



Strategy and Action Plan for Engagement of Local Communities in Nature Conservation, Kemeri National Park

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Introduction

Engagement of local communities is crucial for support of nature conservation efforts. It helps to create the feeling of stewardship over the area and shared responsibility for protecting and taking care of it.

Also part of sustainable management of protected areas is to make sure that our management efforts increase the quality of life of local residents. Engagement in nature protection is one way how to do it – it provides empowerment (by involving local people in decision making process), education, entertainment, and improves health.

There are also other ways to improve the quality of life of local residents, for example, increasing the share of benefits from tourism, that stay in the local economy and providing good service when dealing with administrative issues concerning local people. These areas are covered in more detail in Management Plan and Sustainable Tourism Strategy.

This strategy was elaborated within a project “Community Program for Sustainable Development” partly financed by NORDPLUS Adult programme. It covers the main areas of civic engagement: decision making, education and direct involvement in nature protection. It was created as a separate document, that will later be included as a part of our Sustainable Tourism Strategy and Management Plan.

We want to thank all our project partners, local community leaders and staff of the national park authority (Pieriga Regional Administration of Nature Conservation Agency (NCA)) for their support and contribution in developing this strategy.

1. Background for the strategy

The Kemer National Park was established relatively recently – in 1997 and we are still trying to work out the best ways to communicate and cooperate with our communities. The main principles, aims and actions are laid out in several documents – our Management Plan has chapters on Public Relations and Nature Education, we have a separate Communication Strategy, the Sustainable Tourism Strategy and a strategy for our Nature Education Centre. But most of these documents were developed some time ago, focused mostly on communication and education and cover a wide range of target groups (including not only local residents, but also visitors, politicians, media etc. We have already developed a lot of good practices that are working well, but still from time to time we run into some unsolved issues and long standing conflicts with some groups within our communities. So we took part in the project to develop a new more focused strategy that covers specifically the engagement of local communities.

2. Our communities

After the territorial reform of rural municipalities, ĶNP is included in the territories of five municipalities: City of Jūrmala, Region of Tukums, Region of Jelgava, Region of Engure, and Region of Babīte. (TS)

When considering local communities we think about the people living inside the Kemeru NP (about 4500 – mainly in Ķemeru and Lapmežciems) and in approximately 5 km (ņemts no socekona pētījuma tūrisma stratēģijai) wide area surrounding our national park (another 32 000 people – mainly in Kauguri, Slāpme, Smārde). The survey of local residents within the NORDPLUS project included only local residents living inside the National Park but the action plan for engaging local communities in nature protection includes both the residents living inside the national park and in the area surrounding the national park.

The most important local target groups are:

- local residents in general
- local municipalities
- local NGOs
- land owners and business owners (forestry, agriculture, fishing, tourism)
- educational and social organisations
- hunters
- anglers

3 SWOT analysis of our relationships with local communities

The analysis of the external factors (opportunities and threats) is based mainly on the results of the survey carried out in the NORDPLUS project, the assessment of internal factors (strengths and weaknesses) is based on the discussions among the staff of the national park authority.

3.1 Strengths

- More or less regular meetings (once a year) with local inhabitants organised by the NCA staff.
- Publications in local newspapers, mainly about nature education events
- Participation in the meetings of Kemeru Local Inhabitants Society
- Cooperation started with the Slāpme Local Inhabitants Society
- Organising events together with local residents – Kemeru Festival,
- Participation in local culture events – Night of the Museums, Opening of Summer Season of Jūrmala Resort
- Excursions exclusively for local inhabitants within special/larger? events
- Good cooperation with local schools (organising camps) and libraries (exhibitions about the national park, “Green afternoons”)
- Tourism Forum

- Consultative Council
- Cooperation with local municipalities
- Enthusiastic staff
- Information about the attitudes of local residents towards tourism and nature protections and about the main information channels (NORDPLUS survey)
- Employees who know the history of relationships between national park authority and local residents
- Project on informing landowners in 2008 (financed by Latvian Environmental Protection Fund)
- Engagement of local communities of Slampe and Smārde by staff of LIFE+ project HYDROPLAN

3.2 Weaknesses

- Lack of constant two way communication with almost all target groups
- Meetings with local residents that are organised by NCA staff are not effective (almost no one is attending them)
- Lack of information about local NGOs and their meetings
- Lack of information in local newspapers and homepages of local municipalities about the nature protection / nature management issues that affect local residents
- Weak inner communication about the conflicts, recent developments and plans regarding local residents/municipalities
- Lack of human resources
- Lack of understanding how important it is to create and maintain good relationships with local communities
- Old problems/issues (see threats for more details) that are not being solved
- Some of the tourism stakeholders (local residents, producers) are not represented in tourism forum
- NCA (Central office) lacks a strategy for engaging local communities in nature protection in Latvia (as well as for raising general awareness about the nature protection etc.).
- lack of financing for organising nature education events, information campaigns

3.3 Threats

- People have negative attitude towards several aspects of protected area management (=“Old problems”)
 - Dead trees in the forest (look horrible, make it hard to walk), problems to get firewood while at the same time NCA is cutting forests
 - Quality of roads
 - Problems related to hydrology – drainage ditches are not cleaned, beaver activity, spring floods, wetland restoration projects
 - Garbage, broken tourism infrastructure
 - Lack of picnic places
 - In future – cormorants (constantly increasing population and damage)
 - building restrictions, restrictions in general (lack of information about the restrictions and possibilities to receive permits)

- Some local residents have problems distinguishing responsibilities of NCA, local municipalities and other state organisations involved in environmental protection
- Local people think that NCA staff members are arrogant
- Lack of two way communication (feedback) – most of our communication goes only one way
- 60% of local inhabitants have never attended our nature education events, partly because of lack of information
- People think that nature protection has relatively negative impact on local economy and employment
- People think that very small proportion of tourism benefits stay in the local economy
- 50% think that tourism creates waste and degrades the environment

3.4 Opportunities

- We have an up to date information about the most important information channels used by local residents
- Local residents think that the availability of information about the national park has increased by about 20% since 2002.
- Local resident in general have more positive (than negative) attitude towards the nature protection. They think that it has a positive impact on the landscape, image of the region, social wellbeing, tourism.
- ½ of local residents are willing to participate in nature protection activities (clean ups, monitoring etc.)
- There are compensations available for the restrictions on economic activity imposed by nature protection (for forestry)
- There are some legal possibilities to get firewood in Kemer NP
- Local residents have a positive attitude towards tourism – they think that it increases opportunities for recreation and that the number of tourism can be increased
- Part of local residents want to participate in tourism development – help to create infrastructure, participate in discussions
- Local people are willing to share their ideas about the tourism development (new trails, information signs etc.)
- 29% have attended nature education events organised by NCA at least once

4. Objectives for improving communication and community engagement

Main aim is to create and maintain good relationships with local communities and increase their engagement in nature protection.

Objectives:

- Improve two way communication with all target groups:

- Improve internal communication about the cooperation with different stakeholders (open cases etc.)
- Raise awareness of the staff about the importance of creating and maintaining good relationships with local inhabitants and engaging them in nature protection
- Try solving the old conflicts:
 - Dead trees in the forest (look horrible, make it hard to walk), problems to get firewood while at the same time NCA is cutting forests
 - Quality of roads
 - Problems related to hydrology – drainage ditches are not cleaned, beaver activity, spring floods, wetland restoration projects
 - Garbage, broken tourism infrastructure
 - Lack of picnic places
 - In future – cormorants (constantly increasing population and damage)
 - building restrictions, restrictions in general (lack of information about the restrictions and possibilities to receive permits)
- Improve the involvement of local residents in tourism planning
- Improve understanding of local people about the differences in responsibilities of different governing organisations (NCA, local municipalities, etc...)
- Improve the reach of information about nature education events
- Improve understanding of the economic benefits of tourism and how they can be increased
- Increase volunteering

5. Monitoring and renewal of the strategy and action plan

To monitor the results of the strategy, carry out repeated surveys of local residents every 5-10 years

Annex 1 Action Plan

