

ECO-ROUTE Project

**First Regional Workshop
11 October 2003, Igoumenitsa, Greece**

Workshop Minutes



View of the wetlands in the Drepanos area near Igoumenitsa

Present

Project Partners

GREECE

Giorgos Sgouridis

Prefecture of Thesprotia, Greece

Lambros Kissas

Prefecture of Thesprotia, Greece

Fouli Papageorgiou

PRISMA-Centre for Development Studies, Greece

Stratis Babalikis

PRISMA-Centre for Development Studies, Greece

SWEDEN

Ulf Brangefeldt

Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences (SLU) –
Rural Development Centre, Sweden

Elisabet Andersson

Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences (SLU) –
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Tomas Bergenefldt

Swedish Ecotourism Association, Sweden

Kristina Ohman

Rural Development Agency - Skogslandet AB, Sweden

HUNGARY

Iren Kukorelli

West Hungarian Research Institute, Centre for Regional
Studies, Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Hungary



ROMANIA	
Radu Big	Development Centre for SMEs – CDIMM Maramures, Romania
Mirel Mihali	Development Centre for SMEs – CDIMM Maramures, Romania
Lorena Stoica	Carpathian Foundation, Romania
Laura Bojtor	Carpathian Foundation, Romania

Local Entrepreneurs

Ilias Markou	Hotel and restaurant owner in the Acheron Springs
Stavros Konstantinou	Entrepreneur organising horse-riding excursions in the area
Mihalis Pasiakos	Manager of the Environment Information Centre of the Municipality of Sagiada
Christos Zigos	Hotel owner in the Municipality of Igoumenitsa, Ladochori area, representative of the local Association of Small Tourism Units (including rented rooms and apartments)
Sergios Pitoulis	Hotel owner and tour operator in the Municipality of Syvota
Petros Skrekos	Tour operator in the Municipality of Igoumenitsa

Introduction

The central aim of the regional workshops organised in the framework of the ECO-ROUTE project is to provide information on ecotourism labelling to local communities where ecotourism is a relatively new and not well known activity and exchange ideas and experiences among the participating countries. The workshops concentrate on the participation of the local population, entrepreneurs involved in or interested in ecotourism and policy makers with decision-making power on rural development issues. The workshops that will be organised in the context of the ECO-ROUTE project will be held in the following places and times:

- 2nd Regional Workshop in Norrbotten, Sweden in early May 2004;
- 3rd Regional Workshop in Maramures County, Romania in October 2004;
- 4th Regional Workshop in Gyor, Hungary in March 2005; and
- End-of-project International Workshop in Uppsala, Sweden in September 2005.



Opening and greetings

Mr Labros Kissas from the Planning Department of the Prefecture of Thesprotia introduced the local entrepreneurs to the project partners and thanked them for their participation. The workshop included a presentation of the project partners and their regions and a presentation of the local entrepreneurs and their activities. After the presentations, the workshop participants discussed their views on the region's ecotourism development prospects.



The transnational exchange of experience is an important element of the ECO-ROUTE project

Presentations of partners' regions

Romania

Radu Big explained that in Romania after the transition in the 1990s, there has been an increasing effort to enhance the economic development prospects of rural areas through the promotion of tourism. However, the tourism infrastructure is of very low standards, restricting the tourist activities that could be pursued. He talked of Borsa, a small mountain village at the northern edge of the Maramures County, where sustained efforts are made to develop winter tourism and promote the close-by Vasser Valley (a forest area to the borders with Ukraine very rich in natural resources) as an ecotourism destination. On central government level, legislation has been passed for a classification system setting the minimum standards for rural tourism accommodation units. However, most tourist enterprises in the area operate without permission, creating conflict between illegal operators and authorities responsible for the "flower" classification system. The Romanian team expressed their belief that through the ECO-ROUTE project this conflict may be addressed and a mentality for undertaking legal operations be promoted. Lorena Stoica emphasised the opportunities for economic development offered by the project, which in her opinion is the main objective of Romanian rural communities. She inquired if, besides activities, products too such as handicrafts and food are liable for eco-certification.



Hungary

Iren Kukorelli explained that the Győr-Ménfőcsanak-Sopron County includes Szigetkoz, which is a popular tourist destination, and a sensitive area candidate for National Park designation. The main tourist activities in the area include cycling and horse-riding (though there are very strict regulations in place regarding the use of the National Park). In Hungary, there is a “sunflower” classification system for rural tourist enterprises and a “horseshoe” certification system for horse tourism, introduced by the Hungarian Equestrian Association. She noted that both Szelle Horse Ranch and the Association of Rural Tourism (the other two Hungarian Partners involved in the project), are very keen to develop ecotourism activities and receive training to apply for ecotourism labelling. She also mentioned that information on ecotourism activities has been collected from tourism entrepreneurs interviewed in the context of the EDEN project, which will be valuable for the ECO-ROUTE project both as a secondary source of information and as a database of businesses to be contacted for the ECO-ROUTE questionnaire.



Horse-riding is a popular tourist activity in Hungary

Sweden

Kristina Ohman informed the partners that Norrbotten is a vast and very sparsely populated area, close to the Arctic circle with very rich, protected natural resources. She explained that through the Leader initiative they have created a network of tourism entrepreneurs who wish to develop an ecotourism profile. She noted in particular two villages the Leader group has worked with. The main tourist activities include horse-riding, fishing, hunting, rafting, dog sledging and mountain guiding. There is also a rich Sami culture tradition in the area.

Tomas Bergenfeldt presented himself as the manager of a private company (Aventyrsresor) offering ecotourism activities for 20 years, and as a member of the Swedish Ecotourism Association, created in 1996 from an idea developed by the Swedish branch of World Wildlife Fund (WWF). With government funds and support



from the Swedish Travel and Tourism Council and the Society for Nature Conservation, the Association eventually introduced in 2002 the “Nature’s Best” ecotourism labelling system. Tomas Bergenfeldt is a member of the Labelling Committee, which examines the applications and grants the label to tourism products (i.e. no companies are labelled through this system). As far as he knows there has been one more, not so successful, effort to introduce ecotourism labelling, in Australia.

Tomas Bergenfeldt offered to ECO-ROUTE partners the following definition adopted by WWF in 1994 which summarises ecotourism as “*responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and sustains the well-being of local people*”. He then presented the 6 criteria for ecotourism labelling developed by “Nature’s Best” and circulated a Nature’s Best Leaflet and a list of the labelled ecotourism operators in Sweden (about 40). He explained the process for obtaining the label:

- An application form is filled according to the booklet instructions;
- A quality inspector examines the application, makes site visits for inspection and prepares a report which is submitted for review to the Labelling Committee; and
- The Labelling Committee reviews the report during one of its regular meetings (every 4 months) and takes a decision on granting or not the label.



Winter tourism in Sweden

The costs involved, include an application fee of 200-1000 Euros and an annual fee up to 2000 Euros, both fees depending on the size of the enterprise. The Association’s goal is to manage to fund its operation from the fees, given that government funds are no longer available. Around 150 specialists in different ecotourism products and activities were involved in the formulation of the specific criteria for ecotourism labelling for about one and a half year. The central aim of the Association is joint



marketing efforts through the creation of a brand that stands for high quality of travel with ethical value, thus making it easier to the consumer to find good ecotourism products.

Tomas Bergenfeldt informed the partners that the Nature's Best ecotourism labelling system in place in Sweden includes criteria about contribution to local economy when goods are purchased locally. He stressed though that labelling in tourism, a sector involving both services and products, is a rather complex process and this is the reason why labelling systems are not so common and widespread.

Greece

Lambros Kissas explained that the Prefecture of Thesprotia is an area rich in natural and cultural resources featuring a beautiful coastline, mountain ranges, rivers and wetlands of great ecological value, including 3 Natura 2000 sites, traditional settlements and sites of archaeological interest. There are a few tourist entrepreneurs operating near the Acheron river and along the coast involved in ecotourism activities, such as horse-riding, mild forms of rafting, trekking and diving.

Fouli Papageorgiou talked of a Quality Contract agreement in place in Tzoumerka mountains in Greece, which is related to ecotourism labelling. This system involves mountain peaks, which like stars in hotel classification or flowers in the Romanian classification system, are granted to tourist enterprises when certain quality criteria are met, such as respect of local traditional architecture, food and service quality, furniture and protection of the environment.

Presentations by local entrepreneurs

Mr Pasiakos made a presentation of the history and main activities of Sagiada, including pictures and maps from the area. The Municipality of Sagiada lies at the north-western part of the Prefecture of Thesprotia near the Albanian borders, and comprises 5 villages. The coastline, includes the mouth (delta) of River Kalamas, a large area of wetlands with very rich biodiversity (both Natura 2000 protected areas), sandy beaches and about 30 fish farms. The wetlands include saltpan dating from the Medieval period. A network of paths connecting the wetlands with the surrounding settlements exists, which are now used by tourists. There are also several monasteries and ruins of old, abandoned settlements in the area.

Mr Konstantinou showed pictures taken from the riding excursions he organises in the gorge of Acheron, where besides an outstanding natural environment there are many interesting monument sites, such as monasteries and old watermills. He also organises rafting trips on river Acheron, which are rather floating trips in rafts because the river is shallow and calm along that stretch of the river, without any degree of difficulty. There are recreational activities targeted mostly to the Sunday visitors from around the area or day visitors from nearby sea resorts (there are coastal villages in the vicinity that receive large number of tourists during July and August). Talking about



safety standards applied to these activities (eg. no helmet), Mr Konstantinou, explained that the mentality in Greece is such that people are often reluctant to adhere to safety regulations, during recreational activities. He added that his customers are insured against injuries and accidents. He also noted that he is planning some new activities, like 2-day riding excursions, including overnight stay in tents.

Mr Zigos, informed the project team that the Municipality of Margariti had commissioned a study for the tourism development potential of the area, which includes the Lake of Kalodiki (Natura 2000 protected site) where paths for walking and cycling around the lake and a horse-riding facility are proposed.



Local entrepreneurs discussing with the project team the ecotourism development prospects of their area

Mr Pitoulis explained that there are many ancient monuments in the area, there are also entrepreneurs committed to tourism development in the area but there is also increasing competition from other tourist destinations. He explained that in the last few decades they have seen all kinds of tourism attracted to the area but high prices and competition are nowadays limiting the viability of businesses: he noted that investment in quality upgrading and alternative forms of tourism, together with research on the targeted market are essential for the enhancement of the area's tourism development prospects.

Mr Skrekos said that there are about 45 tour operators in the Prefecture but only two of them are involved in ecotourism. He also stressed that although the area is very rich in natural and cultural resources (Kalamas delta, nature reserve in the village of Perdika, wild horses near the village Kirstini, traditional settlements, etc) entrepreneurs lack knowledge and professionalism, eg. there is only one professional mountain guide. In this context, he expressed his belief, and all others agreed with him, that the region will benefit from participating in the ECO-ROUTE project through the exchange of experience and ideas drawn from the other participating regions.



Discussion of the ecotourism development prospects in the area

In the discussion that followed, Tomas Bergenfeldt remarked that ecotourism activities need not be necessarily considered as tough sports in nature but could also be recreational activities such as floating trips in the river. However, to be profitable they must offer high quality, safety, professional standards and be complementary to other activities; those are all essential ingredients for an integrated tourism product which can be marketed perhaps to fewer but well-paying tourists rather than to mass tourism clients. He stressed that to uncover demand for ecotourism, a well-coordinated and intensive effort is needed, on the basis of:

- contacts with travel agents and specialist agents abroad,
- establishment of a website available in different languages, and
- invitations to journalists to “spread the word” in travel magazines.

He also noted that foreign tourists can be targeted, so that are interested in local culture, which however should be promoted in an authentic and not superficial manner. Whereas, Greek tourists are more likely to be interested on the sport-recreational side of activities. He remarked that the local entrepreneurs should “invest in acquiring knowledge”. They may also make use of the experience of Greek emigrants, who returning home from the massive 1950-1970 out migration, bear the advantage of familiarity with Northern cultures.



The wetlands in the Municipality of Sagiada represent a valuable ecotourism destination, provided high quality standards and eco-certification procedures are introduced

There was an issue raised by Romanian partners regarding how could one convince youth that is worth staying in rural areas and make a profit from employment in tourism. Participants argued that most tourism-related jobs are not well paid and are associated with a “low social status”. It is not surprising that in Greece most of these jobs are taken by immigrants who account for almost 10% of the Greek population.



Tomas Bergenfeldt, remarked that professional qualified guides are very well paid abroad, whilst there is demand for ecotourism and similar activities in Greece; the latter is demonstrated by the fact that several foreign businessmen who possess both the experience and qualifications have embarked in successful and profitable ventures in Greece.

Visit to ecotourism destinations in the area

The following day, Sunday the 12th of October 2003, the project team visited the Municipality of Sagiada. In the Environment Information Centre they were greeted by the Mayor Mr Mastoras, who stressed that the Municipality places particular emphasis on environmental protection issues and is committed to provide support for a fruitful collaboration in the framework of the project. Then, the project team watched a video filmed in the area, showing the nature-created wetlands and their rich biodiversity, and a rafting trip up the springs of the River Kalamas. After the video, the project team visited the wetlands and other potential ecotourism destinations in the area.

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