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Promoting regional countryside tourism in the Sound region (Denmark/Sweden)

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Introduction

This paper analyses and discusses the outcomes of the European Interreg project "Öreferie" (= "Sound-Holidays"), that aimed to promote sustainable regional countryside tourism in the Sound Region. Tourism projects considered within this project were such that offered guided tours on wildlife, "wild food", geology or gardens in the region. Different stakeholders were involved such as private entrepreneurs, municipalities, the regional council, the regional administrative board, interest groups and several universities both on the Danish and Swedish side of the Sound. The goal was in particular to enhance the number of tourist participating in guided tours on the other side of the Sound – that means encouraging Danes to cross the Sound to go to Sweden and Swedes to travel to Denmark. To reach this goal we analysed existing offers of tourist products in the field of our interest, contacted both private entrepreneurs and public institutions for network meetings to discuss options to increase visitor number and other relevant issues. This resulted in support for marketing within the project and created platforms for collaboration between different stakeholders. During this process, opportunities, challenges and difficulties to develop sustainable countryside tourism in the region became obvious, especially when focusing on different kind of guided nature experiences. From our experiences we can conclude that there seems to be a huge potential for this type of tourism in the studied region, but that the providers/entrepreneurs are often small, one-person companies, struggling on their own in a very specific niche. The lack of resources for marketing, for development of new tourist products or testing new products over a longer period of time seems to be some of the most common difficulties experienced. Better co-operation between stakeholders, to find means for free marketing and establishing networks might help to overcome these problems. Therefore EU-financed projects like this Interreg project could be a catalyst to set off these actions.

Interreg projects are financed by the European Commission's European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), which aims to "to strengthen economic and social cohesion in the European Union by correcting imbalances between its regions" (www.ec.europa.eu). The ERDF's objectives are to "diversifying economic structures as well as safeguarding or creating sustainable jobs" in areas such as innovation and entrepreneurship, environment, culture, tourism, education, transport (www.ec.europa.eu). The Öreferie project as part of the Oresund-Kattegat-Skagerrak Program was a stand A program, which in particular focuses on "encouraging and supporting cross-border cooperation in the southwestern part of Scandinavia" (www.interreg-oks.eu). The Öreferie project wanted to combine several of these objectives: educating people by taking part in guided tours and thus learning more about the nature in their region, promoting entrepreneurs working with nature and garden tourism. Cross boarder travelling of tourists was seen as particular important. Originally the project also aimed to support travelling by public transport.

Nature-based tourism is worldwide growing (Balmford et al., 2009; Fredman & Tyrväinen, 2010). Scandinavia is well known for its nature tourism and probably most often associated with Norwegian fjords, the North Swedish mountain ranges, the forest landscapes of middle Sweden and Finland with its lakes, the archipelagos around Stockholm and the sandy beaches of Denmark. Nature-based tourism has been described as tourism that is taking place in nature, focusing on nature and/or nature conservation (Hall & Boyd, 2005; Lundmark & Müller, 2009). This has also been

formulated as “tourism *in* natural environments, tourism *about* natural environments and tourism *for* the natural environment” (Newsome, Moore & Doling, 2002 as cited in Lundmark & Müller, 2009). Thus nature-based tourism comprises a large range of touristic activities as adventure tourism, wildlife tourism, ecotourism, bath and boat activities, hunting and fishing, riding, guided tours, hiking etc. (Lundmark & Müller, 2009). Nevertheless, nature-based tourism has not been extensively studied – at least not in Sweden (Lundmark & Müller, 2009) and it seems as even less in Denmark. Yet, nature-based tourism is becoming increasingly economically important (Fredman et al., 2012). In areas of Northern Finland tourism provides more jobs than forestry (Council of Lapland, 2008 cited in Fredman & Tyrväinen, 2010). However, there are indications that nature based tourism in peripheral areas deals with a number of problems and that it can be overestimated when seen as driving force for regional development of these areas (Hall & Boyd, 2005).

Nature-based tourism “involves consumption of both market (travel, food, lodging, guiding etc.) and non-market (landscape, public trails, safety services, health promotion etc.) goods and services” (Fredman et al. 2012, p. 904). This implies that it often also involves different stakeholders as for example landowners. In most of the Scandinavian countries (but not in Denmark) there is a Right of Public Access, which allows very generously public access to private land with few restrictions. This right has been debated (see for example Sandell, 2006; Sandell & Fredman, 2010) since it was thought as a right for single persons, but not for commercialized tourist activities in groups. Commercialized tourist activities in need of free access to nature assets can conflict with landowners or non-commercialized outdoor recreation (Sandell & Fredman, 2010). In Denmark public access to the countryside is much more restricted (Nordic Council of Ministers, 1997). Here it is permitted to access private land only on roads, farm tracks and paths during day time; longer stays at the same place as for example for picnics are not necessarily allowed.

Since the right to access the countryside in most of Scandinavia has a long tradition, outdoor recreation has very good preconditions because of the large nature resources which are easily accessible – at least in legal terms. Other activities as for example picking berries for free are connected with the right of access and outdoor recreation. Since visiting nature has been for free and widely practiced, commercializing nature-based outdoor activities is partly controversial. Reasons why Scandinavians choose to pay for nature-based tourist activities have been analysed and several reasons such as trying something new, higher quality of the experience, development of skills and the social factor could be identified (Tangeland, 2011). However, even in Scandinavia nature-based tourism is chosen because it offers a “contrast to every-day life” (Mehmetoglu, 2007).

As mentioned nature based tourism involves often several different stakeholder and the entrepreneurs providing nature experience are seen as having a crucial role when it comes to deliver successful tourist products. Lundberg and Fredman (2012) have questioned a large number of entrepreneurs who work with nature-based tourism in Sweden to gain information on success factors and difficulties concerning their business. The authors pointed out, that internal factors as commitment, competence and life style are keys to success, while external factors as for example low profit, regulations and tax systems are major problems. Rønningen (2010) emphasizes in this context the role of tour operators that can give also small firms an important platform

to reach clients within nature-based tourism. Innovation of nature based tourism is seen as one key factor to success and the driving force behind innovative processes can both be entrepreneurship of small firms and competence of larger networks (Sundbo et al, 2007). Networks and regional policies are other important factors that can support development of nature based tourism (Năstase et al., 2010) or development of certain tourist destinations (Henriksen & Halkier, 2009).

As stated above, the focus in this project was to enhance nature based-tourism across the Öresund. To reach this aim we

- analysed existing offers on guided tours (wildlife including marine areas, wild food, geology and gardens)
- arranged network meetings to enable better collaboration between entrepreneurs and other actors
- supported the development of new guided tours in topic with have been considered as having good opportunities to offer interesting products for tourists in the field of nature-based guided tours
- produced information material on guided tours within the field of nature-based tourism in the region.

Methods

Study area

The Sound region comprises the most Eastern part of Denmark with the isle of Zealand, where the Danish capital Copenhagen is situated and Scania the most southern province of Sweden (Fig 1). The Sound (*Öresund* in Swedish) is a strait that connects the Baltic Sea with the North Sea and the Danish/Swedish boarder running through it. Copenhagen is with its 1.9 mio inhabitants (greater Copenhagen area) Scandinavia's second largest town after Stockholm. Malmö in Scania is Sweden's third largest city with 300,000 inhabitants. In 2000 the Öresund Bridge – Europe's longest rail- and road-bridge - opened and connects now the two cities. Even if the Sound region belongs to two countries today, historically the area was under long time Danish. Scania was part of the Danish kingdom from the late 900 until 1658. Thus much of the cultural heritage in this province has its origin from Denmark.

Despite the fact that the Sound region is one of the densest populated areas in Scandinavia, it also comprises large areas with rural character dominated by agriculture or on the Swedish side also by forests and woodlands (Fig. 2). The coast sides include on both sides areas with still quite natural character. In Scania nature reserves and national parks cover an area of almost 75,000 ha (SCB 2011). Also in Zealand, despite being the capital region, there are large areas suitable for nature-based tourism including one (planned) national park (Bürger et al., 2011). While the south western part of Scania is dominated by intensive agriculture, the north western and north eastern parts are characterized by forested landscapes or mosaic landscapes where forest and agricultural alternate at smaller scale. Larger wetland relicts are still left. Outside the urban areas Zealand is dominated by agriculture, but Zealand has also one of the largest Danish ancient woodlands and a long and partly unspoiled coastline.

Thus the region offers a large amount of natural resources and an interesting cultural heritage, which present a wide range of visiting possibilities, which also easily could be

combined with city vacations in Copenhagen or Malmö, which are in a travelling distance of a maximum of 1.5 hours.

Analyses of the supply of guided tours (wildlife, sea, wild food, geology and gardens) in the region

To get an overview on the supply of guided tours an internet search was carried out in spring 2012 for the area. It was searched on the regional tourist websites and in Google with keywords as on tours on bird watching, bats, deer, guided marine tours as on dolphins, toads, frogs, butterflies, plants, geology, caves, fossils, gardens and wild food. Additionally the offers by national parks and nature reserves were searched as well as the ones supplied by the County Administrative Board in Scania and the Danish Nature Agencies on Zealand. Searches were also made municipality wise for the whole county of Scania. On the basis of the search private entrepreneurs working with guided wildlife tours were identified and later contacted to attend network meetings.

Network meetings

Five thematic networks were established: wildlife, marine experiences, wild food, geology and gardens. Between August 2012 and January 2013 one to two network meetings were arranged for each theme. Invited were private entrepreneurs offering guided tours within the theme of the network and other persons/organizations relevant for touristic activities within the network theme. Invitations were sent by e-mail with an attached digital invitation folder. For example for the network meeting about guided tours on wildlife employers of the County Administrative Board in Scania and Danish Nature Agencies on Zealand, non-profit organizations working with guided tours for the public were invited as well as the regional council of Scania, the Öresund Bridge consortium and Natures Best, an organization working with certification of tourist products concerning wildlife experience in Sweden. The network meetings were arranged to offer stakeholders a platform for information and collaboration. The meetings were for free and included lunch and coffee breaks, but participants had to pay for their travel costs.

Development of guided tours within the project

Private entrepreneurs had the possibility to apply for money within the project budget to develop new guided tours. The project's administrative board decided of which projects were financially supported. The opportunity to apply for money was open to participating partners of the projects, but also others actors who where locally connected to participating partners. The project covered 50% of expenses the other 50% the applicant had to finance him/her self, besides of marketing expenses which could be covered by 100% within the project.

Information material

To make potential customers aware of the existing and new developed guided tours, information folders were produced that informed on either specific tours or on tour operators of the region. Also a book was published describing three guided tours for each of the five themes.

Accessibility of certain nature destinations by public transport

Since sustainable tourism was the key aspect of this project, it was originally aimed to in particular promote using public transport when travelling to the destinations were

guided tours were offered. Thus an analysis was carried out which destinations could be reached by public transport.

Results

Guided nature tours in the region

The most obvious result from the internet search was that information on guided tours is not easily obtained. There is one website, the regional council's tourist portal, which includes quite a number of offers, but by far from all. Many offers seem to be only found via the providers homepage, which is not always easy to find on the internet and needs quite specific searches.

Secondly, the providers of guided tours can basically be divided into three groups:

- public actors as the County Administrative Board/Nature Agencies, national parks and certain nature information centres
- non-profit organizations, as nature conservation and bird watching organizations
- private entrepreneurs.

Thirdly, there are pronounced differences of providers of guided tours between the two countries Denmark and Sweden. In Denmark there are in principal only the first two groups that offer guided tours and there are nearly no private entrepreneurs. In Sweden however there are also private providers who offer guided tours. There are also difference between the countries regarding commercialization of guided tours in that way that the guided nature tours arranged by the state organization Danish Nature Agency are usually not for free. In Sweden there has on the other hand long been a tradition that tours arranged by public actors have been for free – as there were thought to have an educational function for the public and thus contributing positively to nature conservation. In both countries non-profit organizations offer guided tours for members, but at least in Sweden also often for the public – at least certain tours. This means that private entrepreneurs in Sweden compete against other actors who have offered certain types of nature experiences for free.

The above statements are mainly true for three of five thematic topics, namely for wildlife tours, maritime tours and tours in the field of geology, but different for wild food tours and garden tours. Wild food is a rather new movement in the region, where the idea is to learn about eatable wild plants by collecting them in the wild and after a guided tour for example preparing a meal together. The number of guided tours offered for wild food has been comparable small and exclusively provided by private entrepreneurs in both countries. Garden tours are also provided by private entrepreneurs, organizations and sometimes public actors as municipalities, but the type of organizations is different from the above named and there are no major differences between the two countries.

Finally, when following up the internet search on providers of guided tours, it turned out that most of them seemed to be small companies with mostly only one person engaged.

Network meetings

On the basis of the internet searches carried out, private entrepreneurs, organizations and other actors were identified and invited to network meetings. These meetings

were one day meetings with presentations by invited speakers in the morning and workshops in the afternoon, which were aimed to establish a set-off for further collaborative work within the networks in future. Four network meetings were held on the Danish side of the sound (garden tourism, wild food tourism, maritime tourism, geology tourism) and one in Sweden (wildlife tourism).

The five meetings varied considerably in size and frequency of invited people interested to attend. The garden network meeting was fully booked with over 70 people attending, to the other meetings between 25 and 40 including people involved in this project. Common was that even if invitations went more or less in equal numbers to both countries that the people coming to these meeting where overwhelmingly persons living in the country where the meeting was held. Thus there was in all meetings are strong majority of either Danes or Swedes.

Here we will give examples of issues discussed at two of the network meetings. At the meeting on wildlife tourism, held in Scania, the following topics were discussed:

- possibilities for promotion
- the Sound bridge role in advertising nature destination across the Sound
- certification systems and if it helps to get more customers
- the role of non-profit organizations in wildlife tourism at both sides of the Sound
- how does wildlife guiding work in Swedish for Danes and in Danish for Swedes.

From the discussion at the network meeting the impression from the internet search of mostly small business involved in guided wildlife tourism could be confirmed. There was only one company that had more employed workers than the owner. Profitability was seen as the major problem and all private entrepreneurs wished larger numbers of customers. Most of the entrepreneurs – if not all – represented typical life-style entrepreneurs, who have made their interest in for example bird watching to a profession and their major source of income. Low profitability is accepted to be able to work and of being self-employed in the field of their major interest. Thus financial resources are not large and therefore often money lacks for advertisement and marketing at larger scale – which means beyond a webpage and advertisement in for example a professional magazine.

The Öresund Bridge Consortium is interested in an increased traffic over the bridge between Copenhagen and Malmö connecting the two countries of the Sound Region. Crossing the bridge with a private car costs around 40 Euro for a single trip and thus the consortium has a comparable large department and resources for advertisement of tourist destinations at the other side of the Sound. The consortium offers free advertisement via internet reaching a large number of potential customers for certain nature destinations and this possibility was one of the issues discussed at the meeting.

Only two of the entrepreneurs taking part at the wildlife network meeting were participating in a certification system (Swedish Nature's Best). Being member in Nature's Best guarantees the customers certain quality standards and that consideration to nature and species conservation is taken into account. It gives the participating entrepreneur also the opportunity for better national advertisement. However, only few entrepreneurs have taken the step going through a certification process. It seemed at the meeting that entrepreneurs with the same profession (e.g.

bird watching) were engaged in different type of networks already, but mostly at local level and not necessarily with each other.

It became obvious that certain private entrepreneurs see non-profit organizations and especially state financed actors as competitors. This became especially noticeable at the maritime network meeting. When customers can choose between offers free of charge and offers where they have to pay competition can be difficult for private entrepreneurs. However, both at the wildlife and the maritime meeting participants were keen to focus on possibilities on how competition about customers could rather be converted into complementation of different offers. Thus it was pointed out that if customers are expected to be willing to pay for wildlife experiences they must be offered experiences which they cannot get from actors who offer them for free. This should lead to a nature experience which contains other qualities either in information, having smaller groups, being able to see different wildlife or offering other contributing services offering an overall greater experience. It was also acknowledged that the free offers on guided tours fulfil an important function in educating the public on wildlife issues as well as they can open up interests that lead to taking part in commercial activities in the field later.

Other topics discussed at the meeting, as problems concerning communicating in similar but even though different languages, were rather seen as a positive challenge than a hinder for cross boarder tourism in the region.

The meetings were generally seen positively as a possibility to meet and discuss relevant topics. However, we could sometimes also notice certain scepticism to yet another meeting with unsure economic outcome for the own business.

The last part of the meetings was designated to discuss the future of the networks and how this work and collaboration can be continued and developed. In the time after the first meeting the various networks developed differently. Some took quite soon own initiatives and starting up regular meetings as for example the wild food network. Also the maritime network formulated clear goals as participation on a regional exposition and organized the preparing work for this event. Here some engaged person took the lead for further work and further collaborative projects are planned. The wildlife network, however, resulted in the first place in a common webpage, which does not have seemed to develop any further. Within this network it was difficult to find a person, who wanted to be responsible for further organizing collaboration.

Development of guided tours

The Öreferie-project worked in different ways in developing tours, getting existing products promoted in the other country, stimulating entrepreneurs to develop new ideas and combinations but also encourage them to try new tourist groups or new places. For example a garden tourism firm that usually arranges trips to Southern Europe got the possibility to try their products in the local region. We also worked with match-making, inviting all entrepreneurs - providers of adventurer, food, hotels, bikes etc. - from a smaller area to meet. Many times they did not know each other and with these meetings they could arrange tourism packages together or just be able to recommend the other businesses in the area.

Information material

Information material in both languages was distributed in both countries to inform the public on guided tours on wildlife, maritime guided tours and wild food tours. Also the book describing experiences from guided tours, written in both languages, has been distributed in both countries. One of described guided tours is for example the guided snorkel tour arranged by the Sound Aquarium in Helsingør (Fig. 3), a possibility little known about by the public.

Accessibility by public transport

An analysis of how major nature tourist destinations in Scania can be reached by public transport showed that some of the most popular destinations are difficult to reach by public transport, especially at weekends. 'Difficult to reach' means in this context, that the nearest bus stop/train stop is several kilometres away and rarely approached at weekends. This includes major destination in Scania as Kullaberg, where a nature information centre and the biggest private company offering nature experiences in Scania is located. This is also the only place in Scania which offers boat trips to watch porpoises. Also one of the national parks (Stenshuvud), a private eco-park, and for example the most popular woodland site near Malmö turned out to have no or insufficient access by public transport. Even the cliffs of Møn, a big geology and adventure centre in Southern Zealand was only accessible by car. Public transport, which otherwise is relatively well developed in the region, seems to be work well for commuting between home and work, but not reach nature destination at weekends. Thus the original plan of the project to only promote guided tours, which could be reached by public transport, was dropped during the project period.

Discussion

The major goal of the project was to encourage tourists to cross the Sound and participate in guided tours on different nature related topics to increase the knowledge about these topics in the neighbouring country. To do so both suppliers were aimed to be supported and information to the public made available as well as the development of new products supported. Sustainable travelling to destinations was an objective.

The results show that the project varied in its success to reach its goals. It can be concluded that it was difficult to get Danes participating in guided tours in Scania and Swedes in Zealand. The guided tours that were organized or supported within the project had an overwhelmingly majority of "home-country" visitors. Quite a number of tours had to be cancelled due to lack of interest by participants. It was concluded that the promotion and marketing of the guided tours was not sufficient in several cases and better marketing strategies would have been needed. The willingness to cross the Sound for nature experiences – which is time consuming and costly for a one-day trip – would need more effort in advertisement to attract customers. Looking at the project organization one could also conclude that there was a large knowledge base within the project group from the academic side on nature issues, but far less on tourism and marketing. Nevertheless, there were also success stories. The garden tours arranged at the Danish site of the Sound visiting gardens in Scania were not only fully booked, but had also a waiting list with people interested to participated. Here we noted that there was a large interest in these types of guided tours to both private and public gardens in Scania, which attracted a large number of people. A reason for this might have been better marketing of these tours compared with others, a whole day offer rather than

with other guided tours a 2-4 hour arrangement and that transportation was organized during the whole day.

Collaboration of different stakeholders and actors is seen as an important key factor in succeeding with nature-based tourism products (Năstase et al., 2010). Thus starting up-networks was seen as a possibility to strengthen small business' opportunities. Time and resources often lack for these businesses to develop new products and establish new networks. As with arranged guided tours, the success of the effect of the first network meetings varied between the thematic groups. Generally these meetings were appreciated, and seen positively as a platform for information and discussion. However, it is questionable how the networks will function now after project time has run out and organization of meetings and work has to be carried out without financial or other external input. It seems as if several networks as the maritime and wild food network, for example, will succeed with continuing collaborative work, while other networks have a more unsure future. Differences can be caused by a range of different factors as seeing direct positive output of collaboration, genuine interest in exchanging information between individuals, enthusiasm about new contacts or the presence of a person that is taking the lead. Hinders can be caused by anxiety about competition, lack of time for getting involved, seeing no advantages of participating in a network or a tiredness in networking when already involved in other networks. We think that the networks could be a valuable platform for the participants especially if the additionally could be used to enhance for example the quality of guiding abilities or other aspects enhancing the quality of the guided tour, which could be done by inviting professionals for presentations, workshops, courses or discussions. Since the network meetings were mostly visited by participants from one country, we did not really succeed in cross-border collaboration within the networks.

Wildlife tourism is increasing and the potential for wildlife tourism is under-researched and often underestimated (Curtin & Wilkes, 2005). We have seen the economic struggles of private actors, but think that the region has a good potential to develop this part of nature based tourism. This is because of the relatively closeness to large urban centres with a growing population, which will have an increasing demand of nature experience which will go beyond traditional recreation as for example walking in the countryside (Lundmark & Müller, 2010). We hope that the information material we have developed and distributed especially the book (Tvedt & Norlin, 2013) will make a larger amount of people aware of the fantastic opportunities the region offers regarding nature-based tourism – either nearby or across the Sound. However, time has been too short to evaluate possible positive effects. Nevertheless, we think that the branch could profit from a certain professionalization regarding marketing on the internet as for example using better the existing website of the regional council, possibly also regarding guiding skills and certification. As Lundmark and Müller (2010) have stated available products are rarely presented and few websites, but very fragmented distributed. Certification systems can contribute not only to quality and safety, but also to sustainability (Haaland & Aas, 2010). Finally, the important role of tour leaders for a successful wildlife experience has been pointed out (Curtin, 2010).

From our analysis on public transport possibilities to major nature destinations and starting points of guided tours we can conclude that it is unrealistic to assume that the large majority of customers would use or can use public transport to reach these destination – at least when travelling to the other country. Crossing the Sound from

outside the major city centres often involves travelling of at least 2 hours on way and often much more. It is realistic to assume that most customers will use their own car, when available, to take part in guided tours especially when going to the other country. This is however not necessarily true when visiting guided tours offered nearby and by for example public actors in Sweden, who in many cases only offer tours that are reachable by public transport. The issue of sustainable transport in the context of nature-based tourism has been discussed (Vellecco & Mancino, 2010) and it is interesting to note that sustainable transport is seen as desirable in nature-based tourism, but that it has been stated that nature-based tourism “does not exclude motorized transportation to nature areas” (Lundmark & Müller, 2010, p. 381.).

In retrospect it can be concluded that cultural, administrative and organizational differences between the countries and between different project partners were sometimes greater than expected. Scandinavian countries are often assumed to be quite similar and the fact that the languages are more or less well understandable in all Scandinavian countries (besides Finland) supports this impression. However, we found quite a number of differences in ways how guided tours were arranged between the countries as for example the lack of private entrepreneurs in Denmark. Additionally there are different rules regarding booking and insurances (required in Denmark, not in Sweden), which made bookings for Swedes of Danish arrangements and vice versa to a rather new and sometimes laborious task.

Nevertheless, Interreg projects like this, financed by the EU, or Leader projects financed through the Rural Development program could be important catalysts or financial contributors for a tourist branch in need of financial and organizational support to get over difficult starting periods.

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Figures



Figure. 1: Situation of the Sound region in Scandinavia. Source: Openstreetmap (<http://www.openstreetmap.org/>)



Figure. 2: Countryside in Scania. Photo: C. Haaland



Figure 3: Guided snorkel tour in Helsingør, Denmark. In the background the Kronborg Castle, setting for Shakespeare's play Hamlet. Photo: M. Stoltze.