



2023 TOP 100

GOOD PRACTICE STORY

Title: Saare language – our own super-pöwer

Destination, Country: Saaremaa, Saare County, 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:

Three generations of men from one family who are wearing Visit Saaremaa produced sweaters stating “Kange kut kadakas. Võimas kut viiking.” (in translation: Tough as a juniper, as mighty as a viking). It is an homage to our islander essence in Saare dialect. As junipers are symbol of our island and about ten years ago two prehistoric shipwrecks were discovered from island. These were Viking ships, from the years 730-750. It highlights how proud we as islanders are of our heritage and it is important to pass it down through generations. But is also invitation to a visitor - you can also be as tough as a juniper and as mighty as a viking , if you want.



Summary:

A language is a super-power, it is the essence of culture and diversity and it gives a real sense of empowerment to express yourself in your own language. We know it as a) Visit Saaremaa is story-teller and language is important part of sharing our story; b) as a small destination within a small destination (Estonia) really have to and want to highlight things that make us unique. And our good practice story is focusing on one of them, our own language – Saare dialect. Its peculiarities are drowning in the common language, but we fight back. In order for our culture, language and community to be alive and thriving we want to state to our locals and as well as to our guests that Saare language is our own super-pöwer. To empower people to learn it, use it and share that super-pöwer.



Good Practice Story:

Destination description

Brief background of the destination.

Saaremaa is the biggest island of Estonia, located in the Baltic Sea. We have been a part of the UNESCO „Man and Biosphere“ area for more than 30 years – meaning that the islanders live in harmony with nature and consider sustainability a part of their daily lives. For us sustainability is a tradition not a trend. Place in this increasingly hectic world, where green forests make you green with envy; where the sea is sacred and the source of life and wellbeing. Where food is real and pure. Where we really hold dear the customs that we have and at the same time seek new ways to interpret the traditional and tweak it. And the locals are a true gem of the destination.

We believe that locals are the destination. Their sense of being, language and actions offer the visitor a better understanding of the destination. The more personal and emotional the experience is, the more the visitor feels an attachment to the place. More and more visitors do not identify themselves as tourists, but they are looking for that, real and genuine, which makes the chosen destination unique. Thus, we see that the experience we want to offer to our guests is a so-called temporary localhood. When you visit us you're a guest in our home. We truly believe that the interests of residents and visitors are not necessarily different, and the destination should be consciously developed at the points of contact between these parties.

Issues faced

Problems/issues solved with the Good Practice Story.

Sustainable Development Goals does not include such specific references to language but we believe it is a nation's super-power to express yourself in your own language, it is the essence of culture and diversity. It is something unique and destination marketing is all about highlighting things that differentiate you from others.

Estonia is a really small country, where 67% of the population speak Estonian as their mother language - that's a little less than 900,000 people. In turn, 17% of them, or 152,000 people, can speak some of the eight Estonian dialects. Estonian linguists say that if the dialects disappear, the Estonian language will also disappear.

It is said that one language in the world disappears every 14 days, and by the next century, almost half of the world's languages will disappear. In Saare county, there are still 40% of the local dialect speakers, i.e. 11,870 islanders, and even though the rich vocabulary, the singing melody and the clearly recognizable use of the 'ö' sound are still so characteristic of the islanders, we have consciously started to value, highlight and preserve the dialect and its peculiarities. When we go to the mainland as islanders, we are instantly recognized by our speech and language - this is our identity, but also our uniqueness, honour and pride. We consciously keep our language alive and do not take it for granted - this way our language will always remain in our minds and on our lips. Knowing and using the dialect is the basis of the islanders' identity.

Methods, steps, and tools applied

Solutions implemented to address the sustainability problems or issues.

There are 3,180 people who can speak dialect among the 30-49-year-old population of Saare County, 1,890 in the 15-29 age group, and only 750 among children and youth up to 14 years old. Compared

to Estonia, 750 is still an excellent figure! Children and young people are a very important target group in promoting the dialect of the islands and raising language awareness.

The work with youth and locals. The curriculum of Saaremaa Gymnasium has a unique course in the world, the studies of being an islander, which is not only limited to the dialect and maritime heritage culture, but also teaches to introduce the special features of the home island to guests. Kuressaare Vocational School developed the idea of using dialect words in the design of county buses - from 2020, 26 brand new "moving dialect dictionaries" will be travelling on the islands' roads.

The work that is directed to guests. The charm of the dialect is also consistently woven into destination marketing, i.e. Visit Saaremaa's content creation. As we believe that we should offer a "temporary localhood" experience to our guests and language is an important part of understanding the island ways and identity.

Practical examples of what Visit Saaremaa is doing to promote our super-pöwer and making the local dialect visible: replacing the 'õ' sound with 'ö' (that is common to Saare dialect). In 2020, a 5-meter-high "statue" was built to celebrate the 'ö' sound, which marks the beginning of the 'ö' coverage area - it has become one of a favourite photo spot and landmark for our visitors; using the island's vocabulary in sentences, created vocabulary games (e.g. bingos, letter squares), made our followers participate in various challenges (e.g. write the longest sentence containing the 'ö') and celebrating Mother language day on the 14th of March. Last two years all our campaigns promoting our destination aimed to our potential guests were in Saare dialect. National tourism board and other destinations in Estonia have praised us for using locals as our models and our humor and language as the principles in our marketing campaigns. We are standing out as we share the magic and what a super-pöwer our language is.

Aftermath. Local entrepreneurs have also been inspired by it for example Saaremaa meat and dairy industry both use local dialect in their branding - so the dialect has an impact on the local economy. These are one of the biggest island companies who are also really well known and popular in Estonia and also in our neighbouring countries. We have motivated our partners to use the Saare dialect in promotions and campaigns that are aimed for end-customers. In the last few years we have seen a huge interest in our islands and the numbers of visitors are again making records.

The interest in our dialect has sparked the idea of a local enterprise to create a new tourism service so people could take the dialect class while visiting Saaremaa. It is a playful but at the same time educational way to understand the destination and islanders better. The idea is in the testing period, Visit Saaremaa is really supporting and contributing to make it blossom. All of this has a clear impact on tourism, as self-aware locals can create vibrant and authentic experiences for guests that will be the best memories of the destination and helps to create the so-called temporary localhood experience for our guests.

Key success factors

Critical elements that led to successfully solving the issues.

Marketing the destination as a whole is an important key factor. In 2020, the activities of Visit Saaremaa were merged with the structure of the local government, and destination marketing gained a county dimension. Thanks to this, Visit Saaremaa also has a significantly wider and more weighty voice when it comes to promoting the use of dialect. The language is a means of speaking about Saaremaa and the county, but at the same time the language of the island is introduced. To bring the language to a wider audience, give the language more visibility and help to preserve the idiom of the time.

In the direction of young people, successful timing is an important keyword: after the renewal of the school network, Saaremaa Gymnasium started working in 2021, which took the island as part of its youthful brand. With the birth of the new institution, the identity of being an islander was taken to a

new level among young people. It is necessary to get the young people to really think along with keeping and passing on the local distinctiveness. When the design of new modern and nature-friendly buses was entrusted to the design major students of Kuressaare Vocational School, there were also dissenting opinions, because the design with 40 dialect words was compared to graffiti - yet the end result received enough attention all over Estonia and allowed young people to come to the picture.

One of the key factors is definitely the visitors, because seeing how much the guests appreciate the local and authentic people, locals have started to value their island identity much more - and this also helps to preserve the local language. That all shows that the dialect is one of our unique selling points and it helps to create more and more tourism services around that.

Lessons learned

Challenges faced while implementing the Good Practice and their solutions.

When dealing with heritage it is important to remember there is no homogenic view or understanding. We believe the most important aspect is that the heritage is viable and we can appreciate its essence also in a contemporary way. This is certainly not a view shared by everyone. Some may view that there is only a very certain and so-called right way to keep traditions alive. And it is important to find the balance between traditional and modern. To keep the discussion alive and to give people the urge and tools so people feel empowered to speak or try to learn the dialect.

It is not always easy to communicate the dialect or importance of it to people who are not familiar with our dialect's characteristics so it is still inviting but so there is also an educational moment. And probably this is why we have not seen it as a part of the marketing for the destinations around us. But what we have seen is that Finland is using their unique point as the happiest nation and they have their own masterclass to apply to learn how to become as happy as a Finn. A good example of how the identity of locals and nation as part of the destination marketing. As well as we have taken the language that is our super-pöwer as part of our story. It is part of our brand and uniqueness. It is at the same time working with our locals to empower them to use that super-pöwer but also work with potential guests to introduce that super-pöwer, to spark interest and to learn some of it. And it is a balancing act to work on the one hand with locals and at the same time with our potential visitors. The purpose is the same but the ways differ. That concept is here to evolve, get bigger and better in time to get more layers and ambassadors. So it is important to see it bigger than project that have an end-date. It is a way of thinking, living.

Achievements and Results

Direct and indirect results of the Good Practice.

Language is a fundamental aspect of cultural identity. It is the means by which we convey our innermost self from generation to generation. It is through language that we transmit and express our culture and its values. And islanders are proud of their heritage and language.

The fact that the dialect has gained vitality is also proven by the census data: if in 2021, 40% of the inhabitants of Saare County considered themselves speakers of the dialect of the islands, when in 2011 this figure was 33%. The reason for this can be considered a strong place of identity and valuing one's own language.

We have a Ö/Õ statue to mark the dialect border. One of the pronunciation features of the Saaremaa dialect is the lack of the 'õ' sound. This makes the islanders immediately recognisable. So we made a statue in honour of that difference that enriches our language and culture. Opening of the Ö/Õ statue in Saaremaa was nominated People's Award "Language act 2020" (since 2006 The Keeleteo competition recognizes actions that increase the recognition and reputation of the Estonian language, value the teaching, learning and proficiency of the Estonian language, promote the use of

the Estonian language and secure its status, and promote the preservation and study of the Estonian language. The recipient of the main prize is decided by the ministers of education and science of Estonia, the people's prize is determined by public vote).

Also in 2021 there were two recognitions for Saaremaa in The Keeleteo competition:

We as Visit Saaremaa for actively using the Saare dialect in marketing. Presenter: Kristiina Praakli, Associate Professor of Applied Linguistics at University of Tartu. And also Saaremaa Gymnasium for using dialect in classroom names (different flower names that are common to island nature).

Tips for other destinations

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

Language is inherently mundane and natural - and so is its extinction! -, that is why very conscious attention must be paid to the use of language: has the local language still preserved its distinctiveness, what exactly does it consist of, and how can we collectively realise that in an increasingly uniform world? A special language is an enormously powerful carrier of identity. Dialect is often perceived as something that belongs to the oldest generation, so the popularisation of dialect requires vigorous modern techniques and out-of-the-box ideas. The most important thing is to realise that our generation still has a rare super-pöwer and it is up to us whether we pass this identity-creating power on to the next generation or undeservedly deprive them of it.

As practical guides we encourage to deep dive into culture and language to find something that is common/special to your language, dialect and see it as your own super-power and use it to a) engage and include the locals and to give them the sense of us-feeling and b) give some knowledge and understanding of your region through the language. Such a project does not have a time frame, but it can be divided into smaller projects. Having no deadline it can last as long as the local language lives. In other words, the more successful this project is, the more endless it is. Our experience is that the first strong results can be achieved in a couple of years.

Recognitions and Additional references

Recognitions and awards the Good Practice received and supporting evidence.

About a Ö/Õ statue to mark dialect border:

<https://leht.postimees.ee/7122354/saaremaa-sai-o-ja-o-haaliku-piiritahise>

<https://www.err.ee/1191571/saaremaa-sai-o-tahe-kauaoodatud-tahise>

The Keeleteo competition 2021:

<https://saartemaal.postimees.ee/7443417/keeletegu-igauks-saab-haaletada-ka-saarlaste-poolt>

The curriculum of Saaremaa Gymnasium unique course in the world

<https://www.err.ee/1608604318/saaremaa-gumnaasiumis-saab-oppida-saarlust>

<https://saaremaa.edu.ee/koolist/opikasitus/>

<https://saartemaal.postimees.ee/7167959/saaremaa-gumnaasiumisse-tuleb-saarluse-ope>

<https://saartemaal.postimees.ee/7394321/valmimas-on-saarlust-puudutav-e-oppematerjal>

<https://epl.delfi.ee/artikkel/50965235/kuressaare-koolidesse-tuleb-saarluse-opetus>

Design of county buses:

<https://www.err.ee/1030107/saaremaa-saab-murdesonadega-ilustatud-ued-liinibussid>