



2023 TOP 100 GOOD PRACTICE STORY

Title: Together for a sustainable development

Destination, Country: Bison Land – Nature Park Vânători Neamț

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

The Story in a picture:

The team which was part of organizing one of EcoBrunch in Bison Land events.



Summary:

The local authenticity as an important resource for the local sustainable development. In Bison Land area the local community was not aware of the value the local authenticity have, and we started to look for ways to make them aware of it. We started by working together, developing a local network. With the help of the partners (guest houses, small local producers, folk craftsmen, local authorities, schools, other organizations in the area, the community in general) we developed different initiatives. One of them are the EcoBrunch in Bison Land, a complex event which brings together the local community to show to the guests (tourists, locals) what the area has the best to offer regarding gastronomy, culture, traditions, arts, places, people. We also find ways to bring economic advantages to the local community for a sustainable development.

In the last years our approach turned out to be a successful one, as nowadays the local community is more open to collaborate, to promote the destination and what it has to offer and are happier about how Bison Land is evolving as an ecodestination.



Good Practice Story:

Destination description

Brief background of the destination.

Bison Land is an ecodestination situated in the North- East of Romania. It overlaps Nature Park Vânători Neamț, Târgu Neamț town, Agapia, Bălătești, Crăcăoani, Vânători Neamț villages, and has a surface of around 38000 ha. It is the place where the legend and bison roam free. Thanks to the initiative of Administration of Nature Park Vânători Neamț it is the only place in Europe where the bison can be seen in the same time in the wild, semiwild and captivity. The first bison were released in the wild 11 years ago, and nowadays over 60 wild European Bison can be met in the area.

It is also a place where every person coming here finds a relaxing atmosphere. The place is called Romanian Athos thanks to numerous monasteries and hermitages, here are also the largest monastic nuns villages in Europe. It is also a place which inspired many national writers, thanks to the beautiful forests, landscapes or culture. Beside 4 of the memorial houses, here are also numerous historical evidences: Neamț Citadel, heroes monuments from the 2 World Wars, the defence front of the II World War.

Bison Land area is rich in traditions and culture. The local authenticity is still present, even from year to year is less. The New Years Festival taking place on 2nd of January is an experience expected by both locals and tourists and it presents the local traditions of this part of the year. The folkcrafts are also willing to transmit to the next generations the local authenticity and culture.

Issues faced

Problems/issues solved with the Good Practice Story.

The richness of the local authenticity is lost yearly slowly. The level of local proudness at the local level is low. It turned out also in a study realised by the UIAC University when realising the master plan in tourism for the county Bison Land is part of. They observed that in the entire county in our area the local proudness is the lowest, even this is the area with the richest culture, material or immaterial heritage.

The local community is not used, and also not so open to work together. During our work for a sustainable development of Bison Land, we observed that the feeling of competitiveness, and not the will to collaborate. And this was influencing our work during the years.

The young generations, but also part of the adults don't see the value of the local authenticity. There is the feeling that if something is old it is no longer current, it is not suitable for nowadays. And they are more open to have a common European – world life or to borrow elements from other cultures, even this means to lose the local authenticity (no matter if we speak about traditions, crafts, habits, gastronomy, architecture, etc).

Some of the local folkcraft men are still active and willing to share their knowledge with the others, but they are getting old and if the newer generations are not open to learn and continue it, the folk crafts will get lost.

A big part of the local income is from the tourism field. The travellers are more and more willing to experience the local authenticity. And if the local authenticity will be lost, the area will lose also part of the persons willing to travel here. So the entire community will be influenced.

Not having enough resources (material, financial, human) it is for sure an issue which is influencing the evolution and the development of Bison Land area. We experienced each of the lacks during our work for around 8 years already. We have a small team and few people in the area willing to be involved and to change things locally, the fundings are limited and the local authorities have other priorities.

The visitors arriving here need more local experiences in order to spend more time in the area. This would help us in maintaining the impact on the environment at a low level. And in the area there

are not many initiatives which to value the local experiences, but more focused on the general experiences, or they are selling what the majority of the people buy from every place they are visiting. So this doesn't make the area more attractive to spend more time here. Also, when being in Bison Land visitors didn't find local products, as they were not promoted or visible, maybe also not to locals.

Methods, steps, and tools applied

Solutions implemented to address the sustainability problems or issues.

We believe that a sustainable development of the destination is possible with the help and involvement of the local community. This is why we focused on involving locals in different ways with the time. It is good for the community, but also for the visitors of the area.

A way to develop the area was exactly to make the community to work together, to bring them at the same table, to organize common events.

We started developing a network of the partners in the destination (representatives of guest houses, local producers, folkcraft men). We begin with visiting each other, keeping in touch by phone (as e-mail was not a proper option), later on we started to organize common meetings, even the number of the one who participate is not a large one. We connected the network through a conversation group, for an easier communication.

In order to make more visible the impact of a cooperation, we started in 2020 to organize events to promote the area, the local culture, gastronomy, traditions, people. During some hours we prepare local recipes, workshops, artistic moments, local products fair, a visit around the place. Everything with the help of the community. EcoBrunch in Bison Land is an events which can gather together between 50 and 120 persons who enjoy the time spent in the nature, in an beautiful place with great people and tasty food. In order to participate at an event, one can reserve his place in advance, buying a ticket on a ticket platform. The budget collected is used to cover the costs with the food, workshops, artists and other kind of costs which may occur for the organization of an event. Also, in order to have the lowest impact in the environment, we are using reusable tableware and cutlery, and the food menu is prepared in accordance with the number of participating persons. Other way to help the small local producers, craftsmen are the shop arranged at the visitor center of Nature Park Vânători Neamț, the several local markets we organized in the area to offer a place to sell their products, but also to promote them. We started in the beginning of this year to go to the local and regional markets with the products of several producers and craftsmen and also to arrange a track with local products which is placed in a touristic area. These are a way to help local producers not only to sell products or to promote them, but also with a person who is representing them, so they can continue their work, and also to sell part of their production. Also, in these ways the tourists can find easier local and quality products like honey, fruits, meat or dairy products, natural juice, sweet or salty preserves, lavender products, candles, hand made gifts, jewelry, wooden, textile or clay products, etc.

The activities for the young generations are also a way to involve the community, and also to promote the local authenticity. At the visitor center of Nature Park Vânători Neamț or at the schools cooking events are organized and the students are involved in the cooking process. It is a way to make them aware of the local recipes, the local culture, but also to learn by doing. Craft workshops organized together with the guest houses, craftsmen for children from our area, but also tourist. We try to help them in different ways: logistical, organizational, promoting, being the judge of the competition, etc.

Involving also some representatives of the local regional institutions, we presented in different events, conferences the local authenticity, the results which we have together with our local community.

In our communication on social media we focus a lot on what our area has to offer, what our community is doing. It is a way to promote it to tourists, but also to raise the awareness to the local community.

In all the projects we are implementing we are including a part of activities to work with the community, as we see that this takes time, but also it needs a lot of resources.

Key success factors

Critical elements that led to successfully solving the issues.

We didn't stop when it was difficult to work together, but we tried several times, we also looked for different solutions, even it meant to do small steps. Also, doing small steps sometimes can be more effective than to try to change something too fast.

The fact that the destination is so rich cultural, but also that there are so many persons doing what they like, it helped us to find better and more creative ways to value and to promote it.

We are part of ecodestinations network at the national level. It helped us to learn from the experience of our colleagues from different parts of Romania.

In organizing EcoBrunch in Bison Land we started by collaborating with an organization which has around 15 years of experience in organizing this kind of events and it helped us to see also other sides of what the area can offer and how a cultural event can look like.

The fact that we allocated enough time to meet the locals, to make them understand that our will is the local development, was a factor which helped us to achieve the results we have till now. There are still many steps to be done, but we see a big improvement from the beginning of our activity.

The tasty food and the passion for kitchen of some of our team members and partners offered a big value to the event we organize for locals or tourists.

Thanks to the funding we have from private, but also European level on the projects we are implementing we managed to procure our own cutlery, tableware and other materials which we are using at each event. It took us a lot of energy to organize all the materials when we tried to involve the community, to borrow from them. We decided it is better to find a way to have our own materials. It turned out that almost half of the time spent for organizing an event was to collect all the needed materials for an event.

The fact that we wanted to organize outdoor events, was a plus at least after the pandemic period, when more and more persons were willing to travel, but also to be in the nature.

Lessons learned

Challenges faced while implementing the Good Practice and their solutions.

If you wait for everybody to be involved, you may wait forever. Better to work with the ones who are more open, and easily also the others will be interested in working together.

Working with the local community not only has an impact on themselves, in the development of the destinations, but also an impact on the tourists, the way they see it or experience their time here, their connection with the local community, but also.

The changes are taking a long time and it needs a lot of effort. But on a long run process it is better to have this approach.

Also, we observed that when, even few persons, are really passionate about the local authenticity, they are active and willing to do a change in the community, they find the power, energy and resources to have a positive impact, to promote it. And also they are able to mobilize other persons.

Involving the local community in the activities, events it is easier to make them aware about the value of the local authenticity and to wish to promote or to keep it longer.

The food is a connection and an attraction element. And it is good to take advantages of it when one wants to promote any kind of experience, activity, place, etc.

The weather can be always a factor which can influence an outdoor event, activity. But we learned to not be so scader because of this. If in the beginning we were tempted to move the event, we understand that a better option is to find a plan b, to make the best experience we can no matter the weather. We also learned that the one who reserve their places to come to outdoor events, are aware of the weather changes.

We also observed is better not to favour someone from the partners, because there will appear conflits and complains, but in the same time to value the wish to get involved. And ussualy this will can differ from one partner/ person/ stakeholder to the other.

Achievements and Results

Direct and indirect results of the Good Practice.

We see now a higher will to cooperate, to get involved, to be part of the development of the area, to keep and promote the local authenticity. We also see that there are many things still to be done, but we now are proud of the results we have in less then 8 years with the resources of human, financial or materials we had.

EcoBrunch in Bison Land took place till now 12 times and we managed to involved till now areount 80 partners in the destination (representatives of guest houses, restaurants, local producers, craftsmens, schools, administration of Nature Park Vânători Neamț, folk groups, other organizations, local administrations, but also the community, in general). The event is dedicated to the tourists who can have more local experiences in the area, but also the locals are enjoying them. Till now the events gathered around 700 persons all over Romania, and not only. And we managed to bring in the destination around 18000 euros.

We promoted till now thanks to the events we organized or the events we took part more then 35 small local producers and folk crafts, who started to be more courageous in doing what they like and know to do, also for their living, not anly as a hobby.

Thanks to the commercial activity we are developing in the last year, we managed to bring in the community, for local producers, over 12000 euro.

In the beginning was more difficult to bring together all the partners, to negotiate with them, to collect all the needed materials, but with the time passing and the organized events, the time and effort is less and we enjoy more the process then before.

The events we organized till now were the best solution we used in order to increase the local cooperation and proudness among the local community. Not only they were involved in the same events, but was also a way to know each other better, to start new innitiatives. Some of them also started to colaborate also in other aspects then the one we are initiating.

We managed to increase the period of stay of tourists from around 1,5 days, to more then 2,5 days till now thanks to the events and promotion efforts we had during the last years.

In the last years started to appear more local initiaves of the locals, privates or authorities to promote the local authenticity.

The fact that tourists or people from other areas, countries had a good impression of what the destination offers at EcoBrunch in Bison Land, was a prove for the local community, people who took part in the events, that the area has a lot to offer and it is important to protect what we have (gastronomy, traditions, places, architecture, etc).

Tips for other destinations

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

When is about the community of the local authenticity, for sure there is a way to manage to work and promote it. Maybe the locals will not be so open in the beginning, maybe will take time, but the results will not start appearing even slowly.

The best way to promote a destination is by taking advantage of what the local community can offer taking into account the local traditions, the culture, the passions or talents. When there are more aspects to be outlined it is more difficult to find a way to promote and to not favour someone, but there are also more creative ways to do so.

The community will not believe that you have impact in the community till they don't see numbers or clear evidence. It is not all the time easy to find a way to measure the impact, but it is an important aspect.

Recognitions and Additional references

Recognitions and awards the Good Practice received and supporting evidence.

What we do is visible at the regional level. A prove in this way is the fact that the Regional Development Organization for the entire Moldavia Region is promoting us, is willing to organize their own events during our EcoBrunch in Bison Land or they are also asking us to organize special events for them. Also, we received recognition at the regional level in the last 6 years for our work in promoting the destination national and international and the way we involve the community in our work.

Till now we were asked by 4 regional or national organizations to organize for them this kind of event, because they have seen the atmosphere which is creating in such an event.