

Baltic Island and Coastal Communities and Economies

What are their specificities? How to foster sustainability through innovative solutions

Date: Thursday, 25 April 2024

Theme: Mission Ocean & Waters

Workshop Summary

The session was moderated by **Gunilla Rosenqvist** (Professor / Project Leader Blue Center Gotland Uppsala University / Blue Center Gotland) and opened with giving context for the presentations to come regarding what sustainable tourism is and highlighting known problems of an islander dislike for tourists. She summed it up by asking: “How do we get people on the islands to feel like they are part of the island and can be proud of it? There is the saying to not leave a place worse than you found it, but we should leave it better than we found it. How do we make this happen in tourism?”

Four presentations were held:

Cecilie Petersen (Ocean Mission Manager, University of Southern Denmark) discussed the work in Flyn, Denmark to increase tourism on the island and in the harbor area. **Ellen Lundkvist** (Manager, Leader Gute) focused on the aspirations at Gotland to increase marine tourism, and the values for society. **Eeva Lauk** (Founder of experimental seaweed farm, Planeet Ruhnu), highlighted the value of small initiatives from private people by showcasing their business with sea-to-fork and citizen engagement activities. **Helen Eric (Saaremaa Municipality)** gave a nice overview of how Saaremaa works with tourism in the municipality from a public sector perspective.

Generally, the common challenges found were:

- Low/high season activity inequality which creates difficulties in city and employment planning to cope with high-season pressure. Also, this creates a social divide between year-round citizens who see tourism more as something bad due to, e.g. higher housing prices, too many visitors in a short period, and getting little in return.
- Tourism has a big footprint, and we need to find a way to reduce it, both for the sake of environmental sustainability, but also local social sustainability.
- Digital and ocean literacy is generally low and are great tools to work with to increase tourism.
- There is a general shift away from the blue economy, which holds current potential for tourism (e.g. fishing, seafood, local cuisine). How are new opportunities created for the tourists, and for the local fishermen?

Panel discussion

What is the biggest challenge?

Ruhne: Small community, small changes are big.

Flyn: Small communities can also be an advantage. Changes are faster, there are less people to convince and it's easier to find common ground in less time. However, everything is on a personal level, which can be a challenge AND an opportunity.

Gute: We don't value our resources enough. We have things that can be exotic and an experience for others, e.g. fish and fishing. We take it for granted and have to realize its potential.

How do we train ourselves to see this potential?

Saaremaa: Communication with locals.

Gute: We need to put on different glasses and train ourselves to focus on different perspectives. Talk to people and see what the needs are, how do we make people cooperate in new ways?

Flyn: We need stubborn and curious people to lead the way. Look at Ruhne!

Ruhne: It's slow, but just keep going. Create critical mass to gain traction.

What about educating children, is this important?

Flyn: YES. They are the grassroots movement in society and create new systems and normalizations. E.g. school meals normalize new food.

Gute: School meals are a cornerstone for making change. Set habits with children to implement in everyday life.

Who should do this?

Saaremaa: We need communal understanding and collective responsibility.

Gute: Don't underestimate the individual. People who raise their voices are heard, and no change will be made otherwise. E.g. young people demanding change is a very powerful tool (learn from the Potato-Right of Gotland students demanding to stop importing potatoes for school meals). We need to create waves/ripples. One drop spreads broad thinking.

Why is it slow?

Gute + Flyn: It is cheap and convenient to be unsustainable.

What are ongoing activities/initiatives?

Gute: Interreg application about sustainable tourism and coastal communities ongoing.

Flyn: A community of practitioners needed to create a common strategy. What are the common interests, what can we do together and how can this be facilitated? It is amazing what can be done when everyone works towards the same goal.

Round table discussions with two focus questions:

What is sustainable tourism?

- It must be based on the local place, it can't be a copy-paste of other initiatives but must be adapted to the local community and culture.
- It spans across all seasons with less defined peaks during summer.
- There are many aspects of sustainability. Economic, environmental, social, etc.
- Sustainable tourism must be kept local, e.g. not importing businesses capitalizing on resources. Locals are the most important driving force.

How can we foster a sustainable tourism shift?

- Cooperation of coastal communities and sharing experiences.
- Seasons are short, how do we attract people in other seasons, and/or prolong the tourism season? Example: Öland harvest season.
- School excursions not only in summer.
- Tourism "fee" or limitations to create awareness and exclusivity.
- How can big companies foster sustainable local tourism, e.g. provide infrastructure and resources to use. Example: fishers in Flyn can't fish but all the infrastructure is in the harbour (smokers, storage, boats, etc.). How can this be used?
- Dissemination and knowledge sharing.
- Sustainable branding.
- Sustainability fund.
- Governance and regulations might be needed.
- Educate tourism providers and locals. How can this benefit them?
- Nudging.
- Create business networks locally.

Conclusion

We need to harvest the personal connections of locals to their own place and use their pride for tourism. They have to be part of tourism, and it has to be on their terms as well, otherwise it will not be sustainable. However, we must remind locals of what to be proud of and bring back the traditional culture. Some things are not new, they are just lost traditions. People going on vacation remember what is different from their homeplace, but this is neglected in everyday life. But we also have to consider the needs of nature in the process, and nature's terms. We have to give nature a voice and create awareness through highlighting the values it brings, and its part in culture.

One of the biggest obstacles is the seasonality of tourism, and finding opportunities for year-round events is challenging, but it can be done! Focus on recurring events, such as the harvest festival on Öland or the street picnic in Saarema.