Title of the Story: Local products in function of sustainable destination development

Destination Name: (include any state, province or region)
Lika Destination
Country: Croatia

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Nomination Category: (Please check the boxes that indicate the focus of your story)

☐ Localizing the destination supply chain
☐ Decarbonizing the destination supply chain
☐ Culture & Communities
☐ Environment & Climate
☐ Nature & Ecotourism
☐ Tourism Reset & Recovery
☐ Other

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Address each aspect of your good practice story in the different sections being specific including relevant quantitative and qualitative information.

Issues faced

The destination of Lika has long been known as an agricultural area, and Lika’s traditional cuisine is most often called monotonous, scarce and unhealthy. Destination Lika is known for its long winters, which is why the people of Lika had to eat well to survive that long winter. But what few people know is the fact that Lika's cuisine is actually full of fruits and vegetables and milk and dairy products that are of special nutritional value precisely because of the geographical position in which Lika is located. The destination of Lika is an area where as many as 3 climates alternate (Mediterranean, mountain and continental), which enables the growth and cultivation of various foods, and what gives this food excellent quality are fresh air and untouched pure nature. Almost 60% of the total area of Lika is protected by some form according to the Nature Protection Act (NATURA 2000), which makes Lika a true ecological core of Croatia and thanks to which Lika is green on the Covid map, which makes Lika a safe and desirable tourist destination. 3 national parks, a nature park and 2 cave complexes are just some of the mentioned protected areas due to which numerous endemic species manage to grow in the destination Lika as rarely anywhere in the world.

In the destination of Lika, every family used to have domestic animals from which they got milk, meat and eggs, and a garden in which they grew fruits and vegetables. Numerous families have maintained this habit to this day. On the other hand, other families today are increasingly turning to tourism and catering or accommodation services, which results in the circulation of an increasing number of foreign guests in the destination who are eager to try traditional Lika dishes prepared from local products. Despite the demand for local products we have on the one hand and local producers we have on the other, due to the disconnection of local producers and local caterers and renters until recently there was no cooperation among the local population which did not meet the demand of guests for local products. In addition, local producers are not educated about tourism opportunities, and there is no promotion of local products. Local farmers do not use technologies such as email addresses, social networks, marketing tools, etc. They sell their products at home, without the ambition to expand production and sales in local stores or near tourist attractions. Also, due to lack of education, the majority of the population is not properly registered for the production of their products and therefore they cannot participate in projects or receive various co-financing that is provided to them. Lika destination with all its natural beauty is also known as sparsely populated, only 7 inhabitants per square meter, which is equal to the area of Sub-Sahara, with a tendency to emigrate young people. The average age of the population is over 50 years. Due to these shortcomings, there are problems such as poor community development, localization of the supply chain of destination, poorly developed tourist offer and the like.

In order to reduce these problems or completely solve them, the Lika Quality system was launched. It is a unique regional quality system of food, beverages and souvenirs that is fully guided by the principles
of sustainable development with the aim of networking local products under the common brand Lika Quality and placing these products in new markets, educating local producers, introducing guests to the richness and diversity of local Lika products and by branding the destination Lika as a gastro destination on the world tourist map.

**Methods, steps and tools applied**

In 2017, we formed a regional quality system - Lika Quality, collected contacts of local producers from the destination Lika and invited them to education about the system. At the training, we presented in detail the system, its goals and how to apply for it.

Our goal was to create a recognizable destination Lika as a gastro-destination, to show the exceptional quality of Lika local products and to certify and protect those products. The Lika Quality logo is designed as a combination of a traditional Lika hat and an international quality label - the letter Q.

After the training, the first Public Invitation for inclusion in the system was published, after which the first 15 brave manufacturers registered their products. In accordance with pre-defined rules, the Lika quality label is awarded to products produced at the destination of Lika in accordance with all legal regulations, and their production and / or products are in any way related to the Lika tradition.

After checking the application documentation, a decision was made. After the first Public Call, there were 39 products in the Lika Quality system, which were divided into 8 categories (honey, meat and meat products, milk and dairy products, drinks and beverages, vegetables, souvenirs and handicrafts, fruits and fruit products). For better promotion, a catalog with product information and photos was made.

After the inclusion of the first manufacturers in the Lika Quality system, we began to promote the destination Lika as a gastro destination and we continued to expand the system.

Every year we announce a new Public Call for inclusion in the system. Also, before announcing each public call, we hold educational workshops at several locations in the destination where we explain in detail the application procedure and application documentation so that interested producers can prepare in time for the application. In addition to logging in to the system, we educate local producers about proper registration and refer them directly to professionals and / or institutions where they can complete the registration. Also, for those manufacturers who are not skilled with creating e-mail and using it, we hold an individual course to educate them for easier further joint communication. We publish the invitation for educational workshops in the media and on our own social networks so that the entire local community knows about it.

In addition to the catalog that we printed in the first year, we subsequently created a website that contains information and photos of all users of the system to make it easier for every potential customer to find product information. We personally visited local producers who are in the Lika Quality system and took photos of their products in order to have professional photos for the purposes of promotion. New leaflets were also printed, which were distributed to each User and which we use at all events, fairs or presentations in which we participate.

In addition, a Google position has been created for each System User, and information about the system and Users is regularly published on our TripAdvisor profile as well as on the social networks Facebook
and Instagram. We also regularly encourage manufacturers to create their own social networks in order to increase the reach of followers, and we regularly invite them to use the joint hashtags #LikaQuality and #LikaDestination.

In addition to promotion, we are working hard on the placement of Lika Quality products in cooperation with the agricultural cooperative LIKA COOP, public institutions, associations and other tourism stakeholders, and we connect local producers directly with other tourism entities in the destination and the rest of Croatia.

During 2020, which was marked by the Covid-19 virus, we paid special attention to educating local producers and connecting with other local tourism stakeholders. Thus, we held a dozen online trainings on behavior and access to guests and customers during the Covid 19 crisis, on more modern and practical packaging, on sustainable development and sustainable business, on the benefits of organic production, on digital marketing, on preparing space and products for photography, on tourism Lika's opportunities, ways of starting a business, self-employment and enabling individual presentation online in front of other tour operators. We placed special emphasis on short supply chains and the benefits of buying local products, which was also a special trend in 2020.

**Key success factors**

Key factors for success in our story was following:
- experience in destination management
- quality products
- good communication with public institutions
- consistency and continuous education
- persistence in achieving results
- understanding of local producers
- giving “step by step” instructions
- connecting local producers with local tourism stakeholders
- product placement
- opening new markets
- promotion through social networks
- development of sustainable tourism
- gain one of the 17 SDGs: GOAL 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities

**Lessons learned**

As mentioned earlier, we initially thought that the only issues were the lack of awareness of local producers about tourism opportunities and the skepticism of local producers about doing tourism. After starting the development of the system, we realized that people are uneducated in the fields of registration of their family farms, crafts, associations, etc. They are not sufficiently familiar with the needs and desires of customers, are not interested in promotion and do not have enough information about sustainable production. Also, in the local community there was almost no cooperation between local producers and tourism stakeholders and quality local products as such were almost completely neglected.
We also realized that young people from the area of Lika are not sufficiently familiar with modern agricultural occupations, opportunities and benefits provided by self-employment and ways in which it is possible to start your own farm.

Through the Lika Quality system, promotion, workshops and online education, we have achieved a change in the opinion of the local population about the quality and importance of local products, about mutual cooperation and encouraged the desire to learn, progress and develop. Local producers have started devoting more time to product packaging, many have become active on social media, completed registrations of their farms and are being educated or trained for some similar additional activities. Also, other tourist stakeholders have started to use local products more and more in their menus, they refer their guests to local producers where they can taste and buy local products, and some have started to work on joint tourist packages. This form of cooperation and connection was especially prominent during 2020, when large retail chains were closed and tourists staying in Lika had access to fresh and quality food.

On the other hand, Lika’s quality system has yielded much more success than we expected. It is recognized in all regions of Croatia and well received by the local population at the destination of Lika.

Results, achievements and recognitions

Today, the Lika Quality system has 58 manufacturers and 148 products. The products are divided into 11 categories, which means that in 4 years we have opened 3 new categories in the system (bakery products, wild herbs and cosmetics). The opening of new categories tells us that producers are more and more creative and innovative in production and that the destination Lika has an increasingly rich local products, which is certainly the impact of workshops and trainings we conducted.

Apart from the local level of the Lika quality system, it is increasingly recognizable at the national and international level. Several tourism stakeholders, institutions and clusters from Croatia (Dalmatia and Slavonia) contacted us to transfer knowledge and experience, education and documentation assistance so that they too could start applying similar sustainable systems at their local level. Cooperation was also initiated with the Croatian Cluster of Island Products and Lika’s local producers were presented to their system users at the fair in Korčula.

The great recognition for working on the Lika Quality system also confirms that the users of the Lika Quality system receive more points when applying for certain agricultural incentives and measures financed from European funds.

As far as product placement is concerned, we are also proud of these results. Since 2018, when it was first opened, every tourist season in the Plitvice Lakes National Park, in cooperation with the Lika Coop Agricultural Cooperative and the Plitvice Lakes National Park, we are opening a joint point of sale for all products with the Lika Quality label. Apart from the joint point of sale, Lika Quality products can be purchased in all souvenir shops and markets of the Plitvice Lakes National Park, which is the largest, oldest and most visited National Park in Croatia.
Apart from Plitvice Lakes, Lika Quality products can be bought in the souvenir shop of the Paklenica National Park, Northern Velebit National Park, Velebit Nature Park, Grabovača Cave Park and Barać Caves, which are almost all the most famous protected areas in Lika.

Also, through cooperation with other local catering facilities, hostels, hotels, camps, etc., the sale of Lika Quality products was initiated in their facilities as well.

By connecting local tourism stakeholders with local producers, local products travel directly from the producer to the point of sale. Since we have connected local manufacturers who together deliver goods to the point of sale, in this way we reduce a certain amount of packaging as well as reduce exhaust gases from cars.

Also in 2020, cooperation was launched with the Croatian Food House "Crotaste", which is located in the Croatian capital Zagreb. In this way, all tourists in the Croatian capital, in addition to buying products with the Lika Quality label, can find out everything about the system and other Lika Quality products via leaflets and QR codes.

We are also especially proud of the cooperation with the Croatian shipping company "Jadrolinija", whose 3 largest ferries are Marko Polo, Split and Dubrovnik, which operate on the international lines Split - Ancona, Dubrovnik - Bari and Zadar - Ancona, and where you can also buy products with the Lika Quality label.

Lika's quality system is guided by the philosophy of sustainable development; encourages higher volumes of local production and consumption. In this way, it provides jobs for local residents and their family farms. The system guarantees quality and local production based on tradition, and local producers are involved in tourism development.

Additional references

Avaible links:

https://www.likadestination.hr/regional-quality-system/
https://www.likadestination.hr/rika-quality-products/
https://www.likadestination.hr/rika-quality-shop/
https://www.likadestination.hr/rika-quality-products/map/
https://hrturizam.hr/en/character-quality-system-richer-for-ten-new-manufacturers/
https://hrturizam.hr/en/4-certificates-were-awarded-to-users-of-the-quality-system-character/
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