GO Eastbelgium

BELGIUM

Implementing local development strategies

Location
Eifel region

Programming period
2007 – 2013

Axis / Priority
Axis - 4

Funding (EUR)
Total budget 82 650
RDP 37 192
Other 45 458

Project duration
2011 – 2013

Project promoter
LAG '100 villages - 1 Future'

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www.eastbelgium.com/
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An innovative LEADER project promotes hiking in the Belgian Eifel area by means of an online hiking planner tool, GPS navigation and a smartphone app.

Summary

The Local Action Group (LAG) '100 villages - 1 Future' and the Tourism Agency of East Belgium (TAO) wanted to reorganize and revalue the hiking paths in the LEADER-region. The multitude of existing local hiking paths was insufficiently coordinated with the paths in the neighbouring villages and municipalities.

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The LAG stimulated cooperation between various local stakeholders such as municipalities, interest groups and tourism associations based on the shared interest in promoting the region. The promoters worked together to develop the content which fed the development of an online hiking planner tool, GPS navigation and smartphone app.

Results

The Virtual Hiking Tours website was visited 22 000 times by 16 500 different users and the Go Eastbelgium app was downloaded 1 200 times.

Lessons & Recommendations

❑ The project showed how new tools based on modern technologies can support the restoration traditional activities and pastimes in rural areas.

❑ The project also highlighted the value of cooperation between different stakeholders with a shared interest in promoting their region.

Context

The Belgian Eifel, in the German-speaking community in the east of Belgium is a region known for its natural beauty. It has long offered nature lovers a myriad of outdoor activities.

The Local Action Group (LAG) '100 villages - 1 Future' and the Tourism Agency of East Belgium (TAO) aimed by this project, to reorganize and revalue the hiking paths in the LEADER-region. The multitude of existing local hiking paths was insufficiently coordinated with the paths in the neighbouring villages and municipalities.

At the same time, outdoor activities are increasingly becoming more popular using mobile technology as part of their activities. Most modern hikers prefer to use apps on their mobile phone - instead of the traditional foldout map and compass - due to their ease of use.

The LEADER-funded project 'Rural Heritage Trail (DigiRoute42)' had already shown the potential success of developing an app and online tool for hiking in the Flemish Ardennes in 2010.

Objectives

The LAG '100 villages - 1 Future' came up with the idea to restructure and consolidate new, existing and unused hiking paths covering these areas by organising them in a regional hiking path network by nodal points. They were keen to restore the value of these old trails both for use by the local communities and to encourage a new generation of walkers to come to their area.

Whilst using existing routes and attractions as a starting point, the promoters wanted to incorporate new features such as abandoned meadow paths which had been used in the past to connect villages.

Activities

To support this approach, the promoters sought to develop an online hiking planner tool, GPS navigation and smartphone app. These tools aimed to enable hikers and ramblers to explore the countryside using long forgotten paths yet again. Moreover, the new and younger generation of hikers can discover and experience the network of hiking paths, thematic routes and local attractions.

To deliver such a project, the LAG stimulated cooperation between various local stakeholders such as municipalities, interest groups and tourism associations based on the shared interest in promoting the region. In particular, they worked closely on the project with TAO who was assigned by the LAG for the project implementation.

The LAG used LEADER funding to develop a project involving five municipalities: Amel, Büllingen, Burg-Reuland, Bütgenbach and St. Vith, as well as cooperation with regional and local tourism actors and offices.

The development of the content was primarily based on the successful cooperation of the LAG, TAO and local stakeholders from the different municipalities. Using an inventory of existing trails, old maps and predefined quality criteria as a starting point, the developers had a frame of reference to create content for the online planning tool and mobile app, Go Eastbelgium.

First, local tourism associations defined the hiking trails, followed by the addition of thematic routes and attractions which would add value. All the local tourist information offices contributed to the virtual walking tour project. By utilising local knowledge, the hiking experience could be improved as busy roads and motorways would be avoided.

Based on this content, IT experts were able to develop the new tools. Hiking standards were also incorporated into the design of the app.

The tools offer selected trails covering a total of 919 km, which are cross-linked by a system of nodes, GPS coordinates, thematic routes and pinpointed local attractions. The tool is available in Dutch, French and German.

The app for smartphones allows users to use the route planner during hikes, even without an Internet connection.

"I believe in the complementarity of GPS and paper maps. A track on a GPS (or in this case virtual points) is useful help to plan a route. Using it with a map gives you the flexibility to change your plans very easily."

Peter Christiaensen (hiker)

Main Results

The Go Eastbelgium project successfully delivered an online hiking planner tool, GPS navigation and a smartphone app, aimed at the modern walking community.

By using the latest technology, a new and younger generation of hikers can rediscover local attractions partially via long forgotten meadow paths.

A seemingly small project on a local level, the Go Eastbelgium hiking app has been hugely successful to stimulate economic activity around hiking and tourism.

The success of the project was reflected in the number of visitors and downloads in 2014. The Virtual Hiking Tours website was visited 22 000 times by 16 500 different users and the Go Eastbelgium app was downloaded 1 200 times.

Key lessons

The project showed how new tools based on modern technologies can support the restoration traditional activities and pastimes in rural areas.

The project also highlighted the value of cooperation between different stakeholders with a shared interest in promoting their region – in this case, five different municipalities as well as local and regional tourism agencies in particular.

"The hike planner made our villages closer, by working together, we have made further plans for our communities. Our example shows how a seemingly small project financed by European subsidies (Leader) can bring about real and positive change on the ground."

Bernd Niessen (tourist information office of Amel-Eibertingen-Valender V.o.G.)

Additional sources of information

- leader@wfg.be

Funded by the

European Commission