

## SUSTAINABLE RURAL TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN LATVIA

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Environmental protection became a major issue in the 1990s after the introduction of the concept of sustainable development by the Brundtland Commission (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987) in Our Common Future. This report was seen as an expression of the increasing environmental awareness toward the latter part of the 1980s. Tourism as an economic activity has an inevitable effect on the environment of the destination. The environment is often regarded as the major pull factor of tourist movements, contributing to the desirability and attractiveness of a tourist destination. As the environment is an indispensable asset to the tourism industry, the protection and conservation of environmental resources (which include natural, cultural and historic resources) are prime considerations for the tourism industry, upon which it depends as primary inputs in the production of the tourist output.

Rural tourism is still a comparatively new and growing part of rural economy in the Baltic countries. While celebrating the steadily growing numbers of tourists, it is a challenge now to maintain the appeal and attractiveness of the countryside protecting the resources on which rural tourism product is based. How to do it?

The aim of the paper is to demonstrate the positive aspects of sustainable rural tourism and its added value potential as a rural development tool to rural tourism providers, municipalities and state agencies, NGOs and all those, involved in rural tourism organisation and management.

The paper identifies the impacts rural tourism and its related activities leave on environment, biological diversity, economical, social and cultural life, and characterises the positive and negative impacts.

Table 1 – Sustainability criteria – applying to serviced and self-catering accommodation establishments

|   |  |
|---|--|
| <b>General environmental information to guests</b>      |  |
| 1.  | Provide guests with appropriate information about local nature, organic farming and local culture ( <i>e.g. by a leaflets, guidebooks, guided trips etc.</i> )   |
| 2.  | Provide guests with information on sustainable behaviour ( <i>what they can do and what should not do to protect the surrounding nature and environment – e.g., not to disturb birds and animals, comply with fishing regulations, make bonfires only in designated places, etc.</i> ) |
| <b>Support of environment friendly agriculture</b>      |  |
| 3.  | Locally produced food products are offered to tourists   |
| <b>Green building policy</b>                            |  |
| 4.  | Maximum use of environment and human friendly materials in case of new constructions or renovations.   |
| 5.  | The landscape and regional architecture traditions are respected in case of new constructions or renovations.  |
| <b>Reduction of waste</b>                               |  |
| 6.  | Disposable tableware and other single use items are not used.  |
| 7.  | Waste is disposed according to the local administrative regulations ( <i>e.g. a contract with a waste management company</i> )   |
| <b>Active contribution to sustain cultural heritage</b> |  |
| 8.  | Traditional building techniques are respected in case of new constructions or renovations  |
| <b>Active contribution to local economy</b>             |  |
| 9.  | Co-operation with local providers/services ( <i>food, souvenirs, production, etc.</i> )  |
| <b>Improvement of environmental performance</b>         |  |
| 10.   | Continuous attention to environmental impact of the establishment, improvement of environment and nature protection measures.  |

The list of sustainability criteria to be included in the rural tourism quality scheme was developed based on the following:

- state-of-art in rural tourism practice
- recommendations and experience of rural tourism and environmental organisations
- indicators for sustainable tourism development in the Baltic Sea region

The criteria are integrated into rural tourism quality scheme Latvia run since 1994, with upgrades and improvements as necessary. This way the quality scheme serves as a tool to motivate rural tourism businesses to adopt sustainable practices. The sustainability criteria are simple enough to be achievable by a rural tourism business. At present, they are the first step towards the “Green Certificate”, the Latvian ecolabel for rural tourism accommodations, and then, possibly further to the “European Flower” ecolabel. The idea is that the sustainability criteria should be periodically revised and upgraded, according to the need.

The paper presents proposals on actions to prevent the negative impacts of tourism, describes the role and recommendable actions of state institutions, self-governments, NGOs and others involved with development of sustainable rural tourism. The paper gives arguments in favour of introduction of sustainability criteria into rural tourism quality scheme, and lists sustainability indicators for rural tourism accommodation sector.

To promote sustainable rural tourism products, the “Green Holidays” brand has been introduced. For better

promotion, the products have been grouped around specialisations and are marked with pictograms in the printed promotional publications and the web site [www.celotajs.lv](http://www.celotajs.lv):

The paper provides extended proposals for actions and measures by responsibility levels of stakeholders in environmental, social and economical sectors to reduce or prevent the negative impacts and facilitate the development of sustainable rural tourism:

**Environment:**

1. Rational use and management of natural and other resources
2. Measures to maintain biological diversity
3. Development of infrastructure
4. Environment friendly information
5. Promotion of ecolabelling
6. Administrative measures
7. Research, monitoring

**Economy:**

1. Privileges in entrepreneurship
2. Development of infrastructure
3. Support for specific rural tourism activities
4. Improvement of local economy

**Social and cultural field:**

1. Maintenance of national and rural traditions
2. Elimination of „disturbance factor” of the local community
3. Raising of environmental education and awareness
4. Co-operation facilitation

Integration of the principles of sustainable development into operations of rural tourism accommodation establishments provides economical effect, improves welfare, preserving of important natural values and biological diversity, which is one of the key tourism resources in rural areas. However, it has to be stressed that sustainable rural tourism development can not take place in isolation, without sustainable development of related rural sectors.