

Development of an old ironworks village towards becoming a fully sustainable cultural tourism destination

What to do when you own more than a half a village and an ironworks in a lush river valley, but the residents are leaving? Fiskars Village is a story about how a dying Finnish industrial village was revived into a centre of design and art, and where a lively community of six hundred people work and live. It is a story about how an old ironworks became a professionally managed cultural tourism destination, where sustainability is integrated into the everyday decision-making.

Early 1990s was a turning point to the small village of Fiskars in Finland. By the 1980s, the last operations of the company world-famous for the orange-handled scissors had been moved elsewhere. Fiskars company's vice president, Ingmar Lindberg, in charge of the real estate, was not willing to give up and made a plan to keep the village alive without the industry. This turning point became historic.

The ironworks in Fiskars was established in 1649 a few kilometres upstream at the last rapids of the Fiskarsån River. The location had plenty of good qualities for successful industrial endeavour. The river's mouth is in the Pojoviken Bay in the Gulf of Finland, connecting the village with the rest of the world. The ore was shipped in from Stockholm and crushed by hammers powered by waterwheels in the rapids. Timber was rafted from the vast forests surrounding the ironworks, kilned into charcoal, and burned in blast furnaces. Knives, pots, and other goods made in Fiskars were shipped out to Stockholm and towns along the coasts of Finland. For over three hundred years, Fiskars employed blacksmiths, coppersmiths, and cutlers from Finland and abroad.

Ingmar Lindberg's plan was to continue the tradition by inviting skilled professionals – artisans, designers, and artists – to live and work in Fiskars. The old buildings were renovated to workshops, studios, and apartments. After a few creative people accepted the invitation, more followed. First art exhibitions were organised in 1994 and a few years later the Cooperative of Artisans, Designers and Artists in Fiskars, Onoma, was formed. The Onoma Cooperative soon grew to have over hundred members, which it still has to this date.

The first visitors were attracted by the high quality art exhibitions and the products of the highly dedicated artisans and designers. The rural charm of the village's old buildings in the fairy tale forests made unforgettable impressions. Word of mouth spread about the revived community in the Fiskarsån river valley. Now Fiskars Village attracts close to 200,000 visitors a year. The plan worked better than anyone could expect.

As the owner of real estate, the Fiskars company found itself in a unique position to steer the development of the Fiskars Village. Ever since, the Fiskars company has developed the village decisively together with the local community, the Onoma Cooperative, and other pivotal stakeholders. The pattern in the stream of decisions has put Fiskars Village to the course to become a sustainable cultural tourism destination. International delegations have visited Fiskars to learn from the model, but the land and buildings in a typical industrial town have more than a few owners, making it difficult to create a shared strategy for development.

Commitment to the principles of sustainable development is required from the entrepreneurs who want to run a business in Fiskars Village and those who want to join the Onoma Cooperative. This is ensured by written guidelines and rules in the selection processes and leasing agreements. The aim is to distribute benefits from tourism equally and to create long term economic viability in the destination. Often those who want move in, are already committed to the principles.

The Fiskarsin Panimo brewery, Kuura cidery, and Ägräs distillery use local wild herbs and berries to create their award winning beverages. The Laatumäki sawmill provides Fiskars' woodworkers with hardwood from the forests surrounding the village. Nikari woodworking shop uses hydroelectricity from a recently renovated power plant in the river. The Fiskars Museum has sheeps grazing the traditional rural pastures. Essentially, sustainable use of the local natural resources has become a part of the culture in the Fiskars Village.

A variety of events and festival are organised to promote and celebrate skills, design, and art. In 2019, the Antiques Fair and the Slow Food Festival are organised for the 10th time in the Fiskars Village. The Spring Market in March opens the new season after the long winter for the seventh time. The latest addition is the international Fiskars Village Art & Design Biennale, organised for the first time. Smaller events and art exhibitions are organised throughout the year to liven up the more quiet months. Every event in Fiskars Village is organised in cooperation between the destination management organisation and the events' own organisations. The Fiskars Village Association often helps with the practical arrangements.

Fiskars Village Association, formed in 1984, represents everyone living and working in the village. They manage the village's public sauna and organise markets at the village square. The events and meetings of the association connect the older industry workers with the newcomers of the creative community. Some people in Fiskars are more dependent on tourism than the others and an open dialogue helps to bridge the differences between the groups. The destination management organisation, Fiskars Real Estate department's marketing team, believes it is always possible to find common ground among the interest groups in tourism development. The Fiskars Village Association paves the way for finding the ground.

The strong community has been recognised in the justifications of the awards Fiskars Village has won. Fiskars Village was awarded as the top emerging cultural tourism destination in Finland in the eighth EDEN (European Destination of Excellence) Awards in 2017. The EDEN is an initiative by the European Commission to promote sustainable tourism development models in Europe. In 2015, Fiskars Village was selected as The Finnish Travel Destination of the Year by The Finnish Guild of Travel Journalists. Fiskars Village's efforts towards sustainability were recognised already in 2008 by the European Environment Agency's initiative Royal Destination Award for Sustainable Tourism.

In the end, Fiskars Village is a story about having the community as the first priority. Fiskars Village was created together with the artisans, designers, and artists. Restaurant, hotel, and outdoors entrepreneurs followed. As long as Fiskars Village is a good place to work and live, it is also a good place to visit. Visitor is likely to return to a destination where they feel welcome.