

ECO-ROUTE

A Route to Sustainable Rural Development Through Ecotourism Labelling

ECO-ROUTE: A ROUTE TO SUSTAINABLE RURAL DEVELOPMENT THROUGH ECOTOURISM LABELLING



“An interest-based example of encouraging bonding, bridging and linking in rural areas”

Stratis Babalikis, Ilmajoki, June 2005



Leonardo
da Vinci

Aim of the project

The ECO-ROUTE project **aims** to promote an ecotourism certification system in the pilot regions and to help local communities increase their capacity to apply such a system effectively.

The local project teams have put together a training package for professionals and entrepreneurs involved in ecotourism, in order to boost local economic prospects, protecting the natural and cultural assets of rural areas at the same time. To achieve this a local task force has been set up, making efficient use of the social capital in the pilot areas to offer advice and support.

The **benefits** from the project are expected to improve local situations in a multitude of ways:

- The destination's nature, culture and people are treated with respect and consideration;
- Local populations get their economy strengthened;
- Tour operators get more and more interested customers; and
- Tourists get to experience more.

Pilot Areas

The introduction of the ecotourism certification is piloted in four European regions:

- Lapland in Northern Sweden;
- The coastal area of Epirus in North-western Greece;
- The Danube region in West Hungary; and
- The Carpathian region in North-western Romania.

These regions feature rich and diverse natural and cultural resources with varied degrees of tourism development. A range of ecotourism activities are on offer and there is potential for further and more quality-orientated development.

The composition of the partnership is mixed, consisting of research institutes and consultancies specialising on rural development, Universities, NGOs and associations focusing on the development of SMEs as well as practitioners (tour operators, other tourist entrepreneurs).

Project implementation so far....

- Reviews of the legal and regulatory framework have been produced for each country involved in the project and surveys of entrepreneurs offering ecotourism activities in the pilot areas have been conducted to identify firstly, ecotourism activities offered in the pilot areas and secondly, explore entrepreneurs' experiences, attitudes and aspirations.
- Task forces have been set up in each pilot area, bringing together members of the local project teams, local entrepreneurs and representatives of local authorities and other social partners with an interest on ecotourism development.
- Local action plans have been prepared; they are based on the following **steps**:

Step 1 – The task force selects businesses on the basis of the survey results in each pilot region;

Step 2 – A list of businesses, their activities and certification possibilities is prepared;

Step 3 – Training of entrepreneurs (theoretical and practical part);

Step 4 – Practical work of trainers – study their own process for obtaining the label;

Step 5 – The best labelling options feasible in each pilot area are examined

Step 6 – The labelling process on the basis of the selected option is defined (a step-by-step approach)

Contribution to social capital...

- A package for non-formal learning has been put together and training has started in all regions, attracting groups of approximately 15 entrepreneurs. This gave the chance to people with common interests and worries to sit together, for the first time in many cases, and discuss their problems, find solutions, build trust and networks. Overall, these gatherings proved invaluable for strengthening the local social capital. It must be noted that the survey in Greece showed that entrepreneurs/professionals are not very likely to participate in businesses or professional associations.
- Project activities and results are widely disseminated through a multi-language project website and four regional workshops in the pilot areas that greatly promoted social networks, “think-tanks” for discussion of problems-solutions and for exchange of ideas.

Contribution to social capital...

The project emphasised on making efficient use of all forms of capital described in chapter 1 of the Thematic Guide:

- Physical and economic: tourist and other infrastructure
- Environmental and cultural: natural and cultural assets of the pilot areas
- Human: enthusiast local entrepreneurs with a vision and will to promote environment-friendly activities
- Social: common values, building trust and networking to create an integrated tourist product in the area.

It is worth noted that this project was a “follow-up” of another one which was more limited in geographic terms aiming to promote tourist development that is balanced with environmental planning; narrow personal interests, short-term vision and pursue of easy profit resulted in conflict that hindered the strengthening of social bonds. ECO-ROUTE project, having focused on an expanded territory and on synergies among professionals and entrepreneurs sharing the aim to diversify and expand the limited tourist product offered in the region (“sea and sun”), overall seem to hold better chances for success.

Contribution to social capital...

- In the 3 training seminars held in Greece so far, a consensus on the value of ecotourism has been reached and people have realised the need for a bottom-up approach to prompt the support from public authorities. The seminars gave the chance to people to meet, find out that they share common problems and realise that together they are in a better position to solve them and request help “from above”. The seminars also provided a “platform” for all stakeholders to interact and negotiate, including regional government officials, local entrepreneurs and professionals and made them start thinking that a partnership is perhaps the “ROUTE” to sustainable rural development.
- The local project team hopes that the horizontal bonds created and the “bridges” promoted at regional level in the framework of creating an integrated tourist product, would facilitate vertical links with public bodies, whose support is essential for the successful implementation of the label.

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Legacy....

- A small-scale experiment of awareness raising, training and advice, encouraging networks and strengthening social cohesion through the promotion of a voluntary eco-labelling initiative.
- Project activities and results will be widely disseminated in the international workshop that will be held near Malmo, Sweden, in 22 and 23 September 2005 with the theme *Ecotourism labelling, a route to sustainable rural development*.
- A Good Practice Guide to ecotourism labelling will be produced at the end of the project in order to present how the criteria for an ecotourism certification system can be applied in different environments across Europe.

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Project partners...an extended partnership which promoted social capital itself...

Greece

PRISMA – Centre for Development Studies
Prefecture of Thesprotia
Apeiros Travel Tour Operator

Sweden

SLU – Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, Rural Development Centre
Swedish Ecotourism Association
Skogslandet AB Development Agency

Hungary

West Hungarian Research Institute, Centre for Regional Studies, Hungarian Academy of Sciences
Association of Rural Tourism of Szigetköz
Szelle Horse Ranch

Romania

CDIMM Maramures Foundation for the development of SMEs
Carpathian Foundation
SC Mara International Tour SRL

For further information, please visit:
the project website: www.ecoroute.org

QUESTIONS

- 1- What is in your opinion important for an entrepreneur when entering in cooperation networks with other entrepreneurs?
- 2 – How would you promote sustainable vertical links between SMEs, institutions and other agents?
- 3 - Do you consider that the step-by-step approach for a quality label described in Eco-Route could be introduced to, and benefit, your area? Do you expect the community to be mature enough to come out with a common, long-term vision and support such an initiative? Draw parallels to similar initiatives, if any, you are aware of and discuss actions for enhancing synergies and reinforce the bonding, bridging and linking of the different stakeholders.