Title of the Story: Palud-Palù – Biodiversity protection in small-scale wetland area

Destination Name: Region of Istria

Country: Croatia

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Position: Regional government

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
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Issues faced

Palud-Palù is the only Special Ornithological Reserve in Istria County, in the City of Rovinj-Rovigno. It is a shallow wetland, situated in the immediate vicinity of the sea, and connected to it by the canal and by underground connections. This allows the salt water to intrude into the shallow system making the wetland brackish and sometimes even hypersaline system. This makes Palud a coastal lagoon and a very specific type of habitat which is endangered along the Adriatic coast, primarily due to human pressure. Although covering only about 220 hectares, with only some 18 hectares of wetland habitats, Palud is an important breeding site for some endangered bird species, and a resting place for numerous migratory birds in spring and autumn. Altogether some 240 bird species are recorded for the area.

Wider area of the Ornithological reserve comprises of agricultural land, Mediterranean coastal forests and sea coast with beautiful beaches which makes it an attractive spot for numerous tourists. This, in turn, produces problems with overcrowding, parking, littering and alike.

There are several inhabitants in the area, as well as small restaurants and agro tourisms.

Other values of the area are high habitat diversity and biodiversity, as well as ichnofossils (dinosaur imprints) on the beach, and rich cultural and archaeological heritage (remnants of Roman water cistern and villae rusticae...).

The Reserve is managed by the Public Institution “Natura Histrica”, who recently conducted an Interreg project CREW (with partners form Croatia and Italy), aimed at preserving biodiversity of coastal wetlands, by developing a common tool using participatory approach to the management of protected area.

High number of tourists in the summer season, high demand on the area form local inhabitants, and lack of adequate data on basic biodiversity and hydrology of the reserve imposed the need to better manage the whole area.

Main problems identified at the beginning of the process were:
- Lack of contemporary data about the area, especially on the hydrodynamics of the area,
- Lack of continuous monitoring,
- Lack of educational programmes,
- Seasonal pressure from the visitors,
- Inadequate level of information available to stakeholders,
- Lack of control of stakeholder’s activities,
- Inadequate level of cooperation between the public institution and stakeholders.

The main challenge faced was to attract stakeholders to participate in the process and to bridge the existing communication gap between Public Institution which is in charge of managing the area, and the local inhabitants and stakeholders.
Methods, steps and tools applied

Within the aforementioned project CREW, the main tool which was applied to overcome the problems faced was so called “Wetland Contract”. It is basically a management tool which stresses four main principles needed to manage the area efficiently:
(1) voluntarism,
(2) active involvement,
(3) co-operation and
(4) accepting the obligations.

Methods applied were: (a) workshops with stakeholders, (b) questionnaires and (c) individual meetings and interviews with stakeholders. The whole process was affected by COVID-19 pandemic crisis, which forced the process to be switched mainly to the on-line sphere, instead of live workshops.

Steps applied in the process were:
1. Preliminary analysis of the area – defining and contacting potential stakeholders, defining main problems form the management point of view,
2. Joint work of stakeholders - SWOT analysis, defining problems and priorities, making a statement of interest for participation and involvement in the process,
3. Joint work of stakeholders - developing a common strategic vision of the area and a future mid-term scenario (for the 2021-2026 period),
4. Joint work of stakeholders - producing an action plan – a mid-term plan with concrete actions and roles of the stakeholders defined,
5. Signing the Wetland Contract for the Wetland area Special Ornithological Reserve Palud-Palù.

Key success factors

The fact that people (stakeholders) recognized the need of joint action and participatory approach was the most important factor for the success in signing the Wetland Contract.

Also, there were a high number of scientists and experts that took part in the process, and showed interest in preserving the biodiversity of Palud and readiness to take part in future educational activities for local inhabitants and wider public.

Main authorities in charge of nature protection on a state level (Ministry of Economy and Sustainable development), also expressed strong support to the process and a new innovative approach to the management of wetland areas.
Lessons learned

COVID-19 Pandemics caused some changes in a way of communication, so the majority of workshops had to be done on-line. It was noted that many people, especially the older ones were a bit reserved about this type of communication. It was overcome by additional efforts in establishing personal contacts with stakeholders on one-to-one basis. These situations have to be taken into account when planning future projects, and additional communication methods have to be well developed in advance.

Communication and constant interaction between the stakeholders present in a protected area, and an official manager of that area is indeed a key factor in successful planning and achieving the goals of biodiversity protection on one hand and satisfaction of local inhabitants on the other.

Results, achievements and recognitions

Main qualitative results are:
(1) Synergy and positive attitude among the stakeholders and between Public Institutions was created,
(2) New ideas emerged during the planning process,
(3) High variety of stakeholders were involved (institutional from state to local level, NGOs, individuals/locals),

Also, very important thing is that with the CREW project a new approach in Croatian framework for managing wetland areas was applied for the first time, using Wetland Contract as a management tool.

Main quantitative results are:
1.) Wetland Contract with an Action plan signed – altogether 17 signees (from the State to the local level), signed the Contract and additional 6 agreed to play active role in the Stakeholder forum; Stakeholders are local, regional and state level authorities (City, County and Ministry), scientific and expert institutions (faculties, museums, agencies and institutes), tourist sector representatives (tourist boards in the area), NGOs on state and local level, and individuals – inhabitants of the area.
2.) 7 specific objectives were defined, falling into three main categories: (a) management, (b) environment and (c) socio-economic development. Additionally, 2 horizontal objectives were defined, aimed at better cooperation among stakeholders on all levels, and at activities of attracting more financial resources through EU funding.
3.) 17 actions are planned and described, with the roles of the stakeholders defined, and a financial frame planned. Five activities are connected to management, six to environment and six to socio-economic development.
Additional references

Photographs form the area, and of the whole process of creating a Wetland Contract for Palud-Palù, with the action plan, as well as the document itself are available at the following link: https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1FYcwEDD6bcN680Lfhxo5owc50u3VA4kV?usp=sharing