



2023 TOP 100 GOOD PRACTICE STORY

Title: The Power of Local Stories. Training of the guides who were born at a place where humans and nature live in harmony

Destination, Country: Lahemaa, Estonia

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In the category: ☐ Destination Management ☐ Environment & Climate ☒ Thriving Communities
☐ Nature & Scenery ☐ Culture & Tradition ☐ Business & Marketing

The Story in a picture:

Certified Visit Lahemaa tour guide Riina telling stories of the House Stone



Summary:

For me, the guides' training has given so much, it has changed the way I see things, not only as a guide but also as a human being. It has opened a door that has brought me so much closer to nature. Now I keep learning all the species with mobile apps and have mapped all the plants in my neighbourhood. I see myself as an intermediate for city folks who come here to see rural life and nature. It's never too late to learn. Whenever you start, you have something to give back to nature. It's a mission.

Ulvi, a participant of Lahemaa guides' training and certification in 2022.

Lahemaa Tourism Association (Visit Lahemaa), a local DMO has conducted a training and certification of local people as tour guides for three years, together with several partners. 75 people have got the certification so far.





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Good Practice Story:

Destination description

Brief background of the destination.

Lahemaa is a small magic place in the far north where nature and humans live in harmony. It has deep forests, stormy seas and huge rocks, but most of all, people with old stories and runic songs.

Lahemaa, the oldest national park of the former Soviet Union, is home to the best that Estonian nature has to offer. In the space of 725 km², you'll find lush native forests, wetlands stretching to the horizon, and both rocky and sandy beaches. Lahemaa is one of Europe's most important forest conservation areas and has the largest deposit of erratic boulders in Europe. It is home to many wild animals— moose, wild boar, bears, and lynx. The northern coast attracts a large number of migratory birds every year.

Lahemaa is also a place with rich cultural heritage of Estonia's coastal areas. 71 villages of the national park with its more than 3000 inhabitants form an active community with lively national culture and welcoming spirit.

Since 1971, when Lahemaa national park was established, organisations and the local community have worked together to save the values of this magic place.

Issues faced

Problems/issues solved with the Good Practice Story.

Lahemaa is a popular nature tourism destination. Therefore, many tour guides work there, but very many of them come from towns and are not locals. At the same time, national park sets many restrictions on local inhabitants, limiting their working possibilities and consequently a large number of Lahemaa people have to work outside the park and commute every day.

Methods, steps, and tools applied

Solutions implemented to address the sustainability problems or issues.

Lahemaa Tourism Association (Visit Lahemaa), a voluntary NGO of local entrepreneurs and inhabitants, realised that when training the inhabitants of the national park as guides would solve two problems at the same time – more people could start working near their home and visitors of Lahemaa could get to hear authentic stories of the real life and history of the place.

So the leaders of Visit Lahemaa turned to state organisations responsible for the national park – the Environmental Board and the State Forest Management Centre. To compile the training program, a

working team was formed that also included Estonian University of Life Sciences to help with educational side. The program was compiled uniquely for Lahemaa, paying much attention to sustainability and regulations, but also local stories and authenticity. It was conducted as a pilot in 2021 by all the partners but was such a success that has by now been done two more times.

There have been three courses of almost the same program, each spring. After the certification, the participants have been asked to fill in feedback forms. According to the feedback, the program has been slightly developed each year. For example, in 2022 several participants wrote that they would have expected to hear someone from a previous group how the training had influenced him. So in 2023 such a lecture was included to the program at the very beginning.

At first there was no money and most of the partners worked at the program and training voluntarily. For two years, Visit Lahemaa has found project money for the training.

Key success factors

Critical elements that led to successfully solving the issues.

The success of the training was based mostly on two pillars – the real need and collaboration.

When Lahemaa national park was established in 1971, it had an administration that among other things took care of the guides' training. For years it worked very well. But in the 1990s the system was centralized and there have not been proper training for guides since that. So there was a huge need for that.

The training and certification has been a success due to fantastic collaboration of both a local NGO and several big state organisations. All of them have realised the need and have contributed much more than officially required.

Lessons learned

Challenges faced while implementing the Good Practice and their solutions.

- At first, nobody thought that the training of guides is their responsibility. Visit Lahemaa had to make a start and convince the other organisations, so everybody got involved. And was happy.
- The level of knowledge of the participants is very different. So the program has to contain information of also rather basic level. We decided that more experienced participants may choose if to attend all the lectures or not.
- Now that we have conducted three courses, the challenge is how to continue. The plan is not to continue with the same program for some years but to carry out advanced training for those who have already participated.

Achievements and Results

Direct and indirect results of the Good Practice.

The training program was initiated in 2021. As several of the sessions were held online, the number of all the participants was approx 90. The whole course was taken and certification given to 27 people. In 2022, 50 people attended the online part. 23 were certified.

In 2023, 32 people attended the online course. 25 were certified.

So in 3 years, 75 people have gained the certification of Lahemaa guide and found a way to work near their home.

It is important that with the training a community of local guides has been developed who can help and support each other. Now we have to think how to continue with the advanced training for them.

All of the participants have stated in the feedback form that they now have a wider view of Lahemaa, nature and guiding. Several of those who had been beginners have started working as guides.

Many of the participants who had already been partly working as guides before, have said that they gained confidence from the training. They realised that they are on the right track when telling their own stories of their own home area.

Tips for other destinations

Your suggestions or recommendations for other destinations facing the same issues or implementing similar solutions

- Take action when you see a need. Don't wait for anyone else to do something.
- Find partners. Nobody can do anything by themselves.
- Trust authenticity. Find the uniqueness of your place and build on that.

Recognitions and Additional references

Recognitions and awards the Good Practice received and supporting evidence.

The list of the certified tour guides is on the webpage of the national park:

<https://kaitsealad.ee/et/node/1421>

And on the webpage of Visit Lahemaa:

<https://visitlahemaa.com/giidid/>

In 2021 the training gained adult learning prize in Harju county:

<https://andras.ee/et/lahemaa-giidide-koolitus-harjumaa>