

## Sustainable Tourism Development in the Northern Vidzeme Biosphere Reserve in Latvia ; priorities and recommendations from nature conservation point of view

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### 1. Introduction

The Group of Specialists on Tourism and Environment of the Council of Europe, meeting in Strasbourg on 12-13.02.98 recommended a second visit to the 3 pilote projects on sustainable tourism development. The Latvian project being related to problems and potentials of tourism in protected areas, most of them situated in the category of wetlands, required also a transboundary assessment of possibilities for joint actions with Estonia.

Since our visit in September 1997, the Northern Vidzeme Regional Nature Protection Complex has obtained the status of *Biosphere Reserve* under UNESCO (Man and Biosphere programme), which allows recreational activities and touristic development in general, taking into account the minimising of impacts on the natural environment.

In this report of the second visit, we emphasise the need for an *integrated planning procedure*, bases upon ecological, environmental, landscape-historical and cultural values, to be combined with sound and sustainable economic development mainly in the field of (eco-)tourism. As requested last year, a transboundary approach with Estonia has been subject of on-the-spot appraisals and considerations.

The present pilot project must also support decision making processes at all relevant levels. Central focus is that nature and landscape values are essential elements of attraction for visitors and need to become a major concern of especially local authorities. In this regard the Biosphere Reserve status clearly offers an added value and can be presented as a balanced model for the next century. In advertising the region it is to be considered as a valuable quality label.

### 2. The Northern Vidzeme Biosphere Reserve

The northern border area of Latvia (Vidzeme) is characterised by large and mostly protected areas of relatively untouched ecosystems and (semi-)natural elements with high biodiversity, which ensures potentials for nature oriented tourism and recreation.

From the 1997 visit we learned that this richness is due to typical mosaic landscape structures where traditional human activities in extensive agriculture and wood harvesting have been in balance with the carrying capacity of the environment and ecological processes. In the previous reports we mentioned and discussed the different types of important habitats, many of them having an outstanding European or even international value (see UNESCO Biosphere Reserve status and RAMSAR-wetlands).

#### Types of valuable natural habitats and landscapes

A. In the Biosphere Reserve of about 400.000 ha 5,6% of the territory has a conservation status (including 12000 ha of core area, as well as buffer and transition zones).

The variety of landscapes and habitats described in our 1997 report concerned:

- the Baltic coasts with a varied structure : sandstone cliffs, rocky shores, sandy beaches, forested dunes, wet brackish meadows and reedbeds, temporary (cfr. tidal) mudflats;
- the rivers Salaca (the backbone of the region), Svetupe and Vitrupe with large sections where almost undisturbed hydrological dynamics and ecological processes continue ;
- lakes of different size and structure with surrounding wetland habitats such as reedbeds;

- large forest areas, often with still well developed natural ecosystems (deciduous, coniferous and mixed forests) ; the forests are situated in the full gradient from very wet to dry soil types resulting in high biological diversity at habitat and species level; in some parts forests are clearly influenced by plantations and more heavy cutting with new types of habitats being created as a secondary effect;
- highly valuable raised bogs and fens (and transitional bogs) with fragile oligotrophic (or mesotrophic) communities of typical flora and fauna ; maintaining of the intact water regimes (both quality and quantity of surface and ground water) is the primary problem ;
- remainders of heathlands on dry acid soils
- different types of grasslands (wet hayfields and meadows in floodplains and depressions around lakes, dry grasslands, coastal brackish wet meadows etc.) ;

In parallel to this biological and landscape diversity, following specific geological and geomorphological values are present in the region :

- diversity of coastal formations
- unregulated river courses
- Devon sandstone cliffs
- caves
- drumlins
- glacial depressions

A third set of values concerns aesthetic and scenery aspects, which are of extreme importance in order to maintain the attractiveness of the rural landscapes. The authenticity, the integrity and harmony, as well as the historic and cultural values are important criteria to be considered here.

Summing up, these different habitats with coastal cliffs and meadows, natural mixed forests, large bog areas, lakes, marshes and untouched riverine systems including semi-natural grassland habitats are to be preserved as core areas for conservation. Especially the large extend of most habitats and the still existing ecological network of corridors and stepping stones at landscape level is essential for the maintenance of biodiversity.

B. The mission of July 1998 paid attention to some areas that were not yet evaluated last year:

#### 1) Estonian nature reserves and protected landscapes

Large areas of outstanding nature quality have been visited, some of them being transboundary with Latvia. This visit to Estonian reserves and protected landscapes approved the high potentials of bilateral cooperation. The contacts with local authorities and site managers were also convincing about the positive intentions for transboundary action. Apart from joint nature management strategies and executive plans, most attention is to be paid to increase the possibilities for cross border exchanges of visitors (facilitate formalities, restoring former cross border roads and bus connections).

Following sites have been visited

##### (a) Kabli Bird Station

Combined actions of NGO and local authorities concerning research (bird migration studies), observation tower open for public, management of coastal meadows in collaboration with farmers. Apparently rather limited recreational functions, except for summer cottages and camping in the coastal strip (effect of nearby Via Baltica).

##### (b) Haädemeeste coastal meadows protected landscape

A coastal strip of 35 km of which 10 km represents most optimally developed coastal meadows with gradients from brackish seashore vegetations towards fresh and acid peatsoils with marshy grassland habitats of extremely valuable biodiversity. This area is characterised by the presence of flag species such as *Gladiolus* sp., *Limosa limosa*, migrating geese stopping place (*Branta leucopsis*, *Anser fabalis*) etc. This site is part of a coastal chain of similar habitats that also occur in Latvia (XXX Nature reserve) and that is of vital importance as ecological network for migrating species and distribution of several threatened or rare species.

Management problems of maintaining grassland character: need of mowing and grazing (cooperation with farmers needed, but without too much intensive agricultural pressure). When no management occurs, species rich grasslands are invaded by less rich reedbeds (*Phragmites*).

(c) Haädemeeste coastal dunes

The coastal seminatural meadow plane is bordered by some smaller agricultural grounds, followed by a large and elevated coastal dune strip with forest and shrub vegetation and some open spaces with specific herbaceous vegetations of calcareous sandy soils. More inland this dunes border the vast lowlands and peatbog areas that can be observed from the highest dune tops. This transect from seashore to inland bogs represents a very valuable and intact landscape ecological gradient with both remarkable biological and scenery diversity. Also for nature education this is a most instructive series of interesting habitats and species.

With the aim to attract tourists (now mostly on passage only along Via Baltica) the establishment of a visitors centre is planned; it is to be recommended to locate this infrastructure as close to the village centre as possible, in order to convince also local population about the values of their environment. Thus a disturbance of the intact gradient landscape described above could be avoided (the concentration of parking cars, visitors facilities etc. remains preferably outside -but within walking distance from- most valuable spots).

(d) Nigula State Nature Reserve at Kilinge-Hõmme, Parnu district

The preservation of this vast and intact bog and forest complex (4651 ha) already started 40 years ago; at present it also has a status as RAMSAR wetland of international importance. At local level, the responsible authorities are fully aware of its manifold importance and support cooperation with NGO and regional/national administration levels.

The main objective of the State nature reserve is to preserve the natural raised bog habitats from exploitation and the study of nature and natural processes, including long-term monitoring (a.o. ornithofauna). The core area of the vast raised bog is typically covered with *Sphagnum*, *Oxycoccus* and *Eriophorum* vegetations and low shrub of *Andromeda*, *Calluna* and *Ledum*. A great number of acid and oligotrophic mires and bog-pools is squattered over the whole area, most of them very small and shallow with poor but typical plant and animal life. Some slightly elevated islets of mineral soil within the raised bog have small woodlands developed in different ecological succession stages (including decaying as a result of acidification). These woodland types are extremely valuable examples of naturally grown vegetations and old stands of Pine and virgin broad-leaved forest. For a number of rare bird species this is an excellent habitat: *Grus grus*, *Crex crex*, *Anser sp.* and others. Also *Woolfs* are still living here.

The public is not allowed to walk free in the reserve, but an exciting 3.5 km track of boardwalk and two observation towers are available for guided visits, thus ensuring the possibility for interested people to experience the wealth of nature and landscape.

(e) Further Comments concerning the visit to Estonia

The positive contacts with the Maires of the Municipalities of Haademeeste and Kilingi-Nomme made clear that development of transborder cooperation is considered as a high priority, not only for nature conservation of the whole forest and bog complexes, but also for cross border (domestic) tourism and other developments.

At present, the local authorities have established remarkable educational efforts for cultural activities and traditions. The industrial activities are mainly situated in monofunctional forestry. It is to be recommended to develop towards more multifunctional approach with the introduction of an eco-label for forest products as added value. (The same holds for agriculture, when still rather extensive being in balance with the natural environment).

The group of consultants is convinced that the status of the transboundary landscape and nature reserve as RAMSAR wetland would offer a valuable and recognisable label for green tourism. This needs further cooperation for planning management and additional development of research and education. Potentially, also the award of the European Diploma by the Council of Europe could be suggested as a further positive contribution for sustainable development (combined efforts for conservation and recreation).

## 2) Further exploration of Latvian landscapes in the Biosphere reserve

After crossing the border at Valga-Valka, the eastern part of the Biosphere Reserve was visited.

### (a) Peat extraction area near Seda

The vast raised bog area is subject to active peat digging industry. This requires the gradual lowering of water tables to remove upper peat layers year after year, leaving at the end large artificial water bodies. In these aquatic habitats a regrowth of the earliest ecological succession stages contributes to the habitat diversity of the whole area. The presence of open water is also attractive for a number of species, especially birds and increases the variety of landscape types as well.

*Although the actual and potential nature value of this artificial water habitats is high, the preservation of existing raised bogs and peat bog landscapes merits absolute priority.*

Except when already planned before conservation boundaries and protection measures existed, peat digging industry (also elsewhere in Latvia) can be continued. However, this will never be a sustainable activity as the natural resource regrowth occurs in a much slower speed than the extraction itself proceeds. A secondary aspect is the lowering of water tables for dry peat harvesting, which also can have very negative effects in a vast surrounding, especially inside nearby nature reserves and other conservation areas.

Thus this industrial development needs careful environmental impact assessments when further developed; it cannot be combined with nature conservation within existing reserves and protected areas.

The actual peat extraction area of Seda, however, can become fully integrated within the Biosphere Reserve indeed, with following criteria:

- newly established habitats such as artificial ponds and lakes with their shores and islands (after restoring water tables) offer supplementary landscape and biological diversity (ecological development from prime successional stages occurs);
- the maintenance requires specific conservation measures in the nature management plan (it is of extreme importance that final stages of exploitation already are used to create land and water structures and patterns that are desirable for the future nature development and scenery.
- introduction of sustainable tourism is easily possible, making use of the attractive local labour train (primitive track of 25 km) through the area, without disturbing wildlife
- awareness of domestic population can be increased for understanding the values of nature and landscape, both natural, semi-natural or anthropogenous

The inclusion of former peatbogs in the Biosphere reserve must also be reflected in the district and local planning; for the exchange of animal populations, it is important not to isolate this part from the core areas of the Biosphere reserve and to consider transition and buffer zones in the wide surroundings

### (b) position of Forests

This point was also discussed, because >50% of the territory is woodland. In the same context as was mentioned in Estonia, the multifunctional use of forests is to be recommended as well as the development of an eco-label for wood products. This green label can be achieved because of the long tradition and expertise in regional forestry and the good relations between the experts of both conservation (also NGO's such as WWF) and forest authorities. Exchange of ideas and information already proved to increase enthusiasm of specialists and guarantees the necessary basis for eco-tourism development.

Again, the facilitation of transborder crossing is an important issue in this regard.

Starting from the role of forests and peatbogs present in the area, specific environmental education at district/local level with discussions on economic aspects are to be included in this approach; the University (Vidzeme College) can play an important role here.

(c) ownership, ecology and economy

The countries in transition receive World Bank subventions for privatisations in relation to economic projects. As a major item of the Convention on Biodiversity, also support for conservation must be envisaged; this requires inclusion of ecological principles (such as development of ecological networks) in the regional planning and in the National Economic Strategy Plan. It is clear that here the potential for rural or eco-tourism is a major argument.

The status of Biosphere Reserve and hopefully a transboundary RAMSAR-wetland must increase the credibility of such an approach. Even small investments in nature education and tourist information centres could have direct local profits and merit starting encouragements.

(d) education and awareness

As already mentioned in Estonia, also in Latvian schools a similar high degree of interest exists for sports and cultural education (music, theatre, handcraft, festivals), which can easily be extended to landscape values, traditional agriculture, historic monuments and nature aspects. Already the forest company contributes in this regard. Possibilities such as outdoor education during summer camps with nature themes (with help of state forest service, nature NGO's etc.) are supplementary to the introduction of knowledge on nature and ecological principles at all school levels. Through the information and training of children and students in relation to nature, their parents get interested in this matter and thus an important increase of awareness can be realised.

There is a great need for recognisable (extrovert) 'labels' to interest a larger public of potential visitors and tourist. Scenic landscapes and nature monuments such as Gauja river and national park can be put forward as a specific quality on itself, or as the environment of special nature-bounded attractions (rafts championship, canoe trips, Seda peatland train experience, forest and wetland exploration).

The Biosphere reserve already serves as a label for the whole region, but could need a better name for more efficient marketing. Especially a joint transboundary label including also RAMSAR could be even more attractive.

(e) Valmiera district

(The Mazalaca area was visited last year)

In general two types of tourism target groups are to be distinguished: summer guests and winter conference tourists. Some doubts exist that the climate does not allow year-round tourism, but investments in eco-museums, domestic winter tourism etc. must be considered.

Our statement is that 'eco-tourists try to escape from asphalt': consequently, the development of regional infrastructure is to be balanced. There are sufficient numbers of roads, but some have to be rebuilt for more intensive traffic and to improve communication between villages (see also 1997 report).

(f) Burtņiek lake

The nature values of the lake and its surroundings were not investigated in detail during this visit, a.o. due to difficult access to the shores. However, it is clear that this vast area needs a Masterplan and strict guidelines in order to combine strategies of conservation, education and tourism. Especially unbalanced or chaotic autonomous developments are to be avoided. Potentials for visitors and lodging are already developed by horse keepers (ranch tourism). The traditional architecture and adjacent parklands of some settlements around the lake are highly attractive on their own. Certainly a sustainable sport fisheries could be stimulated as well, without disturbing natural values of the lake.

In order to avoid remote concentrations of public facilities, the idea for the establishment of a visitors centre in an abolished settlement near Burtņiek is preferably to be changed towards the village itself, thus having a much broader potential public as well, bringing active sporters (e.g. horse riders, fishermen) in contact with nature.

(g) Staicele farmhouse

This private initiative illustrates the possibilities to develop specific lodging facilities for rural tourists with interest in either cultural or natural aspects. The Daina Avotina residence functions mainly as an artistic centre.

In parallel and complementary to this, the future Biosphere Reserve visitors centre for nature could be developed at a relatively short distance.

Both centres have different but related target groups of mainly cultural or green tourists that can be stimulated to visit the area making use of the landscape and nature label of the Biosphere reserve. Small-scale sustainable development is the only acceptable future, not any mass tourism that risks to destroy its own capital (the environment) in a short time. The vulnerability of the riverine landscape must be a concern for the regional planners, as about every 500 m along the river Salaca old farmhouses exist that could become restored and rebuild in a similar way. The result could risk nature and landscape disturbance by increasing outdoor recreation at the river beyond the carrying capacity..

The cultural and historical value of the landscape and its mixture of biological and anthropogenous structures increases the scenic values indeed. Therefore not only the traditional landuse, but also the traditional architecture with regional characteristics must be regarded in an integrated holistic approach. Transformation of settlements aiming farm tourism must take the authenticity into account.

### 3. Threats

Several **threats to the natural environment**, mainly as a result of the transition of the country with changes in political, institutional and socio-economic systems have been mentioned in the previous report.

- land reform in rural territories with changes in ownership (land privatisation)
- expansion of urbanism and restoration of local or regional industrial activities
- autonomous development of (non regulated) recreation and tourism
- pressure to establish further infrastructure
- expected changes related to practices in agriculture
- changes towards more commercial forest exploitation

When considered separately, the impact of developments in sectors such as agriculture, forestry, industry and mining, urban expansion and infrastructure, tourism and recreation can probably remain of limited effect indeed. Combined impacts, however, can turn into negative trends or threats for the safeguarding of nature and landscape. Several short-term trends risk to be negative for the future touristic development itself, if no appropriate *integrated planning* and *governmental control* can be guaranteed.

### 4. Comments on the Ramsar Convention status

The Convention on Wetlands, signed in Ramsar, Iran, in 1971, is an intergovernmental treaty which provides the framework for national action and international cooperation for the conservation and wise use of wetlands and their resources. There are presently (september 1998) 112 Contracting Parties to the Convention, with 934 wetland sites, totalling about 70 million hectares, designated for inclusion in the Ramsar List of Wetlands of International Importance.

In order to function as a chain of high quality habitats that plant and animal species need (for reproduction, dispersal, food, wintering etc.) the member states are asked to add as much sites as possible to the national Ramsar lists. At the regional Pan-European Ramsar Meeting in Riga, June 1998, a recommendation strongly encourages transborder actions in this regard.

Among the variety of wetlands worldwide, peat bogs and fens, lakes and marshes belong to the priority habitats from conservation point of view.

The designation of relevant parts of the North Vidzeme Biosphere reserve as Ramsar wetlands adjacent to the Nigula Bog Reserve in Estonia therefore needs our full support. The transboundary Ramsar complex will indeed contribute in a most significant way to the aims and effort of this convention. At the same time, this status can be seen as a marketing tool for ecotourism related to the whole region in both countries.

## 5. Integrated planning

The conservation and management of nature and landscape values in relation to sustainable (eco-) tourism requires an **integrated planning**, including

- zonation and nature management plans, based upon environmental inventories and mapping (distribution of key species and habitats, CORINE biotopes, soil types, water quality, land cover and landuse; incl. GIS-techniques for overlays);
- integration of regional/local development and basic infrastructure for tourism with existing or potential nature values;
- environmental impact assessments with development of different alternatives and scenarios for location of activities in tourism;
- establishment of regional nature education centres (with skilled personnel and availability of exposition and demonstration materials, folders, nature trails etc.)
- transboundary conservation strategies with Estonian wetlands (both coastal and inland) with emphasis on shared management aims and tools

(this paragraph (see report 1997) is to be completed)

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