

Worlds Wetland Day 2012 in Estonia

The Environmental Board organized the seminar: Protected areas, tourism and local communities“ on 8.-9.02.2012 in Viljandi county, Pärnu-Viljandi region of the Environmental Board.

As the slogan of Worlds Wetland Day in 2012 is „Responsible tourism supports wetlands and people“ there are lot of stakeholders in wetlands in Estonia, who are dealing with the tourism issue. The initiative for seminar came from Environmental Board and the region of Soomaa National Park. One of the themes for discussion was nature tourism in protected areas in Estonia. Second theme was how to communicate more with local people and local entrepreneurs, who are interested in working and living in the region of wetlands.

The program was structured as follows:

Nature tourism as such in protected areas was the focus on first day. The presentation made by representatives of Environmental Board, State Forest Service, Enterprice Estonia, Estonian Ecotourism Association and examples of different international networks which are connected with National Parks in Estonia was presented on behalf of Aivar Ruukel (soomaa.com), Andris Urtans (Latvia, Nature Conservation Agency, National Ramsar Scientific and Technical focal point), Kaja Lotman (Environmental Board, EUROPARC Federation, Nordic-Baltic section president).

Each presentation pointed out the connection between the organisation and nature tourism. Environmental Board – nature tourism & nature protection, State Forest Service – management of visitors in protected areas, Enterprice Estonia – the role of the Estonian Tourist Board (Enterprice Estonia) in nature tourism in Estonia, The Estonian Ecotourism Association – The entrepreneur’s view of nature tourism in protected areas.

Work in working groups, where the subjects were provided by participants of seminar during the first day:

1. How to sell „tradition“? What we should or should not tell to tourist? What is interesting in our culture? Etc.
2. The role of visitor centres in nature tourism? At this moment there is very little general information about Estonia in our Nature Centres (information is about the particular national park, where the centre is situated), also there is too little information in languages other than Estonian.
3. Monitoring of visitors and endurance of nature. There are very different institutions who are in some way dealing with it, but communication between them is very bad. The result of our seminar was the agreement to convene a working group from State Forest Centre and Environmental Board and share available data.
4. Information about tourism infrastructure. How to update the information in different websites quickly. There are different websites, where information is available, but the tourist will not check several pages. It would be better if all information about visitors’ infrastructure and services is available in one website.

During Day 2 of the seminar the issues were: Local community and co-operation between different state organisations and local communities with local people in different protected areas. We asked the Estonian national park to give a presentation about co-operation in their region (in national park etc). The presentations varied very much. Presentation was given by representatives of local NGOs and local entrepreneurs. The situation in Estonia is very different. There are in national parks the

local groups- called activity groups – including representatives from different organisations, local entrepreneurs, NGOs, etc. This group meets normally twice a year or if there is an important decision about national park to be made, or planning decisions, management plan of national park etc. There are also national parks where only one NGO is active and these would like to have better co-operation and knowledge about the processes of national parks.

Very useful was a presentation by Marika Kose about nature tourism, nature protection and local people. She has been working in nature conservation, has been the living next to the protected area and at this moment is active in the nature tourism business. She also gave a short summary of the presentations made on behalf of national parks.

Finally we used the method of Open Space to encourage everybody to bring up the problems which are important in his/her region connected with co-operation between different parties (organisations, ngo, local people) in national parks and as the nature tourism was very important previous day. The method is very good to discover problems which occur somewhere, but as the people are maybe not involved so much, they prefer not to make trouble.

Problems identified from discussions:

1. What is qualitative experience for tourist from abroad? What it is? What is needed for that?
2. How should local communities be involved in national parks?
3. Good nature guide – what criteria should be fulfilled to have one?
4. How to estimate the visitors' impact on nature?

The conclusion of the seminar was that we need communication in Estonia between different stakeholders, who are dealing with nature tourism. This seminar was very good start and it was nice that so many important stakeholders from very different organisations could participate during two days.

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