

Nature-based and cultural tourism

Roundtable RURACTIVE forum

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RURACTIVE



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Challenges

4. Structural nature-based and cultural tourism challenges in rural territories

Evidence from RURACTIVE project activities highlights persistent structural barriers affecting nature-based and cultural tourism across rural regions.

4.1 Infrastructure and accessibility gaps

Rural tourism systems often suffer from underdeveloped infrastructure:

- fragmented or poorly maintained cultural and nature routes
- insufficient signage, interpretation tools, and visitor facilities
- limited connectivity and accessibility in remote or mountainous areas

4.2 Loss of cultural heritage and knowledge

Depopulation and ageing populations threaten the continuity of cultural assets essential for tourism:

- decline of traditional practices, crafts, and local narratives
- weakening of cultural identity and community-based tourism potential

4.3 Weak integration of tourism with sustainability objectives

Tourism development is often insufficiently aligned with environmental and climate goals:

- limited coordination between tourism, biodiversity conservation, and climate adaptation
- risks of environmental degradation in sensitive areas

4.4 Limited visibility and market positioning

Rural destinations frequently struggle to position themselves within broader tourism markets:

- underdeveloped branding and promotion of local assets
- limited access to digital platforms and marketing tools

4.5 Social and participation inequalities

Barriers to participation persist across rural tourism systems:

- underrepresentation of women, youth, and vulnerable groups in tourism activities
- limited opportunities for local communities to co-create tourism offers

The examples presented in Table 1 illustrate some of the challenges collaboratively identified in two different rural innovation hubs (Dynamos) as well as various proposed solutions to address them.



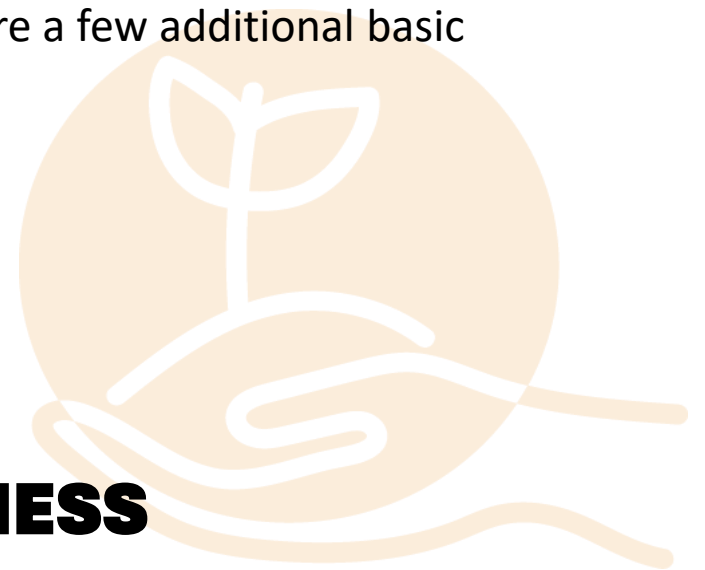
Well summarized in the **Background document**

.... but **from tourism practice**, there are a few additional basic things to consider:

Tourism is **FUN**

Tourism is **BUSINESS**

Tourism needs **MANAGEMENT**



About **FUN**

Visitors want to **relax, dis-complicate, escape from daily life pressure and problems**

Rural problems? – **not for them**

Rural “romantics”? – **YES for them**

Contrast to [Mega-Trends?](#) - **YES**

- Memorable experiences that people associate with relaxation and joy
- Fun activities help visitors connect emotionally with a destination, strengthening its appeal and reputation
- Happy travelers tend to spend more and stay longer.
- Fun encourages cultural exchange in a positive way
- Learn about new places is engaging rather than forced

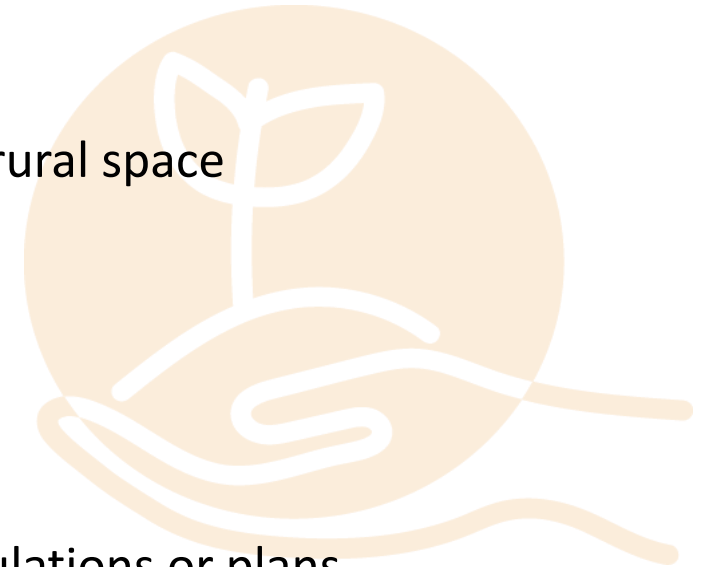


About **BUSINESS**

“Sustainability comes through the pocket”

YES: tourism has a high potential impact (positive and negative) on rural space
over-tourism is a relevant risk
“think and organize before you do something”
rules are necessary

BUT: if it is not profitable in the **individual** pocket, it will not happen
allow to focus on core services, not to comply with 100s of regulations or plans
leave space for initiative and “learning by doing”
facilitate, support and externalize efforts and costs



About **MANAGEMENT**

“Variety generates attraction”

“My competitor is my enemy” – **WRONG !**

Many small (micro and nano) services. None of them alone has sufficient traction.

Only a **combination of complementary services** creates an attractive product

Somebody has to do this ...



**CO-OPETITION at local level:
Destination Management structures**



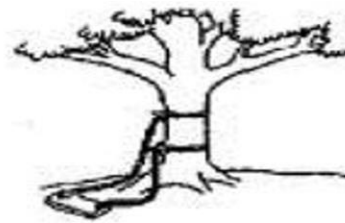
Over-Planning?



**As proposed
by the project
sponsor.**



**As specified
in the project
request.**



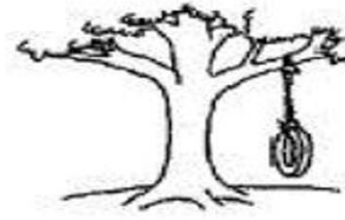
**As designed
by the senior
architect.**



**As produced
by the
engineers.**



**As installed at
the user's
site.**



**What the
customer
really wanted.**



Climate change

Climate change affects **core resources**:

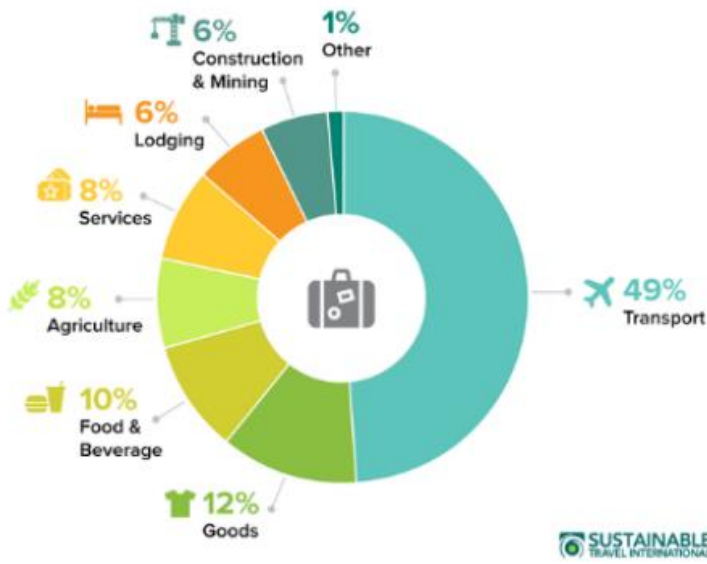
- *Nature*
- *Main historic potentials (ski, water, vegetation, ...)*
- *Biodiversity*

CO2 neutrality. We are part of the game. But we are not good at this compared with more compact structures: insulation, transport, individual infrastructure / supply / waste management, ...

Action required

- Rural Tourism Roadmap to tackle Climate Change.
- Adaptation instead of compensation
- PEF – Product Environmental Footprint
- Multi-modal transport, especially in destination

Carbon Footprint of Global Tourism



Over-Tourism

First cases in rural areas appeared in 2023. **We can bet for more in the future.**

No real-time data available.

Impact on communities:

- *Cost and availability of housing*
- *Accommodation for workforce*
- *Capacity of infrastructure (supply and waste)*
- *Social and cultural impacts*

Action required

- In the first place: **be aware** that this affects us
- Carrying capacity analysis
- Contingency measures planning at destination level



Destination Management



Complex **complementarity** of small (micro and nano) services generates the full visitor experience.

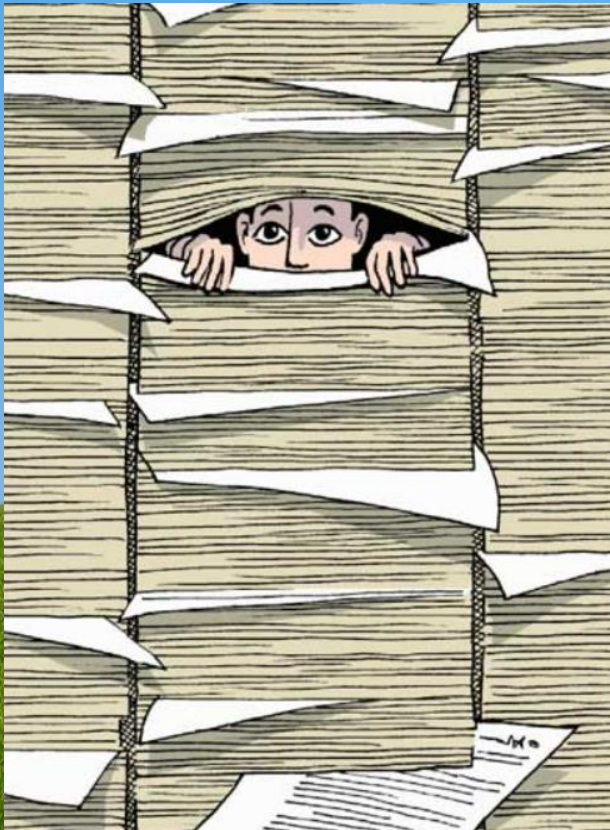
Common tasks and services need to be “socialized” = out-sourced

Need of effective and operative **Rural Destination Management Organisations.**

Actions required

- Best-Practice models and how to transfer them
- DMO controlled by affected stakeholders (**AT model**)
- Necessary legal framework

(Over-) Regulation



Regulation must be **proportional to size of services**

“One fits all” is applied but does not work

Resistance to adapt and reconsider existing systems and rules

Lack of strong voice of the sector

Lobbying-influenced political bias (DSR)

Action required

- “If we are the future, **the system** needs to change”
- Stronger own, independent advocacy
- Best-practice cases across Europe (there is plenty ...)

Skills and competences

The Tourism Industry has rules. If we want to play the game, we must know them.

Lack of awareness about skills gaps

New upcoming profiles and skills

Is the education and training system prepared? - initial, re- and upskilling

Actions required

- “If we are the future, **WE** need to learn”
- Awareness and tangible incentives for stakeholders
- Best-practice cases across Europe (there is plenty ...)
- Training / mentoring / advice



PACT FOR
SKILLS *Leader*

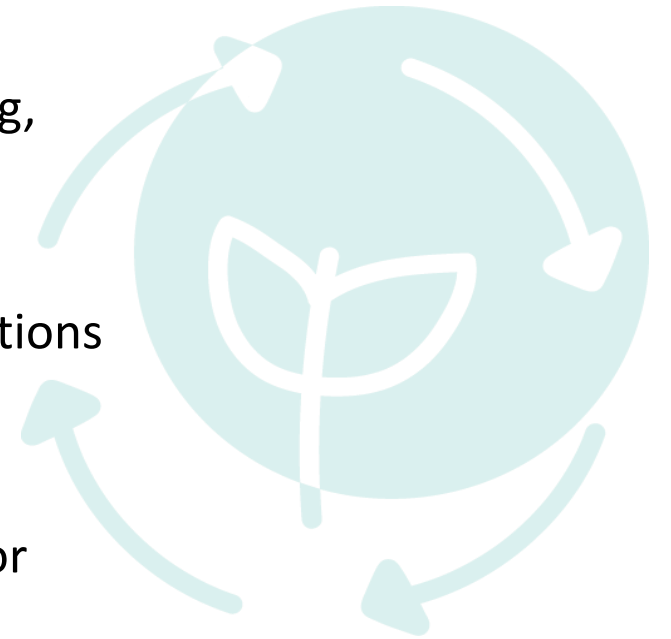
An initiative of the European Commission



So where does this take us for Policy Making?

Focus on Enabling Factors: **KISS**

- **Reduce Overhead** for stakeholders: simple regulation, quick processing, externalization of individual efforts
- **Capacity building:** training, advisory services, mentorship
- Easy-to-handle **support mechanisms:** SCO grants, professional associations with delegated competences (ie. quality control)
- **Branding** (destination, products) – *for nature: Natura2000*
- **Destination Management** structures with sustainable financing (“visitor tax”) – based on and run by local communities, *Austria model*



Food for Thought (and discussion)

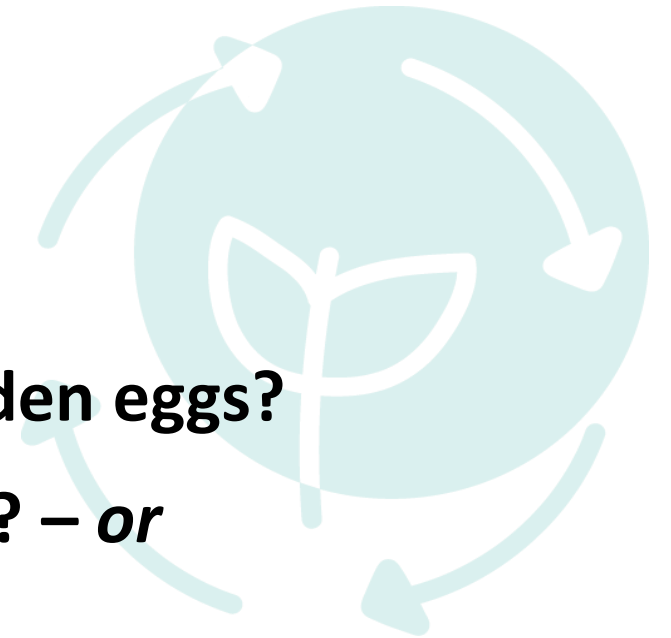
“The way to hell is paved with good intentions”

Is so much planning really necessary?

New tourism model with old framework?

What is the correct diet for the hen to lay golden eggs?

**Is there a demand / market for our nice ideas? – *or*
what does the visitor really want?**



Address real needs → Focus on the User Experience



Thank you for your attention!



RURALTOUR
EUROPEAN FEDERATION OF RURAL TOURISM

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