



Co-financed by the European Regional Development Fund

Inspire Policy Making with Territorial Evidence

## PRE-EVENT BRIEF

# ESPON Peer Learning Workshop: Landscape heritage and sustainable tourism in the post-COVID period

Virtual

25 February 2021



## Introduction



The relationship between landscape heritage and sustainable tourism is fully recognised by current policy orientations and should be viewed from the single territorial development perspective.

As tourism is a place- and time-specific activity, the territorial characteristics of tourism activities are highly relevant when discussing sustainable tourism. The tourism sector has unique territorial aspects and represents an “environmental paradox” as, on one hand, it relies on the preservation of natural (as well as social and cultural) capital for its survival, but on the other, touristic infrastructure is the dominant contributor to land take for many regions in Europe. (ESPON GREECO, 2014)

“Finding the right balance between an autonomous development of the destinations and the protection of their environment on the one side and the development of a competitive economic activity on the other side may be challenging. More than other economic activity tourism can develop synergies in close interaction with environment and society. That is because the development of tourist destinations is closely linked to their natural environment, cultural distinctiveness, social interaction, security, and well-being of local populations. These characteristics make tourism the driving force for the conservation and development of the destinations – directly through raising awareness and income support to them, and indirectly by providing an economic justification for the provision of such support by others”. (Agenda for a sustainable and competitive European tourism, 2007)

The great uncertainty of the impact of COVID-19 on the future affects the entire societal sphere, but the tourism sector is one of the most affected in terms of revenue and employment, as any restriction on peoples’ movements within and between countries has the major negative effect both on this sector and on the countries and regions most dependent on tourism flows and revenues. It is clear that the unexpected, protracted, and unpredictable experience of COVID-19 will strongly contribute to bringing the attention of citizens and policymakers to the challenges of sustainability, economy, environment and culture, and (re)designing the future.

The basis of tourism is the natural and cultural environment which forms the attractive qualities that entice the tourist to experience the place. Maintaining the ecological and socio-cultural functions of these areas is among the main factors to consider in relation to a relaunch of tourism as key development driver for diverse regions.

When defining sustainable tourism, it is necessary to take into account the territorial specificities of where the touristic activity is taking place as its effects will, to a large extent, be felt locally.

Since its early activities, ESPON has conducted research focusing on the role of heritage (cultural and natural) and tourism in territorial development (ESPON Thematic project 1.3.3 The Role and Spatial Effects of Cultural Heritage and Identity, 1.3.2 Territorial trends of the management of the natural heritage; ESPON 2013 Project: ATTREG. Attractiveness of European Regions and Cities for Residents and Visitors) as well as on the role of the tourism sector in contributing to a greener economy (ESPON GREECO) or in challenging territorial specificities (ESPON Bridges, Balanced Regional Development in areas with Geographic Specificities). Research on these roles has provided useful methodological approaches and policy insights for regional policymakers.

More recently two Targeted Analyses carried out tools and policy recommendations to successfully integrate tourism in territorial development strategies. The ESPON HERITAGE project, focusing on Material Cultural Heritage (CH), provides evidence about the economic value of CH on specific economic sectors, including tourism, adopting a market valuation approach that uses employment, value added and other economic indicators to estimate this value. ESPON TOURISM - Carrying capacity methodology for tourism, aims to help regional, local, and European practitioners in identifying and considering their specific territorial contexts and specificities for the measurement of the carrying capacities of tourist destinations across Europe, in order to implement better management and planning.

## Objective

Natural and cultural heritage sites are among the main tourist attractions in Iceland, and a main factor in the rapid increase in foreign travellers in Iceland in recent years where the number of tourists rose by 20 to 25% every year. This has led to a debate over whether Iceland was a victim of “overtourism”, considering Iceland is almost always high on lists of places with a large proportion of tourists relative to the population. In many areas, Icelandic natural and cultural heritage sites are sensitive, especially in some of the most popular sites for visitors; the worst phenomenon for these sites (observed before the pandemic) was the overcrowding in few attractions. Now, COVID-19 has toppled what had become Iceland’s biggest industry, and the debate has become more nuanced.

Iceland now has the opportunity to continue developing its infrastructure, and also to carry out research and manage the overcrowding at certain tourist destinations, rebalancing the general offer of Icelandic territories to tourists, and develop planning and management tools.

The ESPON Peer Learning Workshop ‘Landscape heritage and sustainable tourism in the post-COVID period’ will focus on the ongoing Icelandic discussion about developing a new tourism strategy based on national landscape heritage, providing examples of territorial specific approaches in facing developmental challenges. The objective is to show and discuss how ESPON knowledge can inspire the development of national policy instruments and how national and regional stakeholders can make (better) use of trans-European knowledge and case studies from other countries.

Policymakers, regional stakeholders, and researchers will share their experiences and discuss selected issues related to sustainable planning tourism development in landscape heritage

Three main questions will be discussed during the PLW:

- **What does insularity, peripherality, remoteness, accessibility, vulnerability, attractiveness, and lack of critical mass mean for territories with geographic specificities?**
- **What is the territorial potential of islands regarding sustainable tourism development?**
- **How to develop a sustainable tourism strategy for Iceland in post-COVID times?**

The ESPON territorial evidence gathered in previous studies will serve as background and will nurture the discussions around these three questions.

The workshop addresses policymakers responsible for national and regional development strategies in Iceland and in European regions sharing similar insularity, as well as the Nordic countries in general. Invitations are also extended to researchers and stakeholders that were involved in ESPON projects to reflect on how to better make use of, and bridge territorial evidence into, national and regional practice.

## Goal and expected outcomes

“Interactions between cultural and natural heritage define the identity of a place and can form the basis for distinctive and locally sustainable tourism projects. Tensions can arise where communities, natural resource managers and visitors value the cultural and natural heritage values of a place in different ways. There may be common ground in terms of respect and appreciation for places rich in biodiversity for example, but tourism practices may come into conflict with conservation measures and the priorities of local communities” (SHAPE project).

Two policy processes related to the topic of this PLW are currently underway: the preparation of a national plan for the development of infrastructure to protect natural and cultural heritage (by the Ministry for the Environment and Natural Resources) and the development of Destination Management Plans in all regions of the country by the Icelandic Tourist Board. The main goal of the event is 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 its landscape heritage. This transition period gives an opportunity to rethink the role of tourism in country development .

## Structure and Input

The ESPON Peer Learning Workshop (PLW) “Landscape heritage and sustainable tourism in the post-COVID period” is structured into two parts:

The first part will focus on the territorial evidence provided by ESPON regarding the territorial potential of specific types of territories. The challenges faced by specific types of territories in Europe will be explained by an ESPON EGTC representative while the results of the ESPON Bridge project will offer insights on the potential for tourism development of the islands.

The second part of the PLW will deal with the Potential for Icelandic tourism development in post-COVID period, presenting the current Icelandic strategic vision for Tourism development (a road map by the Icelandic Tourist Board) and the main, national, recent initiative on landscape protection: a national park for the Icelandic Central Highland, considered one of the last great wilderness areas in Europe. The session will give the floor to local stakeholders to reflect on the evidence presented. Therefore, a discussion among speakers about future policy needs and possible policy pathways will be developed.

## Agenda (in Icelandic time = ECT-1)

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|--------------|--|
| <b>12:15</b> | <p><b>Opening</b></p> <p>Welcome word by Zintis Hermansons (ESPON EGTC) (ESPON EGTC)</p>   |
| <b>12:30</b> | <p><b>Part one: ESPON evidence and policy recommendations (20 min each)</b></p> <p><b>Moderated by Maria Prezioso ECP Italy</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <i>How can the territorial specificities of an island be used to ensure sustainable tourism?</i>, <b>Ruslan Zhechkov</b>, researcher of the BRIDGES ESPON project</li> <li>▪ <i>The economic value of cultural heritage: spin-off case-studies of HERITAGE ESPON project in an Icelandic municipality</i> by             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <b>Zintis Hermansons</b>, Project Expert, ESPON EGTC</li> <li>▪ <b>Kristín Huld Sigurðardóttir</b>, Director General, Cultural Heritage Agency of Iceland</li> <li>▪ <b>Sólrún Inga Traustadóttir</b>, Project Manager, Cultural Heritage Agency of Iceland</li> </ul> </li> <li>▪ Q&amp;A</li> </ul> |
| <b>13:30</b> | <p><b>Short break</b></p>  |
| <b>13:45</b> | <p><b>Part two: Potential for Iceland tourism development in post-covid period (20 min each)</b></p> <p><b>Moderated by Grétar Eythórsson ECP Iceland</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <i>Roadmap for Tourism in Iceland. Future Prospects</i> by <b>Elías B J Gíslason</b>, Head of Quality and Development at Icelandic Tourist Board</li> <li>▪ <i>A national park in the central highlands of Iceland</i> by <b>Óli Halldórsson</b>, Director of Husavik Academic Center</li> <li>▪ Q&amp;A</li> </ul>   |

14:45

**Short break**

15:00

**Reflections of two local stakeholders**

- **Arnheiður Jóhannsdóttir**, Director of Visit North Iceland
- **Bjarnheiður Hallsdóttir**, Chairman of Board at The Icelandic Travel Industry Association (SAF)

Discussion about future policy needs and possible policy pathways  
Moderated by **Grétar Eythórsson** ECP Iceland

16:00

**Conclusions** by Luuk Boelens ECP Belgium (tbc)



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#### **Disclaimer**

This delivery does not necessarily reflect the opinion of the members of the ESPON 2020 Monitoring Committee.