Sustainable with the Forest — Following the Paths of Franjo Pahernik

Radlje ob Dravi, Slovenia
Razvojno socialni zavod Radlje ob Dravi
Local Destinations (including villages, cities, municipalities, islands)
Culture & Heritage

Summary of Good Practice Story
Radlje ob Dravi, a Slovenia Green Destination Gold-labelled municipality where forests cover nearly 70% of the land, holds the legacy of Franjo Pahernik, a pioneer of close-to-nature sustainable forest management whose century-old principles remained known mainly within professional forestry circles rather than the wider public. The municipality restored historic Radlje Manor into Slovenia's first interpretation centre dedicated entirely to forests, combining interactive exhibits, multimedia and virtual reality — developed with the Koroška Regional Museum, Slovenia Forest Service, the Pahernik Foundation and conservation experts — so visitors could virtually step into the Pahernik forests, followed by guided walks in the actual forest led by forestry professionals. Unexpectedly, it was elderly local visitors, not younger ones, who were most moved by the VR experience of forests they'd lived beside but never entered. The project shows that heritage becomes meaningful only when its underlying values are actively interpreted and experienced, not merely preserved as a building or archive, and that historic knowledge about the land can offer genuine guidance for present-day climate and biodiversity challenges.

Setting the Scene: Destination & context
In the north of Slovenia, where the Drava River meets the forested landscapes of Pohorje and Kozjak, lies Radlje ob Dravi – a destination where forests are not only a defining feature of the

landscape but also an essential part of local identity. Covering nearly 70% of the municipality, forests have shaped livelihoods, traditions, and ways of thinking for generations.
It proudly holds the Slovenia Green Destination Gold label and is committed to sustainable tourism development. Visitors are invited to slow down, reconnect with nature, and experience the authenticity and tranquillity that define the area.
Among its most distinctive features are the Drava River ecosystem and Slovenia's first and still only chemical-free public biological swimming pool. Equally important to the destination's identity are Radlje Manor and the legacy of Franjo Pahernik, whose pioneering approach to close-to-nature, sustainable forest management helped shape the surrounding forests.
Today, this legacy remains visible in the landscape itself. The Pahernik forests stand as a living example of how long-term thinking, respect for natural processes, and responsible stewardship can contribute to biodiversity conservation, climate resilience, and the sustainable management.

The Turning Point: Why change was needed
Before its restoration, Radlje Manor already housed content connected to the Pahernik family and the history of the area. Yet we saw an opportunity to go further: could a cultural monument become a place where heritage actively contributes to current discussions and future challenges?
The answer lay in the story of close-to-nature and sustainable forest management. The value of the Pahernik legacy was never in doubt. Within professional forestry circles, among local institutions, and across the community, his legacy had long been recognised. What was missing was not awareness, but reach.
More than a century ago, decisions were made about how forests should be managed — decisions whose relevance has only grown in a world facing climate change, biodiversity loss, and increasing pressure on natural resources.
Our goal was clear: not simply to preserve a historic building, but to bring this heritage out of professional discourse and into a shared public space where it could be experienced, understood, and valued by as many people as possible.

The Vision: What you set out to do
For us, turning the vision into reality required a different kind of construction — not only of walls and windows, but of partnerships, knowledge, and shared purpose. At its heart was a challenge of ensuring that knowledge which has shaped this landscape for generations would remain relevant for the future.
We recognised that this knowledge represents more than good forestry practice. It is part of the cultural heritage of our region — a way of understanding the relationship between people and nature that has shaped our local identity and community values.
Our ambition was to create a place where this heritage could be understood, experienced, and shared — bringing together tangible and intangible heritage within a single story. The result would be a restored manor and a living forest telling the same story — Slovenia's first interpretation centre dedicated entirely to forests and close-to-nature, sustainable forest

management: an immersive experience combining interactive exhibits, multimedia content, and virtual reality, designed to reach the widest possible audiences.
At its core, our vision was to ensure that this legacy is recognised not only as part of our region's history, but as a living heritage that continues to offer valuable lessons for the future.

The Journey: How change happened
Turning the vision into reality began with conversation. From the beginning, the municipality recognised that success would depend on bringing together different areas of expertise around a shared understanding of what Radlje Manor could become.

While the physical restoration of the manor was underway, equal attention was devoted to developing its future purpose and content. The Municipality of Radlje ob Dravi and the Development and Social Institute Radlje led the process in close cooperation with the Koroška Regional Museum, which had long been involved in researching and interpreting the legacy of Franjo Pahernik and the forestry heritage of the region. This existing cooperation provided a strong foundation for a broader partnership that brought together the Slovenia Forest Service, the Pahernik Foundation, forestry professionals, conservation specialists, educators, local organisations, and tourism experts.

The restoration was carried out with great respect for the manor's historical significance. Newly discovered architectural elements were documented and incorporated into the restoration plans, preserving both the physical structure and its cultural authenticity. One discovery stood out in particular: a wall that revealed multiple layers of construction materials and techniques, each representing a different era of the manor's history. Rather than concealing it, the team decided to preserve it as a feature in its own right. Today, that wall stands in the central exhibition space — a quiet reminder that the building itself is a document of time.

The goal was never to create a traditional museum focused solely on historical collections or technical forestry information, but a place where visitors could understand why the forests surrounding Radlje ob Dravi look the way they do today. Developing the concept required combining historical research, scientific knowledge, local stories, and contemporary interpretation methods — finding the right balance between honouring the depth of the knowledge and making it genuinely accessible to a broad audience.

Accessibility and inclusion were important considerations throughout. Interactive exhibits, multimedia content, and virtual reality experiences were introduced not as technological attractions, but as tools for interpretation and understanding. Through virtual reality, visitors who may never have the opportunity to enter the Pahernik forests directly can still experience their atmosphere, structure, and ecological significance. The first real test came at the opening of the exhibition, when forestry and conservation professionals tried the VR headsets for the first time. What followed was not a technical evaluation but a moment of genuine emotion — watching

footage filmed directly in the Pahernik forests and responding with enthusiasm and pride. It was a confirmation that the technology had captured something real. The responses were ones of genuine enthusiasm and surprise — for the first time, people could step into the heart of the Pahernik forests without leaving the room.

The museum experience was intentionally designed to extend beyond the walls of the manor itself. Guided visits to the Pahernik forests, led by forestry professionals, allow visitors to connect what they learn inside the museum with the living landscape outside. The forest becomes an extension of the exhibition, offering direct insight into the principles, practices, and values presented within the manor.
Through this collaborative process, Radlje Manor was transformed into a place where the story of tangible and intangible heritage meet, and speak with one voice.

The Breakthrough: What you achieved
The central result is the exhibition Sustainable with the Forest: Following the Paths of Franjo Pahernik — an immersive journey through the relationship between people, forests, and the landscape, told through digital presentations, interactive exhibits, and artefacts that invite visitors to reflect on the value of responsible, nature-aligned stewardship of forests.
The exhibition opens with a virtual experience: entering the Pahernik forest feels like stepping into a vast museum without walls or ceiling — where green canopies replace paintings and centuries-old trees stand as living exhibits. From here, the journey moves through the forests of the world, the layers of forest ecosystems, and the theme of forests as the foundation of planetary and human wellbeing.
At the heart of the exhibition stands Pahernik's study — a reconstruction of his working environment that reveals how he consistently placed the ecological integrity of the forest above economic gain. Subsequent chapters explore close-to-nature, sustainable forest management, and the work of ProSilva, the European network promoting nature-based forestry. The exhibition closes with the secrets beneath the canopy — folktales and stories in which the forest appears as a place of mystery, wisdom, and wonder. The exhibition experience is further enriched by guided visits to the Pahernik forests, led by forestry experts from the Slovenia Forest Service, offering visitors the opportunity to experience firsthand the beauty and grandeur of a forest. For the local community, the restoration gave new purpose to an important historic landmark, creating a renewed sense of pride. Trough this experience, sustainable forest management has moved from professional circles to a public stage, accessible to locals and visitors.

Reflections: What you learned and what others can learn
Heritage becomes meaningful only when people understand why it matters. Preserving a historic building is important — but for us preserving and communicating the stories and values associated with it is what gives heritage lasting relevance.

Collaboration from the very beginning was essential. Conservation specialists, foresters, educators, tourism experts, and the local community each contributed perspectives that made the result more authentic and credible than any single institution could have produced alone. Solutions to present challenges can often be found within local heritage. The Pahernik forests show that heritage is not only a record of the past, but a source of knowledge for the future.
One thing surprised us more than anything else. We had expected the virtual reality experience to appeal primarily to younger visitors. In practice, it was elderly visitors who responded most deeply — people who had lived their entire lives in sight of these forests but had never been able to enter the older, more remote stands. It was a reminder that the most valuable asset is often already there, embedded in the landscape and the people who have lived alongside it. The work was not to create something new, but to make visible what already exists.

The Ripple Effect: Lasting impact

The lasting impact of this initiative extends well beyond the walls of Radlje Manor. Its greatest legacy lies not in the restored building, but in the preservation and continued transmission of knowledge that shapes the landscape, identity, and values of the region.
The story continues to grow through new educational partnerships, guided forest experiences, and initiatives that connect cultural heritage, environmental stewardship, and sustainable tourism. New interpretive trails linking Radlje Manor and the Pahernik forests are currently being developed, while cooperation with schools and professional institutions continues to expand.
The project has strengthened local pride and increased awareness of the cultural and environmental value of forests, helping visitors understand how decisions made generations ago continue to shape the landscape today.
A manor was restored. A way of thinking was preserved — one that continues to inspire responsible stewardship, strengthen local identity, and offer lessons the future cannot afford to ignore. In Radlje ob Dravi, that future is already being written.

Awards or Certifications

- Slovenia Green Destination Gold, Certificate for sustainable destination, tourism industry and parks
- IRDO Certificate for Strategic Management of Social Responsibility and Sustainable Development (Development and Social Institute Radlje ob Dravi)

Web Articles

https://www.rtvslo.si/kultura/dediscina/koncana-je-obnova-dvorca-radlje-ki-s-tem-postaja-kulturno-in-gozdno-sredisce-zgornje-dravske-doline/770833

Other Relevant Links

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n6pkGUePCnY

Quotes or Testimonials

»Regardless of the significant material benefits that forests provide to our nation, we must also appreciate their great importance in terms of climate, health, and landscape aesthetics.« — Eng. Franjo Pahernik, 1933