WTO SEMINAR
“RURAL TOURISM IN EUROPE: EXPERIENCES AND PERSPECTIVES”
Belgrade, Yugoslavia, 24 and 25 June 2002

CONCLUSIONS
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INTRODUCTION

This document presents the conclusions which have arisen from a seminar on rural tourism.

The seminar “Rural Tourism in Europe: Experiences and Perspectives”, was organised by the World Tourism Organisation (W.T.O.). It was held over two days, 24th-25th June 2002, at the Congress Centre Sava, Belgrade, Yugoslavia. Delegates at the seminar comprised individuals involved in tourism in Central and Eastern European countries.

The objective of the seminar was to afford delegates the opportunity to obtain an insight into current trends and developments in rural tourism in Western Europe, and to exchange and share views on their own experiences of rural tourism in Central and Eastern Europe. A further objective was to provide delegates with an insight into possible sources of support for rural tourism. A copy of the seminar programme is included as appendix ‘A’ to this document.

Following the success of “Rural Tourism in Europe: Experiences and Perspectives”, the World Tourism Organisation intends organising a follow-up seminar on rural tourism in 2003.
1. GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

There was a consensus that key objectives in developing rural tourism are as follows:-

- **Economics**: Rural Tourism offers an opportunity for income generation and job creation. It is therefore an activity that can help deliver additional economic activity in addition to replacing traditional rural economic activities now in decline (ie. agriculture), and in so doing, arrest rural depopulation.

- **Protection of the Environment**: The environment is of central importance to rural tourism. Appropriate legislation, a balanced approach to planning, and the adoption of best practice approach to running rural tourism enterprises, are essential in order to ensure that the environment is protected.

- **Legal Framework**: The establishment of appropriate legislation and laws are a necessary pre-requisite to successful rural tourism. The support and involvement of a number of government departments is necessary.

- **Quality of life**: The flow of visitors into rural areas can help maintain the viability of existing services (ie. shops etc), thereby contributing to the overall quality of life of the host population.

- **Preservation of Culture and Traditions**: Because of the importance of culture and local traditions to visitors, rural tourism can play a significant role in ensuring their long term preservation.

- **Transition to the Market Economy**: Because tourism is an economic activity, it can play an important role in facilitating the transition of former centrally planned economies, to market economies.
2. VISION FOR RURAL TOURISM

Participants shared a vision for rural tourism, based on the following key principles:-

- **Alternative to Mass Market Tourism**
  
  Because rural tourism attracts more specialist, niche market tourists with an interest in culture and the environment, destinations offering rural tourism holidays are unlikely to suffer from the disadvantages associated with mass market tourism destinations.

- **Sustainable Development**
  
  Rural tourism represents a sustainable approach to economic development. It can play an important role in the spatial development of economies and the spreading of benefits to undeveloped regions.

- **Common Planning Strategy – Public/Private Partnerships**
  
  In seeking to develop rural tourism, an opportunity exists to initiate a Common Planning Strategy. Such an initiative can also serve as a catalyst for partnership between the public sector and private sector.

- **Harmonisation of standards**
  
  Rural tourism offers the opportunity for the harmonisation of standards of accommodation, facility provision, activities, information provision, guiding and customer care.

- **Balance between ‘Push and Pull’ Forces**
  
  A ‘carrot and stick’ approach to rural tourism operators can be applied. Incentives can be offered in the form of grants for operators who develop their products to high standard. Operators who fail to raise their standards can be excluded from accommodation listings.

- **Role of key groups in society**
  
  Key groups within society stand to benefit from employment opportunities generated through rural tourism. These include women, the young and disadvantaged.
3. STRATEGIES

The following strategic approaches to rural tourism were articulated:

- **Organisation and Co-operation**

  Due to the fragmented nature of tourism in general (and rural tourism in particular), there was a consensus that good organisation was essential in ensuring the establishment and management of a successful rural tourism. (See 5. Organisation).

- **Linkages and Networks**

  It is difficult for rural tourism enterprises to survive in isolation. It is therefore essential to build linkages and networks between rural tourism products providers. For example, by working closely together, the farmhouse owner and equestrian centre owner can offer attractive horse riding holiday packages in the countryside.

- **Zonal Approach**

  A zonal approach to rural tourism can be considered as a strategy which takes account of the natural and cultural assets of a particular destination. (eg. Area A – Farm Tourism; Area B – Mountain Activities; Area C – Vineyard Trails etc).

- **Clusters**

  In starting out, it is important to recognise that due to the economies of scale, the prospect of achieving financial viability in rural tourism are likely to be greater by ‘clustering’ rural tourism enterprises. Typically, this would involve using villages in order to build up a critical mass of facilities (ie. Accommodation, activities, cultural attractions, shops, visitor information). In this way, it makes life easier for the visitor, while at the same time complementary tourism enterprises can benefit by passing on custom to each other.
4. RURAL TOURISM PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT

The following steps are necessary to capitalise on the full potential of rural tourism, and deliver sustainable rural products:

- **Market Research**

  It is essential that tourism product development should be ‘market-led’ rather than ‘product-driven’. This involves identifying markets (ie customers) and equally importantly, the motivations and preferences of these markets. With this information, and having regard to the resources available, rural tourism products can be developed accordingly.

- **Market Segmentation**

  There will be a need to segment the market. This involves identifying different categories of potential visitors in the main source markets (eg. families, greys [ie. people aged 60+], youth market [ie. under 30], activity holidaymakers, special interest holidaymakers). Each of these categories of visitor are likely to have different motivations and preferences. Therefore, different types of rural tourism products and experiences will be required to cater for each of these segments.

- **Quality**

  Above all else, rural tourism products will need to be developed to the highest standard in order to cater for the needs of customers and encourage repeat custom which is essential in sustaining long term viability. Branding or labelling, can be used as a guarantee of quality.

- **Diversification**

  Farm tourism or agro-tourism offers farming families the opportunity to become involved in tourism. Diversification beyond farm tourism is possible, and desirable, if rural enterprises are to benefit from the full range of opportunities that exist in the market place (ie. interest in cultural tourism, activity and health tourism).

- **Shopping**

  Shopping is an important tourism activity. Local products (ie. wine, food items, crafts, knitwear) can be sold to visitors and can help reinforce the distinctiveness of an area while also generating additional income.

- **Classification / Grading Systems**

  Visitors want to have some indication or guarantee of minimum standards prior to booking their accommodation. Classification/grading schemes are an essential ingredient in ensuring that a consistently quality of product is available, in different price categories.
5. ORGANISATION

As previously stated, effective organisation of rural tourism is essential in establishing a successful rural tourism industry.

A rural tourism organisation, which could involve community organisations, accommodation providers, other tourism providers, and the local/regional municipality, could have responsibility for quite a wide range of activities as follows:-

- Provision of **Vision and Strategy**
- Organisation and maintenance of **classification/grading system**
- **Marketing** of rural tourism in the area
- Provision of **business support** services to rural tourism operators
- Provision of a forum for shared experiences – a **network** for rural tourism operators
- Provision of **training**
- **Lobby** government and other agencies
- **Fundraising**
6. PROMOTION AND MARKETING

There are a number of different ways in which rural tourism destinations can market themselves. There was a consensus that the following elements should be included in the marketing mix:-

• **Branding**

By developing a brand name or ‘identity’, rural tourism destinations can help position themselves in an increasingly competitive market. Branding can also offer reassurance to potential customers.

A branding approach can be used to underpin mainstream marketing activity, but should also be carried on visitor information, signage and retail items.

• **Tour Operators**

Tour Operators can be used to promote accommodation in rural locations. For new entrants, they offer the advantage of knowing the tourism market place, and can therefore represent a ‘one-stop-shop’ approach to marketing.

• **Direct Marketing – The Internet**

An increasing number of rural tourism destinations are adopting a direct approach to the marketing of their products.

In this regard, the internet was identified as an ideal tool with which to promote rural tourism products.

• **Co-operative Marketing**

Given the high costs of marketing, combined with the need to offer the customer a full range of accommodation with activities, a co-operative approach to marketing was recommended for rural tourism. This type of co-operative marketing activity could be led by the local rural tourism organisation on behalf of its’ members.

• **Cross- Border Initiatives**

Rural tourism locations adjacent to frontiers are well positioned to become involved in cross-border initiatives. Such initiatives could be based on mutual co-operation, training or marketing.

From the consumer perspective, a rural tourism offer that combines a holiday in two different countries has significant appeal.
7. TRAINING AND EDUCATION

There was a consensus that training and education are essential to rural tourism, particularly at the critical start-up phase.

Training and education are required at a number of levels as follows:-

- **Training the Trainers**

  Training is necessary for individuals involved in leadership positions at a local level (ie. administration, product development, marketing). With the appropriate knowledge and skills, these individuals in turn are well positioned to train other individuals at an operational level.

- **Training for Rural Tourism Product Providers**

  Rural tourism product providers, or operators, require training and education in a range of subjects as follows:-

  - Customer Care
  - Language Skills
  - Product Standards
  - Understanding of partners needs
  - Product Knowledge
  - Basic marketing
  - Internet

- **Training for officials**

  Many officials working at government or municipality level are unaware of the potential benefits of tourism. Training and educational programmes are also necessary for this key group.
8. INVESTMENT AND FUNDING

While rural tourism is largely an activity for the private sector, and for small scale enterprises in particular, investment in the industry is required at a number of levels in order to help ‘kick-start’ tourism and ensure the delivery of a quality, enjoyable experience for visitors. Apart from financial investments, rural tourism also requires significant human resource investment in the form of time and energy.

The key players, in terms of investment and funding, are as follows:-

- **Private Sector**

  Private individuals must be willing to take some risk in order to become involved in tourism, as it is the private sector who stand to benefit most.

- **Government Supports**

  - The private sector are unlikely to invest in rural tourism unless a range of government supports are available:-
    - Technical assistance
    - Development of the infrastructure (ie. roads, signposting, visitor information)
    - Development of flagship tourism projects in strategic locations
    - Provision of start-up grants or home-improvement grants or credits
    - Tax incentive programmes (ie. lower rates of taxation in undeveloped areas to attract developers).

- **International Agencies**

  International agencies, including the European Union and the United Nations Development Programme can assist in the development of rural tourism in the range of supports, both technical and financial, which they can offer to governments and regional administrations.