Culture and Tourism

Mini Case Study RHONE-ALPES: Création d’un espace de promotion /communication touristique sur l’Ain sur le site du Parc des Oiseaux

Work Package 9

Ex post evaluation of Cohesion Policy programmes 2007-2013, focusing on the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and the Cohesion Fund (CF)

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Author: Laura Delponte
Ex post evaluation of Cohesion Policy programmes 2007-2013, focusing on the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and the Cohesion Fund (CF)

Work Package 9: Culture and Tourism - Case Study Rhône-Alpes (France)

Mini Case Study Création d’un espace de promotion /communication touristique sur l’Ain sur le site du Parc des Oiseaux

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The European Commission’s Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy (DG REGIO) is undertaking an ex post evaluation of Cohesion Policy programmes financed by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and the Cohesion Fund (CF) during the period 2007-2013 in regions covered by the Convergence, Regional Competitiveness & Employment and European Territorial Cooperation objectives in the 28 member states.

The Consortium IRS-CSIL-CISET-BOP was selected to undertake the ex post evaluation on ‘Culture and Tourism’ (Work Package 9). An important element within the evaluation is a series of case study analyses of NUTS2 regions covering interventions co-financed by ERDF during the 2007-2013 programming period.

In addition to the full case studies (at a region’s programme level), the evaluation also includes two mini case studies (focused on individual projects) for each regional case study. As with the regional programme case studies, mini case studies are based on desk-based research and semi-structured face-to-face interviews with the main participants involved in the chosen projects.

This report presents the results of the mini case study setting up a promotional space within the Ornithological Park at Dombes to raise awareness about Ain department’s tourist attractions (Création d’un espace de promotion /communication touristique sur l’Ain sur le site du Parc des Oiseaux). This is the first of two mini case studies selected from among the many projects funded by the ROP Rhone-Alpes.

The report begins with a brief synthesis of the project before moving on to a fuller description and the presentation of the results of the analysis undertaken. The report ends with a review of the main conclusions of the study, together with a series of lessons learnt for future policymaking.

The mini case study was based on documentary research and on two semi-structured interviews. The interviewees were identified as part of the wider ROP evaluation exercise of which the mini case studies are part and were selected as being key actors in the design and delivery of the project. They are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of the person</th>
<th>Institution, position and role in the project</th>
<th>Contacts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Karl Joy</td>
<td>Director Aintourisme, Project coordinator</td>
<td><a href="mailto:k.joly@aintourisme.com">k.joly@aintourisme.com</a> 04 74 32 31 30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Céline Issard-Guillot</td>
<td>Director, Chargée d’affaires Service Instructeur</td>
<td><a href="mailto:celine.issard-guillot@direccte.gouv.fr">celine.issard-guillot@direccte.gouv.fr</a> 04.72.68.29.27</td>
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1. Synthesis

Ain is a prosperous French department with a diversified economic structure, a positive demographic trend and an unemployment rate lower than the national and regional average. It is also one of the largest French departments. However, it suffers from low visibility and does not have a well-defined tourist image. Past traditional approaches for promoting the image of Ain were not delivering the expected results, because of the fragmented tourist market structure, that is mostly based on local tourism, and difficulties in connecting the different tourist assets of the department in a more structured vision.

This intervention supported an innovative way for promoting the image of the department. It was based on establishing a permanent tourist showcase facility within the Ornithological Park of Dombes that is amongst the most visited natural sites of the department. The facility was developed as a stand-alone tourist attraction through a creative design that reminds of the park’s theme, and uses creative scenic and audio-visual techniques to increase the sensorial experience of visitors.

The decision to locate the facility within the ornithological park had several advantages. First, the profile of the park’s visitors is similar to the profile of the potential tourist of the department (e.g. gentle outdoor activities, natural experiences, slow tourism). This allowed implementing a better targeted marketing strategy. Secondly, daily running costs are minimized as the personnel of the park is in charge of operating the facility.

The project was based on sound design and market analysis that made it highly relevant to the local tourist development strategy. ERDF funds were vital for supporting the intervention, as departmental funds were not sufficient. No implementation problems were reported, as all the public bodies involved had past experiences with managing EU funds.

The promotional facility was well-received. A customer satisfactory survey reported a level of satisfaction of approximately 80%. No direct occupational outcomes were reported, while there are yet no data available on the results of the intervention in terms of increased number of nights spent in the hotels of the department or increased number of visitors of the department’s cultural and natural sites. However, the intervention has the merit of promoting a more coherent, integrated and long-lasting approach for promoting the departmental tourist offer as compared to past initiatives. It is also remarkable for the innovative approach pursued.

The project is sustainable thanks to public funding that ensures that maintenance works of the site are carried out when necessary and that the media and scenic contest is updated. It is important to notice that the facility was devised to minimize running and maintenance costs, as the staff of the Ornithological Park is in charge of the day to day operations. Transferability is possible, as the project concept can be easily adapted to other contexts and the investment required is not large (e.g. below 1 million euros).
2. Background information

**Country:** France  
**Region:** Rhone-Alpes  
**Full project title:** Création d’un espace de promotion /communication touristique sur l’Ain sur le site du Parc des Oiseaux  
**Duration of project:** Mai 2012 end of April 2014  
**Key words:** Territorial marketing, rural tourism, innovation, media and ICTs

**Funding:**
- **Total budget:** EUR 600,000  
- **ERDF contribution:** EUR 250,000 (41.7%)  
- **Ain department:** EUR 180,000 (30%)  
- **Private funding (Comité Départemental du Tourisme de l'Ain):** EUR 120,000 (20%)  
- **Own funds:** EUR 50,000 (8.3%)

**ERDF Objective:**
- ☐ Convergence  
- ☑ Competitiveness  
- ☐ Territorial cooperation

**Motivation for selection**

Overall the project is deemed as highly relevant for the ERDF strategy on culture and tourism. It is based on an innovative way of promoting tourism in a rural department with an unexplored tourist potential (Ain). In particular, the intervention consisted of creating a tourist promotional facility that was developed as a sort of amusement park attraction within an already developed tourist site. So far, the project had no direct measurable results in terms of regional development, but, given the nature of the intervention, these can only be assessed on a longer period.
3. Project description

The project came out from realizing that Ain department was not considered an interesting tourist destination and that traditional way of promoting tourism in the department (e.g. participation in tourist fairs) were not bringing the expected results (Almax, 2010). It consisted of creating an innovative tourist promotional facility within the Ornithological Park of Dombes, which is one of the most visited tourist site of Rhone-Alpes.

The application was submitted by the publicly owned company NaturAin that manages the ornithological park. However, the project was driven by the public agency Aintourisme that is responsible for promoting tourism in the department. The ultimate beneficiaries of the intervention are the operators in the tourist sector (e.g. accommodation and food services) of Ain department, along with museums and natural parks located in the department.

The project pursued different objectives, namely:

- creating a new attraction within the ornithological park,
- consolidating the federating role of the park for promoting the tourist image of the department, and
- Piloting innovative ways to promote the tourist image of Ain.

Two major outputs were developed through the project. These were:

- An infrastructure (Figure 3.1) to be used as a permanent showcase facility,
- Media contents to illustrate the different ways of enjoying a tourist experience in Ain.

Located near the entertainment area, the promotional infrastructure is similar to a huge nest that is made of four buildings in the shape of eggs.

**Figure 3.1. L’« Aincroyable expérience »**

Source: communiqué de presse

Each "egg" displays a different theme. These are:

- Theme 1. Ain’s Landscapes. This is a sort of hot air balloon flying experience that illustrates the different landscapes of the department through three different itineraries.
• Theme 2. Outdoor activities. By sitting on bikes connected to the screen, visitors experience the different types of winter and summer sport activities that can be performed in the department.

• Theme 3. The Dombes’ ecosystem. An audio text helps discovery the reproduction of a mini pond that are so numerous in the southern area of the department.

• Theme 4. The cultural heritage. A 3D film shows relevant historical and cultural issues of the department.

• Theme 5. Gastronomic Heritage. This is an interactive movie with the participation of a famous French chef coming from Bourg-en-Bress that prepares an iconic recipe.
4. Political and strategic context

Ain is one of the largest department of France and one of the less known. Situated at the crossroads of national and international commodities flows, it is an important transit region. The department has a diversified economic structure and can be divided in four different areas: in the north the plain of Bresse is specialized in agriculture and agro-processing, the Dombes to the south east is a vast natural areas with more than a thousand ponds and lakes that makes it an ideal place for fish farming, the “Pays the Gex” area is in Jura mountainous area next to the Swiss border, while the area of Bugey is famous for wine making (Figure 4.1).

Figure 4.1. Maps of Ain Department

![Map of Ain Department](Image)

Source: various from Internet

Thanks to its dynamic and diversified economy, living standards in the department are higher than national and regional average. In 2009, the tourist sector employed 4.25% of the department’s labour force and in 2014 it generated 192 million euro of income that corresponded to 5% of the regional tourist sector (Aintourisme data from various sources) Its most visited tourist sites in 2014 were: the church at Ars sur Formans (436,000), the medieval city of Pérouge (331,000), the Ornithological Park (283,680), the CERN (150,000), and the monastery of Brou (94,650). The first two of these sites are also amongst the most visited tourist sites of Rhone-Alpes. Gastronomy is also a well noted pillar of the departmental tourist offer with 65 restaurants (6 with stars) included in the Michelin guide.

In spite of a good economic performance, the department is considered to have a weak identity that is dispersed in the diverse economic and natural structures of its territories. External viewers often have little knowledge of Ain and lack of a general overview of the many economic assets of the department (Conseil General, 2014). This is also reflected in the tourist sector.

In 2010, a survey conducted by Aintourisme, found out that most French people had a fragmented view of the departmental tourist attractions, that was limite to a number of specific site, such as the Jura area or the Ornitholgical park at Dombes. The study revealed that Ain was not appreciated as a tourist destination because of the lack of
large cities or flagship tourist attractions, the lack of well-organized tourist sites, an image or reputation as a boring and “non-exotic” destination. The study also highlighted opportunities for the tourist sector that include proximity to large urban areas, quality of gastronomy, a well-preserved natural environment, the presence of cultural heritage sites and the possibility to do many outdoor activities (e.g. hiking, biking, and skiing).

The third departmental development plan for the period 2008-2013, considered the improved image of the department a strategic priority. This objective was to be achieved by leveraging on the most visited tourist sites of the department. In this context, the Ornithological park of Dombes was deemed to be the most appropriate location. Since its establishment, the Park des Oiseaux has become the most important tourist attraction of the department with a continuous growth in the number of visitors between 2005 (a bit less than 200,000) and 2009 (285,000). The park also received other ERDF assistance during the 2007-2013 period that helped improve its attractiveness and usability. This includes a project for making available interpretation services on mobile devices (Mise en place de dispositifs d’interprétation audio sur télémaphone mobile au parc des oiseaux de Villars-les-Dombes, 60,650 euro and 30,325 euro of ERDF support).

The profile of the park’s visitors also fitted with the categories of tourist that could be interested in staying and visiting the department. These people share an interest for a natural and relaxed environment, the possibility to do gentle outdoor activities and enjoy the local gastronomy. The metropolitan area of Lyon was perceived to be the area where laid the largest tourist potential, especially amongst active seniors and couples. Lyon’s citizens are indeed the most regular visitors of the Ornithological Park.
5. Implementation

The project idea came from the findings of a market study on the tourism sector of the department that highlighted weaknesses of the existing tourist offer and opportunities for future development. This proved to be of outmost importance for designing a targeted promotional facility. It helped identifying both the themes that are more relevant to the tourist image of the department, and the potential tourist profile.

The project design successfully addressed a number of constraints. The major challenge was to create continuity for visitors between their visit, which is based on an immersion in nature experience, and the promotional facility. This was done by using a scenography that is well integrated with the theme of the park, and by using a soft promotional approach that had limited commercial elements. The content of each theme was structured in an interactive and entertaining way, to keep visitors interested, and is also developed in a way that children might find it funny.

To help establish a database of contacts that could be used in the future for promotional purposes, visitors are invited to take a picture with a giant pelican doll, that is the mascot of the attraction, and to leave their contact details.

The project was built on a tripartite agreement between the publicly owned company Natur’Ain (ornithological park) the General Council of Ain (Conseil general) and the public agency Aintourisme. The partnership regulates all aspects related to the everyday functioning and maintenance of the promotional facilities, and evolution of the equipment. The agreement was key to ensure the sustainability of the intervention, as it allowed sharing costs for future maintenance.

The ERDF funds were vital for financing the intervention. The project did not receive support from the Rhone-Alpes region, but was entirely supported through departmental funding. Although relevant for the departmental tourist development strategy, it would not have been implemented without additional contributions from the EU, because local funds were not sufficient.

Informations on the attendance of the site are partly available given that visitors can leave their email contacts, but were not provided in the course of this evaluation. There was no obligation for transmitting to the managing authority of the OP data about the attendance of the site. Aintourisme reported to have a system in place for monitoring attendance of the most important cultural and natural sites of the department. This can be used in the future to assess the impact of the intervention, along with statistics on hotel occupancy rates.

No implementation obstacles were reported. Implementation was based on two phases. An open competition for the development of the infrastructure’s design and the related media content, and the subsequent construction works. The beneficiary did not report major implementation delays. As a matter of fact, all the public bodies involved in this intervention were already familiar with the ERDF project cycle and procedures.

The intervention has many innovative elements. The department does not have a structured tourist offer that use intermediaries to help manage the tourist demand, so potential tourists have to be addressed individually as much as possible. Traditional promotional activities were not effective and costly. An innovative approach was thus developed under the present project. It consisted of:
• establishing a permanent promotional facility within an already developed natural site that is visited by people that generally have a tourist profile that match with the tourist offer of the department (targeted marketing);
• creating a promotional facility that is well integrated with the theme of the hosting site and that can be considered a stand-alone tourist attraction, so to add value to the hosting site, and increase impact on visitors;
• using technologies (e.g. creative scenic and audio-visual materials) that increase the sensorial experience of visitors; and
• reconstructing around a number of purposely chosen themes the tourist image of the department.
6. Key results

The facility was reported to be well accepted by the Park’s visitors. A customer satisfactory survey, reported a level of satisfaction of approximately 80%. The use of modern imaging technologies provides a great effect that entertains the people that enter the facility. However, no statistics on the number of users were made available by the project’s beneficiary.

It is not possible to assess whether the objective of increasing the visibility of Ain as a tourist destination was achieved. To do so, Aintourisme will have to launch another regional/national market survey and this was not reported to be planned.

There are not yet data available on the impact of the intervention in terms of increased number of nights spent in the hotels of the department or increased number of visitors of cultural and natural sites, although the monitoring of sites attendance will be carried out. It is important to notice that the project stimulates the interest of potential tourists without using a commercial approach. The facility was established to increase visibility of the department’s tourist and cultural assets, rather than to advertise specific initiatives. This was also deemed to be more respectful of the park’s visitors. A sort of increased commercial approach is foreseen for the future, especially for collecting data about people's interests and preferences. Information about the existence of a web-site (www.aintourism.com) is provided for those who would like to organize their visit to Ain. Interested people can also leave their email to keep abreast of relevant events in the department.

The project had no direct occupational outcomes. No additional personnel was recruited for the day-to-day operations of the facility. Indirect occupational outcomes could come from additional personnel employed both in the department’s cultural and tourist sites, or in the hotels, restaurant and sport facilities of the department. These could be either permanent or seasonal jobs. However, there no statistics are available yet and plans for monitoring indirect occupational outcomes were not reported.

The intervention promoted a more coherent, integrated and long-lasting approach for promoting the departmental tourist offer. As compared to past interventions, such as participation in tourist trade fairs in Lyon or specific promotional initiatives organized within the ornithological park, this project had better strategic grounding and allowed to reach a targeted group of potential tourists. This increased, in principle, the probability of achieving the expected outcomes (e.i. increase visibility of Ain as a tourist destination and increase thus tourist visits to the department)

7. Sustainability and transferability

Sustainability is likely. The facility is freely accessible and is set to receive public funding support in the coming years for maintenance and renovation of the media content. The project was realized in a way to minimize maintenance costs. An upgrade of the facility has been planned every three years with an estimated cost of nearly 15,000 euros per year. No additional personnel were hired to run the project and the every-day running of the facility is ensured by the personnel employed by the park.

The project is easily transferrable to other similar contexts. It is not based on a large scale investment and the media and scenic contents are quite easy to develop. It can
also be designed as a temporary facility that rotates in different sites. Following the experience of this intervention, similar interventions will have to follow some basic principles:

- use a market study to identify the appropriate location, profile of potential tourists, and develop the themes of the media content,
- keep maintenance costs as low as possible to ensure sustainability, and
- give to the showcase facility attractive and amusing features (e.g. innovative design, activities for kids).
8. Lessons learnt

**Traditional means to promote tourism in the department were not delivering satisfactory outcomes and needed to be approached differently.** Participation in tourist fairs was not deemed any more effective to promote the tourist and cultural offer of Ain, because of its fragmentation and small scale. This intervention introduced a strong innovation with respect to past approaches. The showcase facility provided an opportunity for addressing a larger and, most importantly, a better targeted audience.

**A tourist promotional facility can also be a tourist attraction in itself.** This is one of the most innovative element of the intervention. This approach has the advantage of adding value to the site that hosts the facility, and to promote a more dynamic and attractive tourist image. This approach is deemed to be especially effective for areas that are considered as boring and non-exotic, and lack of flagship tourist attractions.

**A diagnostic study of the tourist potential of the department was key for designing an effective promotional facility** This acted in two directions. On one hand, it made the intervention highly relevant to the tourist sector development strategy of Ain and aligned the image promoted through the facility with other territorial marketing interventions. On the other hand, it helped develop a targeted promotional instrument that, in principle, should deliver better results as compared to untargeted marketing.

**Sustainability is more likely if the intervention is designed to minimize maintenance and running costs.** Tourist sector showcase facilities are generally freely accessible and financed through public subsidies that can be easily stopped in periods of financial crisis. Given that this ERDF intervention financed a permanent promotional facility, the capacity of the beneficiary organization to cope with maintenance and daily running costs has to be considered. As this project shows, these costs can be minimized by the choice of the technology (e.g. construction materials) or by sharing these costs with the institution that hosts the facility.
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- Communiqué de presse. 2014. Inauguration de l’«Aincroyable expérience», espace départemental de promotion touristique.
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