

# Cumbria STEEP study visit to Poland 3-10th August 2006

## 1. Summary

This report describes the findings of the study visit to explore the role of sustainable tourism in the Bieszczady and Pieniny National Parks in southern Poland, as part of the EU-funded Cumbria STEEP programme.

## The Participants

Eight professionals from the tourism related sector took part in the study tour. They were:

**James Rebanks**, Rural Regeneration Company (back row, far left)

**Dave Muir**, Cumbria Biodiversity Partnership (back row second from left)

**Katie Read**, Cumbria Tourism (back row, far right)

**Shane Harris**, North Pennines AONB Partnership (front row left)

**Martin Varley**, Friends of the Lake District (front row, 2<sup>nd</sup> left)

**Helen Houghton**, Lake District National Park Authority (front row 2<sup>nd</sup> right)

**Phil Gray**, Carlisle City Council (front row, right)

**Claire Stott**, Tourism and Conservation Partnership (not in picture)



## 2. The Hosts

### Bieszczady National Park

At 292km<sup>2</sup> Bieszczady is the third largest national park in Poland. It borders Slovakia and Ukraine and is part of the Eastern Carpathian International Biosphere Reserve. Wilderness is key element of the park, which has a core zone, in which access is restricted, and a buffer zone where, recreation is allowed. The majority of the park is forested, including areas of primeval woodland. There are also areas of mountain grassland. The park is home to important populations of bison, wolves, bears, lynxes and deer. It is state-owned and attracts around 250,000 a year

### Pieniny National Park

Pieniny National Park is much smaller (<100km<sup>2</sup>) of which approx. half is state-owned. A limestone area, it focuses on the dramatic peaks of the Three Crowns mountain and the Dunajec River. Forests cover nearly three-quarters of the park and access is strict prohibited over 25% of the area. There is a wide range of plants and animals, some endemic: its meadows have some of the richest ecosystems in the country (30-40 species/m<sup>2</sup>). The area has a long history as a tourist destination, rafting on the Dunajec being particularly popular, and attracts 2.5 million visitors a year.



### 3. The Product

#### *Landscape*

Landscapes are a key attraction for both parks. Being part of the Carpathian Mountains, dramatic scenery characterises both parks. The highest peaks in each park were the most popular destinations, and both parks charged for access to them. This did not seem to discourage people and provided valuable additional income.

A unique draw for Bieszczady was its wildness. The area's population was forcibly removed after World War II, since when natural processes have taken over. The park has less 200 residents (mostly park employees) and has essentially been managed as a nature reserve. Large areas of connected ecosystems still remain and it is possible to experience natural transitions of habitats e.g. woodland into upland pastures. However, the absence of human influences in the landscape has left the area with a lack of cultural associations with few local products and a limited sense of identity. State ownership of the park suggests that in the short to medium term this landscape is safe from inappropriate change.



*Rafting on the Dunajec River*

Pieniny's landscape reflects man-made influences more, particularly agricultural. It is a populated park and historic patterns of strip farming give a distinctive texture to the landscape. Traditional 'Highland' farming, with shepherds spending the summers on the hills producing cheese can still be seen and local cheese is common product in the region. Changing society and recent developments with Poland e.g. accession to the EU, could put this landscape under threat. The main attraction in the park is rafting down the Dunajec river, which provides local employment and strengthens local identity. It has been carried out for more than 100 years and appears to be a tradition, which has stood the test of time.

In both parks there is a lot of opportunity for hill walking, with a well-maintained and waymarked network of footpaths. Horse riding also featured prominently. In Bieszczady routes existed exclusively for the use of horse riders. Although mountain biking was being promoted, dedicated routes were only provided within the buffer zone areas and off-road cycling was prohibited within the core national park areas.

#### *Wildlife*

Some mention should be made of the wildlife potential for Pieniny and in particular Bieszczady. The Carpathian is one of the few remaining homes for large carnivores in Europe. Wolves, lynxes, bison and bears can still be found in Bieszczady. This is potentially a powerful product to attract visitors, which has been successfully marketed in other parts of Europe. Profits could then be used to help protect the future of these animals.

As well as these more obvious attractions, both parks offer a wide range of interest to bird watchers and have other perhaps less glamorous, but equally important wildlife.

### *Equestrian tourism*

Equestrian tourism is strong in Poland and featured in both national park visits. Its origins date back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the first tourists explored the Carpathian mountains using the services of local Highlander guides - called the *Huculs* - and their horse breed of the same name, which was strong and well adjusted to mountain conditions. This breed has played a considerable role in the revival of equestrian tourism over the last ten years. Lowland horse-riding tourism has a different origin in chivalry and cavalry traditions.



*Equestrian tourism in Bieszczady National Park*

Horse-riding tourism in Poland is supported by Polish Society for Sightseeing and Tourism (PTTK) and is managed by the Horse-Riding Tourism Committee of the Board of PTTK through its subcommittees. PTTK aims to promote correctly managed and safe horse-riding tourism. The PTTK assists businesses to acquire professional qualifications.

Equestrian centres affiliated to the PTTK, offer horses appropriate for all level of proficiency, accommodation, boxes for visitors' horses and PTTK Horse Riding Tourism Guides, who can not only accompany rides, but also provide all information and advice. Horse-riding trails have been designed and marked out in the buffer zones of the national parks. There are more than 200km of trails in the Bieszczady National Park. Polish equestrian tourism is highly professional, providing good quality accommodation for horse and rider, excellent marketing and infrastructure to revival any European riding destination.

### **4. The Providers**

We were shown a numbers of 'sustainable tourism' providers on the study tour. All of them were of a high quality and comparable to similar providers in Cumbria, but at a much lower price (typically £5-£15 per person for B & B). Some had added attractions besides accommodation e.g. offering craft courses, having a herb garden. There seemed to be limited linking of accommodation with local products and in one case a sense that providing traditional polish food would be a disincentive to tourists. There did not appear to be a widespread general awareness of the meaning of sustainable tourism among providers.



*Farm tourism Polish style*

In Pieniny 'farm' tourism had a large role in providing accommodation. Farm tourism providers were linked together through a non-governmental umbrella organisation which

promoted their services. This was seen by members as being a more effective way of attracting tourists than the state tourist organisations, which seemed to have very little role to play in promoting the area.

Overall the quality of the tourist product, both in terms of things to see and do and where to stay was very high, and offered excellent value for money. Given the relative accessibility of the region through low cost airlines, it was felt by the group that it was only a lack of proper marketing, which prevented these areas from becoming serious competitors to Cumbria.

## **5. Visitor surveys in Bieszczady and Pieniny National Parks**

To try and gain some impressions from visitors to the two national parks, we carried out a number of random, informal, face-to-face interviews. These were entirely unscientific, and only involved English-speaking visitors, but they provide some useful insights.

Many of those questioned had travelled some distance to get to the national parks. A significant number were from the Baltic coast region, and one visitor offered the information that he had travelled 900km to reach the park. Many were staying outside the park boundaries, and for Bieszczady this is hardly surprising given the lack of settlements offering accommodation within the park. One family were staying 50km from the park, and had gone with the specific intention of climbing the highest peak. In this particular case the visit had been prompted by the children's desire to go walking, while other respondents were motivated by childhood memories of the mountains.

Reasons for visiting were fairly consistent and were similar to national park visitors within the UK. Most people mentioned a combination of landscape and scenery, challenging and scenic walks, outdoor activities (cycling, riding, rafting etc) and wildlife-watching.

When asked if they were happy to pay for their visit, the majority of interviewees agreed with the concept. Some felt the charges (4zł -70p- per adult, 2zł -35p- per child) were too high, but others were content to pay. There was near-unanimous agreement that the income raised from visitors should be used to maintain and improve the parks.

It should be encouraging for managers that visitors are in agreement with the concept of paying an 'entry fee' for national parks, as such a proposal in the UK would be met with outrage. However, this loyalty should be rewarded with feedback on how the income is used to improve parks and visitor facilities. More interpretation of the special qualities of the parks may help to build a consensus in favour of conservation of these areas and their wildlife. This may also deflect some of the pressure for additional access trails that was evident in Pieniny.

If visitors are to make a greater economic impact within the regions, additional carefully planned accommodation will be required closer to the natural attractions.

## **6. The Issues**

Several issues related to sustainable tourism arose during the study visit.

### *1. Public access*



*Wolf tracking in Bieszczady, not as easy as you might think*

While there was much to do in both Pieniny and Bieszczady, access control clearly limited the potential to maximise recreation opportunities. Having separate horse riding and walking routes perplexed the group and excluding access to large areas of both parks for nature conservation reasons a felt to be a lost opportunity. Bieszczady

was seen as being more for nature than for people in both the management of its wildlife and its visitors. This has clearly been a philosophical decision by park management which must be respected. However, the disadvantages of failing to allow visitors to experience the special qualities of the park in terms of public understand need to be recognised.

## 2. *Wildlife management*

The potential of the area's wildlife for sustainable has already been mentioned. However, fulfilling this has serious drawbacks. It requires a willingness to share these special qualities and a reliable means of ensuring the animals can be seen. Bieszczady does have a lot to offer, but the overall experience of the group's wildlife watching adventure was not great, both in terms of customer care and what we saw. It is possible to offer a profitable, satisfying wildlife watching experience, as company's like Naturetrek have shown, but it careful planning and preparation to ensure the paying customer gets what he or she wants and that the wildlife retains it wildness.

## 3. *Sustainable tourism*

The experience of our visit seems to illustrate that idea that sustainability only becomes meaningful when a resource becomes scare or under threat. While we were shown some good examples, e.g. one farm tourism provider had a ground source pump, sustainable tourism ideas did not seems to be widespread.

In general the Polish public, emerging from a state control mindset seemed happy to do as they were told and relinquish responsibility to the government for managing the respective national parks. They paid their money, climbed their mountains and went home and the state ensured that they could by managing the landscapes. It was not clear whether there was any understanding of the impact which they might be having on their environment while doing this.

There appeared a general lack of understanding and appreciation in the private sector of the need for environmentally sustainable approaches. This will hopefully change as the numbers of overseas visitors increases. The Polish tourism industry should become more sophisticated, and starts to look abroad to develop its international competitiveness.

The potential already exists, with tourism marketing groups starting to be established. These groups form a perfect basis for environmental training to be delivered and best practice visits amongst members encouraged.

With a charge levied to enter the parks, there was understandably resistance to the visitor payback concept. This could however evolve in different ways, and be a brand which businesses buy into. The idea of offering visitors the opportunity to be 'climate neutral' during their stay could also be a motivating message to facilitate monies for sustainable projects in each of the parks.

From a public sector viewpoint, although the issues with planning are complex, the National Park Authorities and councils could consider a grants scheme or more sympathetic ear for tourism development that is environmentally sustainable. One possibility in the future could be to ask that all new operators undergo a basic environmental training course.

#### 4. *Lack of information/interpretation*

A key tenet of sustainable tourism is the visitor recognising the value of what needs to be sustained. In general on the study visit, there was lack of information about the special qualities of the areas to raise awareness of the visitor to their need to behave appropriately in order for it to be sustained. This was a missed opportunity particularly since with the system of charging to climb certain peaks the park authorities have a direct opportunity to communicate with visitors. Much more so than in Cumbria where the authority and public seldom interact. In Bieszczady, tourism information was available to the public, but nothing on the importance of the area or what the park authority did with its money. Pieniny had a number of tourism well placed information centres, but these were under-utilised and often poorly signposted. Neither park operated an events programme, or provided occasions for the public to learn about the park. The rafters on the River Dunajec had a great opportunity to interpret the landscape through which hundreds of thousands of visitors go each year, but we saw no evidence of this being done.

#### 5. *Availability of resources*

In the UK working for the national parks is seen as a desirable job and relatively well-resourced. In Poland this was not always the case. In Bieszczady, in particular, it seems many jobs were low paid and the park was under resourced, entrenched in the pre-democratic era. There was not the prestige attached to similar jobs in the UK. The implications of this in terms of motivation and willingness to change and embrace new ideas can be imaged.