

# Slovenia: a case-study in sustainable rural development for agriculture and tourism

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**Abstract** — This paper deals with the concept of the heritage trail which main purpose is rural regeneration through sustainable tourism. A heritage trail is a regional network of natural and cultural heritage sites, activities and tourism facilities which is created with a well defined product identity in order to support an interesting and varied tourist visit up to one week. The heritage trail does not necessarily have a single theme, with the visitor following a pre-determined route. It can be designed as a coherent menu of natural, cultural and landscape attractions, out of which visitors can create their own itinerary. The aim of heritage trail marketing is to attract the visitor to the region in the first place, by offering a specific and attractive experience. Once in the region, other facilities and experiences can be offered which are not featured in the heritage trail promotion itself

**Index Terms** — Heritage Trails, Dolenjska, Bela krajina, Slovenia, planning, carrying capacity, marketing.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

It is a paradox that the decade of the 1960's - which saw the roots of modern sustainable tourism, in the world-wide movement for resource-conservation & limits of development, gave rise to a destructive counter-phenomenon! The counter-problem was the explosive rise in air-based international tourism. This transport and revolution was to become damaging to the environments and cultures of 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 & realities.

The rural case-study which is presented, is one of a region in slovenia along the border with croatia, where we track the 10 year process, from preliminary idea - to the operational reality of sustainable international tourism in a strategically-located destination-region.

## 2 ORIGINS AND CATALYSTS

The 30 year period from 1960-1990 saw distinct phases of evolution in tourism, planning, and conservation-thinking and actions in the western world. The indicative bibliography, at the end of this paper, shows how a sequence of publications in the french, german, and english-speaking worlds, developed this field, in parallel streams, over time. This led to concepts and processes of sustainable tourism-planning. By the end of the 1980's a uk national task force on 'tourism & the environment' was set up in order to provide sustainable tourism guidelines for three problem-categories:

1) the countryside 2) heritage sites and 3) historic cities and towns.

Several key actors and catalysts can be identified in this story : a national ministry of agriculture (in slovenia), the bavarian ministry for agriculture, a faculty of architecture in ljubljana, the european commission's tourism directorate, a regional chamber of com-

merce, and that of a commercial tourism operator, plus later - use of a market research consultant.

### 3 INTEGRATED RURAL COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT PROJECT

Crpov programme (integrated rural development and village renovation), which started in 1990, was associated both with the 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, in 1991. Two villages were located in trebnje municipality, and around 500 local residents were involved in the project. During this period around 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, our case-study of a rural region 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!

Crpov as integrated rural community development, led the way to 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, and the commitment of local actors and producers. The appeal of such ac-

tion, is to add tourism products to the other rural products ,which they complement.

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 result of which was an 18kms. 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 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.

### 4 INTERNATIONAL TEAM HERITAGE TRAIL CONSULTANCY

This background of crpov and the wine trails, prompted regional chamber of commerce of the region of dolenjska and bela krajina to accept an invitation by a consortium - who 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 h.t. team conducted a tourist resource inventorying & selection, based upon natural-, built-, and living cultural heritage resources of 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 can offer 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". 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 27 organisations, from the public, private and ngo sectors, which signed an agreement to co-operate in the h.t.'s implementation phases of marketing and product development. This partnership - working under the umbrella of regional chamber of commerce, is now 10 years old, and is still going strong. It 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 commercial partner - Kompas novo mesto, was brought into the partnership in 2001, as it was necessary to have a much "stronger attack" on foreign markets. Kompas was to act as the marketing agency, on behalf of ht 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 the constantly-featured "traditional Slovene tourist Ikons", such as lake bled, Kranjska Gora ski resort, Postojna cave, and Portoroz seaside resort. The effective commercial launch of the h.t. internationally, with a foreign tourist industry

adviser, and a much more professional co-ordinated national approach, was delayed until 2002, in London. There, at the wtm, the launch had the active support of the Slovene tourism board, plus other relevant institutions

## 5 STAGES OF COMMERCIAL PRODUCT ADAPTATION, AND IMPLEMENTATION

After the launch of the h.t. to the domestic market, the international launch of the trail was at the world travel market in 2002, but this did not give rise to responses by foreign tour-operators and travel agents. It became clear that external help was needed to find such foreign trade partners, and identify the niche markets selected and targeted. External consultant, prof. Travis became employed in this role.

From travis's market research 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. 60 firms were contacted by at least two contact modes, but only 6 showed some interest!

The problem revealed was that though there is much interest in slovenia as a high-growth.

Destination country, it is seen by the international industry as one with 3 major attractions or 'tourist ikons', already mentioned. For a long time Slovene overseas marketing

Focused 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 to 'open -up a destination' to international markets-in the first place. Rail travel access must be the aim ! The h.t.product offered was being linked to an air-gateway at Ljubljana or klagenfurt, with access routing via Ljubljana. In-depth contact with key operators by phone showed that there were two viable special- interest packages, which could appeal commercially:

- 1) a heritage trail add-on package to offers at bled, or ljubljana ;
- 2) an integrated new 'highlights of slovenia' holidays, which started with 25% of their time at two existing ikons (bled & ljubljana), then the remaining 75% time allocation spent on the heritage trail.

Testing of this product with a group of 6 uk professionals was extremely successful. A second tour with tour-operators from germany & the uk -in 2004, was less successful. In 2005 a specialist walking- tour firm assembled its bespoke and individualised ht offer, and independent tour operator firms are preparing for launching on-line, two individualised alternative packages -already indicated.

## 6 CONCLUSIONS AND FINDINGS

- A) Because the heritage recycling for tourism phase, was preceded by the work on integrated rural community development, there was a community-based approach to development. In this 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. Sustainable development can underpin successful tourism, if the right strategy is chosen.
- B) Heritage-resource based tourism development, if it is to be sustainable, must:
  - show respect for the carrying capacity of resource- zones -be they robust or fragile,
  - have rural community involvement and commitment to tourism, because they have a stake in it, and have net gains from it.
- C) Much tourism development arises because the destination creates potential tourism. Products, because they want 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!

- D) 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 tourist ikons or magnets. This new slovene offer had to be adjusted , to do just that.
- E) 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 ( like ljubljana), then both add-on package possibilities, as well as links to a popular 'short-city break' destination, add great value!
- F) Continuity of personnel in a development process is of real importance: project manager's initiating, and continuity role- has been critical, and the continuing interactions with external partners- who were supportive & shared a belief in the integrity of the development, over a long period of time, also valuable.
- G) This model ultimately is one of multiple stake-holders, community -based, and having the equal support of small rural operatives, and major agencies. The support from several levels: local, regional, national, and international have enabled this 13 year development -cycle to be achieved.

## 7 ADAPTING THE SLOVENE H.T. MODEL FOR NEIGHBOURING COUNTRIES

There are good reasons why the slovene h.t. model is being successfully adopted in several neighboring countries as an initiative for rural regeneration through sustainable tourism, namely:

- A) Economic regeneration. A heritage trail is created as a tool for rural economic regen-

eration. The heritage trail extends tourism from existing centres into new and under-visited areas, by increasing the number of visitors, extending their stay, and diversifying the attractions and services offered to them: expansion, extension and diversification.

B) Contributes 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.

C) Complements 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 prod-

ucts 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.

D) Transferable. 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.

E) 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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