

## **LOCAL GUIDELINES FOR TOURISM AND SUSTAINABILITY IN THE REGION OF CURONIAN SPIT**

### **Introduction**

Geographical separation of the peninsula, infertile soils, limited economic activities, permanent human migrations - these are the key challenges that affect local businesses of Curonian spit. In addition, the favourable demographic situation, social and economic development, tourist attractiveness of the region stimulates functionalities of SMEs in the region.

Tourism and the provision of tourism-related services are one of the most important sources of livelihood for the locals. The majority of companies related to the provision of tourism services, accommodation and catering. These companies are the main ones that determine the employment of the locals and guest temporal manpower from the mainland of Lithuania.

Curonian spit enlisted to UNESCO heritage, and the whole territory belongs to Curonian spit national park. Thus, economic activities as hospitality services and operation of different services must strictly correspond to the regulation on nature protection. Sustainable tourism development is a key concept for tourism development and that makes permanent affection on structure and intensity of local businesses. The phenomena of overtourism slightly transforms to alternative tourism of specific tourist needs.

### **Understanding sustainable tourism in the region**

The concept of sustainable tourism is widely used in political and practical decisions on tourism development. Sustainable tourism involves cultural and ecotourism together as a unity of tangible and intangible values of local culture and nature when their application to tourism business ecosystems must bear within responsible approach to tourism development.

Definition of overtourism is perceived as mass tourism with crowded tourist areas that are too much commercialized, and overtourism as mass tourism phenomena does not match principles of sustainability. The negative impacts of overtourism are ongoing is segregation of tourists, when services and their costs are applied for wealthy tourists only. A segregation of local community when life quality, annual incomes depend on tourists' spendings, what increases a strong competition among locals. New comers as new owners of the property do not create social relations to local communities, and weakly interested in local values and identities. An approach to environment is based on recreation of tourism perspective to use environment for leisure and recreation. An approach of tourists and the new comers (owners of second houses) to Curonian spit is just like a place for their holidays and vacations, but not as to the place which has fragile nature ecosystems.

Implementation of sustainable tourism based on keeping nature protection regulations, and regulations on inflow of visitors by limiting inflow of one day visitors. This is official political prejudice

on how to manage tourist inflow. Overtourism phenomena is visible in number of intensive traffic within the spit and in a very intensive bookings of accommodation.

### **Local guidelines for stakeholders in the region**

Strengthen the neutrality of the impact of tourism on the climate, the protection of cultural heritage and the environment

- Reduce the CO2 emission of vehicles;
- To promote dialogue between interested parties and the search for solutions through cooperation;
- Join projects to reduce the negative impact of tourism.

Develop innovative infrastructure and services

- Promote environmentally friendly transport that does not leave a carbon footprint and create its support infrastructure;
- Promote services focused on modern forms of tourism;
- Create and effectively use tourism data platforms.

Promote tourism competitiveness and value creation

- To promote digitalisation processes in small and medium-sized businesses;
- Strengthen the orientation towards different demand segments and tourists of different demographic groups;
- Develop the competencies of tourism sector employees.

Promote sustainable practices

- Present and share examples of good practice and success stories;
- Promote the use of eco-friendly facilities and services;
- Support local and sustainable businesses, including the use of local products and services.

Promote communication and dissemination of information

- Prepare and implement an integrated marketing communication plan;
- Encourage visitors to share their impressions and confidence;
- To strengthen the dissemination of information supporting sustainable tourism.

Develop collaboration and inclusive participation

- Foster ongoing collaboration and communication between stakeholders;
- Develop cooperation with scientists and researchers, involving academic youth in the modelling of future visionary solutions;
- Engage with visitors and residents to raise awareness about sustainable tourism and encourage participation.

Carry out monitoring and evaluation

- Monitor the impact of tourism on the local community, environment, and economy;
- Evaluate the effectiveness of the implemented guidelines and adjust them as necessary;
- Embrace technological advancements and digital solutions to enhance efficiency and meet the changing demands of the tourism industry.

### **Best practices for sustainable tourism in the region**

In Neringa municipality is implemented domestic waste collecting system. The inhabitants and SMEs they can sort out waste in a specially designated containers for glass waste (glass bottles and other glass particles), paper, plastic and metal waste (particles) all together, and other domestic waste of bio-origin all of them collected and recycled in the mainland.

Curonian spit region is the westernmost territory of Lithuania located between the Baltic Sea and the Curonian lagoon; therefore this area is evident as the most sunniest territory in Lithuania (a total number of sunny days is 79 per year), therefore the installations of solar panels has got a real potential to be implemented on the roofs of living houses. Due to heritage protection, solar panels cannot be installed on the roofs of heritage buildings of wooden architecture. In addition to install drinking water saving system (for domestic use).

The model of sustainable mobility is not implemented properly, mainly due to a lack of public awareness and acceptance of sustainable mobility principles in the region. A limitation of entrance to access Curonian spit by private transport vehicle is payable. The fee introduced to pay for entrance to the Curonian Spit by motorized transport vehicles in order to motivate the entrance by public busses, bikes and electro bikes. The infrastructure by cycling is not developed properly: the physical shape of cycling pathways must be renewed, also to install more facilities for bike storage and to develop the bike-sharing system.

Local sustainable businesses can be supported by tax reductions and giving them priority to use state support for development of sustainable business models (if these companies do not have any financial debts). Preservation of natural and cultural heritage must be based on preservation of authenticity, local tangible and intangible values and cultural identities. A state support to implement project based on heritage protection and its sustainable application for responsible tourism development. Due to cancellation of Lithuania-Russia Cross-border Cooperation program, the new financial instruments must be created and introduced for investment on heritage protection on Lithuanian part of Curonian spit.

## Recommendations for sustainable tourism in the region

For public institutions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• To determine the possibilities to mitigate geopolitical negative impact on security of the region;</li><li>• To disseminate and propagate ideas and public decisions of promotion of sustainability in the region;</li><li>• To enhance the regulations on simplification to run SMEs businesses in the region;</li><li>• To employ uniqueness of nature as tool of marketing in order to revitalize tourism in the region;</li><li>• To compose agreements with education institutions in order to attract the students for outbound study sessions pursuing to activate social life in the region.</li><li>• To incite innovations in local businesses and promote innovativeness of businesses;</li><li>• To promote development of sustainable businesses and durable services;</li><li>• To develop innovative infrastructure;</li><li>• Education in potential markets in changed conditions of tourism environment;</li><li>• Redirection of visitors to the sources of reliable and trustworthy tourism and business information.</li><li>• Revitalization of cooperation project with neighbouring countries;</li><li>• To incite and popularize sustainable businesses and durable services;</li><li>• To develop innovative infrastructure;</li><li>• To solve the problems related to generation of green energy;</li><li>• To involve visitors in popularization of local nature, history, culture values.</li><li>• To improve accessibility of the Curonian spit during the tourism season by water ways from the mainland of Lithuania;</li><li>• To develop the infrastructure of small marinas, recreational embankments and small quays for yachts and small vessels of internal waterways.</li></ul>
For locals
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• To empower local community and intermutual cohesion of its members;</li><li>• To implement social innovations;</li><li>• To promote local businesses with the means of individual consumption.</li><li>• To diversify the set of offering local hospitality services;</li><li>• To promote development and representation of local authentic crafts</li></ul>
For businesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• To join to the cluster and cooperate within;</li><li>• Creation and elaboration of new services;</li><li>• To search for new markets;</li><li>• To pursue to hold viability of the territory and to attract visitors with different motives;</li><li>• To promote development of alternative tourism businesses as complementarity to businesses related to tourism sector.</li><li>• To enhance visiting objects for the need of extreme tourism;</li><li>• To act in sustainable way and sequent to promote sustainability of local businesses;</li><li>• To cooperate mutually in creation of common programmes/ offers for visitors.</li><li>• To join the model of circular economy;</li><li>• To propagate local sustainable and durable services;</li><li>• To involve local businessmen in training course of sustainability implementation;</li><li>• To assess the need for different types of small-scale investments;</li><li>• To educated local businessmen on perception on tourism development based on the principles of sustainability, durability and authenticity.</li></ul>
For visitors

- Reflections in the comments, feedbacks to express the needs and expectations to get sustainable services and goods;
- On the basis of individual behaviour to convince the visitors to behave in more sustainable way while they visit Curonian spit;
- With the support of individual impressions to reinforce the trust in security of region in the context of geopolitical tension;
- To activate orientation towards the content of culture of Curonian spit.
- To involve visitors in popularization of local nature, history, culture values.
- Propagation of responsible tourism through individual examples.
- To involve the visitors to actions of popularization of tourist destination more actively;
- To extend the length of stay of visitors instead to attract more new local one day visitors.

### **Monitoring and evaluation in the region**

The impact of tourism can be determined and detected using the values of the following indicators:

**Impact on community:** number of local SMEs involved in sustainable tourism actions, number of social events organized of locals, number of newly created tourism products based on local values and sustainable use resources, number of innovative and digital tourism routes based on local heritage values, amount of public and private investments to rejuvenate and protect local architecture.

**Impact on environment:** number of environment protection projects, amount of public spendings on protection of nature objects, number of created ecotourism routes for educational purposes, number of created water transport models as alternative accessibility means to Curonian spit instead of land transport, number of management models in order to regulate inflow of tourists in vulnerable protected landscape of sand dunes, amount of spendings on construction of scenic pathways, consumption of chemical detergents in hospitality services

**Impact on economy:** number of local SMEs with application of sustainability principles in running of businesses: indicators of energy consumption, drinking water consumption, amount of produced waste particles, application of smart technologies (apps) in hospitality business, number of implemented projects on circular economy, number of serviced one day visitors and tourists, number of employed local and guest manpower, amount of taxes paid for municipal authorities.

The effectiveness of local guidelines can be measured according to evaluation to method of BaU (Business as usual scenario) using the indicators to determine the change before and after in quantitative data: as number of responsible SMEs before and after (in 2 years period).

The effectiveness can be determined using method of KPI (Key Performance Indicators) to calculate the effectiveness in percentage of each indicator in order to reach the effect of strategic sustainability principles.

The adjustment of strategic guidelines must match the priorities set up in strategic plan of Neringa municipality, that are in relation to foreseen sustainability principles.

### **Conclusions**

Overtourism as a phenomenon affected by internal and external factors and circumstances. „Blossoming tourism“ is considered as mass tourism with a very high level of tourist inflow and high rate of commercialization of hospitality services. The approach of local SMEs to get the highest revenues during a limited tourism season. These factors does not correspond to the principles for sustainable tourism development. In the Curonian spit region is enabled environmental sustainability,

but the social, economic and political sustainability still remains underelaborated and not clearly set up in strategic plans and in a reality.

Local stakeholders have got increasing awareness towards elaboration of sustainable business models in relation to sustainable tourism promotion, what mitigates the impact of overtourism to local ecosystems of local businesses. A communication between local stakeholders, municipal authorities, administration of the Curonian spit national park, local social groups, local entrepreneurs, and socially active local interested persons can ensure the process going towards sustainable tourism development with clearly vivid participatory approach in planning, implementation and monitoring.