United for Pohorje: How Collaboration Laid the Foundations for the Pohorje Regional Park

Rogla - Pohorje, Slovenia
LTO ROGLA-ZREČE, GIZ
Local Destinations (including villages, cities, municipalities, islands)
Nature & Environment

Summary of Good Practice Story
Pohorje, one of Slovenia's largest forested landscapes with raised bogs, peat lakes and rare species, had long been managed in a fragmented way across six municipalities and multiple institutions, leaving growing tourism pressure and climate change threatening its sensitive habitats without a unified conservation framework. Zreče, Vitanje, Mislinja, Lovrenc na Pohorju, Ruše and Slovenska Bistrica joined with national conservation bodies, tourism organisations and landowners to establish the Pohorje Regional Park in May 2024, formalised through a January 2025 cooperation agreement defining shared governance and funding (about €184,000 invested annually). The park introduced visitor and habitat monitoring in sensitive zones, launched education and volunteer conservation programmes, and is building a dedicated network of trained local guides. The key lesson: successful conservation and sustainable development start with trust-building among stakeholders with differing priorities — investing in partnership before pursuing individual projects creates the durable foundation for lasting cooperation.

Setting the Scene: Destination & context
Pohorje is one of Slovenia's largest and most distinctive forested regions, renowned for its vast forests, raised bogs, peat lakes, meadows, and traditional settlements. For centuries, local communities have shaped and preserved this unique natural and cultural landscape.

Beyond its rich biodiversity, Pohorje is home to people who live and work in forestry, agriculture, tourism, and recreation. As a landscape where many interests meet, its long-term conservation depends on cooperation between local communities, public institutions, tourism organizations, landowners, businesses, and nature conservation experts.

This diversity is what makes the establishment of the Pohorje Regional Park so remarkable. Built on a shared vision rather than a single initiative, the process united six municipalities—Zreče, Vitanje, Mislinja, Lovrenc na Pohorju, Ruše, and Slovenska Bistrica—along with key partners from nature conservation, regional development, tourism, forestry, and government.

Together, they recognized that only through collaboration could they protect Pohorje's exceptional natural values while creating opportunities for sustainable development. This story could only happen in Pohorje, where nature transcends boundaries and cooperation is the key to its future.

The Turning Point: Why change was needed
Pohorje is one of Slovenia's most valuable natural areas, known for its vast forests, raised bogs, rare species, and unique ecosystems. Yet for many years, its management was fragmented among municipalities, institutions, and interest groups, without a unified framework for long-term conservation and sustainable development.

As pressures from climate change, tourism growth, land use, and natural resource management increased, so did concerns about protecting sensitive habitats, endangered species, peat bogs, old-growth forests, the Lovrenc Lakes, and important water sources. The growing popularity of Pohorje as a tourism destination brought new opportunities but also highlighted the need to manage visitor flows and reduce impacts on fragile ecosystems.

At the same time, local communities, tourism providers, businesses, forestry stakeholders, and conservation organizations often had different priorities. The turning point came when they recognized that Pohorje's natural values extend beyond administrative boundaries and that no single organization could address these challenges alone.

A shared understanding emerged that only cooperation could ensure both nature conservation and sustainable development. This realization led to the establishment of the Pohorje Regional Park—a common platform for protecting biodiversity, managing tourism responsibly,

coordinating spatial development, and securing a sustainable future for one of Slovenia's most important landscapes.

The Vision: What you set out to do

The vision behind the Pohorje Regional Park was to preserve one of Slovenia's most valuable natural landscapes while supporting sustainable development. The goal was not only to protect biodiversity, forests, raised bogs, Natura 2000 sites, and water resources, but also to create a long-term framework connecting nature conservation, local development, tourism, and education.

The initiative emerged from a shared belief that the future of Pohorje depends on cooperation. As one of Slovenia's leading tourism destinations, the area offers important economic opportunities while facing growing environmental pressures. Stakeholders recognized that protecting natural heritage and supporting local communities must go hand in hand.

The first steps were taken by six municipalities—Zreče, Vitanje, Mislinja, Lovrenc na Pohorju, Ruše, and Slovenska Bistrica—together with nature conservation experts, development organizations, and tourism stakeholders. United by a common vision, they sought to create a model of shared responsibility and coordinated management.

This vision became reality in May 2024 with the establishment of the Pohorje Regional Park, uniting nature conservation, sustainable tourism, and regional cooperation.

The Journey: How change happened

The Journey: How Change Happened

The establishment of the Pohorje Regional Park in May 2024 was not the end of the journey—it was the beginning of a new chapter. The real challenge was transforming a shared vision into a functioning partnership capable of managing one of Slovenia's largest and most valuable natural areas.

The first step was building trust among stakeholders. Six municipalities, the national government, nature conservation experts, tourism organizations, regional development agencies, landowners, and local communities all shared a common goal: protecting Pohorje while ensuring sustainable opportunities for future generations. Bringing together partners with different priorities required continuous dialogue, patience, and a willingness to find common ground.

A major milestone came in January 2025, when the founding municipalities, regional development organizations, and the Institute of the Republic of Slovenia for Nature Conservation signed a cooperation agreement defining how the park would be managed and financed. This innovative governance model created a shared responsibility between national and local levels and ensured that conservation and development objectives would be pursued together.

Once the management framework was established, attention shifted to people. Local residents, landowners, associations, schools, tourism providers, and businesses were invited to become active participants in shaping the future of the park. Open meetings, thematic events, and regular communication channels helped create transparency and encouraged community involvement. Days of Open Doors at the park's visitor centres and information points enabled residents and visitors to better understand the park's mission and contribute their ideas.
At the same time, partners began addressing one of the key challenges facing Pohorje: how to welcome visitors without compromising the natural environment. Rather than focusing on increasing visitor numbers, the park focused on improving visitor experiences. Plans were developed to restore and upgrade interpretive trails, visitor centres, and educational infrastructure, while monitoring systems were introduced to better understand visitor flows in sensitive areas.
Education quickly became one of the most powerful tools for change. Schools from across the region joined activities designed to help young people understand the value of their natural heritage. Volunteer conservation actions brought together residents, experts, and local organizations, creating moments where people could contribute directly to the protection of the landscapes they care about. One such tradition, the annual conservation action on Pohorje, continues to unite stakeholders around a shared commitment to nature conservation.
Tourism stakeholders also became important partners. Hotels, tourism centres, destination organizations, and local guides worked together to develop interpretation programmes and nature-friendly experiences that encourage visitors to connect more deeply with the landscape. A dedicated network of Pohorje guides is being established to provide high-quality interpretation and support responsible tourism throughout the park.
The journey is still ongoing. New projects such as Pohorka 2 are helping improve visitor infrastructure, interpretation, habitat conservation, and cooperation across the region. Yet perhaps the most significant achievement so far is not a trail, a visitor centre, or a management plan. It is the partnership itself—a shared commitment by municipalities, institutions, businesses, and local communities to care for Pohorje together.

The Breakthrough: What you achieved
The establishment of the Pohorje Regional Park marks a major milestone for one of Slovenia's most valuable natural areas. For the first time, six municipalities, national institutions, development agencies, conservation bodies, tourism organizations, and local communities have come together within a shared framework for managing and protecting the landscape as one connected system.

A long-term governance model has been established, supported by municipalities, regional organizations, and national authorities, ensuring stable funding and coordinated management. Around €184,000 is invested annually, combining multiple funding sources to support nature conservation, education, visitor management, and sustainable development.

The park has introduced visitor and habitat monitoring systems that help reduce pressure on sensitive ecosystems, including forests, raised bogs, Natura 2000 sites, and water resources.

It has also strengthened cooperation among local communities, fostering a new culture of partnership and shared responsibility. Tourism is evolving toward sustainable, nature-friendly experiences with greater emphasis on interpretation and education.

The most important achievement, however, is a shift in mindset: Pohorje is now seen not as separate municipalities and interests, but as a single shared landscape with a common future built on cooperation and trust.

Reflections: What you learned and what others can learn

One of the key lessons from establishing the Pohorje Regional Park is that successful conservation and sustainable development start with trust. The main challenge was aligning stakeholders with different perspectives, including municipalities, tourism organizations, landowners, and conservation experts.

Building a shared vision required time, dialogue, and patience. Although progress was sometimes slow, these discussions strengthened cooperation and led to widely supported solutions.

Once trust was established, collaboration quickly opened new opportunities. Shared goals replaced differences, enabling projects in visitor management, education, habitat protection, and sustainable tourism that would have been difficult to achieve individually.

The process also showed the importance of early community involvement. People are more supportive of change when they understand it and can contribute. Communication, public events, and ongoing engagement proved essential.

Looking back, earlier investment in stakeholder engagement would have been beneficial, as trust is built through transparency and shared experiences, not regulations alone.

The key advice is to focus on partnership before projects. A shared vision may take time, but it creates the foundation for lasting success. The Pohorje experience shows that cooperation can turn different interests into common progress.

The Ripple Effect: Lasting impact

The establishment of the Pohorje Regional Park has created momentum beyond the protected area. What began as nature protection has grown into a platform for cooperation, innovation, and sustainable development across the region.

A key impact is stronger partnerships between municipalities, agencies, tourism organizations, experts, schools, businesses, and local communities. The governance model shows that complex challenges are better addressed through shared responsibility and a common vision. The park has also become a driver of new projects in visitor management, habitat restoration, education, heritage interpretation, and sustainable tourism, with new collaborations continuing to emerge.
It has strengthened local identity, with residents increasingly viewing Pohorje as a shared landscape with common values and a shared future. For visitors, it offers more meaningful experiences through interpretation and education, encouraging responsible engagement with nature.
Most importantly, it has shifted the mindset from balancing conservation and development toward integrating both, shaping planning and decision-making across the region. Although still young, the park has laid strong foundations for a future where nature conservation, community well-being, and tourism align.

Awards or Certifications

Web Articles
https://365.rtvslo.si/arhiv/napovedniki-tv-oddaj/175136720

Other Relevant Links
https://parkpohorje.org/
https://www.naravniparkislovenije.si/slo/naravni-parki/regijski-park-pohorje

Quotes or Testimonials
The Pohorje Regional Park was not created by a single institution, municipality, or organization. It came into existence because people from different fields chose to work together toward a common goal. We have shown that nature conservation, local community development, and sustainable tourism can go hand in hand. Today, Pohorje is not only a protected area – it is a symbol of cooperation, trust, and shared responsibility for future generations.