

Sustainable Tourism Development in the North Vidzeme Biosphere Reserve

Nature and cultural heritage

The North Vidzeme Biosphere Reserve is the only Biosphere Reserve of Latvia situated in the North-West of the country in the border region with Estonia. In relation with several EU and international funded projects this region develops to a sustainable tourism site and is a good practise example for an integration of local community into a sustainable economic development, related to natural values of the reserve. A bunch of awareness raising activities is used to enhance a cooperate identity among local community members as a basis for sustainable development of the region.



Lessons learned:

To develop a quite big area like the North Vidzeme Biosphere Reserve in a sustainable way, several things should be taken into consideration:

- Administration: a central institution is needed to coordinate interests of stakeholders, facilitate communication within the territory and facilitate cooperation.
- Economy: protection concepts should integrate income possibilities for the local population.
- Environment: the bearing capacity of the environment should be evaluated to ensure a really sustainable touristic use, furthermore awareness raising activities are of high importance to promote nature values to the local community and make its potencial visible.

The North Vidzeme Biosphere Reserve is a good practise example for the combination of these issues through the administartive staff working within the reserve.

Main idea:

The main idea is to develop the area of the Biosphere Reserve to an attractive sustainable tourism destination which ensures a long term conservation of the natural and cultural values within the territory and creates new income possibilities for the local community. Moreover, the Biosphere Reserve should be a kind of large scale laboratory where new and optimal practices to manage a succesfull coexistence of natural and human activities is tested and demonstrated.

Background information:

The North Vidzeme Biosphere Reserve is situated in the North-West of Latvia, bordering Estonia in the North and the Gulf of Riga in the West. The reserve was established on 11 December, 1997, and covers a total area of 457.600 hectares, containing a large number of endangered habitats and land cover types. The territory is mainly of rural character; just a few small towns are situated within the region.

Activities:

The following paragraphs give a brief description of the methods and activities targeting the main development idea of the Biosphere Reserve.

Participation of the local population

- Involvement in habitat management activities: Local farmers are involved in habitat restoration and management activities. In order to ensure a continuous management, contracts were set up with farmers to apply for agro-environmental support from the European Union for biologically valuable grasslands.
- Improvement of the communication structure: About 40 meetings with local people were organised in the Biosphere Reserve with the aim to create a network between the coastal municipalities inside the reserve to improve the communication structure and enforce a discussion about cooperative development possibilities.
- Training of nature guides: Nature guides were trained by the administrative staff who can offer guided tours to tourists and gain financial benefit from a sustainable tourism inside the reserve. Moreover, they might act as multipliers and train other persons.
- Support of local environment friendly businesses: Local people are supported to open environment friendly businesses. After publishing the announcement, the reserve administration received 26 applications for new businesses, which are supported by up to 25 % of the financial resources necessary to start the business.
- Tourism route: This initiative, linking the Biosphere Reserve with the Nigula Nature Reserve in Estonia, tries to involve local businesses and cultural institutions through the development of tourist routes. A bilingual – Latvian and Estonian - newspaper was published to promote the project.

Awareness raising activities

- Voluntary monitoring programme: Local people can participate in the monitoring to raise the identification with their natural surroundings.
- Local education centre: To increase environmental knowledge of the local population as a precondition for an increasing environmental awareness, a local education centre was established.
- Common logo: A common logo was designed to enforce a cooperative identity.
- Additional activities: Nature education trails were built here and lessons about the concept of the reserve were held in local schools.

Bearing capacity of the ecosystems

- A study about the bearing capacity was carried out to ensure a sustainable development of tourism infrastructure along the river Salaca.

Outcomes and results:

Management activities inside the reserve are diverse and convey development into a right direction. It is particularly important under the circumstances when the size of the area is big and at the same time it lacks sufficient financial support. Natural values seem to be stable while the economic situation of the local population slowly improves.

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