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Inspire Policy Making with Territorial Evidence

UPTAKE ARTICLE

ESPON Peer Learning Workshop:

Landscape heritage and sustainable tourism in the post-COVID period

Virtual

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Objective



On the 25th of February the ESPON-TNO program organised a virtual Peer Learning Workshop with ESPON researchers and academic and Icelandic stakeholders.

The goal of the event was to nurture the ongoing discussion in Iceland about developing a new tourism strategy based on national landscape and cultural heritage, providing examples of territorial-specific approaches to facing developmental challenges.

The main goal of the event was to develop a better understanding of which policies and local practices can relaunch tourism in a sustainable manner, adapted to the context of the global pandemic without having a negative impact on the country's heritage. This transition period provides an opportunity to rethink the role of tourism in Iceland's future policy-strategies.

In this context, the knowledge from ESPON could inspire national and regional stakeholders in elaborating policy and planning instruments building on trans-European knowledge and case studies from other countries.

Summary

The event started with an introduction of the ESPON programme and its goals by Zintis Hermansons (ESPON EGTC). Maria Prezioso (University of Rome Tor Vergata and ECP Italy) also gave an introduction, stressing the role of sustainable approach for the recovery of the tourism sector.

The first part focused on the territorial evidence provided by ESPON, both on the territorial potential of specific types of territories regarding tourism development and on the Icelandic ESPON Heritage spin-off project. Ruslan Zhechkov (GreenEdgeConsulting) – who has been in charge of tourism issues within the ESPON BRIDGES project on Territories with Geographical Specificities – provided some insights about key principles of sustainable tourism in the Icelandic context. The scope and features of the ESPON Heritage Spin-off project on the economic and societal value of cultural heritage for Iceland, were described by Zintis Hermansons and Sólrún Inga Traustadóttir (The Cultural Heritage Agency of Iceland).

The second part of the event, about the potential for Icelandic tourism development in the period post-COVID, was moderated by Grétar Eythórsson (University of Akurey and ECP Iceland). Elías B J Gíslason, (Head of Quality and Development at Icelandic Tourist Board) talked about the challenges for the tourism sector in a post-COVID perspective, while Óli Halldórsson, (Director of Husavik Academic Centre) described the potential of sustainable development of tourism for the proposed enlargement of the Highlands National Park.

Reflections on the issues that emerged were shared in the concluding section by two local stakeholders, Arnheiður Jóhannsdóttir (Director of Visit North Iceland) and Bjarnheiður Hallsdóttir (Chairman of Board at The Icelandic Travel Industry Association - SAF). An animated discussion among the participants about the roles of cultural heritage and landscape heritage, future policy needs and possible policy pathways was moderated by Grétar Eythórsson. Tom Goosse, the assistant coordinator of the ESPON TNO-project and researcher at the Ghent University, closed the event by highlighting some key elements of the discussion.

Out of the 82 registrations, 64 participants from 17 member states attended the event. The largest proportions of attendees were from Poland, Italy, and Iceland. Approximately one third of the attendees were either public servants, academics, or professionals. Overall, the event has proven to be successful with an average satisfaction rate of 4.6 out of 5.

Main discussion

In order to build effective sustainable tourism development, the geographical specificities must be seen as both opportunities and challenges, while considering specific vulnerabilities. In addition, the same geographical specificities should not be seen as territorial problems but more as governance issues.

The impact of tourism on the environment cannot be avoided. This leads to the acceptance that sustainable tourism must to be a continuous process that first requires us to understand its impact and then follow some key principles of sustainable tourism: stakeholder and community participation to ensure local relevance; continuity of actions and dialogue; integrated action to take into account economic, social, and environmental impacts; and balancing and diversifying activities to avoid hot spots.

The Icelandic context for tourism development and sustainability in the pre-COVID period showed an imbalance of tourism flows with high presence in few hot spots, mainly in natural landscapes, and strong seasonality of tourism. Furthermore, the capital region close to the international airport in Keflavik SW-Iceland attracts high number of tourists. At the same time, there is a strong willingness for preservation of the local ecosystem and the country's cultural and landscape heritage. There is a need to diversify the touristic activities to avoid densification of tourists. Despite the apparently limited presence of cultural heritage, as witnessed by official European data, the local perception and the reality of a rich heritage represents a great opportunity that could enhance not only the economic value of tourism but also the societal value. The participation of local communities is mandatory to increase this societal value and ensure that everybody can benefit from tourism. Direct flights from abroad to Akureyri N-Iceland was spoken for by the director of Visit North Iceland as a tool to balance the number of tourists within the country.

Regarding the tourism development strategy, the current COVID-19 pandemic has changed the situation and brings up a lot of questions about how things will evolve in the future. The pandemic has suddenly interrupted a decade of a completely new tourism boom for Iceland. This represents an opportunity to rethink the tourism strategy for Icelandic actors who were not prepared for this sudden boom.

A roadmap for tourism was in the making before COVID-19 which aimed for more sustainability. Its focus was on a higher coordination with the small communities, increased transport connections and to aim for tourism quality rather than tourism quantity.

Currently, there is a proposal under parliamentary discussion for an enlargement of the Highlands National Park area (almost doubling its surface area) by involving local communities in the enhancement of both the landscape and cultural heritage. National Parks are beneficial for the conservation and protection of nature, recreation, sustainable use of resources and they can strengthen local settlements and businesses. This National Park thus represents a positive opportunity for more sustainable tourism after the COVID-crisis. The current process of defining the specific rules, management practices, possible activities, and implementation of road infrastructure still needs to be discussed with the key stakeholders and local communities.

Conclusion

The discussion among participants stressed that the way in which the national park would be managed is a strategic factor in ensuring that its enlargement has a positive effect on tourism development. Generally, the current COVID-19 situation has dealt a heavy blow to the tourism sector. In the previous summer period, financial support from the state was ensured, which caused domestic tourism to rise during that period. People actually rediscovered their own country. However, this was mainly possible because travelling abroad was not possible, due to the financial support and the significant reduction of prices, which makes such solutions economically unsustainable. Nevertheless, the current focus of development post-COVID should remain on quality over quantity and a concrete strategy/action plan needs to be set up to define a clear path in the coming years.



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