



Good Practice Story Title:

Time flies, will I? – the story of griffon vultures on Cres island

Destination: Cres Island

Country: Croatia

Submitting Organization: Cres Tourist Board

Category:

- Destination Management
- Nature & Scenery
- Environment & Climate
- Culture & Tradition
- Thriving Communities
- Business & Marketing

Destination description:

With 405,7 km² of surface, Cres Island is the biggest Croatian Island. It is located in the northern part of the Adriatic Sea – in the Kvarner Bay Region. The island has a population of 2.849 people. Thanks to its mild climate, beautiful beaches, crystal-clear sea, and untouched nature (more than 95% of the island area is protected in the Natura 2000 ecological network) Cres Island is a perfect natural health resort and a modern tourist destination. Watching dolphins playing in the sea, sheep in the centuries-old olive grooves, or griffon vultures circling over the island will leave you speechless. The preserved archaeological heritage testifies to the historical significance of the island from prehistoric times and ancient Greece and Rome, through the Venetian period and the Habsburg Monarchy to the present day. This rich past is reflected in the folklore customs and the character of the inhabitants, as well as in the exceptional local cuisine. Tourism and traditional agriculture are the main branches of the island's economy. Due to the exceptional and well-preserved natural environment with rich history and tradition, Cres Island is an example of a modern island where the spirit of the traditional Mediterranean still lives – the true paradise – for nature, the local community, and its visitors.



Summary of Good Practice Story:

Cres Island is today the last habitat of the griffon vultures in Croatia. Due to the abandonment of extensive sheep breeding, and thus the reduction of dead animals - natural food for vultures, the last population of griffon vultures in Croatia, remained only on the island of Cres and a few nearby islands. Abandonment of agricultural activities, accidental poisonings, and drownings during the first flight represented a threat to the population of Cres as well.

Aware of the importance of preserving this strictly protected and endangered bird species, *the Program for the integral protection of griffon vultures* on the island of Cres has been developed. Under this program, the *Visitor Centre and Rescue Centre for Griffon Vultures* was opened in 2016. Besides recovering and treating injured birds, the Centre provides information and education for the local population and visitors.

The griffon vulture population has doubled in the last twenty years thanks to the Visitor Center and Rescue Centre for griffon vultures. The Centre has become a must-see tourist attraction and has created new "green" jobs for residents and volunteers who help and participate in educational activities and the work of the Visitor and Rescue Centre. The griffon vulture became the most famous symbol of Cres Island which attracts thousands of visitors, bird watchers, and nature lovers to learn more about this fascinating bird.

Issues faced:

At the beginning of the 20th century, griffon vultures were widespread throughout Croatia, but at the end of the 20th century, their population was preserved mainly on Cres Island (only 60 pairs were recorded in 1982.). Today, griffon vultures are the only remaining species of birds from the scavenger group in Croatia, which never catch live prey for food, but exclusively feed on dead animals they find thanks to their good eyesight - ensuring very efficient, fast and free removal of carrion from the environment!

Throughout history, griffon vultures were inextricably linked to free (extensive) sheep farming on the island. Still, over the years the islanders turned more towards tourism activities, and a smaller number of people are engaged in sheep breeding. A decrease in the number of sheep on the island consequently meant less food for vultures. In addition, vultures raise only one bird per year. As these large birds nest on the cliffs of Cres, directly above the sea, which is a unique case in the world, every year a significant number of young vultures fall into the sea and unfortunately drown while attempting their first flights.

A big threat to vultures was the illegal poisoning of wild animals, which caused great damage to sheep breeding, but as accidental victims, vultures are the first to die, feeding on poisoned carrion. An additional challenge that the vultures faced was the development of tourism and activities related to tourism, so the disturbance of colonies where the vultures nest began to become more frequent. Young birds in the nest are sometimes disturbed by the noise of tourist boats where people come to watch the vultures as a tourist attraction, so the birds in panic fly away from the nest prematurely and end up in the sea, not ready to fly.





Solution:

Although two special reserves on Cres Island were designated in 1986 and there was a huge conservation effort by NGO (1993 - 2012) to ensure efficient protection of the last population of griffon vultures on Cres Island *the Program for the Integral Protection of Griffon vultures on the island of Cres*. Under the Program, an old school in Beli village was transformed into a modern *Visitor Centre and Rescue Centre for Griffon Vultures* in 2016, for the active protection of this highly endangered and charismatic species. Besides being the recovery facility, the Centre greatly contributes to raising the awareness of the local population and tourists who learn more about the important role of vultures in the ecosystem and destination.

Methods, Steps, and Tools applied:

In 1986, two special reserves on Cres Island were designated to preserve the griffon vultures on Cres from extinction. From 1993 – to 2012 Eco – center *Caput Insulae* operated on Cres Island managed by an NGO. Unfortunately, those measures weren't enough for the adequate active protection and recovery of the last Croatian population of griffon vultures. Therefore, County Public Institution *Priroda* with the support of *Primorje-Gorski Kotar County* and the *City of Cres* has developed a *Program for the integral protection of griffon vultures on the island of Cres*. The main activity of the Program was the establishment of a *Visitor Centre and Rescue Centre*.

The old school building in Beli village was renovated and equipped. The modern *Visitor and Rescue Centre* was opened in 2016. A total of 530.000 € was invested by the *City of Cres*, *Primorje – Gorski Kotar County*, the *Ministry of Tourism of the Republic of Croatia*, and the *Cres Tourist Board*.

The Centre organizes lectures, workshops, and exhibitions for the local community and tourists to inform and educate them on the importance of the griffon vulture and its importance for nature and heritage.

As part of the Centre, there is a recovery facility or "hospital for vultures", which takes ten young vultures into its care every year, and all of them return to nature after recovery. Their lives are saved from drowning by the staff of the Centre in cooperation with residents who are reporting and participating in rescue operations which is crucial for timely intervention. After recovery, and immediately before returning to nature, some vultures are equipped with small satellite transmitters, which enable the collection of extremely useful data on the movements of these birds. Vultures are true "world travelers", and after 4-5 years of wandering, they return to Cres for nesting. In the upgrading and increasing of the capacity of the recovery facility 120,000 € were invested. The funds were secured through the project "Improving and increasing the capacity of the recovery facility for griffon vultures in the Beli visitor centre" with EU funds from the cohesion fund.

The *Zagreb Zoo Institution* provides continuous and selfless help and cooperation while monitoring the nesting population of vultures and marking the released birds GPS transmitters Centre intensively cooperates with the NGO *BIOM* from Zagreb.

In 2016, the Centre established feeding grounds popularly called "vulture restaurants" on the island, where sheep carrions are regularly deposited so that the vultures have an additional source of food, especially during the period when they are feeding the young in the nest.

The Centre cooperates with the *Cres Tourist Board* in organizing numerous communication campaigns to raise awareness of the importance of not disturbing griffon vultures.





Achievements and Results:

Opening the *Visitor Centre and Rescue Centre Beli* as part of the *Program for the integral protection of griffon vultures on the island of Cres* has led to the following achievements and results:

- An average of 10 birds are rescued per year (from 2016 the Rescue Centre rescued 82 griffon vultures and returned 73 of them to the wild);
- The population of the griffon vulture has almost doubled (today 130 pairs with a growing tendency);
- The recovery of the population has also led to the relocation of part of the population to the surrounding area of Mount Učka (Učka Nature Park);
- Awareness of the local community and tourists regarding the importance of conservation of the griffon vulture has been raised as well as their active participation in reporting injured birds;
- Griffon vultures became a real brand of Cres Island which attracts more and more bird-watchers and nature lovers every year;
- *Visitor Centre and Rescue Centre for Griffon Vultures Beli* has become a must-see attraction for visitors, and Cres agencies are offering guided vulture-themed tours, as well as guided bird-watching tours which attract an increasing number of visitors every year;
- The work of the Centre has created new "green" jobs for residents and volunteers who help and participate in educational activities and the work of the Visitor and Rescue Centre itself;
- The cross-sector cooperation and engagement of stakeholders strengthen good examples and incentives for others on how to sustainably manage tourist attractions;
- The Cres Island is recognized as a "green" destination that plans development by sustainable practices and the preservation of untouched nature.

Lessons Learned and Advice:

The extinction of this strictly protected bird species and the only remaining bird species from the group of scavengers in Croatia has been stopped by numerous activities that are continuously carried out. From the 60 pairs that were recorded in 1982, the population currently numbers 130 pairs with a growing tendency!

Dealing with a specific issue such as the conservation of the last population of strictly protected species requires the inclusion of a wide range of experts, organizations, and institutions. Therefore, although led by scientists – ornithologists, the *Program for the integral protection of griffon vultures on the island of Cres* was



developed with the help of the local and national tourist and business organizations, the City of Cres, the Primorje–Gorski Kotar County, and the Ministry of Environmental Protection as well as the Ministry of Tourism of the Republic of Croatia. They have been working for years united with one goal in a joint noble effort to save one of the rarest and most endangered birds in Croatia from extinction. In saving the birds, the main goal is informing and educating residents and guests about the importance of griffon vulture preservation.

More than 15,000 visitors annually come to the small village of Beli, which in winter has only about 40 permanent residents, to learn the fascinating story of Cres griffon vultures. In this case, the evaluation, interpretation, and preservation of natural heritage, apart from the noble goal of saving one species, had a much wider reach and effect - educational, cultural, social, and economic through the development of new tourist attractions.

This is exactly why investing in nature pays off and is a pledge for a healthy society and great wealth for future generations. Today, griffon vultures are an amazing sight in the Cres sky as they calmly sail on the air currents above the island landscape in search of food.

Those huge birds taught us that by taking care of them, we take care of healthy and clean pastures, we take care of our natural heritage and the identity of the island we live on!

Recognitions and Additional References

Croatian Tourist Board – Award for the best stakeholder in sustainable tourism (2018)

<https://www.htz.hr/hr-HR/projekti-i-potpore/godisnje-hrvatske-turisticke-nagrade/arhive-nagrada/nagrada-za-odrzivi-turizam>

Kvarner Tourist Board – Award for the contribution to the sustainable development of Kvarner tourism (2018)

<https://mints.gov.hr/vijesti/kvarnerski-dan-turizma-u-cetiri-godine-turisticki-promet-porastao-za-gotovo-30-posto/17755>



