

Innovation in Rural Tourism (InRuTou) project - implications for visitor management in protected areas

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Tourism Development in Rural Communities

Many communities in rural and mountainous areas are facing challenges, including unemployment, depopulation, environmental degradation and social problems. According to the World Tourism Organization (WTO), rural tourism plays an important role in rural development, as it offers an opportunity for income generation, job creation (Sharpley, 2002) and economic diversification (Brandth & Haugen, 2011).

The ‘EU Strategic Guidelines for Rural Development’ comprise as the third priority: “Improving the quality of life in rural areas and encouraging diversification of the rural economy” (European Commission, 2006) and emphasize the diffusion of ICT as an important factor for the diversification of rural livelihoods (Galloway, Sanders, & Deakins, 2011).

As evidenced by research, the mainstream rural tourism development frequently does not empower rural mountain communities, as they are often excluded from the development processes (Sproule, 1996).

The project Innovation in Rural Tourism (InRuTou)

The project Innovation in Rural Tourism (InRuTou), funded by the Lifelong Learning Programme of the Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency of the European Union, was launched in January 2012 with the objective of providing new skills and competencies to rural tourism managers.

InRuTou aims at creating tourism capacities based on specific local necessities in the rural mountain communities of the Carpathians, the Alps and the Apennine, and testing them in the pilot areas in Poland, Romania and Ukraine, Italy and Austria. Overall, sustainable community-based tourism development shall be fostered through the project.

The planned InRuTou activities

- Promoting tourism as a development economic opportunity, leveraging on New Media for the creation, administration and promotion of rural tourism initiatives.
- Fostering community consultation processes, networking and destination governance through the formation of partnerships on local and regional levels.
- Creating a pedagogical training model for empowering rural communities in the establishment of tourism activities.
- Creating a set of Open Source digital tools and learning contents in open educational resources (OER) for European Rural Tourism Stakeholders
- Supporting participating communities in pilot tourism product creation, using the developed technological tools.
 - Training the local population to use created technological tools for local heritage promotion and local tourism product development
 - Increasing awareness of the local residents of the international, regional, national and local information resources and tourism – related processes and of ways to engage in them.
 - Training a number of rural innovators/opinion leaders to act as multipliers
- Promoting a comprehensive view of rural tourism attractions in the selected locations via online and mobile promotional e-tools
- Transferring the innovative methodology and tools to wider areas of the EU and the Neighbourhood.

Current project status

Community consultations have been held in the pilot areas and questionnaires conducted. Results of the background analysis have shown that rural communities are facing distinct challenges and thus, need to gain capacities in specific competence fields. The results are used to construct the pedagogical training framework and develop electronic modules, which will be used to train the local tourism actors in the participating communities.

The role of research in the project

Research plays an important role in several aspects of the InRuTou project: in the background analysis, used to adjust the training to the needs of the participating communities; in the evaluation of the project results, and in presenting the project to academic community, in the fields of tourism development, vocational and educational training and e-learning, to promote further findings in these spheres.

Protected areas and rural tourism development

One focus of sustainable regional development efforts, which also plays a role in tourism attraction, is protection of biodiversity, natural resources and unique natural landscapes via establishment of protected areas (PAs).

PAs can facilitate preservation of cultural heritage and traditional land use, provide alternative opportunities of socio-economic development, and support income – generation activities, such as tourism (e.g. Dredge & Thomas 2009), in the surrounding local communities. These perspectives could mean that PAs could provide the platform of cooperation, knowledge and experience sharing in the field of rural tourism development. If managed accordingly, this could help prevent land use-related conflicts between local inhabitants and PAs.

Protected areas in the InRuTou project

Protected areas are involved in the InRuTou project in most pilot areas, and in several ways: by participating in community consultations and supporting project implementation.

The potential impacts of the InRuTou project on Protected Area Visitor Management

Although protected areas are not the main focus of the InRuTou project, they are considered as potential project beneficiaries, as part of the local communities. As such, PAs could profit from the project, including in the field of PA visitor management, and specifically by attracting more visitors.

PA staff could act as the local tourism innovators/opinion leaders, or cooperate with other local organizations/individuals assuming this purpose. As such, they could be trained by the open source courses, developed by the InRuTou project, and use the electronic tools to create and advertise innovative tourism offers. Such offers, combining various activities within the PA with the local community attractions, could interest a more diverse range of visitors.

The tourism offers could also be developed in accordance with each protected area's visitor rules and restrictions.

In addition, participation of the PA in the community cooperation process, which forms the basis of *InRuTou*, could increase awareness among the local population about the PA itself, leading to increased local visitors, and other advantages for PA management.

The role of research in the process

The above process can be facilitated by research focused on the impacts of the training on PA staff and their competencies in tourism development and visitor management. A participatory study with PA staff could contribute to developing an additional module geared towards PAs and addressing visitor management specifically.

The poster will present the project, partners, and process to-date, with a focus on participating communities and protected areas and their cooperation in the local tourism development.

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