

AMVRAKIKOS (Epirus, Greece)



# Development of eco-tourism

## The action

Development of eco-tourism and gradual participation of the community in the enhancement of its environment, conceived as an alternative to the development of aquaculture which is threatening the local ecological balance.

Until the 1980s, the delicate balance of the ecosystem of this wet area comprising lagoons, lakes and marshes and which is the habitat or rest area of endangered wild birds had been preserved, and pressures on the natural environment had been relatively reduced, despite some conventional infrastructure work. But beginning in the 1980s these pressures rose, particularly because of intensive aquaculture. Although this opens up economic prospects, it is still a threat to the environment. That is why a solution was proposed in the form of a non-traditional activity that preserves the environment while relaunching the local economy.

## Key elements

- > Introduction of a sustainable development policy in a rural area of ecological interest.
- > Search for a balance between the protection of a sensitive area and economic development.
- > Enhancement of the environment by the local community, which is considered as an asset for development. Given that the idea that wealth can be created while preserving the environment is rather recent in Greece, the maturing time for economic initiatives based on the preservation of natural resources is necessarily long.

## Context

Scientists and regional planning officials were the first to become interested in protecting the area's environment. With scientific studies carried out by the University of Essen (Germany) and the Ecoset consulting firm in Athens highlighting the biological importance of the delta and the lagoons, the idea arose that a small flow of visitors could lead to local awareness of the ecological value of the site while providing additional income to local farmers.

The idea was taken on board by the local authorities who proposed measures to stop or limit intensive livestock farming and aquaculture in certain sensitive micro-areas. But when some of these activities, which were based on the comparative advantages of the area, were stopped or restricted in the name of environmental protection without alternative solutions being proposed, the community reacted in a negative manner. Efforts therefore had to focus on better informing the population, completing planning at the central and local level and obtaining subsidies from national and Community funds so that the idea of utilising the area's eco-tourist resources - instead of intensive holdings - would gain supporters.

## Starting point

In face of the "economic development or environmental protection" dilemma, the local and central governments decided in 1985 to launch a regional development programme: the "Planning Contract for the Development and Protection of Amvrakikos", which was to be signed by 28 public organisations (at the national level: ministries, consular chambers and banks; local and regional authorities and farmers' cooperatives).

Lasting five years, this pilot programme was the first national programme to propose on such a vast scale a form of development taking into account economic, tourist and ecological requirements.

Elaboration of the five-year plan was entrusted with the Centre for Economic Planning and Research (KEPE), and in 1988 the Amvrakikos development agency (ETANAM S.A.) was founded in association with cooperatives, the local authorities, the local representative of the central government, agricultural banks and the chamber of commerce. It was made responsible for providing the technical assistance necessary to implement the planned initiatives, notably the enhancement of aquaculture, soft tourism and the environment.

## Implementation

In 1988, ETANAM came up with a development plan for eco-tourism. The idea was to allow a certain socio-economic development while defining protection zones. For this, eco-touristic activities were introduced that ran for the whole season and that enabled natural resources to be used for the benefit of the local communities while preserving the environment. The plan basically anticipated a series of recreational activities specific to the region (excursions on the lagoons and lakes, bird watching, fishing, village festivals, etc.) and itineraries of ecological, general or specific interest enabling the area's microbiotopes and their geology, biodiversity, traditional activities and historical and cultural features to be explored.

Because the community's awareness and support was essential for this type of approach, ETANAM worked to organise seminars to inform the local actors and invite them to

participate in the programme's implementation and to raise the community's awareness of the value of the environment and the interest of eco-tourism.

The financial support of the LEADER I programme enabled certain actions to be launched that were indispensable for starting up a certain number of activities:

- > search for potential markets;
- > general training in villages to raise the community's awareness;
- > professional training of nature guides and awareness of proprietors of accommodations of the needs and expectations of tourists;
- > creation of facilities (guest rooms, campsites, etc.), construction of observatories, erection of signs, installation of scientific equipment for researchers;
- > tourist information: the opening of two tourist offices and the establishment of a regional information system;
- > building of bird observation booths;
- > creation of small natural history museums and traditional agricultural instruments, rehabilitation of the old port.

Those who currently visit the area are primarily scientists who come from all over Europe for meetings and research work organised on site, or journalists and photographers or special correspondents of press or television organisations. Most of the work at the local level is carried out in the schools, for which a basic environmental education programme has been developed and excursions organised in the area since 1995.

Although the infrastructure work and coordinating effort undertaken by ETANAM has been quite substantial (55% of the LEADER I funds were allocated to this activity), the needs in infrastructures necessary to operate the proposed eco-tourist network have still not been fully met. The potential markets are therefore still far from being affected (the fitting-out of the reception, information and observation buildings, the erection of signs along walking trails and the introduction of means of maritime and land transport that remain to be completed will be paid for through national funds and LEADER II).

The action is still in the gestation phase where the "thematic product" has still not been entirely developed. It should nonetheless be pointed out that the delay in witnessing the economic consequences of this activity creates a certain scepticism in the local community. Moreover, ETANAM, which is aware of the fact that it is important to incorporate in the same course of action a supply of traditional products (crafts or farm products) is making an effort to provide information and encourage initiatives in this direction.

## THE GULF OF AMVRAKIKOS

The Gulf of Amvrakikos is on the west coast of Greece and opens up to the Ionian Sea. In the northern part of the gulf live most of the 85 000 inhabitants of the departments of Arta and Preveza. There are 41 inhabitants/km<sup>2</sup> and 13 000 ha of remarkable wetlands comprising lagoons, lakes and marshes, which are extremely rich in wildlife since they are the habitat or rest area of endangered wild birds - the area is a biotope whose importance is internationally recognised and which is protected in particular by the Ramsar Convention and the European Directive on the protection of wild birds. The region can also lay claim to a rich historic and archaeological heritage.

The wetlands are surrounded by fertile farmland which continues to be farmed intensively: the primary sector (livestock

## Budget and sources of funding

The main budget of this action which comprises 26 projects is covered by the Community's LEADER I initiative. It amounts to ECU 253 000 of which ECU 53 000 come from national public funding and ECU 124 000 from Community funds.

## Innovative elements for the area

### *The area's identity*

Although the direct effects (the creation of jobs and increase in income) of this programme are still not perceptible, the indirect effects are: Amvrakikos has raised the interest of the international community, and the local population has become involved in a process of discovery and enhancement of its environment.

### *Activities and services*

More than the number of activities created, what is innovative here is the development of the spirit of enterprise and the course of action that consists in encouraging the community to think about possible initiatives in a totally new area.

### *Environment, management of space and natural resources*

Until recently, the local population considered that protecting the environment was like "putting birds before people" and that eco-tourism meant "reducing development to bird watching". Part of the community is now becoming aware of the interest of the project and is adhering to the actions of the developers of the programme.

farming, aquaculture, agri-food industries) provides jobs for 56% of the area's working population, a percentage much higher than the national average (29%). A quarter of the working population is employed in the tertiary sector (mass tourism on the west coast and day tourism inland) which represents 40% to 50% of local income.

## Contact

Nicholas Doussias  
ETANAM S.A.  
Karyotaki 1  
GR-48100 Preveza  
Tel.: + 30 682 22 224 (26 104-5)  
Fax: + 30 682 22 511