

Greenways: An American Model Takes Root in Belarus

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Introduction

The paper is dedicated to developing Greenways in Belarus – the country with transition economy, different mentality and great resources for tourism. Greenways concept is understood in various countries differently: sometimes further and broader than in the U.S., sometimes narrower and more functional. It depends a lot on natural, political, economic environment in the countries and initiatives of local communities. In Belarus Greenways is considered as a model which provides not only access to the nature but rather acts as an instrument for economic development of rural areas based on sustainability principles. Greenways also support development of civil society in the country after the collapse of communism. Greenways act as a tool for 'creative economy' and 'learning arena' for tourists.

Background

The term 'Greenways' appeared in the U.S. in the late XIX century. The idea of Greenways gained great attention of the American public, including the concerned government agencies, NGOs, private business. As a result, most states have designed programs to implement long term strategies for the development of Greenways. Today, the total Greenways network spans about 30 thousand kilometers in the USA.

The majority of Greenways Concepts and related publications are based on American experience (Fabos and Ahern, 1995, Ahern 2002). Greenways development in other countries may provide a further and boarder understanding of this concept.

J.Fabos classified Greenways mainly into three categories: ecological, recreational Greenways and historical corridors, which can be clearly recognized in Greenways development in U.S. (Fabos, 1995, Zube, 1995).

European countries generally lag behind the U.S. in development and promotion of Greenways. To date, these countries have gained rather varied experience. Some of them have been engaged in Greenways for more than three decades, others are just beginning their path.

Greenways were introduced in Central Europe through direct cooperation with the U.S. based initiatives in the early and mid 1990s as part of a wider initiative to promote civic engagement in environmental improvement and decision making in an effort to re-establish a functioning and vibrant civic society. Greenways were viewed as a useful tool for promoting NGOs, environmental and heritage protection, responsible tourism development in the regions. Since these early initiatives, the Greenways movement has undergone many changes in vision, impact and purpose. Greenways now present a flexible umbrella methodology for promoting sustainable development in many varied communities and geographic locations. (Murphy, Mourek, 2010).

The Central European Greenways network currently includes 8 long-distance Greenways and a dozen or more local trails – over 8000 km of ‘eco-trails’.

In China – a country with huge population, unwise use of natural resources and many natural disasters (floods, sandwind, draught, soil erosion, desertification, etc.) - Greenways development has different approach. The major function of Greenways in this country is protection from natural disasters. Recreational function is not so important. Moreover most of Greenways are mainly planned with a top down approach with little public participation. This approach is a reflection of the centralized government system (Dihua Li, Nuyu Li, 2006).

Belarus is the first country of former Soviet Union that started to develop Greenways. The idea of Greenways came to Belarus in 2005, when our country was visited by a group of experts who gave their recommendations for creation of the first two Greenways in the country. The idea was pioneered by the Belarusian Association ‘Country escape’ which started implementation of activities for development of the national Greenways (www.greenways.by) (Klitsounova, 2010).

Since that time Greenways movement in the country became stronger and acquired new features and functions which are described in this paper.

Goal and Objectives

The goal of this paper is to evaluate the role and functions of an American model – Greenways in Belarus which is a non-traditional tourism destination with different socio-economic system.

Objectives:

- to define major functions and peculiarities of Greenways in Belarus
- to retrace Greenways role in sustainable development
- to provide recommendations for further Greenways development in Belarus

Results

Belarus is situated in the center of European continent. It is one of the former Soviet Union countries. It borders on Russia, the Ukraine, Poland, Lithuania and Latvia. The area of the country is 207 500 km². Belarus boasts unique beautiful nature (20 000 rivers, 10 000 lakes, 36% of the territory is forested). The biggest peat bogs and fen mires in Europe and the oldest forest in Europe (the National Park of Belavezhskaya Puscha) are situated in Belarus.

The forests, rural countryside, villages, towns and cities of Belarus provide an excellent venue for an outstanding, world-class visitor experience. One of the most important elements of this experience is interacting with the warm, friendly and hospitable citizens of Belarus.

The Belarusian terrain itself, with its gentle hills and broad flat plains, is generally accessible to people of all ages and abilities who want to walk, bicycle or ride a horse. In addition, the numerous lakes and rivers provide opportunities for creating greenway water routes.

The rural landscapes in Belarus remind of the upper Midwestern United States. In the Dakota's, Wyoming, Montana, Colorado, Idaho and Utah, a similar pattern of rural development exists.

Over the past decade, Belarus has made a strong beginning in creating a national system of Greenways which celebrate the country's rich heritage of natural and cultural resources. The first Greenways were created by the initiative and expertise of a small group of energetic Belarusian greenway pioneers, a group which included individuals, professionals, local authorities and private organizations.

Few projects in the sphere of Greenways development were implemented in Belarus. The most significant ones are 'Greenways – working out environmentally friendly trails in Belarus' (supported by OSCE office in Minsk, 2005-2006) and EU/UNDP project 'Sustainable development on the Local Level' (2008-2010). They helped to develop eight flagship Greenway initiatives in different parts of the country and to create a network.

Today, Greenways in Belarus are ready to enter a new phase, which will emphasize making Greenways more accessible and attractive to tourists. This next phase of greenway development can significantly increase national and international ecotourism.

Greenways are becoming an essential component of strategies for sustainable development of many territories. Dozens of workshops, seminars and meetings have seen genuine interest in the topic of Greenways. Partnership initiative groups were formed and started creating and developing Greenways in many pilot regions. These are large geographic regions and the available Greenways consist of four types of facilities: long distance Greenways, local Greenways, urban Greenways and ecoroutes. These varying types of Greenways provide a range of visitor experience and make use of different native landscapes and cultural facilities within each of pilot regions.

The team of professionals trained in the field of Greenways was formed. There were produced few documents – 'Greenways development concept in Belarus' and 'Guidelines for the opening and operation of Greenways', which can be used as a tool for creation and development of such routes.

While introducing American model of Greenways in Belarus a range of local peculiarities revealed connected with the particular features of our country. Belarus is a country in the period of transition, where one can find both market economy and strong socialism elements. Civil society is at the initial stage of development. That's why Belarusian Greenways acquire new functions compared to American ones.

There is no private ownership for land and the function of accessibility to natural attractions in the regions is not so important in Belarus.

But at the same time Greenways in our country are becoming a tool that promotes sustainable development in different regions. They form the sound basis for quadruple bottom-line dimensions of ecological, social, economic and cultural sustainability.

Greenways attract attention to environmental protection, promote healthy lifestyle, add to biodiversity protection in the regions.

Greenways initiate processes that contribute to establishment of civil society – the new model for our country. The process of Greenways development involves local community, representatives of local authorities, local business and non-governmental organizations. It is a democratic platform that provides private-public partnership.

Greenways stimulate economic development of the regions. New small and medium size businesses in tourism sphere appear – homestays, B&Bs, farms, ecomuseums, cafés, bicycle, canoe, ski rentals, and the like. Tourist flow increases. Money spent in the region brings multiplication effect.

Greenways contribute to cultural and historical heritage preservation (both tangible and intangible). Local heritage sites turn into popular tourist sites. Local folklore, crafts, rites and rituals are interpreted through festivals, holidays, workshops, books, brochures, souvenirs, etc. It raises interest among tourists and stimulates pride and self-identification of local community.

All the above mentioned arguments show that Greenways concept in Belarus is seen as a pathway to sustainability.

In Belarus Greenways combine all the three categories defined by J.Fabos: ecological, recreational Greenways and historical corridors. Greenways act as a good platform for new sustainable tourism product. Non-urban area of Belarus possesses significant tourism potential but lacks infrastructure, formulated tourism product, brands, etc. It is Greenways that is a basis that unites various tourism initiatives of local population based on natural and cultural heritage under one theme. The theme predetermines logo, brand and content of a Greenway. Here new for our country ideas are implemented – heritage interpretation and creative economy. These are approaches for people with big ideas and small budgets.

Belarusian Greenways are based on a fundamental concept in Greenways design - the ‘visitor experience’. In essence, the greenway ‘visitor experience’ involves moving through the landscape, usually by non-motorized transport (walking, bicycling, paddling, riding) along a continuous linear Greenway route that connects sites of natural, historic or cultural significance. The quality of the visitor experience is determined by the environment (for example, the weather or physical characteristics of the trail, roadway, or waterway) and by the information (for example, greenway brochures, websites, tour guides, or interpretive signs) provided to the visitor to help understand the significance of the sites and region. The goal in designing the ideal ‘visitor experience’ is to touch all the visitor’s senses in a deep and memorable way through interpretation.

Freeman Tilden defined interpretation as ‘an educational activity which aims to reveal meanings and relationships through the use of original objects, by firsthand experience, and by illustrative media, rather than simply to communicate factual information’. This is a communication process that involves tourists and forges emotional and intellectual connection between the audience and the meaning inherent in the resource (Tilden F., 2009; Pine, J. and Gilmore, J., 1999). Chinese

proverb says ‘Tell me and I’ll forget; show me and I may remember; involve me and I’ll understand’.

The abovementioned concept became a basis for the new model of ‘creative economy’ that does not require significant financial investments but can generate significant income and, what is more important, can leave a mark in tourist’s soul (Ham S., 1992).

Belarusian village is becoming a ‘learning arena’ for tourists, where they receive non-traditional information through informal communicative channels. And this information is something that is hard to forget.

One of the most successful examples which illustrate the points mentioned above is Greenway ‘Volozhynskie gostinty’ (from Russian – ‘The Volozhin roads’).

There are several items that make the Volozhin region an excellent destination for tourists. First, the natural and cultural landscapes are outstanding. The Naliboki Forest is one of the best ecosystems anywhere in Europe. It also contains a fascinating human story that was transformed into the movie “Defiance.” There are 184 heritage sites here which are included in state Belarusian heritage list. Second, the region has a number of established homestays that can accommodate tourists. Third, there is a variety of other activities for tourists to enjoy, from the Monkey EcoPark, to river canoeing and kayaking, to hiking and bicycling trails.

Five years ago initiative group was formed for Greenways designing. It was a bottom-up approach and now Volozhin region benefits from strong local leadership. Initiative group includes around 20 active people – country homestay owners, craftsmen, historians, representatives of local natural reserve, artists, farmers, representatives of museums, etc. This group has become a real team, a motor of Greenways development and managed to win the contest. Volozhin became a pilot territory of international project “Sustainable development on local level” (2009-2011). In frame of this project the route was developed as well as Greenway logo, brand and name (Figure 1). Several banners, signs, booklets were produced and mini-grants program supported local tourism initiatives. Real public-private partnership was established (local authorities, local community, business, NGOs). Nowadays various financial resources are used for Greenways development – donors programs’ money (EU, USAID, American Embassy, UNDP, etc.), as well as private and state money.



Figure 1. Map and logo of a Greenway ‘Volozhinskye gostintsy’

Some facilities on the ground that support tourism started to be developed. The photos below show one of the most readily available routes of travel in the region, rural roads that can accommodate cyclists and pedestrians (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Different types of roads and their users on Greenway ‘Volozhinskie gostintsy’

The Greenway has become an innovative tourism product with a variety of activities, tourist sites and festivals which provide unique visitor experience. Newly created ecomuseums* attract particular tourist attention – these are places where one can get acquainted with bee life, taste pancakes with honey, learn to dance and sing Belarusian songs, do something with clay and the like. (Figure 3)



Figure 3. Activities on Greenway ‘Volozhynskie gostintsy’

Modeling excursion along the Greenway was developed which was presented on International tourism exhibition in Minsk (capital of Belarus). (It was financed by the Ministry of sports and tourism of Belarus). The informational center was established. It is planned to develop Greenway’s own web-site. These processes led to rapid tourism development in the region (Table 1).

Table 1.

Tourism development in Volozhin region

Indicator/Index	Year					
	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
1. Tourism receipts (\$)	11.721 \$	64.854 \$	127.174 \$	250.133 \$	199.246 \$	284.269 \$
2. Number of homestays	3	13	20	25	29	29

Nowadays Greenway ‘Volozhinskie gostintsy’ plans to reach new level and according to experts’ recommendations it is necessary:

- provide Access to Unique Natural and Cultural Attractions;

- wayfinding and Signage Systems should be improved;
- visitor Lodging needs upgrading and certification;
- visitor Support Services are to be developed;
- guided Tours should be designed and guides should be developed;
- local Food should be promoted;
- local Festivals are needed to Highlight Tourism and Generate Revenue.

Summing up the abovementioned example one can point out a range of Greenways functions in Belarus. Among the main are:

- Supporting and strengthening local communities: development of local entrepreneurship, creation of new jobs and additional sources of income, preservation and revival of traditional crafts.
- Development of civil society and public-private partnership.
- Preservation of natural and cultural heritage, and protection of natural landscapes.
- Promoting the sustainable use of local resources for infrastructure, accommodation, catering, guided tours, local industrial and agricultural products.
- Development of cooperation between regions, cities and rural settlements and their residents.
- Assisting local communities in enhancing their socio-cultural identity and improving the quality of life.
- Encouraging travel using the most environmentally-friendly transport: walking, cycling, canoeing, horseback riding, and public transportation instead of a personal vehicle.
- Helping to form and develop branded innovative tourism product on the basis of Greenways.

The following seven actions provide a focused strategy to support and stimulate Greenways development taking into consideration the above mentioned functions:

1. Fully integrate the concept of “Greenways” into the National Tourism Development Program till 2015 and other relevant regulations, as well as recommend the establishment of at least one pilot Greenway in each region with tourism potential.
2. Conduct a series of informational seminars for the general public, in cooperation with government and local authorities, to promote the concept of Greenways as an instrument for effective use of local resources to develop innovative tourism products on the basis of sustainability principles.
3. Create a special Program and Development Fund for Greenways in Belarus, mobilizing intellectual resources and public, private and donor funding.
4. Create a national steering body to develop Greenways - a non-profit association (or an NGO) to guide and promote Belarusian Greenways. (Currently, this function can be performed the Belarusian Association ‘Country Escape’).
5. Train a team of specialists to provide guidance, technical assistance and coordination to local and regional Greenways initiatives.
6. Create an inventory of Greenways in Belarus which contains relevant information about the infrastructure, available services, and charts the progress of Belarusian Greenway development
7. Develop and adopt a national system of standards, symbols and principles of environmental management for Belarusian Greenways.

All of this will help to make Belarusian Greenways Vision which has been formulated come true.

Belarus is a land of deep forests, sparkling rivers, and welcoming people who honor their traditions and care deeply for their lands. Greenways in Belarus provide a network of alternative transportation linking our towns and villages. While exploring our diverse Greenways by bicycle, on foot, by canoe or on horseback, you can experience the beauty of our landscapes, learn about our customs, crafts, songs and dances, enjoy local cuisine, improve your health and connect with nature.

Conclusion

Greenways is a universal model which may be successfully implemented in countries with various natural and cultural resources and different economic and political environment. However it is important to know the peculiarities of Greenways development in different countries as it will enrich, broaden and extend this model and will allow to implement this model more efficiently and creatively. This model could be used not only by planners, researcher and designers but also by community leaders, local authorities, businessmen and NGOs for sustainable regional development.

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