

This series of informative fiches aim to present, in summary, examples of practices and approaches that EU Member States and Regions have put in place in order to implement their Rural Development Programmes in the current period. These examples want to contribute to the understanding of what has worked well and less well in the delivery of the 2007-2013 RDPs and as far as possible, draw lessons in the view of future improvement of the programmes.

## Innovative approach to nature tourism in Spain: Creation of a mobile bird watching



### BACKGROUND AND SCOPE OF THE PROJECT

**Almudena García Álvarez** works in the rural tourism sector since she left school. Her profession as a climbing instructor has provided her with a beneficial insight into the rural tourism industry and she knew this sector could provide her with lasting employment if she was able to diversify. Now, at the age of 38, she has realised that she won't be able to exercise this profession forever due its physical requirements and she started to look for other opportunities in rural tourism. The project was born out of this need to look for such alternatives and her interest to promote the natural resources of Extremadura and differentiate her work from that of other tourism companies in the region.

**Keywords:** Rural Quality of Life & Economic Diversification; Rural economic diversification; Biodiversity; Innovation; Eco-tourism; Employment; Natural environment

**EU Member State:** Spain

**Specific Location:** Zafra, Badajoz province, Extremadura region. However the service/ activities offered cover the whole region of Extremadura.

**Main beneficiary/ies:** Almudena García Álvarez

**RDP Measure(s):** Measure 313— Encouragement of tourism activities

**Funds Allocated:** Total cost: €65 943.78

EAFRD: €30 960.60

Private contribution: €34 983.18

**Implementation Period:** 01/11/2010 – 31/08/2011

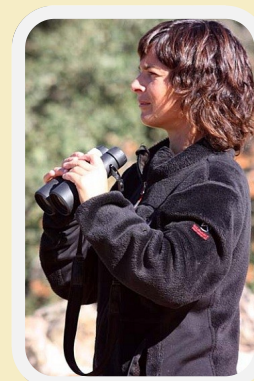
The region lacks specialisation in nature tourism with only a couple of foreign companies working in this field. She decided that bird watching tourism was therefore a niche with good prospects that she could exploit. The idea was to provide a mobile bird watching facility for tourists. Given her good knowledge of the local birdlife, their habitats and conservation needs she considered to be in a good position to offer nature tourists a quality service. The objective was threefold: to make a living out of nature tourism; to make the region known to others within and outside it; and to preserve its nature and exploit its potential. To this end, the beneficiary had to identify a unique type of nature tourism service. The project also aimed to demonstrate the potential of a region's biodiversity and natural resources for providing alternative and sustainable forms of income for rural residents. Expected benefits for the beneficiary include an alternative source of income and an opportunity to offer a unique service in her province and region. The province and region also benefit from additional tourism products that make the area more attractive to tourists, hence increase its wealth, while promoting and protecting the region's biodiversity.



## DEVELOPMENT AND PLANNING

Although the beneficiary did not carry out a feasibility study, she sub-contracted the preparation of an action plan to a local consultant. This however was not a product she could use as it did not correspond to the actual project expectations. A fundamental support role was then played by the “Centre for Enterprise Guidance”, which provided support with the application form. This Centre is close to the beneficiaries, engages with them and with the area and strives to match the ideas of local entrepreneurs with local reality and potential.

The project was designed in the context of the overall service offered by “Naturaleza del Sur”, a limited company created by the beneficiary and offering several tourism services (traditional guided tours, tours on demand, tours to special protection areas and - this new project – caravan tours for bird watching). The caravan tours are promoted through the company’s website (<http://www.naturalezadelsur.com/>) and this has contributed to increase its popularity.



The main risks faced by the beneficiary were related to administrative delays from the Local Action Group (LAG) in approving the project and subsequently there were long payment delays and an apparent lack of capacity to understand the value added of this project.

Other risks are associated with the lack of start-up capital for this investment. Young people do not have any savings to start a business and during this crisis period banks do not easily offer loans. The beneficiary managed to obtain a financial guarantee from a close relative and to secure a bank loan. As a result the project went on while waiting for payment of the EU grant from the LAG.



## IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PROJECT

The main activities included the purchase of a caravan, equipped with the latest technology so as to be converted into a mobile bird observatory and used for ornithological tourism activities. The transformation of the vehicle included the following tasks:

- ⇒ removal of the furniture in order to free space and create a comfortable environment for bird watchers; refurbishing;
- ⇒ makeover of the roof into a terrace/observatory and the construction of an internal ladder to allow bird watchers to climb to the terrace;
- ⇒ installation of cameras outside the caravan monitored with Bluetooth equipment from inside;
- ⇒ repainting the vehicle with a camouflage colour, to blend with the surroundings and not scare birds away.



## RESULTS OF THE PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION

The project assisted the beneficiary in creating a unique service complementing the other more traditional tourism activities of Naturaleza del Sur. It also differentiates the business from other companies in the rural tourism sector in the region.

On a personal level, the beneficiary has now a viable activity that she will be able to carry on in the future. The number of visitors has increased improving the region’s reputation as a first class nature tourism destination. The new bird watching facility offers nature lovers and in particular bird watchers an innovative way for observing

## Current practices across the EU27

birds. It allows them to fully enjoy nature while respecting the environment and its wildlife. The new bird watching business also brought an alternative to agricultural activities contributing to halt the depopulation trend. More concretely, the activity employs 4 to 7 people depending on the period of the year and the demand for the services offered by Naturaleza del Sur. The project also enables her to show that natural resources can be exploited in a sensitive way for the benefit of local people, visitors and wildlife.

In relation to the province and region, the new bird watching facility offers nature lovers and in particular bird watchers an innovative way for observing birds. It has also brought socio-economic benefits to rural areas in Extremadura by offering an alternative to agricultural activities and thus contributing to halt the depopulation trend in these areas. More concretely, the project offers employment to 4-7 people depending on the period of the year and the demand for the services offered by Naturaleza del Sur.



### LESSONS LEARNT

#### Factors that contributed to the success of the project:

- ⇒ An expert's input into the planning of the project. The "Centre for Enterprise Guidance" has played a vital role in supporting the beneficiary to prepare a successful application.
- ⇒ Perseverance of the beneficiary during the implementation stage, allowing the project to progress despite payment delays from the LAG.
- ⇒ A thorough knowledge of the bird watching activity and the territory, to provide a high-quality service to tourists.
- ⇒ A meticulous and early preparation to facilitate and speed up the project's activities .
- ⇒ Cooperation with relevant authorities and a good network of contacts contributing to the efficiency of the investment.

#### Factors that impeded the success of the project:

- ⇒ There is a proliferation of local consultants who are not real experts in rural development or in the EU framework and procedures. Their input can be detrimental to projects which rely on them for their applications .
- ⇒ Economic solvency can be an impediment in obtaining the necessary funding that complements the EU grant. This is particularly a risk for young beneficiaries who lack savings and need guarantees for obtaining bank loans .

#### Resolution of problems/difficulties:

- ⇒ The beneficiary managed to identify a local enterprise support centre that provided support at the application stage and therefore remedied the poor input received previously from a local consultant .
- ⇒ The financial guarantee from a close relative contributed to resolve the economic solvency difficulty.



### WHAT'S NEXT?

The beneficiary's plan is to continue looking for new nature tourism products and services to offer to tourists for each season of the year. For example, during springtime Naturaleza del Sur is planning orchid guided tours. Another idea is to identify new destinations around the area to organise trips, such as Portugal's Algarve region.

Small businesses have difficulties to survive with their own funds. The sustainability of such project depends on the ability to obtain additional funding. The beneficiary continuously searches and applies to public tenders.

What sustains the project today is the variety of services offered by the Naturaleza del Sur website. For example, if the demand for caravan tours is low, more traditional tours will be offered to cover the financial needs of the company.



## SUMMARY

Nature tourism activities are well suited to rural areas and offer valuable employment opportunities. Young people, increasingly aware and concerned by environmental issues, are among the promoters of these types of new businesses.

### *Tips/lessons related to the beneficiary:*

#### At the project inception phase:

- ◆ In small, local projects, beneficiaries need to have experience and deep knowledge of their area, its strengths and weaknesses and a genuine interest in developing something new .
- ◆ To have a vision for the area and for oneself. A vision for the area involves the capacity to identify tourism diversification alternatives. A vision for oneself implies perspective and being ready to offer services that correspond to changing capacities and needs .

#### At the project planning and development phase:

Securing co-finance is essential in order to deal with the risk of payment delays from public administration.

#### At the implementation stage:

“Doing your job with a smile” summarises the importance of engaging fully and wholeheartedly into a project for it to become a success.

#### After the end of the project:

Sustainability of small local projects is very delicate and depends on:

- a. the availability of private funding or the capacity of the business to self-finance itself (possible only if the business has been very successful);
- b. the capacity of the beneficiary to identify and successfully apply to other sources of funding;
- c. the effectiveness of marketing strategy to attract clients even after the grant is over.

### *Tips/lessons related to Managing Authorities, LAGs and other public sector actors:*

- ◆ LAGs (possibly not all LAGs) would benefit from capacity building training, on how to support beneficiaries and how to efficiently apply the payment procedures .
- ◆ Future programmes could foresee mechanisms for overcoming the dual challenge: young beneficiaries do not have savings to use as start-up capital or provide the necessary co-finance; at the same time, due to their age and lack of experience, they cannot obtain bank loans without a guarantee, even though their project idea may be suitable for obtaining an EU grant idea may be suitable for obtaining an EU grant.