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# A CONCEPTUAL VIEW ON ECOTOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN CRIMEA

**ABSTRACT.** A potential of Crimea for ecotourism development is discussed and the key stakeholders are defined. The main obstacles for the implementation of the ecotourism concept are analyzed and recommendations are provided based on integration of institutional, infrastructural, marketing, and educational components. Prospective regions for pilot projects on ecotourism development are outlined and priority actions defined.

**KEY WORDS:** ecotourism, sustainable tourism, Crimea.

## INTRODUCTION

Crimean peninsula possesses a unique combination of natural and cultural heritage represented by more than 160 natural protected areas of different categories, around 11,5 thousand cultural and historical sites, and ethno-cultural mosaics of nearly 130 ethnic groups [Bagrov, Rudenko, 2003; Council of Ministers..., 2011]. Mountainous Crimea has been recognized by Ukrainian and international experts as a hotspot of biodiversity and landscape diversity of international significance [Biodiversity Support Program, 1999]. Being located for centuries on the crossroads of trade routes, Crimea inherited a unique system of antique and medieval trade pathways and mountain roads which could be considered as a special category of cultural heritage. The combination of natural and cultural heritage provides for potential for ecotourism development, especially in Mountainous and Pre-Mountainous Crimea. South-western Crimea is among

the most prospective regions of Crimean peninsula for ecotourism development in the administrative boundaries of the city-region of Sevastopol that has an area of 900 sq. km with 32% of its territory covered by natural protected areas, where *zakazniks* (IUCN category IV) dominates.

## THE ECOTORISM DEFINITION AND ITS MAIN COMPONENTS

Ecotourism belongs to a broader concept of sustainable tourism and has been recommended as an appropriate form of tourism activities in valuable natural sites, including protected areas, by leading international organizations such as IUCN, UNEP, UNWTO [Eagles et al., 2002; Rasin Yu. et al., 2004]. A clear definition of ecotourism has been proposed in the 1990s by the International Ecotourism Society that defined ecotourism as a *"responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people"* [The International Ecotourism Society]. Other definitions that exist in the literature follow the general concept of ecotourism which is based on

- ✓ Responsibility of travelers due to education and awareness raising component (interpretive materials, visitor centers, education on the trails, etc.), when "the prime motivation is the observation and appreciation of natural features and related cultural assets..." [UNEP, 2002].
- ✓ Establishment of the mechanism of partial redirection of the generated by ecotourism profit towards sustainable

management and protection of the natural protected areas which serve as a primary destination for ecotourists (including biodiversity and landscape diversity conservation campaigns).

- ✓ Contribution to sustainable development of the local communities and conservation of local and regional cultural diversity (including tangible and intangible cultural heritage).

These components combined together define the essence of ecotourism; compromising any of the components can lead to a misuse of the term “ecotourism,” mislead the customers, and ultimately undermine the successful ecotourism development [Eagles et al., 2002; UNEP, 2002].

#### EXPECTED BENEFITS FROM ECOTOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN CRIMEA

The development of ecotourism in Crimea in a careful and corresponding to its definition and concept way can bring such benefits as:

- Diversification of tourism activities and development of brand new tour products in the region.
- Extension of the tourism season in Crimea due to attraction of ecotourists in the autumn, winter and spring seasons, out of the summer peak of tourist loads.
- Development of system of visitor management and redirection of the tourist flows both spatially and temporally in coastal and mountainous regions; balancing the increasing tourism flows with goals of protection of natural and cultural heritage.
- Optimization of the tourism activities in the mountainous forest areas via involving the “left aside” mountainous forest and pre-mountainous regions.
- Support and optimization of management of the Crimean protected areas including a

mechanism of co-financing and obtaining additional resources (informational, volunteers, etc.) for sustainable management of the protected areas.

- Promotion of sustainable social-economic development in the rural territories adjusted to the areas.
- Rehabilitation of the existing trails network and development of the interconnected and sustainably managed system of ecotrails and visitor-centers as essential elements of the ecotourism infrastructure.
- Raising awareness of the local Crimean population on values of the regional natural protected areas and natural and cultural heritage.
- Raising level of knowledge and awareness among tourists and visitors on Crimean natural and cultural heritage.
- Creation of a unique image of Crimea for potential investments into “green” spheres: the niche forms of tourism such as ecotourism, heritage tourism, ethno-tourism, vine tourism, etc., into renewable energy sector and other green businesses.

#### A HISTORICAL OUTLINE OF ECOTOURISM IDEAS DEVELOPMENT IN CRIMEA

In Crimea, scientifically-based proposals similar to the modern ecotourism concept were developed at the end of the 1980s. One of them is the creation of Tavrida National Park in Mountainous Crimea covering the area from the Sevastopol region in the south-west to Kara-Dag region in the south-east [Tavrida National National Park]. The loop “Big Crimean Ecotrail” on the edge of the National Park was proposed; it would be nearly 500 km long and would have radial trails based on a well-developed, during the Soviet period, hiking trails network. However, due to political and economic instability of the 1990s, the National Park concept was not

**Table 1. Key stakeholders for ecotourism development in the Autonomous Republic of Crimea (ARC)/Sevastopol city-region**

Organization	Sector	Relevance to ecotourism development
The Republican Committee of the ARC on Forest and Hunting Service / Sevastopol State Forest and Hunting Service	GO	Management of the forested areas in Mountainous and Pre-Mountainous regions of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea / Sevastopol region and management of recreation in the forests, including trails marking and visitor management
The Ministry of Resorts and Tourism of the ARC / Sevastopol Department on Culture and Tourism	GO	Development and implementation of governmental policy on tourism in the Autonomous Republic of Crimea / Sevastopol region
The Republican Committee of the ARC on Environmental Protection / Sevastopol State Department of Environment and Nature Resources	GO	Monitoring of the state of environment in the Autonomous Republic of Crimea / Sevastopol region, particularly, control over the protected areas management and limits for visitors and tourists in protected areas
The Ministry of Emergency of Ukraine Branch in ARC/Sevastopol (Mountain Rescue Department) and Crimean/Sevastopol Rescue Service	GO	Safety control for visitors and tourists and rescue operations, particularly in Crimean Mountain area and coastal areas
Crimean Association of Tourism Agencies	NGO	These associations connect leading Crimean tour-operators, tour-agencies, tourism oriented businesses, and non-governmental organizations that are focused on marketing of Crimea as a destination
Association of Tour-Operators of Crimea and Sevastopol	NGO	
V.I. Vernadsky Tavrida National University	S	Education in the sphere of tourism and environmental management with the focus on sustainable practices. Research and practical recommendations on sustainable tourism development in Mountainous and Pre-Mountainous Crimea
M.V. Lomonosov Moscow State University Branch in Sevastopol	S	
Tour-Operator SNP-Crimea	B	One of the leading Crimean tour-operators that promotes hiking tours in Mountainous and Pre-Mountainous Crimea. Since 2005, has been initiating conferences, meetings, and partnerships on nature-based active tourism in Crimea
Tour-Operator Comandor	B	One of the leading Crimean tour-operators that promotes innovative nature-based tours in Mountainous and Pre-Mountainous Crimea
Tour-Operator Prikladyuchenie	B	One of the leading Crimean tour-operators that promotes a wide spectrum of active tours in Crimea
Crimean Mountain Club	B	Historically, one of the oldest associations developing nature-based active (and currently extreme) tours in Crimea
USAID LINK	IO	Conducted a series of workshops on active and heritage tourism as well as other types of tourism development in Crimea; established a network of Tourism Information Centers
US Forest Service, Office of International Programs	IO	Conducted several workshops on ecotourism, recreational site planning, visitor management, and sustainable forest management in July, 2012
EU Crimean Diversification and Support Projects	IO	Focused on institutional, educational, and marketing support of tourism development in Crimea, including ecotourism

B – Business, GO – Governmental Organization, IO – International Organizations, NGO – Non-Governmental Organization, S - Science

realized. In the Sevastopol region, the “Project on the Concept of Ecotourism Development in the Sevastopol Region up to 2020” was developed in 2004 [Rasin Yu. et al., 2004], but political controversies of 2005–2006 did not allow the project to become a reality. Currently, there is an environment in Crimea when ideas of ecotourism development got sound support among key governmental stakeholders, NGOs, scientists, interested tour-operators, private sector representatives, and international organizations (Table 1).

### MAIN OBSTACLES ON THE WAY OF ECTOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN CRIMEA

Analysis of the current state of ecotourism development in Crimea demonstrates that there are obstacles that significantly slow down the process. These obstacles could be divided into three categories: Institutional, Infrastructural and Marketing, and Educational.

#### *Institutional*

- Unclear definition of ecotourism in the Ukrainian Law on Tourism and the regional (Crimean and Sevastopol) programs on tourism development: its definition or meaning does not correspond to the internationally recognized understanding of the ecotourism concept or the definition is blurry.
- Absence of an up-to-date concept and programs on ecotourism development in the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the city-region of Sevastopol.
- Unsettled and unclear process with defining of carrying capacities (limits of number of visitors per season) and getting permits for recreational use in the protected areas.

#### *Infrastructural and Marketing*

- Underdeveloped ecotourism infrastructure: lack of ecotrails signage, lack of visitor-centers and criteria/standards on visitor centers functions; lack of places of accommodation (eco-lodges, green mini-

hotels) and food services (organic product markets, organic cafes, and organic ethnic restaurants).

- Absence of long-term recreational site planning and visitor management plans.
- Existing hiking trails network inherited from the Soviet time needs renovation and categorization with conversion of selected trails into the system of ecotrails.
- No carefully developed ecotourism packages and weak marketing of Crimea as an ecotourism destination on the Ukrainian, Russian, and international tour markets as a separate or combined (heritage, active, wellness, etc. tours) ecotourism tour-product.

#### *Educational*

- Lack of qualified specialists in the sphere of ecotourism.
- Lack/absence of professional and certified ecotour guides.

Cause:

- Few programs and special courses on ecotourism offered by Crimean and Sevastopol universities, and educational and training centers.
- Lack of understanding of ecotourism perspectives among tour-operators and knowledge on ecotourism capacities among protected areas management agencies that lead to conflicts between tourists and foresters in the mountain forest areas; lack of understanding how ecotrails and visitors center should look like and how they can help manage visitor/tourists flows.
- Unclear understanding/misunderstanding of the ecotourism concept by responsible governmental officials and tour-operators, misleading tourists by mixing ecotourism with rural, green, active, nature, geo, etc., types of tourism.

Cause:

- Few/if any trainings and workshops on ecotourism exist for governmental officials, protected areas managers, NGOs leaders, tour-operators, and tourism business sector representatives.
- Lack of international experience on ecotourism development among tourism professionals in Crimea and Sevastopol.
- Lack of developed environmental education mechanisms for visitors/tourists.
- No integrated electronic resource (portal) on ecotourism exists in Crimea. Available electronic resources on nature-based tourism (including ecotourism and active tourism) are at a different stage of development.
- Lack of coordination between existing courses, trainings, and workshops with the nature tourism component.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

A set of recommendations has been proposed to overcome the obstacles.

### *Institutional*

- Development of the integrated concept and strategy on ecotourism in the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the city-region of Sevastopol:
  - conducting expert group meetings with invitation of regional experts and international experts from the regions that are successfully developing ecotourism products (e.g. Republic of Cyprus, Slovenia, etc.)
  - setting guidelines for the concept and strategy.
- Development of the Law on Ecotourism and amendments on ecotourism to the current Law of Ukraine on Tourism.

- Development of regional programs for ecotourism development in selected pilot regions with a potential for ecotourism development.

### *Infrastructure & Marketing*

- Marking of several pilot ecotrails and development of a brand new trail marking (signage) according to both Ukrainian and international standards.
- Creation of several visitor centers in selected regions with a potential for ecotourism development in partnership with the Crimean and Sevastopol Forest Service and protected areas administrations. The visitor centers could serve, in the future, as model examples for proliferation in Crimea.
- Sharing the best international practices on places of accommodation (ecolodges, mini-hotels, etc.) and food services (organic food markets, organic cafes, etc.) as elements of an ecotourism product.
- Development and marketing of ecotourism packages on Ukrainian, Russian, and international tour markets:

- for the Sevastopol region: combined ecotours with inclusion of hiking, horseback riding, biking, sea kayaking, elements of heritage tourism, rural tourism, and wellness tourism

- for the Autonomous Republic of Crimea: combined ecotour-packages specific for selected destinations.

- Defining the target audience and finding the best ways of marketing the created ecotour-packages.

### *Educational*

- Conducting a project on education of a team of certified ecotour-guides (education for trainers with the focus on gaining practical experience) who will be able to educate new teams of ecotour-guides with the involvement of Ukrainian

- and international ecotourism experts and practitioners.
- Initiation and assistance in development of the focused short-term trainings based on the blended education principles (on-site education combined with innovative on-line education) for such target audience as:
    - educators from Crimean and Sevastopol universities, colleges, and educational centers
    - managers of the Crimean and Sevastopol tourism enterprises
    - protected areas managers, forest service managers, and representatives from organizations involved into management of protected areas in Crimea and Sevastopol.
  - Preparation and conduct of a series of trainings and workshops on different components of ecotourism and natural tourism for focused groups, for example:
    - planning of ecotourism activities
    - risk management in ecotourism
    - best practices on ecotourism development in the EU countries.
  - Development of several connected visitor centers and training the visitor centers personnel.
  - Organization of educational tours for target groups of Crimean and Sevastopol tourism professionals who are interested in ecotourism development in Crimea, to the countries and regions with similar to Crimea landscapes that are successfully

**Table 2. Key regions selected for the pilot projects on ecotourism development in Crimea**

Region	Priorities defined for ecotourism development
Sevastopol region	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• development of the regional ecotourism concept</li> <li>• development of a visitor center based on the Sevastopol Forest Service facilities in Laspi Valley)</li> <li>• marking of the proposed 5 loops and 1 radial ecotrails</li> <li>• training of team of ecotour guides in the autumn-winter of 2012–2013</li> <li>• trainings for foresters on ecotourism aspects</li> <li>• marketing of planned ecotourism packages for Ukrainian, Russian and EU tour markets</li> <li>• development of a thematic web-site on ecotourism</li> <li>• promotion of south-western Crimea as a brand new ecotourism destination.</li> </ul>
Kara-Dag Reserve area	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• creation of a new visitor center in Kara-Dag Reserve</li> <li>• establishment of boundaries for the Reserve buffer zones and development of plans for buffer zones sustainable management</li> <li>• redirection of the tourism flows via new ecotrails marking in adjacent Echki-Dag and Meganom areas</li> <li>• marketing of scientific ecotours on EU tour market</li> </ul>
Opuk Reserve area	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• development of the concept of “ecotourism triangle” in south-eastern Crimea: Kara-Dag Reserve area – Opuk Reserve area – Kazantip Reserve and Karalarskay steppe area</li> <li>• marketing of thematic tours with the focus on birds-watching and heritage tours</li> <li>• development of a new visitor center</li> <li>• modernization of the Reserve web-site.</li> </ul>
Stary Krym-Sudak-Novy Svet area	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• development and marketing of a new destination for ecotourism and heritage tourism</li> <li>• development of combined eco/heritage/rural tourism tours and their marketing</li> <li>• marking of ecotrails (Tarak Tash, Baka Tash, and nearby areas)</li> <li>• development of a visitor center in Dachnoe village</li> <li>• development of innovative camping sites for motor-homes</li> </ul>
Chatyr Dag-Demerджи area	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• development of a Salgir Valley ecotourism destination</li> <li>• development and marketing of combined tour-packages that would include hiking, horseback riding, mountain biking, and speleo-tours in Marble Cave and Kizil Koba Cave</li> <li>• development of a visitor center in Dobroe village</li> </ul>

developing ecotourism, e.g. Cyprus, Slovenia, Italy, and France.

- Development of an interactive on-line platform on ecotourism focused on education and awareness growth, information dissemination, best practices sharing in Crimea and Sevastopol, with the use of existing web-sites/portals, e.g. web-sites of the Crimean/Sevastopol Forest Service, Ministry of Tourism and Resorts, Ministry of Emergency, interested universities: Tavrida National University, Moscow State University Branch in Sevastopol, and tour-operators.

### SELECTION OF SITES PROSPECTIVE FOR ECOTOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN CRIMEA

According to the proposed recommendations, a set of criteria has been developed for the selection of sites prospective for pilot projects on ecotourism (Annex 1). Based on the criteria, five regions have been selected and visited in the summer of 2012 by a team of experts to evaluate the potential of the territories for ecotourism development; a set of priorities has been defined (Table 2).

### EXPECTED OUTCOMES OF THE PILOT PROJECTS ON ECOTOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN THE KEY REGIONS

- The combined concept on ecotourism development for Crimea and Sevastopol<sup>1</sup> will be established forming the optimal Integrated Crimean Ecotourism Model (ICEM). Regional strategies and programs will be developed for selected regions<sup>2</sup>.
- New packages will be created for different categories of ecotourists with the focus on benefits of coming in the spring and autumn seasons and marketed for

Crimean, Ukrainian, and international tour markets using existing institutional basis, created elements of infrastructure, and trained staff.

- Pilot ecotrails will be marked and equipped with signs and information placed along the ecotrails in innovative and understandable format and in an environmentally friendly way.
- Recreational site plans will be developed with the strategic vision of visitor management and protected areas sustainable management for the areas of proposed ecotrails.
- Pilot visitor centers will be established as trailheads and/or nodes of the ecotrails, equipped with interpretive information and resources (guidebooks, interpretive maps, information stands, etc.), provided with a trained staff.
- Special medium-term practical and regional specific training course on ecotour-guides education will be developed based on blended on-site and on-line education by the Educational and Training Consortia.
  - potential participants from Sevastopol: Sevastopol Forest Service, Moscow State University Branch in Sevastopol, Sevastopol Tourist Club, Sevastopol Rescue Service
  - potential participants from the Autonomous Republic of Crimea: Crimean Forest Service, Tavrida National University, Crimean Mountain Club, Ministry of Emergency
  - other educational, business, governmental and non-governmental bodies interested in ecotourism development in the region.
- Teams of selected trainers educated as ecotour-guides will start activities including guiding groups of visitors/

<sup>1</sup> The combined concept will allow putting together ideas of Sevastopol and Crimean experts and the contribution of international experts and avoiding further miscommunication on the functioning of the ecotourism components, and will integrate the existing interconnected trails into a manageable trail system for the benefit of the ecotourists and protected areas management.

<sup>2</sup> The criteria for selected regions are described in the Annex 1.

tourists on the proposed ecotrails, conducting trainings, assisting Forest Service managers in recreational flows management, and participating in educational campaigns in the region

- Special integrated on-line platform on ecotourism education, information dissemination and capacity building will be developed and start operating.
- Thematic programs will be developed for trainings and workshops to be conducted regularly on-site and on-line on recreational site planning, visitor management, and different aspects of ecotourism development for the target audiences.
- Partnership (Ecotourism Cluster) will be formed among Crimean tour-operators promoting ecotour-packages, existing and planned places of accommodation, and food services with involved governmental and non-governmental structures in the framework of a public-private partnership concept.
- A series of multilingual guidebooks on ecotourism with ecotrails routes schemes, sites of natural and cultural heritage,

scenic places, information on natural areas values, and places of accommodation will be published as hard copies and also available in electronic format for distribution via visitor centers, tourist information centers, and on-line platform on ecotourism.

## CONCLUSION

Ecotourism, while supporting environmental education, sustainable management of natural protected areas, conservation of natural and cultural heritage, and sustainable development of local communities, can be considered as an alternative to conventional tourism development patterns in Crimea. The recommended integrated approach to ecotourism development in Crimea based on institutional, infrastructural, marketing, and educational changes is focused on overcoming the existing obstacles and developing a framework for an innovative ecotourism tour product. The proposed combination of ecotourism and heritage tourism provides a balance between the needs of tourism development and conservation of the natural and cultural heritage of Crimean peninsula and leads to the creation of a new image of Crimea as an ecotourism – heritage tourism destination. ■

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## ANNEX 1

A general set of criteria for site selection to evaluate a potential of the territories for ecotourism development in Crimea.

- Presence of natural and cultural heritage sites of local, regional, and national significance and/or places of high recreational and/or aesthetic values.
- Existing established and/or planned protected areas (IUCN category Ib-V).
- Management objectives of the existing and/or planned protected areas do not confront ecotourism activities and ecotourism infrastructure development.
- Presence of a network of user trails or tourism routes which combine relatively undisturbed nature, attracting natural and cultural components (biological and physical), picturesque views, and a potential for ecotourism infrastructure development.
- Ability of a site to provide for safety issues for ecotourists.
- Capacity of the territory in development of ecotourism and management of recreational and tourists' flows.
- Existing flows of visitors and tourists have already created a demand for a site but cause risk of damage for the natural complexes in case of conventional tourism development.
- Willingness of local and regional agencies responsible for the area management to contribute to ecotourism development.
- Sound potential of the area to contribute to local or adjacent territories sustainable development and improvement of protected area management in ecotourism development.
- Potential of a site to serve as a regional model area for ecotourism development activities (education-for-trainers places and centers of excellence that will share best practices on ecotourism in the future).



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