



Regional Working Group on Environment Report on Ecotourism



Proposal for Information and Training Package on Ecotourism in the Barents Region

Foreword

This report from the Regional Working Group on Environment is a proposal for an information and training package in ecotourism for small- and medium-sized enterprises in the Barents Region. This report will be a step further for linking tourism and conservation.

The Regional Working Group on Environment wish to thank Annelie Nilsson, Swedish Ecotourism Association and Miriam Geitz, WWF International Arctic Programme who has been the authors of this report.

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I. Introduction

The County of Administration of Västerbotten has on the behalf of the The Barents Euro-Arctic Regional Council Working Group on Environment commissioned the Swedish Ecotourism Association (SEA) to write a proposal for an information and training package in ecotourism for small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the Barents Region. The training package is based on the quality label Nature's Best that SEA developed and launched in 2002. The WWF International Arctic Programme contributed to this report with their expertise and experience on arctic conservation and tourism issues.

II. Background

The Arctic is a truly unique place that centers on the northern pole and the Arctic Ocean, and is surrounded by the eight arctic countries of Norway, Sweden, Finland, Russia, USA (Alaska), Canada, Greenland and Iceland. Its boundary to the South is not a static one but defined based on political, geographical or climatic factors.

The various definitions of the Arctic encompass large parts of the Barents Euro Arctic Region (BEAR); and like the BEAR, the rest of the Arctic is characterized by stunning natural landscapes, shy and charismatic wildlife and vivid indigenous and local peoples.

More than in the temperate and warmer climates of the globe, it is the combination of untouched nature and living culture that draws visitors to the North. And though belonging to eight different jurisdictions, the characteristics of and preconditions for tourism in the circumpolar Arctic are quite similar.

Tourism is constantly rediscovered as one way to diversify economic activities and to benefit a local community. While these are legitimate concerns, the third pillar of sustainability, the environment, is often regarded as less important in this context.

III. Tourism and the arctic environment

The pitfalls of tourism in the Arctic

Tourism in the North is based on and takes place in an extremely vulnerable and fragile environment. Though most visitor numbers are far away from mass tourism, their relative number and impacts can be considerable if handled carelessly.

Factors that make tourism potentially detrimental to the arctic environment and its people:

- sensitivity of the ecosystem,
 - o trampling
 - o infrastructure impacts (e.g. buildings, roads & paths, bird watching stands)
 - o pollution (air and water, e.g. oil or other fuel spills from vehicles and boats)
 - o waste (solid or organic waste, e.g. food left behind in nature)
 - o noise (motorized-transport, disturbance of wildlife)
 - o collection of historic artifacts, flowers, fire wood, eggs, etc.
 - o non-sustainable use of species, e.g. over-fishing and –hunting
 - o fragmentation (development of and access to new visitor sites)
 - o energy wastefulness

- “sensitivity” of the social and cultural structure,
 - o unequal participation of and benefits to local people in tourism
 - o cultural insensitivity
 - o dependency on certain tourism-related activities

All these negative impacts have a potential to degrade a host community’s quality of life, create social conflict and alter the environment and the resources it lives off.

The positive side of tourism or how tourism can help to protect nature and benefit local people

Although no tourism at all would probably be the best solution from an environmental point of view, tourism can be positive for nature and local people when done in the right way.

In times where things are evaluated based on their economic value and “civilization” puts pressure on the last unspoiled wildernesses, ecotourism can be an acceptable means to protect natural assets from unsustainable and destructive exploitation.

As mentioned throughout this report, ecotourism gives more than it takes, to nature and to local people, thus creating a win-win situation for all involved. One way to strengthen sustainable tourism development and the benefits for nature and people through ecotourism is by means of knowledge-sharing and capacity building with the local stakeholders and especially the SMEs. There are many examples of committed and successful ecotourism businesses, and WWF highlights one of these operators each year with its Arctic Award for Linking Tourism and Conservation while other examples are the operators that have been recognized by the Nature’s Best label. Nothing is more effective in encouraging and convincing local entrepreneurs about the value of a sustainable ecotourism business than providing and sharing hands-on experiences and know-how about best practice.

But ecotourism does not mean that the tourism providers only work on improving their operational and mostly internal practices, but tourists as well should have the opportunity to be more involved. One key element of ecotourism is nature interpretation, where the visitor has the opportunity to learn about the environment and the particular activity he or she is participating in. Interpreting the experience should stretch through the ecotourism experience all the way – from the preparations to the post-trip discussion around the fireplace.

Apart from good environmental practices in the field, it is interpretation what makes the big difference between nature-based tourism and ecotourism. A combination of first hand experiences and knowledgeable and interesting information will enhance the product significantly and will be appreciated by most visitors. It will personalize and deepen the contact with nature and culture, and leave lasting memories that will remain after the trip is over. Ecotourists more than other tourists will appreciate the experience and its value, thus becoming ambassadors of the Arctic.

IV. Natures Best – a quality label for ecotourism

Nature’s Best is a quality label for Swedish ecotourism, developed in co-operation between the tourism industry, land owner- and conservation interests and launched during the UN International Year of Ecotourism 2002. The label has been tailored to guarantee high-quality tourism products, combined with criteria that contribute to nature conservation, environmentally friendlier ways of travelling and care for the cultural heritage of the destination. The label is meant to be a trademark and a joint marketing channel for the best

Swedish nature tour operators and their finest products, and a guide for tourists to find them. Nature's Best is the product of primarily the Swedish Ecotourism Association, together with the Swedish Travel and Tourism Council and the Swedish Society for Nature Conservation.

Nature's Best has had a great response in the tourism industry and among tour operators in Sweden. More than 100 operators have joined the process and today 38 approved tour operators can offer more than 100 labelled nature travel products.

The Nature's Best labeling system is defined by six basic criteria, (One of the main sources for these criteria are the Ten Principles for Arctic Tourism (see appendix) which have been developed by a WWF-led initiative as early as 1996.)

1. Respect the limitations of the destination – minimize negative impact on nature and culture

Ecotourism is about conserving what the visitor has come to experience. The carrying capacity of each area must be respected. This demands thorough tour operator knowledge about the destination, and co-operation with other on-site actors.

2. Support the local economy

Ecotourism is also about community development. Conservation can easily fail if local people object to it. Tangible benefits from tourism are a positive force. Each tourism product contributes by purchasing goods and services locally. The more the better.

3. Make all the company's operations environmentally sustainable

Ecotourism operators are pioneers of best environmental practice. Approved operators use minimum environmental impact policies, regarding for example transportation, lodging, waste management etc.

4. Contribute actively to conservation

Ecotourism assumes its responsibility for the protection of biodiversity and cultural values. This means supporting conservation in various ways. The ecotourism operator co-operates with conservation NGOs, in a partnership for mutual benefit.

5. Promote the joy of discovery, knowledge and respect

Ecotourism is to travel with a curious and at the same time respectful attitude. Approved operators have competent hosts and knowledgeable guides, providing good interpretation. This is often the key to memorable travel experiences.

6. Quality and safety all the way through

Ecotourism is quality tourism. Approved tour products meet, or exceed, high customer expectations. Safety issues are taken very seriously, and satisfied customers are the norm. An approved ecotourism operator is a trustworthy supplier and partner.

Tour operators can apply for the label and if they fulfil the quality criteria and environmental criteria there will be an on-site visit. Their application is thoroughly studied before an independent committee takes the final decision.

Nature's Best is aiming to be a realistic and cost-efficient quality system, with subsequent quality control largely based upon customer feed-back. An already approved operator can be excluded and thereby lose the right to use the label.

V. Proposal for an ecotourism information and training package

The training package proposed in this section has four steps that build on each other. The aim of the first step is to inspire and spread information about ecotourism in order to attract interested tour operators. Step two is for tour operators who want to know more about the subject and the third step offers training for those interested in practical implementation of ecotourism principles. The fourth step gives further incentives and inspiration by pointing out practical examples of benefits for companies joining the Nature's Best system.

The training package can have two goals / levels of ambitions:

Level 1: to raise awareness and interest for ecotourism practices among local tour operators, and to support and promote implementation through capacity building measures.

Level 2: to develop a ecotourism certification or labeling system and prepare interested tourism businesses for their participation.

To achieve changes in practice, guidance and support on ecotourism practices have to be offered to the tourism businesses, in addition, interested operators need to see the direct and indirect benefits of ecotourism for their business. Direct benefits include, for example, improved marketing opportunities, better product quality and higher turnover, while indirect benefits could result from a labeling/ certification scheme.

The proposal presented is based on the labeling system of Nature's Best and under the assumption that a potential project will result in a tourism certification system of some sort. If not some alterations will probably be necessary.

It should also be emphasised, that in order to engage as many companies as possible in the process, different levels of involvement have to be offered. Some entrepreneurs might already have a basic knowledge or practise of ecotourism whereas others just start to learn about it. The following modules are combinable or to be used separately, depending on the level of knowledge and involvement that an entrepreneur has.

Introduction & Motivation

Purpose

This initial introductory module addresses all enterprises in the nature and cultural tourism sector. The objective is to inform participants about what ecotourism is and to spark their interest to learn more.

Content

The introductory step will answer the following two questions:

- why is ecotourism good for business, nature, the environment, the guest and the community?
- what is an ecotourism label and what are the benefits?

Method

Depending on the situation, this first module can be presented in different formats, e.g. a seminar, an interactive CD ROM or online module, a brochure or more advanced as a video.

Basic training

Purpose

The basic training module provides more in-depth information on the concept of ecotourism and its implementation. This course is open for all companies who want to know more about ecotourism and how to make it work. In Sweden, participants of this course are entrepreneurs who decided or seriously consider to apply for the Nature's Best quality label.

Content

- The six basic principles of Nature's Best.
- Presentation and explanation of the different elements used in the labelling process like destination analysis, environmental management plan, purchasing policy, quality management and internal training.
- Marketing of ecotourism, benefits of and rules for a common marketing strategy like Nature's Best.

Methods

The experiences from Sweden show that it is advantageous to gather a group of companies since this encourages and stimulates exchanges of knowledge and experiences between the entrepreneurs which is an important motivational aspect. The ultimate way of doing the basic training is therefore to arrange a two to three day course and workshop.

As the geographical distances of participants in the Barents region can be quite long, alternative solutions can be employed, for example a training team that travels to regional/local courses, a train-the-trainer approach or distance studies via internet. This will on the other hand reduce the opportunity for building a broader network for co-operation and experience exchange.

Practical application & consulting

Purpose

In this module the entrepreneur, on his/her own or together with others, transforms and applies the principles and concept of ecotourism to practise in their own company. At this stage it is very useful to be able to offer some sort of external consulting, and it has to be emphasised that the system of Nature's Best has proven to be an invaluable driving force in this work. Without a clear incentive, such as applying for a quality label and without a concrete deadline it is very unlikely that these kinds of tasks will be prioritised.

Content

- Transformation and application of the six principles and other elements of the labelling system to his/her company by the entrepreneur. The participant works on his/her own destination analysis, environmental management system, purchasing policy, product development, quality management and internal training plan.

In Sweden, this course has the goal to prepare participants' tourism products for the meeting the criteria of the quality label Nature's Best. It also includes the next step, a visit from an auditor and a final assessment from the independent labelling committee.

Method

In Nature's Best forms, models, examples and background material play a big roll in working with the different tools and elements. It is also useful to use hands-on consulting from consultants, tourism industry organisations and individual experts. Meetings in person can be complemented with consulting via telephone and internet.

Best practices – advantages for businesses

One of the best ways to motivate entrepreneurs to join this training package/ labeling system and to invest time and money into the effort, is to hear success stories about benefits that entrepreneurs already in the system have gained. This part will therefore present the experiences of entrepreneurs that have joined the process of working with Nature's Best have made.

Experiences from the SMART project (Sustainable Model for Arctic Regional Tourism) and the network in Norrbotten and Västerbotten in Sweden for implementing the SMART will also be presented since it has many similarities to this training package. See appendix for more details.

Content

Best practices and good examples from:

- Marketing (national and international)
- Product development
- Creating network for exchange of knowledge and experience
- Environmental adaptation
- Safeguard of natural and cultural heritage
- Better operational structure
- Staff involvement and pride

Method

Presentation of concrete examples from approved operators in Sweden combined with a workshop where the participants shall try to transform similar ideas to their own businesses.

VI. Feasibility in Barents Region

Different stakeholders (see details in appendix) in the Barents Region have been asked to give their viewpoint on how well this training package and the Nature's Best labeling system would work in their region/area and if any alteration would be necessary.

Their general viewpoint is that they think that the system is very elaborated and well thought through, and that they are interested in working more closely with it and adapt it to their field of work. There is some concern that the system might be too detailed in some respect and that some requirements can be very costly and thus hard to motivate companies to implement them. If the proposed training package will be developed, more stakeholders will be involved in the process of adjusting the model to suit different conditions. In Sweden, a business consultant who has used the Nature's Best system thinks that it has added norms to an in many senses young industry, which is welcomed by consultants and authorities.

vii. Conclusion

Throughout the document, it is mentioned that creating incentives for businesses to participate and apply ecotourism principles in practise is critical for achieving the potential benefits and a positive change on the ground. Developing or adopting a tourism label like Nature's Best could be one way to create these incentives. However, before engaging into the development of any label applicable in the Barents region, a thorough discussion on the opportunities and pitfalls of such an approach should be led, and the many lessons that have been learned in this field taken into account. There are many questions to be asked when

looking at ecolabels, and many of them will determine whether or not such an undertaking is the right tool.

Nature's Best has seen a good start and well acceptance in Sweden. One reason for this is the fact that the system is build on a bottom-up approach were the tour operators have taken part in the process from the beginning by being both co-writers to the criteria and pilot companies testing them in their businesses. Other parts of the tourism industry, land owner- and conservation interests have also been involved in creating the system through a reference group. The system has gained a broad backing and has been easy to implement since it was developed through co-operation and agreement.

Another reason are the benefits the tour operators who have joined the system have gained –for example improvement of their businesses through different measures taken and educating themselves and their staff. These positive effects will all companies gain, wether they chose to apply for the quality label or not. So even if Sweden has good experiences from working with a certification system, the Barents Region can achieve considerable effects even if it will not go as far as to adapt or create a system.

This proposal for an ecotourism information and training package has been developed under the assumption that in the Barents region, there are different levels of knowledge and interest in ecotourism. Thus the package offers a step by step approach to accommodate the interest and needs of as many companies as possible.

One way of testing the interest for a training package and a certification system in the region is to use the experiences Nature's Best has gained so far, and sending out a collection of good examples and best practises (from module 4 in the training package) to different areas in the region. If not the whole region is interested, you can chose to start in the areas that are. After a while there will hopefully be more good examples that will spread the ecotourism principles like ripples in the water and attract more and more areas.

Ecotourism is worth all the effort. It is simply a more enjoyable way to travel - for all involved. More fun for the traveller, for the tour operator, for local people, and better for the natural and cultural values that can be protected more easily this way.

VIII. Appendix

Further information

- **Swedish Ecotourism Association (SEA)**

SEA is a non profit-making association which is open to anyone who wants to work for more and better ecotourism in Sweden and abroad. SEA has more than 200 companies as members, most of them small nature and culture based businesses (around 50 of them operates in northern Sweden). Another hundred members are travellers interested in ecotourism, journalists, students and people working with nature conservation.

The main object for SEA has been to create a quality label for Swedish ecotourism which became a reality during the UN International Year of Ecotourism 2002 when Nature's Best was launched. SEA also wants to create a powerful network of stakeholders working for spreading the ecotourism principles on all levels of society – to travellers, tourism business, communities and authorities.

SEA publish at least four number of the newsletter SAFARI each year and several of the key persons in the association are popular lecturers in the field of ecotourism. SEA also arrange seminars about ecotourism and more environmentally friendly travelling and runs the web site www.ekoturism.org. For more information about the label Nature's Best see www.naturesbest.nu.

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- **WWF Ten Principles for Arctic Tourism**

The WWF International Arctic Programme got involved into tourism issues in 1995 when it became clear that this economic activity was going to continue to grow in the future, presenting both threats and opportunities to the arctic environment. As one of the first activities, we started to facilitate a dialogue between interested stakeholders from different backgrounds and different parts of the arctic region. The Linking Tourism and Conservation in the Arctic initiative was born.

Through a series of workshops, the group with representatives from industry, communities, authorities, NGOs and researchers developed the *Ten Principles for Arctic Tourism* and the respective *Code of Conduct for Tour Operators in the Arctic* and *Code of Conduct for Arctic Tourists*.

Ten Principles for Arctic Tourism

- 1) Make tourism and conservation compatible
- 2) Support the preservation of wilderness and biodiversity
- 3) Use natural resources in a sustainable way
- 4) Minimize consumption, waste and pollution
- 5) Respect local cultures
- 6) Respect historic and scientific sites
- 7) Communities should benefit from tourism
- 8) Trained staff are the key to responsible tourism
- 9) Make your trip an opportunity to learn about the Arctic
- 10) Follow safety rules

Since then, the principles have been tested in pilot projects and been translated into all arctic languages for distribution among travelers and businesses. They were the first voluntary guidelines developed by a multi-stakeholder group for an international region as big and diverse as the Arctic, and a number of destinations have taken these general principles and refined them to address specific local needs and conditions.

WWF also achieved the endorsement and recognition of the Ten Principles for Arctic Tourism within the political fora of the arctic countries.

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- **Stakeholders that have been contacted:**
 - Natalia Moraleva, the Russian Ecotourism Association
 - Veronica Tarbaeva, Russia

- Timo Seppälä, tour operator and representative of the Pyhä-Lousto tourist resort, Finland
- Nikolaj Fomin, biologist, speaks Swedish and has worked with hunting tourism and has contacts with Russian tour operators
- Peter Lugnegård, business consultant in Västerbotten who has worked with the Nature's Best system

- **SMART – Sustainable Model for Arctic Regional Tourism**

SMART is a circumpolar co-operation program in sustainable tourism that sets out to help the tourism sector adopt economically, environmentally and culturally sustainable tourism practices. The official start of the project was in April 2003.

Focusing on training and capacity building, international co-operation will help businesses and communities understand what sustainable tourism is and how to get involved. In addition, the project will promote and create market incentives to support the implementation of sustainable practices in the tourism sector. The guidelines are based on the Nature's Best criteria and WWF's Ten Principles for Arctic Tourism.

The SMART project, which is an official project of the Arctic Council's Sustainable Development Working Group and the Northern Forum, has received three years funding from the EU's Northern Periphery Programme.

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Realization plan for SMART in Norrbotten and Västerbotten in Sweden:

1. To collect, analyse and document good examples/products for nature based tourism in Norrbotten and Västerbotten.
2. To market the concept of sustainable tourism and the benefits that companies will have when developing products and the company according to the concept.
3. To support companies in their learning of using sustainable tourism in the company's product- and business development.
4. To identify and adapt the concept of sustainable tourism (Nature's Best) for the market and to reward companies/products that acquire the model.
5. To create/ develop clear incentives for the Tourism business to develop sustainable tourism (like for example through Nature's Best).

- **Environmental education options in Norway and Finland**

Norway

In Norway it is above all the foundation Green in Practice (GRIP), the Norwegian centre for sustainable production and consumption, that has courses in environmental issues and in some extent ecotourism for SME's.

GRIP covers a number of different branches and professional fields, among these the travel and tourism industry. GRIP develops methods for a more sustainable and eco-efficient travel and tourism industry, field tests these methods in pilot projects around the country, and distributes handbooks for reducing the environmental load and increasing the profitability of each individual establishment. The GRIP handbooks are all developed in close collaboration with the industry in question. and some of them are field tested in pilot projects in the industry.

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Finland

- YSMEK (The Network for Developing Environmentally Friendly Tourism in Finland). Different projects have resulted in a guidebook for tourism enterprises, an Environmental Management System (EMS) adaptable to three types of tourism facilities, and an environmental management guidebook for organisers of mass events. YSMEK project has also resulted in establishing an informal network, MAYAVAT, of the environmental representatives of the pilot enterprises.
- There exist a training for “green hotels” but the information is only in Finnish.
- A system for quality certification for tourism businesses in rural areas.