BELGIUM

Local development

Cooperation to develop an online tool and on-site infrastructure.

Summary

The Brabantse Kouters area is the green belt north-west of Brussels, Belgium, which until recently had little or no infrastructure for hiking and related tourism. Regional stakeholders, including local authorities, farmers and nature conservationists, worked together to develop an online tool and to set up on-site infrastructure, e.g. signposting to nearby farm shops.

Location
Brabantse Kouters

Programming period
2014 – 2020

Priority
P6 – Social inclusion & local development

Measure
M16 - Cooperation

Funding (EUR)
Total budget 146 000
EAFRD 47 450
National/Regional 47 450
Private 51 100
Other n/a*

Project duration
2017 – 2018

Project promoter
Regionaal Landschap Brabantse Kouters

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Results

Prepared an inventory of 1 100 km of paths and roads.

Marked 480 km of trails in the western part of the region. An additional 300 km were included in the online tool. This resulted in a total of 780 km of trails, making it the largest network of hiking trails in Flanders.

Recruited more than 20 farms to join the hiking network.

Improved the hiking area's infrastructure by setting up 26 trail starting points with information boards and 10 wooden features that highlight species specific to the area.

Constructed 14 playgrounds with small-scale wooden or natural materials.

Following the project's implementation, the number of hikers using the trails has tripled.

Lessons & Recommendations

❑ During the project's implementation, it became evident that while the number of people using smartphone apps or global positioning system (GPS) devices for hiking is growing rapidly, many people still prefer to use traditional maps in combination with signs en route.

❑ Dealing with issues related to land ownership, management and legal issues is very complicated. Even after extensive consultations with all stakeholders to verify juridical aspects and tackle bottlenecks, the project team was still confronted with some issues after opening the trails to the public.

❑ Combining the work of the project team and funding from multiple sources (Flemish RDP and the provincial tourism board) led to a bigger and more coherent project. Cooperation pays off!

Context

The Brabantse Kouters area is the green belt north-west of Brussels, Belgium, which includes 10 municipalities. Up until 2016, the area did not have adequate infrastructure for hiking tourism. By contrast, some of the existing hiking networks in other regions were already digitally accessible through online route planners and other apps. The options to improve the situation in Brabantse Kouters, however, were limited since only part of the region had been selected by the Flemish Tourism Board for the development of hiking networks with marked trails.

In response to this need, the Regionaal Landschap Brabantse Kouters (RLBK), a regional non-governmental organisation for nature conservation, education and sustainable regional development, in cooperation with the Tourism Board of the province Vlaams-Brabant (Toerisme Vlaams-Brabant), set up a project using funding from the Flemish Rural Development Programme.

The project aimed at developing a hiking network, and uniquely, part of it was planned to be without on-site signposting. This had never been done in Flanders and it was risky because developing the inventory and route choices required intensive fieldwork and consultation, which was a complicated process compared to developing a classic physically signposted network. There was also the possibility to link the hiking tourism with local farmers selling their produce on-farm or at local shops or offering lodging and educational activities.

Most municipalities admitted that working together on this topic could result in higher leveraging of visitor attention and revenue; however, they did not have the personnel and money to do so. The area also lacked a sense of 'togetherness', which contributed to the deficiency in transboundary initiatives among the municipalities.

Objectives

The main objectives of the project were to:

* improve access for hikers in the area, both by providing reliable on-site infrastructure and a user-friendly online tool;
* improve the links between tourism and services provided by farmers and local initiatives (heritage museums, regional product vendors, etc.); and
* develop a sense of togetherness and cooperation among the municipalities and their inhabitants.

Activities

In the first phase, the project focused on establishing the hiking network through:

1. developing an extensive inventory of the hiking recreation points;

2. identifying opportunities for linking the hiking network to the local economy (farm shops, regional product vendors, agritourism) and other initiatives using additional peripheral infrastructure;

3. increasing the support for and quality of the hiking network through intensive consultation and coordination with the various stakeholders (farmers, local authorities, etc.).

Multiple coordination meetings and theme nights were organised to inform and engage as many regional stakeholders as possible. This allowed for a fully coordinated and reliable design of the hiking network. Two maps and one guidebook were produced. The hiking network was then integrated into an online platform, which shows all the routes and junctions in the area. It also shows various points of interest, including catering outlets, regional producers and attraction sites. The online tool enables visitors to:

* view all hiking networks and nodes on a virtual map;
* determine their location on the map using the GPS function on their smartphones;
* design a walk by selecting various nodes;
* save a mapped walk and view it later;
* import a trail designed with the online route planner or select an existing suggested route from the list; and
* explore points of interest and rural initiatives along the trails.

The RLBK and the Toerisme Vlaams-Brabant organised the construction of the signposted part as well as the other infrastructure along the 780 km of trails in the hiking network. The following infrastructure was constructed:

* There were 26 starting points installed with information panels. Each location allows visitors to physically access the digital network with a QR code and shows possibilities for recreation near that point, such as picnic and resting places, catering outlets, etc.

* 14 small-scale playgrounds using wooden installations were built as well as 10 wooden carvings highlighting flagship species that are important in the area, among others.

The hiking network was opened to the public in September 2018. The opening event included several workshops for children, theme walks and other activities.

Main Results

- Marked 480 km of trails in the western part of the region and an additional 300 km of trails were uploaded into the online tool. This resulted in a total of 780 km of trails, making it the largest network of hiking trails in Flanders.
- Fostered cooperation between more than 36 partners, including local authorities, nature conservation organisations and farmer organisations.
- Involved more than 20 farms in the network.
- Installed 300 wooden signposts and another 3 100 direction signs, of which 50 have holes of different diameters to provide nesting places for solitary bees.
- Developed two hiking maps and a tourist guidebook.
- The number of hikers walking the trails after the signposting has tripled.
- The opening event was attended by more than 200 participants.
- More than 100 attendants participated in the four themed nights on nature conservation, farming, beer brewing and local food production.

Key lessons

- During the project's implementation, it became evident that while the number of people using smartphone apps or global positioning system (GPS) devices for hiking is growing rapidly, many people still prefer to use traditional maps in combination with signs en route.
- Dealing with issues related to land ownership, management and legal issues is very complicated. Even after extensive consultations with all stakeholders to verify juridical aspects and tackle bottlenecks, the project team was still confronted with some issues after opening the trails to the public.
- Combining the work of the project team and funding from multiple sources (Flemish RDP and the provincial tourism board) led to a bigger and more coherent project. Cooperation pays off!

Additional sources of information

http://rlgc.be/natuurrecreatie/wandelnetwerk-brabantse-kouters/
https://www.toerismevlaamsbrabant.be/hoofdthema/wandelen/wandelapp
https://www.toerismevlaamsbrabant.be/publicaties/wandelnetwerk-brabantse-kouters-kaarten-en-infogids

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