

**Using Greenways concept to develop sustainable tourism
in non-traditional tourism destination in Belarus**

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Greenways concept attracts more and more attention of researchers, practitioners, planners, representatives of local administrative bodies and local communities. Greenways act as a catalyst for promoting sustainable development, the conservation of resources and provide economic benefits for rural communities through increasing livelihood chances (European Commission, 2003; Mac Nulty P., 2004).

The definition for the Greenway concept largely remains internationally undefined. Originally the ‘Greenway’ was a term coined by urban designers and landscape architects for ‘green’ connections between parks within the urban and peri-urban fringes of cities. The concept has since developed widely by name and type.

The Greenway concept started spreading at the end of 1980s – beginning of 1990s. European Greenways Association was formed which nowadays unites 35 members comprising of national organizations and associations dealing with the development and promotion of Greenways. The most active are organizations from Belgium, Spain, France, Ireland and the Czech Republic.

In Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) there is an existing network of greenways developed across Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary and Romania. The “Central and Eastern European Greenways” Program (CEG) (<http://www.environmentalpartnership.org/regionalceg/>) supported by the association Environmental Partnership for Sustainable development unites the CEE countries. The CEG network currently includes 8 long-distance Greenways and a dozen or more local trails – over 8000 km of eco-trails“ that attract substantial numbers of tourists.

Belarusian Association “Country Escape” within the framework of CEG joined the European Greenways Association in 2006. Membership in this body allows organizations to promote their national Greenways within Europe and provides an opportunity to access information and experiences from Western European countries.

Within the context of Belarus, Greenways are understood to be heritage trails leading along green corridors – rivers, historic trade routes, natural corridors managed together with local people to protect their ecological function, bring tourism and recreational activities and promote healthy lifestyle and non-motorized transport means (Klitsounova V., 2009).

Each greenway has its own identification system including name and logo. The name and logo of the greenways is shown on the information signs, panels, maps, guidebooks and other publications. Every greenway project has 5 necessary elements:

- “backbone trail” for non-motorized transport;
- network of different thematic local trails/loops, belong to backbone trail;
- eco-tourism product based on local resources (natural and cultural heritage);
- partnership in region and trail coordinator;
- local heritage initiatives (Zaręba D., 2005; Galuszka N., 2008).

The main aim of this research is to demonstrate the efficiency of the Greenways concept in tourism development in one of the regions of Belarus which is a non-traditional tourist destination.

The goals of the research are the following:

- to define Greenways as it is understood in Belarus and characterize their role in tourism development;
- to demonstrate the efficiency of the use of Landscape Stewardship Exchange as an effective means of Greenways planning;
- to evaluate Greenways based on cultural and historical heritage as a good platform to establish partnership and generate entrepreneurship initiatives in local community;
- to show organizational connection and synergy effect of Greenways and Local agenda 21;
- to show the successful pilot status of the project region as an example for other regions.

Unfortunately Belarus is currently terra incognita on the map of international tourism, however it has located within its boundaries many beautiful and beguiling regions containing fragile nature and traditional culture requiring special strategies for development and promotion. Rossony district is one of them. The district is located in the north of Belarus, its territory extends to 1900 km² and it has the countries lowest density of population at 6.8km². Six municipal councils administer 140 villages. The main economic sectors are agriculture and forestry. 70% of Rossony District is covered with forests. The tapestry of traditional land uses coupled with natural features such as lakes, of which there are 192, have provided the district with a wide range of rich and varied habitats supporting a plethora of flora and fauna. Over 200 species of birds are known to both reside in and frequent the area, these include the Capercaillie and Black Grouse. There are also Wolves, and Lynx in the region, species that are in decline throughout Western Europe. Two national reserves noted for their wildlife are located in the region, also the European cross-border eco-corridor stretches across this territory, all providing a good basis for regional tourism development.

Rural tourism started to develop actively in the region several years ago. Firstly a local initiative group was formed and two farmsteads developed for ecotourism. The first problems the group needed to address were, how to create tourist product? how to involve local population and local authorities in the activity? how to use the local resources without damaging the natural and cultural resource base? and how to promote a tourist product to the local and international markets?

The initiative group adopted the Greenway concept as the main tool for rural tourism development. In 2005 the first greenway route called the “Blue Necklace of Rossony” was established using international assistance through a Landscape Stewardship Exchange programme, this has become a national pilot greenway project which connects the two natural reserves of Krasnyj Bor and Sinsha.

The Landscape Stewardship Exchange is a model of international exchange that brings people with diverse backgrounds together to share experiences related to the needs and aspirations of the host area. The Exchange participants visit the area for one week, learning about the status and plans of the host region. All participants are volunteers, and have no stake in the outcome of the Exchange or local development. Their observations and recommendations are thus impartial, and driven solely by their own experience and expertise.

The seven participants in the Exchange came from Poland, Serbia & Montenegro, United Kingdom, and United States. While all have experience in rural tourism, it is from many different perspectives, including international tourism consulting; forestry; wildlife; greenways development; heritage conservation; public relations and protected areas management. Most were supported to participate in the Exchange by their organizations as a training opportunity. The Exchange has value not only to the host area, but also to the participants, who have an opportunity to think about related issues and challenges in their own work in very different ways.



Figure 1. Greenway “Blue necklace of Rossony”

A trail has been developed for tourists who prefer non-motorized means of transportation i.e. cyclists, hikers, kayakers, horse-riders and skiers. The backbone trail connects to a wider network of local walking trails, these provide access to interesting natural and cultural heritage sites. The backbone trail is a 200 km circular route: Rossony – Klyasticy – Sokolishche – Kulnevo – Yankovichy – Mezhno – Krasnopolje – Ukleenka – Zaborje – Gorbachevo – Rossony (Figure 1).

Much progress has been achieved since 2005, the tourism potential of the region has been assessed and development priorities set. Several information centers have been created, information materials and brochures published, a logo for the greenway designed and incorporated into publicity materials, five promotional tours of the greenway for mass media and tour operators have been organized. The number of farmsteads participating has grown from two to thirty, an annual rural tourism festival is organized in Zaborye village. The number of tourists has grown annually since 2005 (Figure 2).

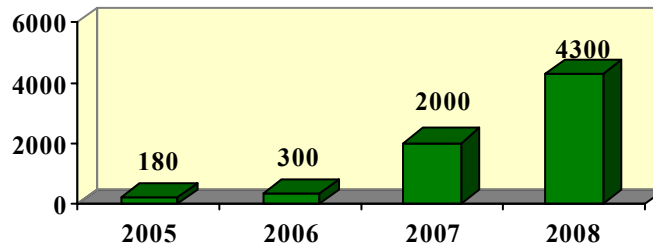


Figure 2. Number of tourists in Rossony region

Since its inception, greenways have developed into a widely popular concept appreciated and developed by local population, businesses and Government. The process has evolved from creation of a few eco-farmsteads by a small number of dedicated local people into a regional greenways development initiative. Its success has drawn the Government’s attention and commitment by involving it directly in the process of writing the Strategy of Sustainable Development and Agenda 21 for Belarus. (Sivogorov O., 2009) Local people have formulated their own Vision 2020 and specified what has to be done. (Table 1). It took place during general meeting in 2007 where participated more than 40 people – the representatives of all local municipalities and different stakeholders. It is remarkable that all the main Greenways principles have become the foundations for the Regions Sustainable Strategy and Agenda 21.

In 2009 the EU / UNDP project “Sustainable Development on the Local Level” was started under supervision of Ministry of Environment. This project has given a new impetus to greenway development in the Rossony District. The region has upgraded its previous Agenda 21 Strategy and developed a series of projects in order to obtain mini-grants aimed at improving greenway infrastructure and to create ecomuseums along the route.

Rossony region has turned out to be one of the most active among other pilot regions developing Greenways and has developed around 20 project proposals. Among them – the initiatives of creation of ecomuseums of local horse breed, forest herbs and herbal tea from them, renovation of local rites and traditions, ecological projects for local schools, creation of informational centers for sustainable development, rural entrepreneurship development center, development of Greenways infrastructure and signs, support of traditional rural tourism festival ‘Zaborsky fest’.

Table 1. The vision of the Rossony region’s future till 2020

Tourism infrastructure	“Green economy”	Ecological education	Nature protection
1. Infrastructure and communication development 2. Tourism service development (working places, crafts, etc.) 3. The basis of regional economy – tourism 4. Joint work of all tourism connected bodies 5. Creation of detailed map of the region	1. Specialization of small enterprises in ecological products production 2. Combination of innovations and traditions	1. Development of educational institutions in the sphere of ecological enlightenment 2. Improvement of cultural level of population 3. Renovation of folk traditions	1. Streamlining of forestry activity 2. Limitation of industrial use of nature resources

In relation to the project, a survey was held among the representatives of main stakeholders of the Rossony region to define the attitude of the local community to ‘sustainable development’ and Greenways. Among the participants of the survey were representatives of all status differentiated groups (socio-demographic, socio-professional and territorial).

87.5 % of the training participants (100% of the respondents) indicated that they were acquainted with the term “Greenways” and have positive attitude to the idea of creation a Greenway. Respondents defined the following advantages of the concept (Table 2).

The results presented reflect the support of the Greenways concept in Rossony region and confirm that their planning and creation is largely a bottom-up process.

**Table 2. Advantages of the Greenways concept for the Rossony region
(according to the survey)**

Tourists attraction/tourism development including rural tourism	12,5 %
Solution of ecological problems/ Ecological stability	12,5 %
Creation of resting places/ Expansion of recreation opportunities	12,5 %
Improvement of quality of service	12,5 %
Element of territory development	6,25 %
Improvement of regional economy, economic growth	6,25 %
Potential (natural and cultural), location	6,25 %
Promotion of the region	12,5 %
Start stimulates further work	6,25 %
Purity	6,25 %
Partnership/ Cooperation	6,25 %

Table 3 illustrates the results of a survey on what local people define as the most interesting and significant for the Rossony region in terms of core element that can be developed as local tourist products. The answers given by the respondents reflect that the areas natural heritage is a strong contender for the formation of region's identity and its promotion on tourist markets.

**Table 3. The potential basic for a tourist product in Rossony region
(respondents could give several answers at one time)**

Mushrooms and wild berries	25 %
Wild life	25 %
Honey	18,75 %
Fish and fish products	18,75 %
Game	6,25 %
Wood	6,25 %
Trickled pastries (local culinary speciality)	6,25 %
Nesherdo lake (famous local lake)	6,25 %
Nature potential	6,25 %
Cranberries in sugar	6,25 %
No answer	43,75 %

As a result of intensive ecological and rural tourism development in the region and thanks in part to the development of the greenway, there has emerged an idea for the creation of eco- and rural tourism resort to be supported by the Government. The creation of such a resort in the region is logical, as it will assist in stimulating the regional economy, create new working places and preserve the region as one administrative unit.

This example demonstrates that Greenways can unite the natural and cultural heritage of the region and that tourism can be used as an effective tool for ecological conservation and social development. This model has been widely adopted in Belarus through the above mentioned UNDP project which is currently supporting ten initiatives in pilot regions and has given a start to the development of National Greenways concept in Belarus.

The development of Greenways in Belarus has successfully shown that they contribute to the development of partnerships on local level, improve the local economy and livelihoods and to the formation of civil society.

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