gardening, modern design crafts, healthy food, innovative products, architecture, environment and green lifestyle. Even though rural lifestyle can be defined by attributes such as authentic and local, **rural lifestyle products must also be planned and designed** like any other tourism product to be saleable and successful in the marketplace.

NOTE: You do not need to include all these elements in your products, but should cover the basic issues.

Things to pay attention to in Rural Lifestyle products Try to be as objective and realistic as possible when filling in the checklist!	OK	Needs to be improved	Not relevant or possible to provide in my product
Have you selected your target markets and are you aware of their demands?			
Have you found your unique selling points that differentiate you from other rural tourism products?			
Are your unique selling points clearly communicated to customers and intermediaries?			
Rural lifestyle products are based on local culture, does your product display the local traditions in an authentic manner?			
Rural lifestyle products are particularly based on modern local culture, does your product display this in an authentic manner?			
The farther away the tourists come from, the more the local lifestyle needs to be interpreted to them, including in your marketing and info material . Your customers need to understand the product to be able to buy it. Is this information provided in the language that your customer groups prefer?			
Does your product provide opportunities for the customers to take part in different kinds of activities during their visit? Not only sight-seeing!			
Is it possible to meet and interact with local people during/in your product?			
Storytelling often has a major role rural lifestyle products. These stories often relate to changes in the rural lifestyle and the traditional perceptions of the countryside. Does your product present interesting stories?			
Places that locals visit are of interest to tourists and include not only the “biggest” sights (local cafés, parks, bars etc.). Are these kinds of elements part of your product?			
The role of guides is extremely important in interpreting local experiences/activities. Is interpretation provided in the language that your customer groups prefer? NOTE: a human guide is preferable in rural lifestyle products compared with other kinds of guidance, e.g. information boards, brochures or videos.			
Tasting local food is an important experience – stories/origin of food should be available in the language your target group prefers. Always use local food, if possible!			
Taking part in local activities (along with local people) is often appreciated, even outside the scheduled programme . Provide information on local activities, like markets, village festivals, etc., “what-to-do” handouts!			

Things to pay attention to in Rural Lifestyle products Try to be as objective and realistic as possible when filling in the checklist!	OK	Needs to be improved	Not relevant or possible to provide in my product
“Peeking” into everyday activities e.g. local supermarkets is interesting. Can such activities be included in your product?			
Rural Lifestyle products can successfully combine offers from small and micro businesses. Does your product include co-operation with other local companies? Be sure to harmonise the quality within the product offer?			
Hospitality plays a major role to creating rural lifestyle experiences. Have your employees been given sufficient training and information on hospitality requirements?			
Tourists rarely stay in one company only and encounters with locals, e.g., at petrol stations or village shops can impact on their experience. Local community members may help tourists to “discover” and enjoy a more intense experience of the place or spoil it. Do your tourism activities have acceptance from the local community, can you achieve this somehow?			
Does your infrastructure meet the requirements of your product and target markets?			
Are there any ways you can improve the required infrastructure with relatively small investments?			
Sustainability and responsibility are attributes often linked to rural lifestyle products by customers. Can you meet their expectations and have you paid attention to sustainable tourism requirements?			
Easy access is the key! Provision of transportation from a harbour, main bus station etc. is seen as a competitive advantage, especially by foreign target groups.			
Clear signposting is essential for those tourists arriving with their own transportation. Does your product take this into account?			
Information on public transportation must be available, clear and up-to-date.			
Intermediaries, e.g. online platforms or tour operators normally charge a proportion of the product price as a commission. However, trying to reach end consumers directly can be difficult and very expensive. Have you considered, which supply channels are most sensible and economically viable in your case?			
Does your product image match that of your destination? Regional and national tourism boards have established images as part of their marketing. Make the best use of these in an innovative way!			

