



## **Good Practice Story Title: Together for a better future: Uniting people for destination progress**

**Destination: Lika Destination**

**Country: Croatia**

**Submitting Organization: Lika Destination Cluster**

### **Category:**

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

### **Destination description:**

The Lika Destination, located in the heart of Croatia, is the least developed and least populated region with the lowest GDP in the country. The destination includes Lika-Senj, Karlovac and Zadar counties on the area of 6.796 km<sup>2</sup>. The rare population density of the destination is equal to the sub-Saharan region of only 7 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup>, while the Croatian average is 68,7 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup>. It is characterized by an older population with a tendency for young people to emigrate.

The destination area of Lika is located in a favorable geographical position and has great natural wealth, cultural heritage and a rich gastronomic offer. It is connected to the rest of Croatia by highway and is located near the airports and seaports. In Lika you can experience three climates in just 30 minutes of driving you and experience this unique phenomenon of contrast. The destination has the largest mountain in Croatia - Velebit, endless fields, plains as well as the Adriatic Sea. Three of eight national parks in Croatia are located in Lika and almost 60% of the area is in the NATURA 2000 ecological network. Lika is also the birthplace of Nikola Tesla.

### **Summary of Good Practice Story:**

In 2017, the Lika Destination Cluster was founded with the aim of promoting and branding the destination, starting with what Lika always had, but was not valorized - untouched nature and healthy food created in that environment. We gathered representatives of protected natural areas, i.e. national parks, to start joint activities, and gathered local food producers and formed them under the common brand "Lika Quality". We expanded the activities since the local community recognized us as a driver of development and a place



where they can turn to for support in starting or improving their business. Therefore, in 2019, the gathering of all tourism stakeholders began, with the aim of comprehensive development of the destination. We have a unique integrated approach to bringing together different tourism sectors and created a platform that unites protected areas, tourist attractions, accommodation facilities, restaurants, local producers, agencies.... In this way, each stakeholder contributes and uses the benefits developed by joint efforts.

This is the first time Croatia that 15 municipalities from different counties on territory this big (13% Croatian territory) were combined in this way in order to gather people and put all of their individual offers into one. The result is not only tourism, but also economic development because all sectors are included, young people have the reason to stay and develop their own business because they have a network based on solid grounds. It is in practice in Croatia that one municipality had its own tourist board but we gathered the tourist boards too.

Another important fact is that Cluster is an organization with no permanent income and a lot of work was done on a voluntary basis, therefore the community really started working as one. Even though with modest start from the 0, today the example of Lika Destination management is an example of good practice, mentioned in professional literature and a base for scientific research. This kind of success, with limited resources, would be impossible if a community wasn't really a thriving community.

Today we can proudly point out that Cluster Lika Destination, with more than 300 stakeholders, is improving its business and Lika's position as a tourist destination through joint activities.

### **Issues faced:**

Faced with economic stagnation and insufficiently developed tourism, Lika needed a joint approach to the development. The Cluster faced a number of challenges during the implementation of changes. The main problem was the closed mindset and not willing to try something new. In addition, we encountered skepticism and resistance to new initiatives. Additional challenges included a lack of awareness of the need for networking because these principles were different from everything they were used to.

It was often difficult to gather people because of the long distances, which reached as much as 170 km between some points. We tried to find locations that were closest to everyone, but that wasn't always feasible, so we turned to online gathering. However, we encountered the problem of low computer literacy, which is why we had to provide additional support, including help with using e-mail, which some did not even have.

In terms of promotion, the lack of quality promotional materials was a major obstacle, as well as no online visibility. Also, many did not have the necessary knowledge of at least one foreign language, not even English.

In addition, we also faced a lack of financial resources. The cluster is an NGO that is self-financed, so it is very challenging for us to find funds for maintaining all these activities.

### **Solution:**

The solution was to first raise awareness of the need for a unified performance, and we worked in two ways - towards stakeholders in the form of education and gatherings, and on the other hand, promoting ourselves to potential tourists. By strategic development, guided by the principles of sustainable development, we changed the perception and with the first results more and more people joined us.





We did the research, market analysis, workshops, interviews with stakeholders and collaboration with experts from different fields. With these methods of information gathering, we were able to identify the key needs, challenges and opportunities for the development of the destination and devise strategies to solve them. By promoting stakeholders offline and online, we strengthened the promotion, allowing them greater reach and visibility.

We finance ourselves through the implementation of various projects from support via national and international grants, adapting them to the specific needs and priorities of the destination's development so we continuously provide funds for the implementation of activities in order to bring the stakeholders one to another.

### **Methods, Steps, and Tools applied:**

We started with the basics, such as the use of hashtags on social networks, all for the purpose of gathering people under a common name - Lika Destination and motivated them to do the same so they raised awareness that they are a part of something big and new. We organized meetings and interviewed stakeholders to get to know them and better understand their needs and perspectives. We have become a central point for information exchange, collecting information from stakeholders and distributing it to make it available to a wider audience. We also visit some of the stakeholders every year to introduce them to future plans and to make quality promotional materials for their business. We also organize education on important topics: sustainable development, business improvement, green and digital transition, trends in tourism and digital marketing, and English language courses. We provide them support in translation and managing social networks and we created e-mail addresses for some of them ourselves. In addition, cluster employees also attend trainings to learn more about topics important to stakeholders in order to educate and guide them as well as possible to be competent destination manager and a leader.

In order to ensure that the development of tourism does not harm nature, the Cluster creates promo-materials, like water saving stickers distributed to stakeholders to stick in their facilities. We also produced manuals and brochures (recycled material!) with information on environmental protection. We sent waste containers code to schools and protected areas so that visitors could be informed about environmental protection.

We created a website that brings together all stakeholders in the same place and provided them a platform where they have the opportunity to present their services and products through texts and photos.

We also created a Facebook group specifically intended for cluster stakeholders. This group serves as a space for exchanging information about their business activities, facilitates their promotion and networking. In addition, we organize workshops and other forms of participatory events to directly involve stakeholders in the project development process. These events not only provide us with valuable feedback, but also encourage creativity and collaboration among participants and enabled us to communicate directly with stakeholders, which resulted in a deeper understanding of their needs and expectations.

### **Achievements and Results:**

The implementation of meetings enabled stakeholders to communicate regularly and get to know each other.



Some of them even offer joint packages and arrangements and buy products and services from one another. They go on fairs together and they represent themselves and the whole Lika destination. Collaboration has become a key element, and stakeholders now promote and support each other, share resources, ideas and information. As an indicator of trust, we are seeing a significant increase in the interest of various business entities in joining the cluster, which clearly indicates a growing recognition of the cluster's work as a key driver of destination development. In the last year, 40 new stakeholders have joined us.

The most successful collaborations are in the sectors where we began - national parks and local producers.

The joint Lika Destination ticket of national parks has multiple positive effects. One of them is reducing the concentration of tourists in the most visited place in Croatia, Plitvice Lakes National Park, through the dispersion of visitors to lesser-known parks in Lika. They visit additional facilities, which encourages extended stays and increases the income of accommodation providers. The entire destination benefits because visitors are directed to different locations, the pressure on protected areas is reduced, while the local economy is strengthened through an increase in the income of all tourism sectors.

Lika Quality system is now known outside the borders of Croatia, and while we continue to accept new producers, regional certificates are being developed based on it. The brand's products can be found with stakeholders in the destination and this is an award-winning example of the involvement of local producers in the tourism development of the destination.

Most successful joint offer is Stay 3 Days in Lika, a set of itineraries created in order to extend the one-day staying of tourists to three days. We have designed different thematic programs so that people stay longer in the destination. In this way, it also contributes to the preservation of the environment because transport is reduced. We are especially proud about the fact that the average stay of tourists in the destination increased from 1,1 to 1,7 days, which shows the positive impact of our joint efforts on the development of local tourism. In some municipalities, tourist visits and stays were not registered. All 15 municipalities today are keeping statistics related to tourist arrivals, as a reply to our request and a strategy of thriving community. Also, according to the data of the national monitoring system, the Lika Destination records an increase in the number of arrivals and overnight stays every year, so in 2023 the number of arrivals increased by 11% compared to 2022, and overnight stays by 2%. Also, tourists who stay longer usually spend less energy on heating, cooling and washing bed linen, which contributes to lower energy and water consumption. This model also promotes sustainable practices and educates guests about environmental protection, boosting the local economy.

Lika is an unavoidable topic in magazines and portals, which proves that through joint efforts we have created a large thriving community aimed at the common good.

### **Lessons Learned and Advice:**

Adapting to diverse stakeholder needs was a primary challenge and employing a bottom-up approach, we prioritized understanding stakeholder perspectives and needs before crafting strategies. We conducted detailed analysis to identify the most important areas for investment. Open communication, cooperation, flexibility, and regular dialogues were crucial in creating today's synergy. We encourage stakeholder initiative and involvement in project design, fostering greater engagement for achieving shared goals.





We combined both individual visits and mutual events and we have enabled an authentic and personal presentation of their activities, which contributes to better connection within the community and promotes the diversity of our destination.

In this way, the cluster has positioned itself as an important stakeholder in the development in the community.

## Recognitions and Additional References

The Cluster Lika Destination has achieved significant achievements and awards. For two years in a row (2019 and 2020), the destination was included in the Top 100 World Sustainable Destinations, and in 2023 the destination won the Green Destinations bronze award, a recognition that confirms its commitment to sustainable tourism. "Lika Quality" system is also described in Green Destinations education material. Some destinations in Croatia have already started to implement their own system, modeled after our example.

Also, the destination received recognition from the European Commission through inclusion in its travel manual, due to destination management principles led in destination and due to gathering the stakeholders. Furthermore, Cluster was awarded the Lika Senj county contribution award for the exceptional results and for the promotion of the destination in Croatia and in the world.

The fact that one stakeholder is a part of our community has a significant importance both for our stakeholders and for institutions at national levels. When our stakeholders apply to grant tenders, they often ask us for confirmation of being a part of Lika Destination Cluster. These certificates earn them additional points when evaluating their application.

We have built cooperation with public institutions, Ministry of Tourism and Sports, Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Regional Development and European Union Funds, schools, faculties and others. We have positioned ourselves as an important stakeholder in the national strategies, which confirms the national importance and support that the destination enjoys in its efforts.

### References:

Lika destination official site: <https://www.lika-destination.hr/en/>

