

Creating a transnational ecotourism offer: The MEET Experience

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Introduction

Despite the environmental and cultural importance of the Mediterranean, many immediate and long-term threats to biodiversity and local cultures persist, including the region's reliance on revenue from mass tourism. Ecotourism has been demonstrated to be a form of tourism that is respectful to nature and culture which engages local people and brings significant economic benefits to local communities without the disruptive effects that mass tourism brings in its wake.

The Mediterranean Experience of Ecotourism (MEET) is an EU-funded initiative, designed to harness the potential of ecotourism in the region. Having recently completed its three-year project life at the end of 2015, and involved 25 protected areas in 8 countries, MEET's goal is to continue integrating new protected areas to expand the conservation and economic benefits of sustainable, respectful and nature-oriented tourism across the Mediterranean Basin.

MEET Approach: creating a Mediterranean DMO

The Mediterranean Experience of Ecotourism (MEET) is a target-oriented network of people and organizations managing ecotourism products built around the natural and cultural attractions of protected areas. The network acts as a Destination Management Organization of the involved protected areas and has a support structure that facilitates the joint design, management, marketing and sales of these products, by incorporating them as a unique destination with strong branding and professional support.

The shared objective of the network is to strengthen the conservation of protected areas while respecting local culture and history and generating economic benefits for the communities that live in and around them. The MEET DMO is managed by the MEET Association, through its secretariat, which encompasses the MEET Network members and a Destination Management Company (DMC).

The MEET Network is now formalized in an Association and continues operating under the supervision of the MEET Secretariat.

Methods & Tools

The methodology followed by MEET project and applied to the 25 protected areas part of the initiative, followed the main principles detailed below.

1. Ensuring Local buy-in: the Local Ecotourism Clusters

The MEET Ecotourism model, inspired by the Europarc Federation's European Charter for Sustainable Tourism (ECST), set a leading example for public-private

partnerships working towards sustainable tourism in the Mediterranean region. To build on, implement and spread the MEET model across the Mediterranean at a local level, MEET supported the creation of a series of public-private 'local cluster' partnerships between protected area management authorities and local tour operators and service providers. In each protected area, the management authorities have taken a leadership role in the design, development and improvement of their own ecotourism packages ensuring that conservation of natural-cultural features of each site remains their primary objective.

2. Defining a common ecotourism product

The process for identifying the final features during the project spam consisted of the following steps:

1. Defining the methodology – the «MEET Ecotourism product selection criteria»
2. Testing (ecotourism experts) the first pilot ecotourism packages and customer satisfaction questionnaire;
3. Identifying improvement needs per each package;
4. Testing (ecotourism experts) the improved packages and customer satisfaction questionnaire;
5. Selecting the Approved packages for promotion;
6. Organization of Fam tour with OTOs;

3. Capacity building, partnership and continuous learning

MEET tests and familiarization tours have been an important part of the process for the continuous improvement of the packages together with the capacity building training workshops, organized in between each testing round, to address the most pressing needs for training were addressed (Fig. 1).

Since the inception of the MEET Network in 2014, the following capacity building workshops have taken place:

- Ecotourism Product Development Training
- Local cluster reinforcement (conducted per country in order to adapt to local contexts)
- Guiding & Interpretation for Conservation
- MEET Branding, Communication & Storytelling

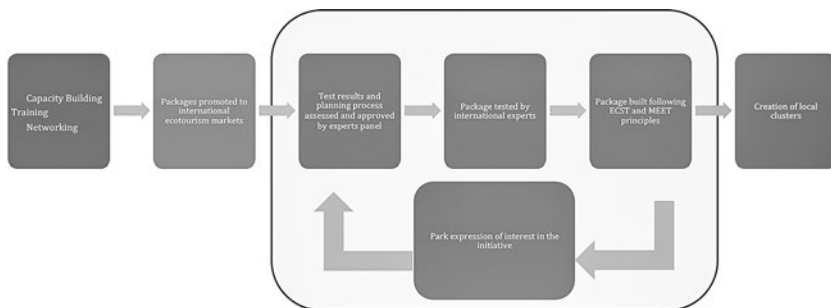


Figure 1. MEET Ecotourism packages Design & Improvement Process

Furthermore, various international coordination and networking events among the Network members (local clusters) took place during the project life, to strengthen the understanding and the buy-in of the initiative and share lessons.

A market-oriented approach

Specific market surveys were implemented, and about 50 Tour Operators from the target markets (USA, Canada and Australia, and UK) were contacted and took part in an educational to test and appreciate the product.

MEET project decided to develop its product towards a specific target, eco-tourists from long haul markets and with a common brand and marketing, coordinated by MEET DMO, and included in a common ecotourism catalogue to be promoted to outbound tour operators.

Financial contribution to conservation

As far as MEET packages are concerned, a minimum contribution (to conservation activities at park level) of 2-6% of the total package price has been set.

Lessons learnt

Cooperation is better than competition

Tourism providers in the surroundings of protected areas are often little organization with scarce experience and resources to dedicate to promotion. Having a single catalogue with the elements of the MEET brand facilitates the marketing of small, individual products located across a broad geographic region.

Eco-tourism is more than nature-based tourism

In the Mediterranean, eco-tourism is not just visiting a natural area, but “meeting a territory”, where the relationship between the Man and land has created particular features along the centuries.

Participatory planning improves capacity in tourism planning and management

The participative approach (local cluster) creates a stable platform that can generate consensus towards the Park management body’s decisions, a place to solve any controversial, and a clear roadmap for reaching tangible results, positive both for the environment and for the local economy.

Adaptation to local needs and realities

Rather than imposing rigid schemes (i.e. for the financial contribution mechanisms) it is better to allow for adaptation to the different financial and regulatory realities of each protected area.

Training and capacity building is vital

Joint training and networking of protected areas and local service providers was a key component for the success of the initiative.