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BULGARIA: National and Regional Ecotourism Strategy Project

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Background

Bulgaria has a rich history and internationally significant nature and culture; a conservation ethic and cultural identity are particularly well-developed in rural areas. The country, which is positioned at a crossroads between Europe and Asia, contains nine World Heritage sites, and has plentiful cultural, historical, and religious resources reaching back more than 5000 years. It contains high-mountain ski resorts, beautiful beaches and many "wild" and undeveloped rural areas for nature and adventure seekers. These resources provide a strong base for tourism in Bulgaria.

The two principal sectors of the Bulgarian tourism industry include *mass tourism*, which is focused on sun/sea and skiing tourism that are based on high volume/low value programs, and *specialized tourism* based on niche markets and focused increasingly on high end/high price consumers. Historically, as once part of the Soviet Union, the Bulgarian tourism industry focused on the mass tourism sector, which did not significantly benefit rural peoples, rural economies, and rural areas. Since 1989, and after 12 years and 6 governments, Bulgaria made a concerted effort to both capitalize on its unique natural values and increase the amount of revenue per tourist and keep more tourism revenue in Bulgaria. USAID assisted this effort through its Biodiversity Conservation and Economic Growth (BCEG) Project.

Objectives

The BCEG Project (2000-2004) helped to develop a broad-based approach to ecotourism development and biodiversity conservation. Its multiple objectives included nature conservation and biodiversity protection, rural development, enhanced local governance and support for government decentralization, and poverty reduction. By helping to position Bulgaria as a travel destination, an investment opportunity, and a cultural/nature destination in a region characterized by ethnic rivalry and political destabilization, the project helped the country to advance a reputation as a competitive, peaceful, value-for-money tourism leader. BCEG efforts resulted in a National Ecotourism Strategy and Action Plan that are guiding international and national investments in a new sustainable tourism agenda with the motto *Ecotourism: Naturally Bulgaria.*

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Some Specific Objectives of Bulgaria's Conservation and Economic Growth Project:

- Accelerate regional cluster development and growth of private firms in a competitive environment.
- Achieve increased and better-informed citizen participation in public policy decision-making.
- Develop revenue-generating and revenue-capture mechanisms for Bulgarian protected areas and buffer communities.
- Engage the public and key target groups near national parks in decision-making and management of protected areas.

Approach

During the first phase of the BCEG project, work focused on developing systems to encourage sustainable natural resources conservation and management in and around Bulgarian protected areas, and using this management approach to benefit local communities. As part of the protected area management implementation effort, the project applied a competitive cluster approach to destination development in select regions around two of Bulgaria's largest parks – Rila and Central Balkan National Parks. Activities included eco-enterprise development based on non-timber natural resources harvesting, ecotourism destination development through community/municipal ecotourism associations, and significant amounts of public awareness and organizational development. The project's second phase expanded activities to the national level. Phase 2 used successful regional ecotourism models around Bulgaria's protected areas to develop a national sustainable tourism strategy and 5-year action plan which is being delivered through public/private partnerships. Between 2004 and 2006, the Action Plan was used to guide more than USD 15 million in new tourism investments by the Government of Bulgaria to municipal governments and the private sector. The National Ecotourism Action Plan is complemented by 12 Regional Ecotourism Action Plans.

Sustainable tourism goals are addressed through the "triple bottom line" approach that includes social well-being, environmental protection and conservation, and economic growth. BCEG Project assistance helped small, independent tourism providers and regional ecotourism associations to analyze the national ecotourism market. Based on this experience, the Bulgarian ecotourism sector became increasingly confident in its ability to capture a larger portion of the European and other international markets.

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Achievements

Several significant accomplishments resulted from the project:

- Ecotourism Monitoring Guidelines were produced in conjunction with Bulgarian National Parks, the University of Sofia and participating ecotourism communities. This "Guidebook" is used by communities to select and monitor indicators linked to the triple bottom-line of social, environmental and economic welfare.
- The nation's first protected area management plans were developed, approved by the Government of Bulgaria and are being used to guide in-park and outside-park tourism development and management agendas for two national parks and a world heritage site – Rila Monastery's Nature Park.
- A model for collaborative management of natural resources was developed and implemented with ethnic minorities, municipal governments and the private sector through the parks focused on the sustainable harvesting of non-timber, wild renewable natural resources.
- A National Ecotourism Strategy and Action Plan for Bulgaria was created and endorsed by three collaborating ministries under the Project, and submitted to the President of the Republic of Bulgaria by the U.S. Ambassador in 2004.
- Twelve Regional Ecotourism Action Plans were designed, and they contributed to the development of a national ecotourism action plan.
- A national ecotourism market survey was conducted and used to inform product development.
- Two ecotourism associations were institutionalized around Rila and Central Balkans National Parks, and members were trained in hospitality skills, marketing, destination management, and membership promotion.
- Several community ecotourism projects were created, and destination management plans developed for two of these associations.
- Eastern Europe's first Protected Areas Trust Fund was established and institutionalized with Bulgarian and international funding.
- An ecotourism product development manual was developed for use throughout the country.
- Public awareness was improved through the production and distribution of a national parks multimedia CD, websites, publications, mass-media outlets, and conservation education materials.

The project contributed significantly to national pride in Bulgaria's culture, hospitality, and environment. It has created a base for tourism product diversification, encouraged concrete local initiatives toward implementing ecotourism activities, linked the complementary objectives of cultural and nature tourism, created synergies among donors, and has institutionalized a replicable planning process.

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Lessons Learned

The process of developing sustainable tourism strategies and implementation plans has yielded several critical lessons:

One is the need to clearly identify and involve all key stakeholders in a strategic planning process from the onset; it is essential to build on existing experience and perceptions, and to use these to build case studies for success. The ability to link (at small scale) the efforts of local government, national authorities, local business and local civil society was key to team-building, visioning and creating a common set of objectives. Each understood they had an important role to play in any successful ecotourism investment/success.

In the absence of a "full" enabling national policy, a partial national policy and lots of political good will can do! Ecotourism in Bulgaria was able to capitalize on a changing national tourism development policy that, although focused on mass tourism, was open to capturing other forms of tourism market diversification.

Publicity at national and local levels is not just important but critical to helping regions, local government, local investors, and even commercial banks, to better understand the opportunities for linking natural, cultural, and historical resources to rural development and economic growth opportunities. Those same information efforts and focused campaigns are critical to the development of a bottom-up approach that is based on rapid, mass information sharing between stakeholders at regional level. Kamelia Georgieva, Bulgarian ecotourism specialist for the BCEG project, confirmed, "Sustainable tourism development is about social and political engineering, as well as enterprise development. Public information is critical to support this process."

Other lessons learned during the five-year project include:

- Strong links with national efforts to support local government planning and decentralization are essential.
- Long-term technical and commercial financing support to governments, NGOs, and the private sector are needed to implement the sustainable tourism agenda.
- Sustainable tourism product development and marketing to national and, more importantly, international markets is essential to careful but concerted ecotourism growth.
- An initial focus on domestic tourism markets in countries where citizens have a culture of holiday and growing disposable income will build the local confidence needed to start expansion into the global market.
- International networking and global market development are excellent opportunities for public-private partnerships. There are no better "low-hanging" opportunities for linking common agendas, and shared costs and benefits.

For Further Information:
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