

Heritage Trails through Dolenjska and Bela
krajina in Slovenia
Tourism entrepreneurship in action and stakeholders'
relationship

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A multi-stakeholder approach to tourism development

Introduction

One of the beneficial methodologies for growing and developing a level of tourism which is sustainable and enhances the totality of local and regional environments is a multi-stakeholder approach to tourism development. In this paper, we present the case of the "Heritage trails through Dolenjska and Bela krajina in SE Slovenia" by which sustainable rural development¹ takes an integrated approach in terms of start-up, implementation and development and is supported by and benefits from the notion of a core of multiple stakeholders.

It is clear that:

- Entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial skills, harnessed in a bottom-up model of development, will have a huge impact on rural and agri-tourist micro-economies at a local community level. The effect in driving wealth creation and expanding employment is measurable in a very tangible and transparent way
- Furthermore, multi-stakeholder tourism projects benefit the ownership transformation process by forcing public², private³ and social⁴ ownership agents and enterprises to work together for common benefit. Because of the bottom up approach the measurable value at an enterprise or agency level is also more tangible and obvious
- We can also see that by engaging local public agencies, the dimension of environmental planning and protection can be assured. In this way the sustainable nature of tourism and its impact on the local environment can be assessed and given due priority
- At the same time, in such integrated projects, individual entrepreneurs begin to comprehend and understand the value of co-operation as well as of competition. A key feature is often the need for small-scale tourism entrepreneurs to develop a promotional mechanism to market their product or service at a wider national and international level. Individually the costs of such an activity are too great for micro-enterprises, but they are

¹ We take this to include cultural & heritage, vinicultural & gastronomic as well as ecological tourism

² By **public** we mean municipal/local government, state agencies and international organisations operating in a local or regional framework

³ By **private** we mean privately owned companies, including quoted or unquoted companies, as well as partnerships or self-employed individuals

⁴ By **social** we mean entities established for mutual benefit, including co-operatives, societies and not-for-profit agencies

possible for groups of enterprises. This evidences how an integrated model enables participants to benefit from the totality and complexity of resources and skills held by all stakeholders

Clearly the model we are referring to, as demonstrated in the Case Study utilised in this paper, has a very precise local/regional orientation. The Heritage Trail of Dolenjska & Bela krajina Case Study has a rural base and is profoundly affected by the necessity to attract tourism inputs without damaging the sensitivities of the rural environment. It also has a strong multi-stakeholder approach which in many ways illustrates the impact in EU-funded programmes of the concept of subsidiarity⁵ - aiming at seamless connectivity between EU supranational policy and funding, member state objectives in macro-economic harmonisation and stabilities and local micro-economic needs.

Case Study

THE DOLENJSKA-BELA KRAJINA HERITAGE TRAIL

INTRODUCTION

It is a paradox that the decade of the 1960's - which saw the emergence of modern sustainable tourism, through the global movement for resource conservation and the limiting of development, also gave rise to a destructive counter-phenomenon! That counter-problem was the explosive rise in air-based international tourism, given added impetus as the result of the deregulation of airline routes in the European economic space. This revolution in low cost and accessible air transport which grew exponentially in the 1990's with the emergence of low-cost budget carriers has become damaging to the environment and culture of many tourist destination-regions. It has taken 40 years to respond effectively to this demanding global process, and to start to achieve sustainable rural regional tourism products and realities.

The rural case-study presented is one of a region in Slovenia along the border with Croatia, where we track a ten year process, from preliminary idea - to the operational reality of sustainable international tourism in a strategically-located destination-region.

1. ORIGINS AND CATALYSTS:

The thirty year period from 1960-1990, saw distinct phases of evolution in tourism, planning, conservation- focused thinking and actions in the Western World. This led to the concepts and processes of sustainable tourism planning. For example, in the UK, by the end of the 1980's a National Task Force on 'Tourism & the Environment'

⁵ The principle of subsidiarity is defined in Article 5 of the Treaty establishing the European Union and was intended to ensure that decisions are taken as closely as possible to the citizen and that constant checks are made as to whether action at supranational level is justified in the light of the possibilities available at national, regional or local level. The Edinburgh European Council of December 1992 issued a declaration on the principle of subsidiarity, which lays down the rules for its application. (source: European Commission, 2007)

had been established in order to provide sustainable tourism guidelines for three problem categories:

- a. the Countryside
- b. Heritage Sites
- c. Historic Cities and Towns

In the case of the Slovenia example explained in the case study, an additional factor is the multiple dynamic of international, national, regional and local agencies involved in the project. These were drawn from public, private and social sources, but the key actors and catalysts who can be identified in this story were the Slovenian Ministry of Agriculture, the Bavarian State Ministry for Agriculture, the Faculty of Architecture in Ljubljana, the European Commission's Tourism Directorate, a Regional Chamber of Commerce, a commercial tourism operator, and at later date, an international market research consultant.

2. INTEGRATED RURAL COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT PROJECT

The CRPOV Programme (Integrated Rural Development and Village Renovation), which commenced in 1990, was associated both with the UN Food & Agriculture Organisation (FAO) and with the Bavarian Ministry for Agriculture. Bavaria helped in the initial phase transferring experience and know-how. CRPOV was based on a bottom-up approach, involving an initial 14 local project-areas, starting in 1991. Two of the project villages were located in the Slovene municipality of Trebnje with around 500 local residents involved in the project. During this period some 250 local projects were developed in Slovenia, primarily aimed at development possibilities for rural economic diversification.

The community development role of CRPOV involved many local village meetings, linked to the economic need for diversification of the rural economy. CRPOV worked together with an expert team on strategy and action. Critically, this case-study relates to a rural region which sits strategically between Ljubljana and Zagreb, on the international motorway from Belgrade to Ljubljana. This has a high location potential for selling locally-sourced food and wine products, as well as craft and tourism products. Tourism is based on the appeal of a gentle landscape of hills and river-valleys - for walking, horse-back riding, cycling, angling, rafting, or the simple enjoyment of its unspoilt character!

The CRPOV, as an Integrated Rural Community Development programme, led the way towards rural product development, and as a by-product, community-based sustainable tourism. Such tourism requires partnership and co-operation between the public, private and the NGO voluntary sectors. Co-operation of this sort was not common in the period 1992 -1995 in Slovene tourism. It was clear, however, that sustainability -in Slovenia or anywhere else - requires community involvement together with the firm the commitment of local actors and producers of products and services. The appeal of such action is to add tourism products to the other rural products, which they complement⁶.

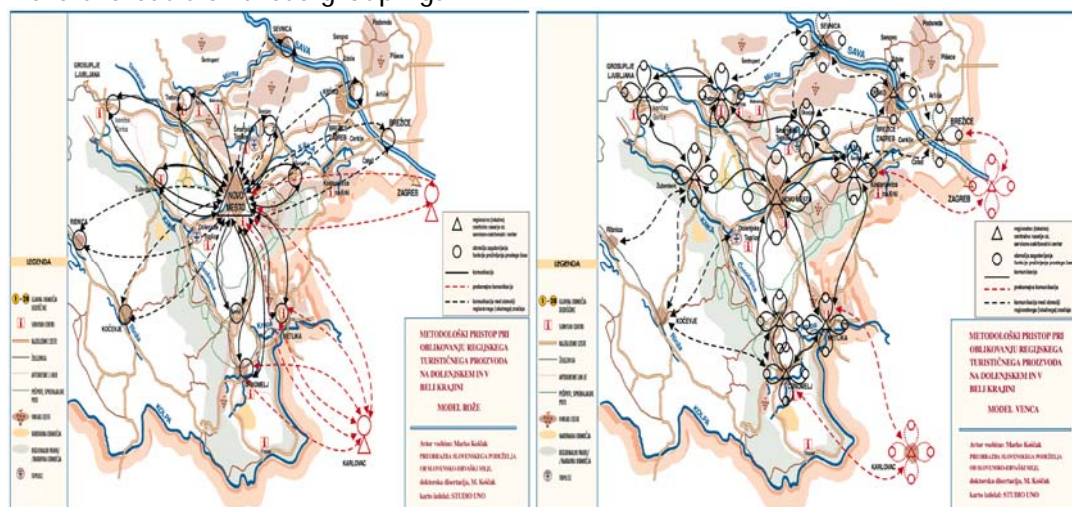
⁶ NB. Community-based rural development is thus an ideal starting point for sustainability, whether in agriculture, and /or in tourism. This creates an 'environment' in which new opportunities for economic diversification, new job-creation, added value to agricultural products, local guiding, and new farm-services can occur. In this process, institutions like an Agricultural Extension Service and others play a very important role, in terms of capacity-building, and of human resource development.

CRPOV resulted in the creation of a tourism product, by offering a themed 'commercial package', by linking with Slovene Railways, in developing a one-day tour. This theme was the main idea of a development strategy, one outcome of which was the 18km long Baraga Walking-Trail. Initially, this product was offered to school pupils. The response was limited, as there was no commercial partner to market and sell the product on the domestic market. However, there were improvements in infrastructure, and in housing, plus local training-schemes to create business opportunities. In 1996, the project was given an Award in Munich, as part of the ARGE- 'Landentwicklung und Dorfeneuerung' development competition. This was also a confidence-building phase for rural people locally, later enabling them to become part of a broader, regional project, with its tourism elements. The Wine Trail was a parallel project to CRPOV, at the national level. The idea behind it was to promote wine products as well as the culture, customs, and traditions of wine-making areas of Slovenia. The effort resulted in 25 Wine Trails, created all round the country.

3. INTERNATIONAL TEAM HERITAGE TRAIL CONSULTANCY

This background of the CRPOV programme as well as the parallel development in terms of Wine Trails, prompted the Regional Chamber of Commerce of Dolenjska & Bela krajina to accept an invitation by a consortium (which had in 1996 secured European Union funding to launch two pilot projects in Slovenia and Bulgaria) to create Heritage Trails. The consortium included Ecotourism Ltd. (a British consultancy firm), PRISMA (a Greek consultancy firm) and ECOVAST (The European Council for the Village and Small Town). All of these were supported by regional and national institutions in the field of natural and cultural heritage.

The UK/Slovene Heritage Trail team conducted a 'Tourist Resource Inventorisation & selection', based upon natural, built and living cultural heritage resources in the selected region. Some 150 sites were identified and proposed by the different partners involved in the participation process for the Heritage Trail. From this large number, 28 sites were selected, to be networked in a trail system for the area. The idea was to develop a tourist product which was capable of offering opportunities for stays of up to seven days in the region. Two key access-forms were used for the clustering of attractions, one a "flower structure", and the other a "garland structure" (see Figures 1 and 2). Existing tourist assets and potentials were the basis of these groupings.



A major result of this work was the creation of a Regional Partnership of 32 organisations, from the public, private and NGO sectors, which signed an agreement to co-operate in the Heritage Trail's implementation phases of marketing and product development. This partnership - working under the umbrella of the Regional Chamber of Commerce - was in operation for 12 years, and was in 2009 transformed into the LEADER Local Action Group - LAG responsible for overall rural development in the region of SE Slovenia including sustainable tourism. From 2011 this partnership also co-ordinates and is responsible for destination management of the region of Dolenjska and Bela krajina (see <http://www.visitdolenjska.eu/?&language=eng>) The partnership supports, co-ordinates and brings together the provider-partners. Work in general consists of marketing activities, product development, and training activities, where different combinations of partners, institutions, and individuals are involved.

For marketing purposes, a local commercial partner - Kompas Novo mesto - was invited into the partnership in 2001, in order to articulate a stronger and more effective assault on foreign markets. Kompas was engaged to act as the marketing agency, on behalf of the Heritage Trail partnership. Although the official launch of the product was in 1997, at the World Travel Market in London, followed in 1998 by a presentation at ITB/Tourist Fair in Berlin, there was no significant response. Foreign markets at that time had limited awareness about any Slovene tourist products, other than what can be described as the constantly featured traditional Slovene Tourist icons such as Lake Bled, Kranjska Gora ski resort, Postojna Cave, and Portoroz seaside resort.

The effective commercial launch of the Heritage Trail at an international level, with a foreign tourist industry adviser and a much greater professionally co-ordinated national approach, was delayed until 2002, in London. There, at the World Travel Market, the launch had the active support of the Slovenian Tourism Board, together with other relevant institutions.

4. STAGES OF COMMERCIAL PRODUCT ADAPTATION, AND IMPLEMENTATION:

Despite the launch of the Heritage Trail in the domestic market, followed by the international launch at the World Travel Market in 2002, the level of response by foreign tour-operators and travel agents was weak. It became clear that external help was required to target appropriate foreign tourism-trade partners as well as to identify and select niche markets. An External Consultant, Professor A.S. Travis of East-West Tourism Consultancy Ltd became employed in this role.

From the market research conducted by Professor Travis on Slovenia's key foreign markets, the special interest markets, with a focus on either cultural tourism or nature-tourism (eco-tourism) were selected. Independent and some major commercial operators were to be approached by phone, fax, or on-line. 200 firms were identified in 7 European countries; of these 60 firms were contacted by at least two contact modes, but only 6 showed some degree of interest.

The problem revealed was that though there is much interest in Slovenia as a high-growth destination country, it was seen by the international industry as one with 3 major attractions - the 'tourism icons' already mentioned - lakes and mountains, caves and sea. For a significant period of time Slovene overseas marketing has tended to focus only on these well-known destinations!

By 2003, low-cost airlines made Slovenia easily accessible to high-spend markets. Air travel cannot be a basis for sustainability, but may have to be used as the initial opening up phase for a new destination or product in the first place. Ultimately connected rail travel access must be the longer term primary aim. However, as this initial stage of opening the Heritage Trail market, the transport access methodology was via the low-cost airline destination airports of Ljubljana (Easyjet), Klagenfurt (Ryanair) and Graz (Ryanair), with access ground transport routing via Ljubljana. In-depth contact with key operators by phone showed that there were two viable special-interest packages, which could appeal commercially:

- a. A Heritage Trail Add-On Package to offers at Bled (Lakes & Mountains) or Ljubljana (City & Culture)
- b. An Integrated new 'Highlights of Slovenia' holidays, which started with 25% of their time at two existing icons (Bled & Ljubljana), then the remaining 75% of the time allocation spent on the Heritage Trail

Testing of this product with a group of six UK travel professionals was extremely successful. A second tour with tour-operators from Germany and the UK in 2004, was less successful. In 2005 a specialist walking-tour firm assembled its bespoke and individualised Heritage Trail offer, and at the time of writing, Independent Tour Operator firms were preparing for launching on-line, two individualised alternative packages.

5. THEMATIC ROUTES - NEXT STAGE DEVELOPMENT...

From these well accepted initials we seek for further development of the product. Our thinking was led by the facts that we experienced ourselves as well as were trends in global tourism industry, namely:

- More than 75 % of tourist from foreign markets are seeking the active holidays,
- More than 50 % of the reservations are made by internet,
- More tourists want to change the destinations every couple of days, ect.

We find out that we have to create the product which:

- Can be used by individual traveller in the same manner than by tour operator
- Will connect actual tourist offer in the region
- Will be supported by all new common and used technologies
- Will support active holidays
- Should be different than other products in the field of active holidays.

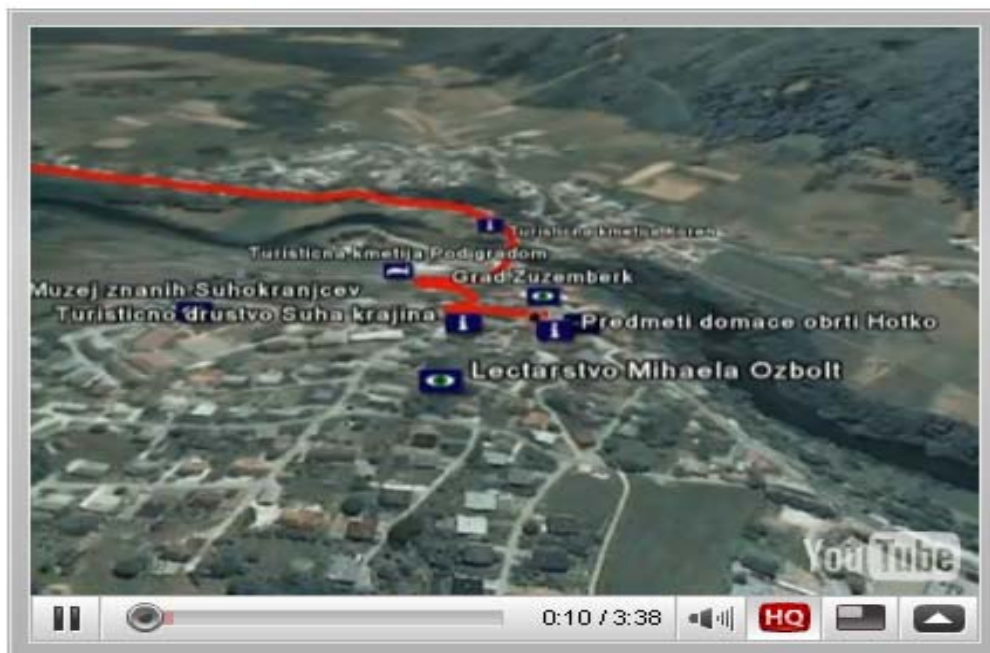
In 2009 and with financial support of the European Regional fund we successfully finished the project, which fulfil all that conditions.

With the project we built "back-bone" for four main activities hiking, biking, horse riding and rowing in the whole region. The routes are connecting natural and cultural heritage of the region with other tourist offer, such as accommodation, activities, information, services etc.



Wholly digitalised and located by GPS, routes are now presented in the renewed portal <http://www.slovenia-heritage.net/> and the new built mobile portal <http://activeslovenia.mobi>. The product also is presented in the facebook and YouTube. Biking and horse riding routes are also visualised.

Main tourist offer of the region is showed on these attractive visualised routes and in the portal.



The potential tourist can detail look and plan its holidays from home (internet). Once on the terrain, they can use Mobile, PDA, GPS devices (and print outs) to navigate himself on the region. For those who don't have enough time to create the holidays by themselves, the active tourist packages are (pre)-prepared and shown on the web as well.

LEARNING POINTS

1. It is evident from the Case Study that the Heritage Recycling for Tourism phase was preceded by the work on Integrated Rural Community Development. This stimulated a community-based approach to development, in which context tourism was a part of the economic mix. This created a real hope of sustainability via the local communities support for a new mixed economy, thus indicating that sustainable development can underpin successful tourism, if the correct strategy is chosen
2. The evidence from the project has also made clear that heritage-resource based tourism development, if it is to be sustainable, must a) show respect for the carrying capacity of resource-zones - be they robust or fragile and b) have rural community involvement and commitment to tourism, because they have a stake in it, and have net gains from it
3. Much tourism development arises because the destination creates potential tourism products, due to the fact that they wish economic gain from them. Rural tourism products have to be adjusted to fit niche market demands that are highly competitive sectors internationally. Thus market awareness and understanding must be built-in early in the development process, or it becomes much longer and harder
4. New tourist destinations are very difficult to launch internationally, even if they have high accessibility, unless they can be linked and tied in to existing tourism icons or magnets. This new Slovene offer had to be adjusted to do just that.
5. The "gateway" identification is critical in new product formulation. Whether this be a selected airport, seaport, railway station or whatever. If the gateway is the airport of an attractive heritage city (such as Ljubljana), then both add-on package possibilities, as well as links to a popular 'short-city break' destination, add great value
6. Continuity of personnel in a development process is of real importance. The role of the Project Manager in initiation and continuity is critical, and the continuing interactions with external partners - who are supportive and share a belief in the integrity of the development, over the long term - is also valuable
7. This model ultimately is one of community-based multiple-stakeholders, having the equal support of small rural operatives and major agencies. The support from several levels: local, regional, national, and international, have enabled the thirteen year development-cycle of the Dolenjska-Bela Krajina HT project to be achieved

Conclusion: Critical Success Factors

There are good reasons why the Slovene Heritage Trail model is being successfully adopted in several neighbouring countries as an initiative for rural regeneration through sustainable tourism, namely:

Factor 1 - Economic regeneration

A heritage trail is created as a tool for rural economic regeneration. The heritage trail extends tourism from existing centres into new and undervisited areas, by increasing the number of visitors, extending their stay, and diversifying the attractions and services offered to them: expansion, extension and diversification.

Factor 2 - Contributing to regional tourism development

The heritage trail is a tourism product which makes the natural and cultural heritage of a region the focal point of the offering. The development of such a product is, therefore, an integral component of the development of the whole region as a tourism destination. However, a heritage trail is only one product, and many regions have other tourism products on offer which may not be included in the trail. In creating heritage trails in Slovenia, there was frequently a temptation to include all tourism attractions and services in the region. But to give into such a temptation would have been to lose the focus of a well defined tourism product.

Factor 3 - Complementing other tourism products

Although a heritage trail focuses on only some of the attractions of a region, it can be complementary to other tourism products on offer. For example, it can contribute to economies of scale in regional promotion - in Slovenia, the heritage trail and spa tourism were promoted jointly, and costs of this shared. A heritage trail can also contribute to a wider choice of products for target markets. Taking the example of Slovenia again, spa tourists may be interested in the heritage trail product, and heritage trail tourists may enjoy the spa facilities.

Factor 4 - Transferability

The heritage trails concept is transferable to other regions and countries where there is sufficient natural and cultural heritage to attract tourists and where there is a local desire both to benefit from tourism and to safeguard that heritage. This is particularly the case in parts of central and eastern Europe where established settlement patterns and rural economies have developed similarly to those in Slovenia.

Factor 5 - Sustainable tourism

A heritage trail focuses on the natural and cultural assets of a rural region. This runs the risk of exposing some of the most vulnerable sites in a region to excessive numbers of tourists. The preparation of a heritage trail, therefore, must include a tourism »carrying capacity study« at each proposed tourism site. If a sudden increase in tourists risked damaging the physical or natural attributes of a site, or if it were to exceed the tolerance of the local people, it should not be included in the heritage trail until preventive measures can be implemented.

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