

# European Amazonia

## Nature-based tourism development scenario for Polesia



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#VisitPolesia

December 2019

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# Introduction

This report was written in a period of four months (from August to November 2019) by Aivar Ruukel, board member of Global Ecotourism Network, local nature tour operator at Soomaa national park in Estonia, and supported by Volha Kaskevich, Advocate for Nature and coordinator of environmental projects of NGO Bahna, Sergiy Pidmogylnyy, coordinator of Greenways development in Ukraine, board member of Ukrainian Adventure and Ecotourism Association, and Valeria Klitsounova, chairwoman of Belarus Rural Tourism Association.

The methodology of the study has been a desk-based review of relevant literature and websites.

# Aims

The main aim of this study is

- to create a detailed scenario for the development of nature-based tourism in Polesia;
- to show international visitors the way to the protected areas of Polesia, and let them dive in the pure natural ecosystem;
- to initiate a discussion on Polesia on the regional and on governmental level about future development of nature- and ecotourism and to identify directions that would be supported by wide public;
- to formulate recommendations and a roadmap for developing a sustainable, low-impact and profitable nature tourism in Polesia region.



# Summary

Polesia is a vast lowland region on the border of Belarus, Ukraine, Poland and Russia. The area is covered in wetlands and forests and has huge wilderness areas. It also has a unique cultural heritage. Currently there is only limited tourism in the area, primarily rural farm stays and 'nuclear tourism' concentrated around the site of the Chernobyl disaster.

There are three potential groups of nature-based tourists that we can attract to Polesia. '*Silver tourists*', 50-70 years of age, are experienced travellers who enjoy natural, quiet environments and look for new experiences. They expect high value for money and are willing to pay more for authentic experiences. Europe's growing senior citizen population makes this a promising source market.

In addition, '*Young nature lovers*', 18 to 44-year-olds are the second largest segment for nature tourism. Most of them have travelled a lot and are increasingly interested in exploring new destinations. Finally, '*Green families*', families with kids are also an important, growing segment of nature-based tourism.

Looking forward, business as usual will mean that tourism continues to struggle. There are no major initiatives ongoing to improve tourism, and past projects appear to have been without follow-up. The persistent problems of the lack of information and services in English, the lack of visitor centres and routes, and the lack of funding for nature protection and income for the local communities will remain. A further problem is the poor coordination among park managers, local tour guides, and tourism service providers.

An even worse scenario is the construction of the E40 waterway, which will destroy the naturalness and authenticity of the region, opening it up to mass tourism, and will also impede the development of water tourism on small boats and kayaks.

Tourism can however thrive in the region. A precondition for this is the development of a Polesia Tourism Network with the right partners, and with local governance, transparency, monitoring and commitment. Tourism development needs to be underpinned by a Sustainable Tourism Development Strategy, including zoning for tourism, and a Tourism Marketing Plan.

We need a strong 'destination brand' in order to attract tourists to Polesia', in order to make Polesia distinctive and set it apart from all other nature tourism destinations. In this development scenario we identify '*European Amazon*' as the best candidate. The brand will need investment and careful management to be successful.

Financial support for making Polesia into a successful nature tourism destination is important. Potential funding sources are donors' support, the sponsorship of private and state business, private business investments, private personal donations, crowdfunding and state funding. The main donors who can generate funds for Polesia are the EU, USAID, the UN and other institutions of western countries.

# 1. Destination Polesia

Polesia is a vast, forested region, located in the border area of Belarus, Poland, Russia and Ukraine. It stretches across more than 900 km from west to east and measures 300 km at its widest point. The total area covers around 186.000 km<sup>2</sup> (Ukraine 94.000 km<sup>2</sup>, Belarus 62.000 km<sup>2</sup>, Poland 7.000 km<sup>2</sup>, Russia 23.000 km<sup>2</sup>).

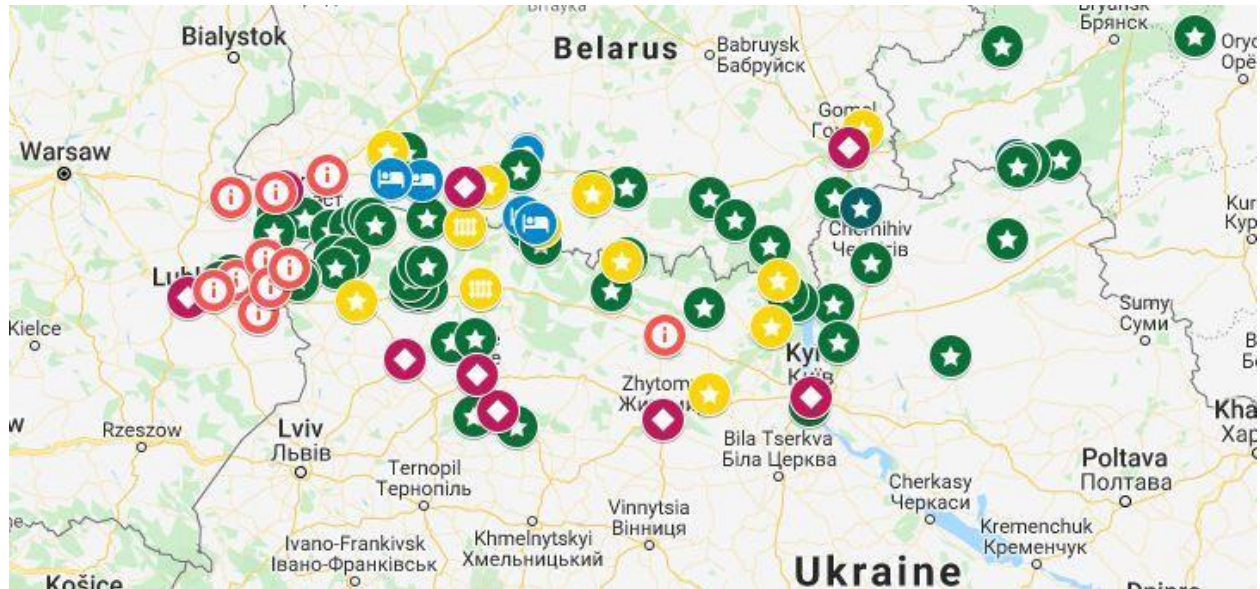
Polesia is one of the largest natural landscapes in Europe, it is a flat landscape; the ground smoothed and levelled by glaciation, with the maximum height difference across the region just 150 m. Yet it is precisely this feature that makes Polesia so special, with the low gradient allowing the Pripyat to flow very slowly for more than 700 km. In spring, countless wetlands form along the river as snow melts; during high water the Pripyat looks more like a large lake than a river (Cambridge Conservation Initiative 2019). Flood meadows in Polesia region are of the greatest significance for the preservation of species threatened with extinction in the world. For example, this unique pan-European location of nesting and migrating swampland bird species hosts over 1.5 million migratory birds annually (RiverWatch 2017).

Poland's part of Polesia or Western Polesie (also known as Polesie Podlaskie or Polesie Lubelskie), is located in the Lubelskie Voivodeship along the eastern borderlands of the country. The capital of the Voivodeship – Lublin - is the historical centre and the largest town in eastern Poland, nowadays a vibrant academic centre (12 universities) and the main gateway to Polesia. The main settlement of Western Polesie is Włodawa. The most important natural area is the Poleski National Park, established in 1990 – a vast area of moorland, where among others the European pond turtle inhabits the water (poland.travel 2019).

Ukrainian part of Polesia (also known as Polissia or Polisia) consists of the following six oblast: Volyn, Rivne, Zhytomyr, Kiev, Chernihiv, Sumy. The main tourism centres of “the Polesia recreational region” are Lutsk, Ostroh, Rivne, Shatsk (Malska, M 2007). Polesia has a large number of crystal clear lakes. There are many extremely valuable and sometimes inaccessible wetlands, which is why the area is called the Polissia Amazon. There are many nature parks, best known are Shatsky, Pripyat-Stokhid, Mezynsky (Greenways Ukraine (2019).



## [Destination Polesia - a collaborative tourist map](#)



Belarusian Polesia is located in the Brest and Gomel oblasts. One of the well-known characteristics of it is the presence of unique mires. The Pinsk (also Pripyat or Polesie) mires are a huge wetland territory, one of the largest in the world. They cover an area of almost 4.7 million hectares and are about 11 thousand years old. The Olmany Mires, one of Europe's largest mires, can be found here, covering an area of 100.000 ha. Two thousand years ago, the Greek historian Herodotus described region of nowadays Polesia in his History: 'After leaving this lake, the Gipanis River [as ancient Greeks called our Dnieper] is shallow and its fresh water is sweet for five days of sailing" (sb.by 2015). Herodotus wrote about the mysterious land Nevrida and a big sea located there. Probably it was the flooded Pripyat River Valley or it was really a sea, which is evidenced by seashells and ancient deposits of salts found in these places (belarus.by 2019).

In addition to wetlands, as much as 40% of Belarusian Polesia is covered by forests – mainly birch and pine. A specific feature of the region are oak forests, preserved in small woodlands.

Domestic tourism in Polesia is growing rapidly, but internationally Polesia is very little known. One exception is birdwatching tourism. Polesia is on the list of birdwatching and wildlife tours organized by specialized foreign tour operators such as Birdquest, Rockjumper Birding Tours.

Chernobyl is the only place within Polesia that is famous on the general tourism market. Still, very few people know that Chernobyl is situated in Polesia.

Today there is neither a tourist network or association of tourism, nor a cross-border cooperation in the field of tourism in Polesia. (Belarusian Association Country Escape, 2016). But, there has been some development projects in the last decade:

- *'Development of tourist information system for cross-border eco-tourism in the Euroregion Bug'*, was carried by Ecotourism Club, Lutsk (Ukraine), Brest Regional Agro-industrial Union (Belarus) and Lublin Regional Tourist Organisation (Poland) from 2014 to 2015. The project was co-funded by the European Union within the framework of the Cross-border Co-operation Programme Poland-Belarus-Ukraine (Polesie Turystyka 2016).
- *'Establishment of informational complex in the sphere of cross-border eco-tourism in the Euroregion Bug'* The project included marking of 7 ecotourism routes in Volyn Region, 4 ecotourism routes in Brest Region and 6 ecotourism routes in Lublin Voivodeship, the creation of cross-border bicycle route and holding a Cross-border Bike Ride tour through National Parks of the three countries and the creation of the Polish-Belarusian-Ukrainian cross-border tourism Cluster. (PI-by-ua.eu 2015). Unfortunately, there is no evidence, at least online, that this Polish-Belarusian-Ukrainian cross-border tourism Cluster is functioning, after the EU financed project ended.



## 1.1 Tourism on protected areas

Around the world visitors are increasingly travelling to destinations where they can experience unique natural features and authentic culture. This phenomenon has the potential to generate significant economic benefits for communities living in and around parks and other protected areas. These areas are typically places that represent a country's most significant flora, fauna, landscapes and geological formations and are among the best examples of balanced relationship between humans and nature (Drumm 2016).

Protected areas enable quality ecotourism (GEN 2019). They provide opportunities for visitors to immerse in experiencing nature and culture and to learn about the importance of biodiversity conservation and local culture.

When these opportunities are managed sustainably they:

- Create economic value from the ecosystem services that protected areas provide.
- Generate direct and indirect income for local stakeholders, creating incentives for conservation in local communities.
- Diversify conventional tourism models to include ecotourism.
- Attract new market niches, with higher spending capacities.
- Stimulate new business opportunities in and around protected areas (e.g. food, handicrafts, rentals, outdoor shops and wildlife guides).
- Strengthen destinations, with stakeholders collaborating in the development or consolidation of local clusters, increasing economic benefits.
- Gain the attention of local, regional and national government agencies as destinations worth promoting and supporting.
- Generate incentives locally to educate about protected areas and natural resources and to learn new skills — like guiding techniques, customer service or new languages (Drumm 2016).

These and more opportunities illustrate the potential of protected areas for local communities, particularly in less-known areas of Polesia. A rather extensive network of protected areas has been created in the region. The largest protected areas are Pripyatsky National Park, Polesie State Radioecological Reserve as well as reserves (landscape, biological, hydrological) of national (Sporovskiy, Pribuzhskoye Polesie, Olmany Mire, Morochno) and local (Yel, Topilovskoe) importance. The State Programme for Development of the System of Specially Protected Natural Areas for 2008–2014 of Belarus, has established recreation activities in over 26 preserves, improved tourism infrastructure to attract tourists to the national parks and actively developed ecological and botanical tourism (UNECE 2016).

The most attractive protected areas for tourism in Polesia, from West to East:

*The West Polesie Biosphere Reserve* was created in April 2002 on the area of 139.917 ha. One of the most important reasons for establishment of the area was the unique variety of nature in this part of Polesie and its location on the border of contrasting physiographic and ecological structures, the abundance of lakes, bogs, moors and forests, the presence of many relict and rare species and the unique importance of this region in the ecological structure of Europe. Central part of the Biosphere Reserve constitute the Polesie National Park. It is surrounded by 3 landscape parks: Leczna Lakeland Landscape Park in the west, Polesie Landscape Park in the centre and Sobibór Landscape Park in the east, joined together with the Polesie Landscape Protected Area (LTR Poland 2019).

The visitor centre is located in Urszulin, Poland. There are walking and bicycle trails, nature paths, observation towers, campsites and different kind of rural guest houses in the area. National park website <http://www2.poleskipn.pl/> provides up to date information.

*The Shatsky National Natural Park*, established in 1983, the area of 48.977 hectares is adjacent on the Ukrainian side of the border in Volyn Polesia. In the park there are 23 lakes with a total area of about 7 hectares (one of the largest lake groups in Europe). Due to high ecological and landscape criteria Park received two international diplomas: Ramsar and IBA. During spring and autumn more than 70.000 birds migrate via the lakes.

The park has a visitor centre, walking trails, camping sites. The website has information about a variety of accommodations and tourist services in the area (shatsk.com 2019).

*The Pribuzhskoe Polesie landscape reserve* was created in 2003, with an area of 48.024 hectares, in order to preserve the unique landscapes of the southern part of the Brest region, Belarus. In 2012, the international coordination Council of the UNESCO program “Man and biosphere” designated the transboundary biosphere reserve “West Polesie” that operates on the basis of three national parks – biosphere reserve “Pribuzhskoe Polesie” (Belarus), biosphere reserve “Shatsky” (Ukraine) and biosphere reserve “West Polesie” (Poland). In these cross-border areas are unique territories in scale Europe of preserved natural forest and wetland ecosystems.

Its website <http://brpp.by/> has the information about trails, accommodation, excursions and services and also rental of bicycles, canoes, kayaks and tents.

*The Bugski landscape reserve* was established in 1999 with a total surface of 7.566 hectares with the aim of conserving the unique natural landscape and to maintain the hydrological conditions required to protect the key biodiversity. In the Bugski reserve 29 species of plants and animals are found which are listed in the National Red Data Book of Belarus.

*The Sporovskiy biological reserve* is the largest (19384 hectares) complex of lowland swamps of Polesia. It was the first territory in Belarus, which received international protection status of Ramsar site. The Sporovskiye swamps, located in the floodplain of the Yaselda river, have been preserved almost in their original state enabling many endangered species of plants, animals and birds to survive. The flora of the reserve is very diverse - more than 600 species of vascular plants (topbelarus 2019). The largest European colony of aquatic warbler and an endangered plant species of lady's slipper listed in the International Red book, attract ecotourists from all over the world.

*The Pripjat-Stokhid National Nature Park* was created in 2007 to protect and unify a series of natural complexes of the Pripjat River and Stokhid River valleys in northwestern Ukraine. The park provides protection, research areas, and recreation representative of the meadows and wetlands of the Polissia biosphere region. The park supports two Ramsar wetlands of international importance, and are joined in a cross-boundary Ramsar wetland in Belarus. Website <http://www.pripjat-stohid.com.ua/> provides information about walking trails, bicycle routes, canoe-kayak routes on the rivers.

*The Olmany Mires Reserve*, covering an area of 100.000 hectares is one of Europe's largest natural complexes of bogs and transitional mires and is the largest natural swamp of its type in the Pripjat Polesie region. It borders Ukraine in the South and is located between the Lva and Stviga rivers. The Site is particularly important for nesting and migrating waterbirds, and supports more than 1% of the European population of the globally threatened greater spotted eagle *Clanga clanga*. Together with Perebrody Peatlands Ramsar Site in Ukraine (Site no.1402), Olmany Mires Zakaznik Ramsar Site is part of the Olmany - Perebrody Mires Transboundary Ramsar Site established in 2015. People use the Site for gathering berries and mushrooms and for recreational fishing.  
<https://rsis.ramsar.org/ris/1091>

*The Rivne Nature Reserve*, 42.288 km<sup>2</sup> is a strict nature reserve in the northwest of Ukraine, across the border from Olmany Mires, here are the largest untouched peat-bogs of Ukraine. Rivne Nature Reserve was created to protect and study the representative landscape of the Polesia region. Website <https://rivnenskyipz.blogspot.com/> is a blog in Ukrainian language.

*The Pripjatsky National Park* is one of the most popular tourist attractions in Belarus. It provides many different services and activities, such as sightseeing tours along ecological paths (European bison, the Amazon land of Polesie), motor ship and boat tours, fishing, ecological conferences, discussions, and meetings with researchers etc. Nature Museum demonstrates diverse landscapes of Belarusian Polesia with its rich flora and fauna. English language website <http://www.npp.by/en/> needs to be updated.

*The Middle Pripjat Landscape Reserve*, established in 1999, the flood bed of the famous Pripjat River is often referred to as the European Amazonia (UNECE 2016). Website of protected area provides information about bicycle routes, canoe routes on the river and walking trails. Accommodation in guesthouses is offered too.

Website <https://zaklun.by/>

*The territory of Turov meadow* biological reserve (the only non-state reserve in Belarus) is a key migration route connecting the regions of the North, East with the Mediterranean and even the African continent. It is also referred to as the main breeding place for waders in Belarus. For several years now the reserve holds regular activities aimed at preserving the existing ecosystem, attracting volunteers and tourists, and most importantly – to maintain the biological diversity of this territory. Every year the Wader festival takes place on Turov meadow.

*Mozyrsky and Yourievsky Ovrage (Mozyr Ravines)* are natural ravines that belong to the system of Mozyr ravines, the largest and oldest in Belarus. For our country, this is a rare and atypical biotope. Here you can often find rare species of plants, springs (Green Belarus 2015).

*Chernobyl Radiation and Ecological Biosphere Reserve*, 227000 hectares, established in 2016, for reservation of the most typical natural complexes Polissya in the natural state, ensure support and increase the barrier function of the Chernobyl exclusion zone.

Website <https://www.zapovidnyk.org.ua/>

*The Mizhrichynskiy Regional Landscape Park*, 1.000 km<sup>2</sup>, founded in 2002. The large wild area provides a habitat to many animals. Park is located between two large rivers, the Dnipro and Desna, from which the park's Ukrainian name meaning 'between the rivers' is derived. The Desna river forms the eastern boundary of the park, while the western and southern boundaries coincide with the border of Chernihiv region. There are many swamps, bogs, lakes and forests.

*The Polesie State Radiation-Ecological Reserve* was established in Belarus in 1988, two years after the Chernobyl disaster, a closed nature reserve to enclose the most affected territory of the country. While the area will remain inappropriate for human habitation for hundreds more years, wildlife has since flourished there. The reserve is not only one of the biggest in Europe (216.093 hectares) but also one-of-a kind in the world. Visits to the unique closed nature reserve in the Zone are possible with APB-Birdlife Belarus, website <http://birdingbelarus.by>, website of the reserve <http://www.zapovednik.by/>

*The Beremytske Nature Park*, is located in Chernihiv region, among the oldest Polissia forests and swamps, in the valley of the fast Desna River. Beremytse is part of European Rewilding Network (Rewilding Europe 2019). It is a reserve of wild animals and infrastructure project with eco trails, zoo, museum of wild cats, stable, campsite, conference hall, cafe and souvenir shop. Website <https://beremytske.com.ua/en/> provides information about programs with animals, walking, rental of summer houses, tents.

*The Dnepro-Sozhskiy Biological Reserve* established in 2005 to preserve rare species of plants and animals, covers 14 556 hectares. It is located between the rivers Dnieper and Sozh, 1 kilometer from Loev and 60 from Gomel. The territory of the reserve is 80% forests - beautiful floodplain oak forests and high-growth pine forests. The landscapes are diverse birch groves, flood meadows. Information about accommodation, rental of equipment and guide services can be found on the website of the reserve <https://dnepro-sozh.by/>

*The Desna-Starogutsky National Nature Park* covers a middle section of the Desna River in northeastern Ukraine, representing the variety of wetland and mixed forest landscapes of the eastern Polesia region. The park contains two sections, one on the floodplains of the Desna, the other in the southern region of the Bryansk forest on the Russian border. The area is relatively clean, ecologically, being clear of the radiological zone and being in a non-industrial region. A component of the park is a Ramsar wetland site of international importance 'Desna River Floodplains'. It is also a component of the Desniakysi Biosphere Reserve, designated in 2009 by the UNESCO Man and Biosphere (MAB) Reserve Programme. Website <http://www.nppds.inf.ua/> has information about walking trails.

## 1.2 Wildlife and birdwatching tourism

Polesia is home to nationally and internationally-threatened wildlife including charismatic species like bison, bears, wolves and lynx (Cambridge Conservation Initiative 2019). **Wildlife viewing** and **birdwatching** are the flagship activities of nature travel and ecotourism industry. Birdwatching is a passion of millions of people all over the world – for instance, in Great Britain, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds has over a million members among its ranks.

While more than one million hectares of the Polesie area were drained between 1966 and 1990, large parts of the Pripjat floodplain are still exposed to the natural flooding regime. This created habitats such as alluvial oak forests, wet meadows and lowland fen mires. The land is used for hay making, pasture and fishing and is extremely rich in biodiversity. Polesia has preserved unique bird habitats like marches and free-flowing rivers. Many rivers in Europe (and in Polesia, too) were channeled, and their riverbeds were straightened for the convenience of agriculture. Therefore, the rivers with natural riverbeds are as rare and valuable natural phenomena as geysers in Iceland.

Polesia is destined to become one of the front-rank bird watching destinations in Europe. The region supports numerous species of nationally and internationally threatened flora and fauna. The yearly gathering of Eurasian wigeon and godwits on the floodplains of the Pripjat is the largest in Central and Eastern Europe, and the vast natural floodplain meadows and mires provide critical spawning grounds for many fish species. In spring the Pripjat flows over a dozen kilometers from one riverbank to the other and resembles a sea with islands and forests surrounded by water. Ruffs, birds with magnificent collars come to flood area in spring to feed a bit on their way from Africa to tundra (34Travel.me 2019).

There are a lot of well-preserved bird habitats in Polesia, not existing anywhere else in Europe. Mainly, these are the combinations of different types of marshes. The best-known symbol of unspoiled Polesian nature is the endangered Aquatic Warbler (*Acrocephalus paludicola*). More than 50 percent (about 30.000 pairs) of the world population of this small, globally threatened, wetland songbird breed in the wetlands of Polesie (Birdquest 2019). The endless water-covered areas of the Pripyat floodplain hold thousands of waterbirds, among them Terek and Marsh Sandpipers, Great Snipe, Avocet, Black-tailed Godwit, Black, Whiskered and White-winged Terns, Bittern, Black Stork (Branta Tours 2019).

In 1995, a first Belarus-German ornithological expedition explored the vast floodplain, most parts of which are only accessible by helicopter during flood events, and put the Pripyat on the conservation map. APB-BirdLife Belarus (created in 1998) joined up with specialists of the National Academy of Sciences and the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental Protection of Belarus. They have since been supported by RSPB, BirdLife partner in the UK, and the United Nations office in Belarus. (Ramsar 2002)

Important Bird Areas that contain areas which qualify as Ramsar Sites are

- **8 locations in Belarusian** Polesia: Zvanec, Sporovski, Selets, Vygonoshchanskoe, Mid-Pripyat, Olmany, Lower-Pripyat, Flood-plain of Sozh River
- **3 in Poland side** of Polesia: Bubnow Marshes, Middle Bug River Valley, Chelm Calcareous Marshes
- **14 in Ukrainian** Polesia: Shatzki Lakes, Zakhidnyj Bug River Valley, Turija River Valley, Styr River Valley, Cheremsky Mire, Stokhid River Valley, Syra Pogonya Mire, Ushomirsky Game Reserve, Novograd-Volynsky Game Reserve, Dniprovskiy-Teterovskis Game Reserve, Bondar Marsh, Sosynskiy Protected Area, Korotchenkivski Meadows, Sejnm River Valley (BirdLife International 2001) .

Polesia is a wonderful place for bird watching at any time of the year. In the springtime birds come back from overwintering areas to their breeding grounds. Then, the breeding season begins, which results in greater activity of birds related to mating, courtship, building nests, incubating eggs and raising nestlings. Breeding time is the best time to watch birds. In the summer and autumn spectacular bird journeys to overwintering areas take place. Hundreds of thousands of birds migrate in characteristic V-formations, huge flocks or small groups as well as individually. They mainly fly by day, however, there are species that fly exclusively at night. During autumn migrations in Polesie there are many places where musters of white as well as black storks or staging areas full of cranes can be observed.

Coming here even in winter is worth it since several species of birds come here for winter from Northern and Northern-Eastern Europe. Then, Polesie becomes a winter 'warm country'. Everyone who comes here will not only find interesting bird species, but will also be captivated by charming landscapes of Polesia which are not to be found in other parts of Poland and Europe (Birdwatching Polesie 2019).

## 1.3 Nuclear tourism

Chernobyl is the most famous city of Polesia, known for the accident in the nearby nuclear power plant on 26 April 1986. The Soviets evacuated more than 300.000 people from around 2.000 square miles around the plant, while the said area is nowadays known as the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone. The old power plant was encased in an immense concrete sarcophagus for containment. However, what took place in the Exclusion Zone after everyone was evacuated is a constant topic of disagreement in the scientific field. For years, studies conducted in the zone revealed that fauna and flora had disappeared, while the life forms that survived mutated their genes. Newer studies depict the fact that the wildlife in the area and the plant come back, leading to diversification in regards to species. In other words, it is a living experiment about what the world would look like after humans are extinct (Brutal Tours 2019).

The accident at Chernobyl nuclear power plant resulted in complete abandonment of a huge territory in Polesia both on Belarus and Ukrainian side, creating the largest ever experiment as to what nature does when people leave. 30 years later the area is the nearest that Europe has to a wilderness and gives key lessons on how wildlife doesn't need us (APB-Birdlife Belarus (2019)).

There have been two different approaches of 'nuclear tourism' from Belarus and Ukraine. Two years after the Chernobyl disaster in the Belarusian part of the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone the Polesia State Radiation-Ecological Reserve covering a total area of 1.313 km<sup>2</sup> was established on July 18, 1988 and closed to visitors. Belarus only recently, on April 6th 2019 opened its part of Chernobyl Zone for visitors. Visits to the unique closed nature reserve in the Zone are possible with APB-Birdlife Belarus, website <http://birdingbelarus.by>, website of the reserve <http://www.zapovednik.by/>

From Ukrainian side illegal tourism to Chernobyl Exclusion Zone started soon after the accident. In 2011, Chernobyl, site of the world's worst catastrophe at a nuclear power plant, was officially declared a tourist attraction (Johnson 2014). There have been growing numbers of visitors to the Exclusion Zone each year, and there are now daily trips from Kiev offered by multiple companies. In addition, multiple day excursions can be easily arranged with Ukrainian tour operators. Most overnight tourists stay in a hotel within the city of Chernobyl, which is located within the Exclusion Zone. According to an exclusion area tour guide, as of 2017, there are approximately 50 licensed exclusion area tour guides in total working for approximately nine companies. Visitors must present their passports when entering the Exclusion Zone, and are screened for radiation when exiting both at the 10 km checkpoint and at the 30 km checkpoint.

A Private tour to the Chernobyl exclusion zone (including the city of Pripjat) is a special tour designed for individuals or groups who would like to explore the zone at their own pace, with their own preferences, on their own date and with no other people. For this tour you can choose your date, time, pick-up place (from Kiev) and your own preferences of what to see in Chernobyl exclusion zone. Private tours allow visitors of Chernobyl zone to see places usually hidden from



the group tours and enter parts of the city of Pripyat and the exclusion zone rarely seen on tours at all. Additionally, only private tours can show you the breath-taking Chernobyl nuclear power plant, including the control room and underground bunker. For your private tour you can choose your pick up place and transportation - even retro cars from Soviet union times. Old Soviet uniforms for your photo shooting will bring back the atmosphere from 1986 on this unique journey (Lonely Planet 2019).

Travelers have the chance to observe various Belarusian villages, 95 of them being in the reserve. Before the disaster took place, over 22.000 people lived here, which is why everything feels like it was frozen in time. Hence, even though the buildings were affected by the passing time, you will get the chance to see how people abandoned their villages because everything looks like you are back in time. What is even more interesting and surprising, is that you can get the chance to spot wildlife in the area, including species such as foxes, giant catfish, wild horses, bison, bears or even wolves (Brutal Tours 2019).

The Polesky State Radiation-Ecological Reserve hosts many rare and endangered species, which thrive here thanks to the virtual absence of humans. The area has seen returning Bears, rebounding Wolves and Boars and prospering herds of European Bison and Przewalski's Horses released in the Zone after the accident. Camera traps in the area have captured evidence of the reappearance of extremely rare native Lynx. The Reserve is now home to the rare Greater Spotted Eagle, Eagle Owl and White-tailed Eagle (APB-Birdlife Belarus (2019)).

## 1.4 Cultural heritage of Poleshuks

Polesia is a region covered in forests and swamps. Due to their relative isolation, the Poleshuks (indigenous population of Polesia) rarely interacted with inhabitants of other regions. Poleshuks did not leave their own region, and foreigners did not travel there often. Therefore, old traditions of the deep Polesia have been very well preserved.

The language of Poleshuks (a mixture of Belarusian, Polish and Ukrainian), clothes, houses, festive rites, food, folklore – differ from those in other parts of Ukraine and Belarus. Moreover, even within Polesia itself every town and village is different, and by the way people look like, talk or act one can identify their place of origin.

There are about 100 architectural, historical, artistic and archaeological heritage sites of state importance. Wooden churches of Polesia are one of the best examples. Of particular importance for nature-based tourism are local museums and cultural centres, which transmit first-hand experience of traditional life in Polesia.

Museum of Folk Art 'Bezdzehski fartuszek' ('Bezdzeh Apron') displays a collection of 300 self-woven aprons with each one different from the rest. The exhibition also shows items of peasants' every day's life and the interior of their house, tools for flax processing, patterns of folk clothing items, modern embroidery and weaving. On a tour, local people will tell about the life of Belarusians and traditions of folk fashion. Often tours are enriched by playing and singing of local folk groups. In Bezdezh one can see a rare dance with pitchfork 'Nikita' (museum.by 2019).

Many traditions of Polesia have been preserved until today because people have carefully kept them for generations. A vivid example of this is the Museum of folk medicine in Strelno (Brest oblast), the only one of such kind in Belarus. There one can find 110 different species of local plants and learn how they are used for health purposes. For young mothers there is a special exposition that reveals the secrets of caring for small children. Tasting herbal teas at the end of a tour enhances the pleasant experience in the museum.

In the villages of Polesia, the tradition of authentic Polesian singing has been preserved. Stari Koni, Komory, Svalovychi — in these and some other villages in Polesia, there are still people who remember the old songs that were known and sung by everyone. Local people used to learn singing easily and naturally. It was like breathing. Nowadays, when the number of villagers is sometimes not more than 30 and most of them are elderly, singing on the streets is a rare occurrence. Despite it all, there are some local people who still remember, preserve, sing, and even teach to sing. (Kapra 2019).

*Bortnytstvo* (wild-honey farming) was especially developed in regions situated within the Irpin, Slutch and Pripyat Rivers. The forests here are rich in pine trees, where bees like to build their nests. The honey was harvested and stored, and with the advent of spring, foreign merchants who travelled along the nearby trading route, visited these areas to buy up the golden nectar.

Despite the fact that many sources claim that wild-honey farming has disappeared, today it is possible to meet people in Polesia who have rethought and reworked this concept in a modern way without losing the original traditional approach. (Angeljuk 2019).

Same type of traditional wild bee-keeping is also living heritage on Belarus side of Polesia, see video on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NhXGpOMJ-ew> .

Special attention in Motol Museum of Folk Art (Brest oblast) is paid to the preservation and promotion of spoken folk art. There is a collection of folk poetics: holidays, customs, rituals, sayings, proverbs, jokes, songs, children's folklore. The Museum offers a number of interactive programs for visitors. For younger audience, a set of Museum-pedagogical classes under the general name 'Visiting Grandmother Elena' has been developed. It reveals a rich potential of folk pedagogy. For adult visitors, a ceremonial tour 'Live sound' based on the year-round calendar cycle, lecture-tour "Wedding round loaf" and other programs are offered. All creative activities of the Museum are held with the participation of folk group 'Motol neighbors'. This museum was honoured with a special award by the President of the Republic of Belarus in 2001.

An unusual track which is 750 mm wide (a standard railroad track is 1520 mm wide) starts from the station town Antonivka and extends to 106 km to the station Zarichne. It is the longest narrow-gauge railway in Europe. On its way — the pristine beauty of pine forests, blue lakes and little-known attractions for tourists (Haran 2018).

Cultural and natural heritage is already attracting tourism in Polesia region. There are thematic ethnographic routes, such as 'Patterns and fairy tales of Polesie', 'Polesie patterns' and ecoroutes, such as *Bobrovaya* ('Beaver way'), Mozyr Wildlife Photography and others. Additionally, nation-wide and international events take place in the region. The most famous are mowing contest Sporovskiye Senokosy ('Sporava Haymaking') (Beryoza District, Brest Oblast), Festival of ethno-cultural traditions *Zov Polesia* ('Call of Polesie') (Lyaskovichi agrotown, the Pripyatsky National Park), culinary festival Motalskiya Prysmaki (Ivanovo District, Brest Oblast).

The natural and cultural heritage of Polesia demands special preservation and protection, including the opportunity to enlist it in UNESCO World Heritage List.

## 1.5 Agritourism

Farm stays are one of the largely represented types of accommodation in Polesia region. As an example, there are 388 rural homestays in Brest oblast and 156 homestays in Gomel oblast. Agri- and ecotourism has been rapidly developing in Belarus since 2005 with the number of tourist farm-stays growing from 34 to 2473 in 2018.

But a rural farm stay is more than sleeping place for tourists. Instead, it can create a whole complex of experience for tourists at one place because it combines all components of value creation chain. Therefore, agri- and ecotourism is one of the best ways to develop Polesia as a sustainable tourist destination.

It is worth pointing out that the absolute majority (up to 90%) of all agritourists have come to Belarus as individual self-organized visitors. The number of contracts between them and agri- and ecotourism agents reached 70.790 in 2018, which was equal to 422.300 served tourists.

Agri- and ecotourists spend in Belarus five days on average (Belstat 2019). 89% of them are the Belarusians. Foreign tourists represent 79 countries, such as Russia, Poland, Ukraine, Germany and Israel.

This type of tourism is closely connected with responsible behaviour of travellers to the place of visiting. Staying at the agritourist farmstead combines learning local culture, including local cuisine, language, folklore, traditions etc. with exploring natural richness by the way of environmentally friendly, low-impact activities, such as hiking, swimming, picking berries and mushrooms and alike.

Because staying at a farm stay is about the whole visitor's travel experience, many local service providers that contribute to creating this experience can be involved. An efficient way to unite stakeholders is cluster formation. In other words, many different tourism service providers, such as farm stays' owners, artisans, historical clubs' members etc. can unite their resources and create a complex tourism product, which they promote under one brand. Beside forming cooperation, creating an attractive and competitive tourist product also implies the usage of innovative approaches on the principles of creative economy: ecomuseums, thematic farm stays, educational farms.

In the Polesia region, there are several successful examples of agritourism clusters. One of them is 'Muchavec Pantry', which offers various thematic routes (ecological, ethnographic, gastronomic) around Belarusian Polesia as well as opportunities to experience cultural traditions, take part in national celebrations, learn craftwork and communicate with local people. Cooperation between rural tourism providers and nature reserves' representatives can create a strong synergy effect. On the one side, people working in nature reserves are experts about natural territory, but they lack modern infrastructure and financial resources to create a competitive tourist product. On the other side, when creating tourism products, farm stays'

owners invest their own money and therefore, build nice infrastructure. Besides, many farm-stays are located in picturesque areas close to natural reserves. So, cooperation between farm stays and natural reserves can exist in the following forms:

- organizing trainings for farm stays' owners and educating them to serve as nature guides,
- providing equipment for active tourism (boats, bicycles).

Different national and international initiatives were implemented to support the promotion of cultural and natural heritage of Polesia region, including:

- The State program of socio-economic development and integrated use of natural resources of Pripyat Polesie for 2010-2015;
- The project 'Clima-East: Conservation and sustainable management of peatlands in Belarus to minimize carbon emissions and help ecosystems to adapt to climate change, while contributing to the overall mitigation and adaptation effort (EU/UNDP, 2013-2017);
- The project 'Development of tourist information system for cross-border eco-tourism in the Euroregion Bug' (co-funded by the EU within the framework of the Cross-border Co-operation Programme Poland-Belarus-Ukraine, 2014-2015);
- Local Entrepreneurship and Economic Development Project (USAID/UNDP, 2011-2014). Within the framework of Local Entrepreneurship and Economic Development Project, seven tourism destinations in Brest and Gomel oblast have designed strategies for ecotourism development: '*Amazonia of Paliessie*', '*Pinsk Paliessie*', '*Valley of the Jaselda River*', '*Belaviezhski Route*', '*Green Ring of Baranavichy*', '*Motal Way*', '*Muchavec Pantry*'. The project also aimed at forming new partnerships and cooperations, strengthening capacity building, studying best practices of sustainable tourism in Belarus and abroad. Apart from that, the project supported many local initiatives. For example, 'Muchavec Pantry' cluster received a real *drakkar* (a type of Viking warships), which is used in entertaining programs for tourists.

The Ivanovo district and the Motal rural council in the Brest and Gomel oblasts have developed their own strategies for sustainable development, where tourism was given priority in the social and economic development of the territories.

The programs of village tours give also an opportunity to enjoy the following activities: getting acquainted with a traditional village lifestyle like milking a cow or a goat, taking part in the harvest, mowing the grass, gathering of berries or flowers, horseback riding and admiring local sights (Belarus Intourist 2019).

## 1.6 Flood tourism

Two thousand years ago, the Greek historian Herodotus described region of nowadays Polesia in his History: *“After leaving this lake, the Gipanis River [as ancient Greeks called our Dnieper] is shallow and its fresh water is sweet for five days of sailing”* (sb.by 2015). Herodotus wrote about the mysterious country Nevrida and a big sea located there. Probably it was the flooded Pripyat River Valley or it was really a sea, which is evidenced by seashells and ancient deposits of salts found in these places (belarus.by 2019).

During the flood season Pripyat indeed resembles a sea; the forests and villages on its banks remind small islands (34travel.me 2019). Flood is a natural phenomenon in Polesia, people have adjusted their lifestyle to floods, this why the regions is often called The Amazonia of Europe.

Spring high water is a characteristic phase of the natural hydrological regime of the rivers of Polesia. They are accompanied by floods of the river, which at the maximum water level rise acquire the character of catastrophic events, leading to the flooding of human settlements, agricultural land, roads, etc. The flood in the spring is formed each year as a result of snowmelt and rainfall. It usually begins in the first half of March, but in some years it can be shifted to February or April. Average long-term duration of flooding of floodplain is 80 -110 days, and in some years it can be up to 150 -180 days. The width of the spring flood on the Pripyat varies from 5 to 15 km and in some areas it is 1-2 km, the largest is in the area of the town of Pinsk and reaches 30 km. The duration of spring floods on small rivers varies from 40 to 45 days (Volchaka 2016).

The second most important, after the spring flood, are rain floods. Maximum flow of the rain floods are formed, by heavy rains, as the showers at the same time do not cover the entire territory of the catchment. Rain flooding, unlike floods, occur irregularly and the magnitude of maximum flow and floods layer are usually significantly smaller than the maximum of flood. However, the rain floods in 1952, 1960, 1974, 1993, 1998 in many watercourses and alignments on the most of the Pripyat basin exceeded the spring flood. In relation to climate change, since 1988 on the rivers there are more cases when the highest level for the year was observed not during the spring flood but during the summer flooding and more often during winter flooding. For example, the post of Mozyr on r. Priapyat of 118 years of instrumental observations noted 19 cases in which the highest annual level was not found during the spring flood but during the summer and winter flooding, and 9 of them are recorded in the last 13 years. In the most rainy years (1908, 1917, 1927, 1928, 1923, 1952, 1979) the rivers of Polesia held 3-4 floods in the season. The average duration of the summer floods is about 15 days. The most striking high water flooding of recent years was in 1993 (Volchaka 2016).

Regular natural flooding of Polesia could be also developed into the tourism season, here an example from Estonia can be studied (Millard 2014). The flooding when the snow melts means that you can canoe through dense pine forest, as the runoff causes the water level to rise up to five meters, well and truly covering the floodplain and the forest (Millard 2014). An Estonian

region of Soomaa national park hit by floods every spring, uses this natural phenomenon to attract visitors and organise canoe tours through flooded territories. Flood is called Fifth Season by local people and can raise the water levels by as much as five meters (Reuters 2013). Soomaa National Park is the most popular wilderness tourism destination of the Baltic countries. Its tourism products are based on wilderness experiences, the uniqueness of Soomaa and its cultural heritage, and the quality services that are offered by the local tourism entrepreneurs (Ramsar 2012). Tourists explore flooded landscape by canoe during Estonia's '**fifth season**' (Reuters 2019).



## 2. Profiles of potential nature-based tourists

One of the early adventure travellers who visited Polesia in 1934 was American explorer Louise Arner Boyd (Ananich, A 2019). Thanks to her, the world saw a vast region of marshes and rivers in all its complexity, uniqueness and originality. *“This entire shallow depression is a country of forests and marsh... It is a region of ancient settlement, but man has modified the original landscape less here than elsewhere in western Europe”* (Boyd 1936). Today adventure and nature tourism accounts for about a fifth of all international travel, making it a key segment. Nature- and ecotourists have a passion for nature. They are interested in natural landscapes, flora and fauna, new and authentic experiences, increasingly at non-traditional destinations (CBI 2016).

European nature and ecotourists are generally:

- well-educated
- well-travelled
- from higher socio-economic backgrounds

What motivates these tourists is the natural environment of the places they visit. They like to learn about the lifestyles of people living there. Nature tourism is based on experiences directly related to nature.

Nature tourism is closely related to:

- adventure tourism
- rural tourism
- agritourism
- wildlife tourism
- community-based tourism

European nature and ecotourists are generally very active outdoor people. They are adventurous and like to enjoy nature and culture actively, for example by going on walking or cycling tours. Customized itineraries are increasingly popular, as well as adding wellness and transformative elements to adventure trips.

*Adventure tourism* combines physical activity with nature and/or cultural learning. The Adventure Travel Trade Association defines it as *“trips that provide experiences (both mental and physical) to places that are novel or unique to the traveller, emphasise the natural environment, and provide challenge through experiences of culture, activities that promote physical health, and excitement/fun”*. It varies from soft to hard adventure.

Examples of soft adventure tourism activities are:

- birdwatching/wildlife observation
- canoeing/kayaking/rafting
- cycling
- diving/snorkelling
- hiking/walking
- horse riding
- surfing/sailing

Hard adventure tourism activities include:

- caving
- climbing
- kite surfing
- paragliding
- trekking

Health and safety are important to European nature and ecotourists. They often inquire about the safety of their destination. Vehicles and accommodation also have to be safe. Guides should have good local knowledge, and should know which places are safe to visit and which are not. Safety is crucial, especially because some destination countries for adventure tourism are politically unstable. Most commercial tour operators don't offer holidays to countries that their Ministry of Foreign Affairs has declared unsafe. Fortunately according to recent The Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Report 2019, by World Economic Forum Ukraine has been improving most in safety and security among all countries in the World. The current score of Ukraine is 4,8 of 7 (Focus.ua 2019).

For most adventure and nature tourists, **authenticity** is more important than luxury. They like unique, small-scale accommodation that is run by local people and preferably reflects the local nature and culture. However, they are becoming more demanding in terms of standards of facilities and comfort. For example, they require clean rooms, good meals and comfortable beds. Ecotourists prefer accommodation with a minimum impact on their destination. This can range from budget-conscious eco-lodges to luxurious eco-hotels.

European tourists mainly choose a nature holiday to enjoy the quality of natural, unspoiled landscapes. This is often more important than the level of facilities. In recent years, authenticity has become a major factor in tourism. This is not expected to change any time soon. European tourists seek unique, meaningful experiences that they have not tried before (CBI 2016). Polesia has great natural and cultural resources to offer such experiences.

Nature and ecotourists also like to discover the local culture and its people. To that end, they are keen to interact with locals. This trend is expected to continue in the coming years. Some examples of activities they are interested in:

- visits to cultural heritage sites or local communities
- staying in an accommodation run by local people
- participating in workshops with local people
- educational activities

Based on our desk research we propose following three target groups for nature-based tourism in Polesia:

- Silver adventurers
- Younger nature lovers
- Green families with kids

## 2.1 Silver Adventurers

Nature tourism is especially popular with older Europeans, which are its largest target group. Tourists in this segment are between 50-70 years of age and their children have left home. Many are experienced travellers who enjoy natural, quiet environments and look for new experiences. They expect high value for money and are willing to pay more for authentic experiences. They generally seek higher standards of comfort than younger age groups.

Europe's growing senior citizen population makes this a promising source market. Seniors are healthier and wealthier than previous generations and are more flexible in terms of travel periods than other groups. They are especially interested in experience holidays that combine nature, culture, soft adventure activities and encounters with locals (CBI 2016).

Unique experiences are important, today's senior tourists are more experience-driven than previous generations. They like to be active, learn, discover and enjoy new experiences. Another key to engaging senior tourists is to appeal to their senses. They tend to find a travel experience that incorporates taste, touch, smell and sound more memorable.

Compared to non-adventure travellers, senior adventure travellers are more likely to use professional services such as guides, instructors, tour operators, or other services (ATTA 2013). Senior tourists are keener on package travel than younger age groups. The main reason for them to choose a package holiday is that they find package tours more reliable. Many senior tourists require detailed information. They want a structured schedule that tells them what they are going to do and when. They also generally prefer to travel in groups of 20-25 people, as they like to meet other people and feel more secure in a group.

European senior tourists generally:

- are more willing to spend money on travel
- are looking for new experiences and are willing to pay a higher price for them
- are able to enjoy longer holidays as they have fewer work or family commitments
- prefer to travel outside of the peak season, saving money and avoiding crowds
- spend more time planning their trip than younger age groups
- frequently use word-of-mouth information to make decisions
- use more traditional media than younger travellers, such as newspapers and television

However, needs and motivations may differ among European senior tourists. Where some travel for rest and relaxation, others travel to undertake physical activities or to learn about other cultures. Seniors are looking for more adventurous holidays, they are healthier than ever and have a more active lifestyle than previous generations. This is also reflected in their holidays. They are increasingly interested in soft adventure activities: light physical activities combined with interaction with nature or cultural learning. This trend is expected to continue in the coming years (CBI 2016).

In their search for new experiences, European seniors are expected to increasingly visit less known developing country destinations.

Tips:

- Focus on older tourists, as this is the largest segment for nature and ecotourism.
- Emphasise the unique, authentic features of your product in your marketing.
- Engage good and knowledgeable guides, as this segment is very interested in interpretation and education.
- Use both the Internet and traditional media for promotion.

## 2.2 Younger Nature Lovers

18 to 44-year-olds are the second largest segment for nature tourism. Most of them have travelled a lot and/or worked or studied abroad. They are increasingly interested in exploring new destinations further away. There are two groups of younger nature tourists:

- high income, little time
- low income, more time.

*High income, little time*, these are young professionals with high incomes but limited time to travel. They are mostly between 31-44 years old. They often travel in couples, although there is also a singles market within this age group. The people in this group are looking for unusual 'once-in-a-lifetime' experiences. They want to fit as much into their holiday as possible. Comfort is important to them.

*Smaller daily budgets, much more time*, this group is mostly between 18-30 years old. Think of backpackers and gap year travellers. Their daily budgets are small but they travel over longer periods of time, anywhere between a month and a year. They choose cheaper accommodation, are keen to engage with local communities and experience local activities and products.

*Younger nature lovers* are increasingly interested in small group travel (up to 12 people). Travelling in small groups has several benefits, such as meeting like-minded people, sharing a memorable experience, safety, and online networking before and after the trip. The small size of the group also allows travellers to have a more immersive experience.

Travelers are increasingly more connected, nature and adventure travellers also rarely leave without a phone or tablet to capture their holiday moment or stay in touch with loved ones. This trend is breaking down geographic boundaries and allowing travellers to venture further afield than ever before. The Internet helps bring market access to adventure tourism businesses located in the most remote corners of the World. From small guiding outfits to big hotels, tourism businesses need a reliable internet connection, a website, and other online platforms to successfully market and effectively communicate with clients (World Tourism Organization 2014). Younger nature and adventure travellers increasingly research and plan their trip online. To gather information and share experiences they use:

- peer review sites, like TripAdvisor and Zoover
- travel forums, like Lonely Planet's Thorn Tree forum
- social media, like Instagram, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube.

*Personal recommendations* from family and friends are also important. Online research is a trend that has increased exponentially over the past years. Although growth has peaked, the use of internet to research tourism will continue to increase. It is predicted to remain the most important research channel for years to come.

## 2.3 Green families with children

Families with kids is also an important, growing segment of nature-based tourism. Families are becoming more quality and price conscious. They seek high-quality facilities and the right balance of safety and fun. Their holidays should combine fun with cultural enrichment and higher-end experiences. All-inclusive holidays are especially popular among families, due to the convenience and control over expenditure. Eco-awareness already starts in school, making children very interested in ecotourism.

### Tips:

- If you want to target families, offer family-friendly accommodation. For example, adjoining room options, a children's programme, a playground or a pool.
- On the trails educational entertaining materials should be created from zero-waste materials located at eye level, visit centres should plan the exposure taking into account interactive techniques for teaching and learning about nature
- Package your product with family-friendly, memorable experiences. Include fun, educational, unique and safe activities.
- Offer special discounts and all-inclusive prices for families. This appeals to more budget conscious families as well.
- The family tourism market is very broad. Work with specialised family travel tour operators.

### **Selecting smaller specialised tour operators**

Nature Adventure travellers are more likely to use professional services, such as tour operators and guides, than non-adventure travellers. Especially when it comes to lesser-known developing countries, or more challenging adventure tourism activities. Tour operators therefore remain the most important trade channel. Smaller European tour operators specialised in nature tourism or offer the best opportunities (CBI 2016).

## 3. Scenarios of nature-based tourism in Polesia

Tourism development analysis of previous EU financed projects have indicated that the strongest assets of Polesia is the natural environment, and the weakest points: poorly-developed tourist and technical infrastructure, irrational development of West Polesie and insufficient tourist marketing (Polesie Turystyka 2016).

Three scenarios for nature based tourism have developed by this study:

- 3.1 Business as usual continues
- 3.2 Building E40 and destruction of Polesia nature values
- 3.3 European nature tourism champion scenario

### 3.1 Business as usual

There has been made several efforts to improve the tourism cooperation within the last decade. Belarusian Agro- and Ecotourism Association '*Country Escape*' together with Greifswald University (Germany) has implemented the project "*Establishing Rural Tourism Clusters in Belarus: Innovation, Integration and Institutionalization as a basis for sustainable rural development*". In collaboration with the Institute of Economy of the Academy of science the project developed recommendations for tourism cluster development. (Greenbelarus 2013)

The agreement on creating Polish-Belarusian-Ukrainian cross-border tourism cluster was signed in 2014 by the President of the Lublin Regional Tourist Organisation, Head of Volyn tourism cluster, and the Chairman of the Brest tourism cluster during the conference "*Development of tourism as a way to increase competitiveness of the region*", which was organised within the cooperation project in the Euroregion Bug (IPBU.01.02.00-78-540/11) (pl-by-ua.eu 2014).

A two years project - "*Establishment of informational complex in the sphere of cross-border ecotourism in the Euroregion Bug*" was carried out from 2014 to 2015. The project aimed to improve the quality and quantity of tourist services, tourist information about tourist objects, tourist safety and availability of the unique natural landscapes of Polesia. It also aimed to contribute to create a positive tourist image of the Polesia territory on the international tourist market through promotion of the international ecotourism brand name "*Polissia*". During the project period, partners jointly participated in 5 tourism exhibitions (Keep.eu 2019) However, these efforts have had no continuation during the last five years. These activities ended when project ended, cooperation in collaborative marketing across the borders has stopped when the project was over. Website of Polesia Turystyka (<http://polesie-turystyka.pl/en/>) has not been updated for 4 years, and as a result it is not actually contributing to "*a positive tourist image of the Polesia territory on the international tourist market*".



Without taking a tourism cooperation to the next level it is likely that next 10 years tourism development will follow the model of the last 10 years, and the problems of today will continue. Business as usual scenario means the lost opportunities to build a successful ecotourism economy, based upon great natural potential of Polesia. Some naturally attractive spots become overcrowded, wild uncontrolled development cause the overuse of nature in these places and disturbance of wildlife in their sensible habitats. Illegal hunting and fishing will continue to be part of Business As Usual.

Some more characteristics of the '*business as usual*' tourism scenario in Polesia:

- Not enough tourism information in English
- Not enough guide service in English
- Not enough trails & routes
- Not enough visitor centres
- No income from tourism to nature conservation
- Almost no income for local communities

The root causes for such poor tourist development are the unclear definition of roles between park managers, local tour guides, service providers and other types of private businesses. Lack of understanding leads to the weak cooperation for tourism development. Development agencies create tourism development project not for solving real bottlenecks of tourism and helping small local service provider to improve, but for receiving EU grants, and running their agencies towards the next project. Some recommendations on how to improve tourism cooperation has been given by Cross-Border Cooperation Programme Poland-Belarus-Ukraine, and listed in their publication "*Thematic handbook on tourism development*" (Hrytsku-Andriesh 2015). Some more recommendation we have gathered from the best practice of many other European examples of tourism in and around protected areas. How to overcome the challenges, and make Polesia into *European nature tourism champion*, please see scenario No 3.

## 3.2 Building E40 will destroy Polesia nature values

The waterway from the Polish Gdansk through Pripyat in Belarus and the entire Dnieper in Ukraine to Kherson is a project of a tremendous transformation of wildlife. The straightening of Pripyat will lead to the drainage and actual destruction of Polesia as a natural region. Also, the entire length of the path to Ukraine and 2/3 of its length in Belarus are the territory of the Emerald Network, approved at the Council of Europe level, and has international and national security status.

The E40 restoration project (Maritime Institute in Gdansk 2015) is a direct threat to specially protected natural areas of national and international significance – Ramsar Sites, Natura 2000, Emerald Network and Territories important for birds (IBA) – that create ideal conditions to a large number of migratory birds, rare and endangered species, rare biotopes and natural landscapes (RiverWatch 2017)

The waterway will pass through more than 70 valuable natural areas of Poland, Belarus and Ukraine that will be inflicted irreparable damage. The habitats of rare species of birds and other animals will be destroyed, floodplain oak forests and other valuable plant communities, the Vistula, Western Bug, Pripyat valleys, the Narew and Pilica will be under threat of extinction. Some of these areas play a very important role in the European biodiversity strategy and are the so-called pan-European corridors. This includes the largest flyway across the Republic of Belarus, used annually by over 1,5 million migratory birds (European Wilderness Society 2017). Kayak and canoe trips are organized in the area of Mozyr Ravines on the small rivers of Ptich, Jaselda. Goryn, that run into Pripyat. E40 would affect the water level of these rivers.

*“There is no guarantee that the port will be able to become indispensable for any significant amounts of cargo. Taking into account these and other circumstances, the reservation of the investors is more than justified. It’s clear why, despite the repeated presentation of the project to private donors, there is still no one willing to invest in this facility”* – notes **Ales Gerasimenko**, deputy chief editor of *Belarusians and the Market* weekly and press-secretary of Business Union of Entrepreneurs and Employers n.a. Kunyavski

In Poland, the preliminary cost of E40 is calculated at 11.9 billion euros. Both the European Investment Bank and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development stated that in order to make the decision on financing the project, they first need to assess its environmental and social impact. The Belarusian environmental alliance is very concerned about the fate of the Pripyat, one of the last prominent intact rivers in Europe. This region is of international importance from an environmental and touristic perspective. *“We envision a completely different development scenario for the Polesia and Chernobyl zone in the coming years. Belarus can create a new world heritage site that will bring vastly more wealth to the country in the future than industrial development and the transformation of the main aorta of the region into a canal.”* – adds **Volha Kaskevich**, environmentalist and ecological engineer of NGO Bahna.

Some more characteristics of the '*E40 influenced Polesia*' tourism scenario:

- Important natural ecosystems that serve as a highlight for developing wildlife observations will be damaged: presumably, the water level in the mires will decrease, which will lead to drying out of ecosystems, appears fires in the dry period, loss of biodiversity and the impossibility of visiting these territories, which are a single complex with the Pripyat River
- The Chernobyl Exclusion Zone (CEZ) will become more accessible for visiting a mass tourist, which will entail the destruction of the idea of a thirty-year world scientific experiment in the wild nature, where there was no disturbance factor for wildlife, which will reduce the highest paying type of tourism – scientific and nature-observation tourism. Thus will reduce the global interest of the scientific community, destroy the idea of creation CEZ into a world research centre for observing wildlife and man-made technogenic impact
- The development of river shipping for tourist and industrial purposes will intervene in the natural pattern of the river, modify it with the creation of new locks and other structures, which will destroy the naturalness and authenticity of the ecosystem, local small villages, and will also impede the development of water tourism on small boats and kayaks
- Mass tourism brings less economical benefits and loss of one of the most important targeted audiences, will be less manageable in terms of visits and less safe for human health

### 3.3. Champion of Nature Tourism

Such vast corners of wildlife that have been preserved in the Polesia are few in Europe today. Polesia has a huge nature tourist potential. It is only necessary to make good use of this natural wealth (Media Polesye 2019). Cross-Border Cooperation Programme Poland-Belarus-Ukraine have analyzed the projects that they have supported, and identified such general problems that hindered the development of tourism in the whole cross-border region as:

- Instability of institutions and frequent changes in approaches to managing the tourism sector in Ukraine, Poland and Belarus.
- A public policy regarding forming the mechanism for managing the tourism sector is characterised by a lack of consistency, which is due to the restructuring and reorganisation of the management of the tourism sector, frequent changes in priorities and funding of tourism development (Hrytsku-Andriesh 2015).

Therefore, according to the best world experience and practice, taking into account tourism projects implementation within the Cross-Border Cooperation Programme Poland-Belarus-Ukraine 2007-2013, we could formulate several main aspects on how to improve the tourism sector in Polesia:

- Development of cooperation and joint actions between tourism organisations
- New projects must be initiated with a goal to create associations of tourism service providers;
- The success of initiatives with a goal for tourism development depends on a solid financial basis, and should be based on joint budgets of cooperating organisations supported by external sources, especially EU funds
- Improvement of competitiveness of actual regional tourism products as well as development of new ones, targeted at selected segments of the tourism market.
- Initiatives must be supported with the goal to develop tourism in rural or nature areas, with respect to sustainable development and common environmental policies (Hrytsku-Andriesh 2015)

## Creation of Polesia Tourism Network and Polesia Cooperation Board

There is an urgent need for better connection between various tourism stakeholders and greater cooperation among tourism businesses and stakeholders of Polesia. A good base for establishing Polesia Tourism Network are the tourism clusters created by previous projects:

- Volyn Tourist Cluster' Association based in Kovel;
- Brest Tourist Cluster based in Brest;
- Lublin Regional Tourism Organisation based in Lublin (Polesie Turystyka 2016)  
and
- Muchavec Pantry in Kobryn
- Valley of Yaselda River
- Motal Way
- Pinsk Palessie
- Amazonia of Paliessie in Stolin (UNDP 2014)

Cluster creation is a process that should take place at all important nature parks of Polesia. Already popular tourism destinations develop clusters naturally, yet in most cases they still need to be strengthened. Developing a tourism cluster requires at least one stakeholder able to initiate a participatory process with service providers and key stakeholders in the destination. In the case of protected areas, ideally the park management body should impulse and lead the initial meetings, after identifying and inviting key stakeholders. Failure to include all relevant stakeholders within a cluster — including the ones that may be in conflict with the protected area managers or other stakeholders — is the most common cause of discord and ultimately, failure of a tourism cluster (Drumm 2016). Inclusion of stakeholders in the planning process is critical, although not always the easiest way of ensuring that the needs of each stakeholder are

developed in a manner that fosters economic benefits and protects the natural and social environment.

A key role for successful nature tourism have ground operators and other local business partners: outbound tour operators require a reliable local partner to take responsibility for all local ground arrangements. Suitable business partners are likely to have a track record in tourism, employ well-trained and experienced managers, provide training to their staff, and have good local networks of business contacts (UNEP 2005).

The Polesia Tourism Network will act as a Destination Management Organization of the involved protected areas and has a support structure that facilitates the design, management, marketing and sales of these nature tourism products, by incorporating them as a unique destination with strong branding and professional support. The overarching shared objective of such network is to strengthen the conservation of protected areas while respecting the local culture and history and generating economic benefits for the communities that live in and around them (Drumm 2016).

The Polesia Tourism Network will work with the local tourism clusters for the establishment and promotion of Polesia tourism products. Cluster involves at least the park authority, ensuring conservation is respected, the private sector — local Tour Operators and service providers — aiming at regional development and the civil society representatives — NGOs and local communities — making sure their requirements are heard. Becoming a partner of the Polesia Tourism Network is instrumental to establish the Polesia as a functioning nature tourism destination.

These aspects should be taken into consideration by the 'promotor' of the idea (ideally the park management body):

- **Right partners:** identify various appropriate local Inbound Tour Operators that should, at least:
  - be willing to collaborate and invest in the sustainable development of the destination following a participatory approach both at local and international scale
  - agree to develop a tourism product following the principles, characteristics and requirements of the Network
  - agree to be part of and uphold the interests of all Polesia as part of a common Tourism Destination
  - comply with all applicable legislation and regulations with respect to labour, environmental, and human rights, health and safety issues and professionalism
- **Local Governance:** when identifying local stakeholders will potentially be part of the ecotourism product, local identities, traditions and needs (especially those of the local community), or rural groups/individuals with a close connection to the area should be assessed and informed

- **Transparency:** make sure the sharing of information, announcement of meetings, publicizing and calling for inputs on joint decisions is transparent
- **Monitoring:** when deciding the activities, identify, assess and discuss all potential positive and negative impacts and agree on a plan for their monitoring and management
- **Ensuring commitment:** it is strongly advised to formalize the commitment of the involved parties in the process, at least between:
  - protected area managers and Inbound Tour Operators
  - inbound Tour Operators and service providers
  - protected area managers and the Network

**The Sustainable Tourism Development Strategy** should aim to develop tourism in ways that support the objectives of Polesia protected areas for nature conservation, to create jobs and businesses for local communities, and generally to support the welfare of local communities and help to preserve the local ways of life (Ramsar 2012).

It also sets out zoning for sustainable tourism development. Zoning for tourism should also include **non-disturbance zone**, where no tourism is developed.

The strategy should be created with the Polesia Cooperation Board which will be established as the main participatory mechanism inside cross-border region of Polesia. The panel brings together the park managers and local government, business and community representatives, including conservation organizations, the State Forest management, local authorities, the environmental NGOs of three countries, the Polesia Tourism Network, and village groups.

The promotion strategy of the western part of Polesia territory was created by EU financed project 4 years ago (PI-by-ua.eu 2015). This could be a good strategic document to start with, but highly important is to include tourism stakeholders of eastern part of the region, and work together with whole Polesia.

**A Tourism Marketing Plan for 2020-2022** should be developed by the Polesia Tourism Network, which includes international marketing especially of wilderness aspects and nature values of Polesia, in cooperation with international nature tourism businesses; improvements in the quality of the existing visitor infrastructure; and monitoring of the effects of tourism on both conservation and the local economy.

The project of Endangered Landscapes Program „*Wilderness Without Borders: Protecting one of Europe's largest natural landscapes, Polesia*” has started in 2019, it will create a network of protected areas in Polesia. Project also aims to submit Polesia to UNESCO World Heritage Nomination, to protect an area of at least 300.000 hectares.

Some more characteristics of '*Champion of Nature Tourism*' tourism scenario:

- organized tourism allows you to engage all participants and organize a sustainable system for visits with a developed infrastructure and the planned economic effect in the long term perspective
- the local community meets the demand for authentic rural tourism while preserving the history of places and traditions
- regions attract external financing to create infrastructure in nature reserves and initiate the construction of educational trails, visit centres, local brands etc.
- full-fledged routes for tourist visits have been developed taking into account different target audiences with the separation of nature sites that require strict regulations without visits (non-disturbance zonation)
- the high interest among foreign visitors is maintained, Polesia has become an invitation to visit the country with interest from the international community, appears in famous foreign guides and media as a tourist destination as the last natural Amazon of Europe, a green corridor for unique biodiversity

## 4. Brand of Polesia ‘European Amazonia’

### 4.1 Brand of the Polesia region today

Polesia is a region which encompasses one of the last large marshlands and alluvial forests in Europe. During the 20th century, human intervention transformed the region’s landscapes and living environments fundamentally: Polesia has experienced drastic changes in terms of regional development planning and land use, the exercise of power and the introduction of new technologies. Since the 1930s, continuous efforts have been made to drain the marshlands. Since the 1970s, the Soviet Union has made plans to transform the Ukrainian part of Polesia into an energy landscape (Herder-Institut, 2019). One of the power plants, Chernobyl, has become the symbol of a modern ‘risk society’ with its inherent technological risks throughout the world. No doubt, Chernobyl is the best known toponym within the Polesia region. But very few people know that Chernobyl is located in Polesia.

Building a destination brand for Polesia requires answers to the following questions on behalf of potential visitors:

- What are the main things I like about Polesia?
- What sort of place is Polesia?
- How does Polesia make me feel?
- How would I describe Polesia in one sentence?
- What makes Polesia different from all other destinations?

*‘Destination brand’* refers to a Polesia’s competitive identity. It is what makes Polesia distinctive and memorable. It differentiates Polesia from all other nature tourism destinations. It is the foundation of Polesia’s international competitiveness. A destination brand generally cannot be manufactured like a consumer product brand. It inherits Polesia’s core assets: the landscape, people, culture and history. It exists in the way in which these assets are perceived by potential visitors and the emotional value they attach to experiencing them.

There has been a lot said and written about the character of Polesia online. One remarkable aspect is that often this region is compared with Amazonia region of South-America, and rivers of Polesia are compared with the Amazon River. Below are some findings.

**In Belarus** the Pripyat River is no doubt the Amazon of Europe (Branta Tours 2019). The Pripyat river is called *‘Amazon of Belarus’*, because *“up to five months floodplains are covered by natural floods”* (wildlife.by 2018). This is the way it is communicated to foreign visitors (Sp.by, 2006). Sometimes Pripyat has called *“Amazon of Polesia”* (Walktofolk.by, 2019) and it is even made fun that indigenous people of Peru call Amazon for *“South-American Pripyat”* (Onliner.by, 2018).



Tour programs 'Polesian Amazon' are organized by Centre of Adventure Tourism 'Chervony Bor' in cooperation with Tourism Department of Prip'yatsky National Park usually in May (Wildlife.by, 2017). Tourism route 'Polesian Amazon' is offered by Agency Itourist (itourist.by, 2019).

**In Ukraine** the Stokhid river is called the 'Polesian Amazon', which is a right tributary of the Prip'yat River in Volyn Oblast (Kometa, 2019). With its countless meanders, tributaries and cut-offs, the Prip'yat river shapes the region in a unique way: the landscape is a veritable labyrinth of waters, islands, mires, wetlands and floodplain forests. This is why the Prip'yat is often also called the 'Amazon of Europe' (FZC, 2019).

Visitors to Prip'yatsky National Park can go on a safari trip in the primeval 'Belarusian Amazonia' (Belarus.by, 2019) - *"The huge area of the Belarusian Amazon land is home to the pristine natural systems with a wide variety of flora and fauna — vast swamps, wide inundated lands, oak woods, and broad-leaved forests."*

The tourism destination 'Amazonia of Paliessie' (in the district of Stolin in Belarus) is the corner of the virgin nature, where river floodplain is interspersed with marshes and forests. One can start getting acquainted with the wild nature of the regions in the National Protected Landscape Area 'The Middle Prip'yat', (UNDP, 2014)

The Prip'yat-Stokhid National Nature Park in Liubeshiv district, Volyn Oblast, Ukraine has been called 'Ukrainian Amazonia' (<https://www.instagram.com/p/Bxdw33vCe4m/>), as well as 'Polesian Amazonia' (Aktur, 2019). The international water tourism festival 'Polesian Regatta' is held here (my.rv.ua, 2017). Also the Ukrainian part of Polesia has been called 'Volynian Amazonia' (day.kyiv.ua, 2017). Excursions branded as 'Polesian Amazonia' are organized by Ukrainian tour operators (Restlib.com, 2019). The regular natural flood in spring is called 'Polesian Amazonia' (Autokatalog.by, 2019).

Polesia brand represents the core essence and enduring characteristics of a destination. Its core brand characteristics, like someone's personality. It is the DNA that defines Polesia as a destination. It should run through every act of marketing communication and behaviour of Polesia's stakeholders.

Creation of the visual identification system for the international ecotourism brand name 'Polissia' was made by EU financed project 4 years ago (pl-by-ua.eu 2015). The logo and slogan *"Polesie – the Magic of Nature"*, was created (Polesia Magii Natyry 2015). But the brand is much more than a logo.

The Polesia brand represents a dynamic interaction between the destination's core assets and the way in which potential visitors perceive them. It really only exists in the eyes of others. It is the sum of their perceptions, feelings and attitudes towards Polesia, based on the way in which they have experienced the destination or on how it has presented itself to them.

[Polesia logotype created by EU funded project](#)

**Polesie**  
the magic of nature



## 4.2 Suggestions for improvement the Brand of Polesia

### 4.2.1 Brand development process

- Branding Polesia is for everyone. Polesia brand values should run through all marketing communications, whether simple website pages, public relations messages or expensive TV advertising
- Polesia should focus on its core market segments when developing a brand. Their perceptions will define the brand's core characteristics. It is therefore essential to understand how they perceive Polesia through targeted consumer research
- Qualitative research is the most effective way to identify consumer perceptions of Polesia. People's psychological needs and travel motivation must be explored in sufficient depth to reveal their true motivation for travel, identify the experiences they are seeking, and to understand what kind of destination would satisfy them. This requires much deeper psychological investigation than merely establishing visitors' 'likes' and 'dislikes'
- Stakeholders (e.g. political, commercial, travel businesses and residents) should be involved from the outset in developing the brand. This is the best way to obtain their buy-in to the concept, as well as secure their active participation as

advocates of the brand in how they talk about Polesia and how they behave towards visitors. This can also reinforce national/civic pride amongst residents

- A fine balance is required to enable the creative flexibility necessary to appeal to different market segments while still maintaining a coherent destination brand that is universally recognizable (ETC & UNWTO 2009)

#### 4.2.2 The Brand Pyramid of Destination Polesia

The brand pyramid is a simple tool that builds up a brand logically from an assessment of the destination's main strengths to a distillation of its essence. Starting from the bottom and ascending through each of these five stages towards the top:

**Rational attributes:** which are Polesia's main tourism assets – What are the things people do visitors like to see and do in Polesia? For further exploration these would be identified in a SWOT analysis.

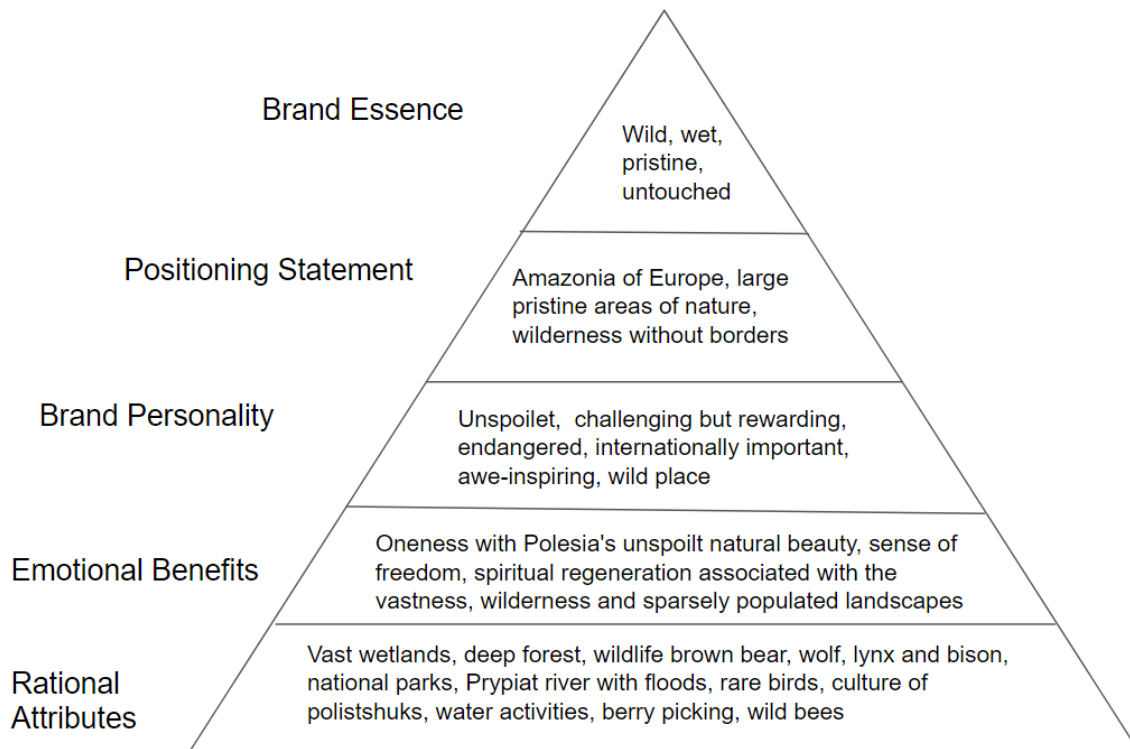
**Emotional benefits:** which is the emotional impact that Polesia has on visitors. How do visitors feel about place? This should be established through qualitative consumer research, which explores consumer perceptions of Polesia and their motivation for travel.

**Brand personality:** Polesia's brand personality is established following a competitor analysis, to identify what is truly unique about Polesia. This represents a succinct summation of the Polesia's defining characteristics and reflects how the destination would like to be seen by its key audience.

**Positioning statement:** A summary of the Polesia's strongest competitive features. What makes Polesia stand out from everywhere else? This functions as the basis that should guide all marketing activity – whether by Polesia Tourism Network, national tourism organisations, marketing agencies or stakeholders. This should summarise the destination's strongest appeals, which give it 'competitive stand-out'.

N.B. The positioning statement is a 'back-office' tool. It encompasses the way in which the destination should be projected in marketing communications. But it is not a statement that should ever be used in talking to consumers. It is a technical statement that is not sufficiently inspiring to motivate potential visitors; but it should contain all the key elements describing Polesia's competitive position that the NTO and its marketing agencies require to develop powerful marketing communications. Its job is to guide creative people in advertising agencies, marketing staff within the NTO, and all who market Polesia in developing their marketing messages. It should then be possible to check back that the key elements of the positioning statement are expressed creatively in marketing communications (ETC & UNWTO 2009).

**Brand essence:** Finally the brand essence includes 3 to 4 core values that are enduring and which, in combination, comprise Polesia’s DNA. These define the core essence of the destination. These are generally single word descriptors. They should be as visual as possible. They should be reflected in all destination marketing communications, particularly in the tone of voice and visual imagery used (ETC & UNWTO 2009).



Draft brand pyramid of Destination Polesia

#### 4.2.3 Brand implementation, management and monitoring

- Once the essence of the Polesia brand and its values have been established, they should then be run through all marketing activities by the tourist organizations and, ideally, by stakeholders in their own marketing communications. This means reflecting the brand essence, through the projection of appropriate brand values, in every single marketing communication, no matter how small
- Projecting Polesia’s true essence with real impact in marketing communications relies on clever, creative execution
- A high level steering group is valuable for developing Polesia brand and monitoring its progress. This signals that the Polesia brand is considered important by senior people.

This can make it easier to obtain buy-in from important stakeholders and opinion-formers within the destination

- A Polesia brand manager should be appointed who should have a direct link to the National Tourist Organizations chief executives of Belarus, Ukraine and Poland
- A modest number of high profile brand champions should be appointed to espouse and promote the brand amongst stakeholder groups in different economic, political and community sectors. These should be people who are leaders in their field and are able to command respect across a wide range of sectors
- Brand advocates should be recruited throughout as many stakeholder organisations as possible. They are generally people who hold positions of influence in relevant organisations, who can therefore ensure that Polesia brand is adopted within their own organisations
- Polesia brand champions and brand advocates need to be well-informed about the brand and well-equipped to champion it. This usually involves training them in the principles and application of the brand. They need to be provided with key facts and information about the brand, so that they can promote it knowledgeably and convincingly
- An internal marketing programme should be developed for National Tourist Organization staff of Belarus, Ukraine and Poland and key stakeholders. This should explain what the brand is, why it is important, and how to implement it. They must also be kept up to date with any feedback on, and changes to, the brand
- A brand toolkit should be produced for National Tourist Organization staff of Belarus, Ukraine and Poland and other stakeholders on local, regional and national. This should explain: the role of Polesia brand; the destination's brand essence and values; and how to apply them in marketing communications. It should also contain technical guidelines on using any brand logo or brand identity. This should be available in electronic format, ideally via websites of NTOs
- Residents of Polesia need to be brought on board too. They should be informed about the nature, value and purpose of Polesia brand, which is in effect representing them both nationally and internationally. This can be done through presentations, discussion groups, and media communications
- The brand's impact should be regularly monitored and, if necessary, refined. This is best done through brand-tracking surveys, on-line panel surveys, 'Omnibus'-style surveys, consumer research, visitor satisfaction surveys and benchmarking surveys
- The brand manager needs to be alert for signs that the brand might be getting tired and in need of refreshment. Brand-tracking surveys and media monitoring will usually provide the first early warning signs of a brand's decline (ETC & UNWTO 2009)

## 4.2.4 Critical success factors

Critical success factors in developing a successful brand are:

- A good understanding of the destination's core market segments
- Qualitative consumer research to understand people's deep motivation for travel and their feelings and attitudes towards the destination, not just their likes and dislikes
- A clear understanding of the destination's competitive position, its relative strengths and weaknesses
- Leadership and support for the brand from the very top (e.g. National Tourism Organisation CEO and ideally from government as well – tourism minister, prime minister or president), that is both enthusiastic and highly visible
- A robust brand management system that includes an energetic brand manager/guardian, influential brand champions and committed brand advocates
- An internal brand communications programme that inspires commitment to the brand amongst National Tourism Organisation (NTO) staff
- Destination stakeholders' buy-in to the brand through their involvement in developing the brand from the outset
- Ongoing communication with stakeholders as involved participants, not as external observers
- Adoption of the brand by commercial and other destination stakeholders in their own marketing communications – thereby stretching the brand's impact
- Constant monitoring of the brand's impact and relevance amongst key target segments
- An understanding throughout the NTO that everyone is responsible for applying the brand in marketing communications and behaviour, not just the brand manager
- Long-term commitment to enable sufficient brand equity to be built up for the brand to gain traction in the marketplace.
- A mindset within the NTO that positions the brand at the centre of all marketing communications
- Living the brand: A brand is not just about marketing communications; behaviour is critical – by the NTO and its staff, by stakeholders, and by residents (i.e. everyone with

whom the visitor comes into contact, whether face-to-face or as a recipient of information, services or products provided by anyone in the destination). Behaviour – as in the way that visitors experience a destination through the people they encounter – has always been the most important element of a destination brand. In the Web 2.0 environment, where people can 'Twitter' and exchange immediate views on both good and bad destination experiences, brand-compliant behaviour, or at least behaviour that reinforces rather than contradicts the core brand essence, will become even more critical to a destination's image (ETC & UNWTO 2009)

## 5. Funding opportunities for investment in nature-based tourism in the region

Financial support for making Polesia into a successful Nature Tourism Destination is important. Examples of funds and donors that already have supported tourism development in Polesia include:

- The project 'Development of tourist information system for cross-border eco-tourism in the Euroregion Bug' was co-funded by the European Union within the framework of the Cross-border Co-operation Programme Poland-Belarus-Ukraine, 2014 – 2015. (Project budget about €1 million over 2 years).
- Development of ecotourism strategies at the local level ("Pinsk Paliessie", "Valley of the Jaselda River", "Muchavec Pantry") in Brest oblast have been financed by USAID / LEED project, 2011-2014.

There are six types of financial sources that could be used in Polesia region:

- Donors' support
- Sponsorship of private and state business
- Private business investments
- Private personal donations
- Crowdfunding as a form of private sponsorship
- State budget

### 5.1 Donors' support

The main donors who can generate funds for Polesia are the EU, USAID, the UN and other institutions of western countries.

Bilateral donors:

- EU-countries: Austria, Germany, Poland, the Netherlands (incl. MATRA Program), Sweden (incl. SIDA - The Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency), UK, Denmark, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia and others
- Other countries: USA (incl. USAID, Small Grant Program US Embassy in Minsk, Coca-Cola Beverages Grants, Eurasia Foundation), Canada (incl. CIDA – The Canadian International Development Agency), Switzerland, Japan and others



## Multilateral Donors

- The European Union programmes, including Cross-border Co-operation Programme Poland-Belarus-Ukraine
- The UN: United Nations Development Program (UNDP; a big project that could be initiated and developed by the government), UN World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), UN Environment Programme (UNEP), UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), The World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), The UN Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) and others
- Other international organizations: the Global Environment Facility (GEF), The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), The Central European Initiative (CEI), International Finance Corporation (IFC), European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) and others

## Non-governmental organizations

- The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, the New Eurasia Foundation, the Support Programme of Belarus of the Federal Government of Germany, the Konrad Adenauer Foundation and others

Moreover, there are financial resources of thematic and several cross-border cooperation programmes, which are available now for Belarus, Ukraine and Poland. These are the Interreg Baltic Sea Region Programme (8,8 mln euro) and the Poland - Belarus - Ukraine Programme (165 mln euro).

Green economy and actions on combatting climate change are national priorities for Belarus. In 2002-2018, Belarus managed to receive more than 734 mln dollars from different sources (economy.gov.by 2019).

## 5.2 Sponsorship of private and state business

The trend for social responsibility is strong in business sphere nowadays. Along with maximizing their profits socially responsible businesses aim at making a positive difference for their stakeholders (f. e. for local community). Therefore, many private and state businesses actively support initiatives connected to sustainable development. A good example of private business sponsorship in Belarus is activities of Velcom mobile operator company, such as charity for children and social educational programs.

## 5.3 Private business investments

Adventure and nature-based tourism is a very attractive area for small and medium-businesses (SME) because it does not require significant investments. For example, canoe renting, nature guiding, birdwatching, tailor-made ecotourism agencies, rural tourism units etc. have a high potential for SMEs' development.

## 5.4 Private personal donations

There are responsible people who want to support ideas of sustainable development and contribute to their realization. This can be done by financial donations as well as through other kinds of support in organization of festivals, restoration of cultural sites, development of study trails. Often private personal donations are done secretly.

## 5.5 Crowdfunding as a form of private sponsorship

Crowdfunding is a relatively new source of financing in Belarus. It started about four years ago. Today, there are four main crowdfunding platforms in Belarus. The first and most successful is “Ulej” (ulej.by, around 300 projects supported), “Talakosht” (talaka.by, more than 500 000 euro collected), Social Weekend (socialweekend.by, more than 500 000 euro collected), charity auction “Mae sens” (maesens.by; about 1 000 000 euro collected). Unfortunately, the last one was closed in 2018. Ecotourism initiatives have big chances to be supported on these platforms.

## 5.6 State budget

Official policy of governments of Belarus, Ukraine and Poland is actively heading for realization of sustainable development goals (sdgs.by 2019). The main strategic documents in this sphere are: the National Strategy for Sustainable Socio-economic Development in the Republic of Belarus up to 2020, National Action Plan for the development of the green economy in Belarus until 2020, the concept of Belarus' national sustainable development strategy. Thus, it is highly likely that the development of sustainable tourism in Polesia region will find financial, organizational and in-kind (roads, trails, signage etc.) support of initiatives based on PPP (private-public partnership) (economy.gov.by 2019).

## 6. Conclusions

Neighborhood of people, proximity to nature – with this phrase our small study of an alternative plan for the development of Polesia began, where we wanted to inspire leaders in this direction to think about how to develop the tourism potential of Polesia on the basis of natural and cultural values. Nature- and ecotourists have a passion for nature. They are interested in natural landscapes, flora and fauna, new and authentic experiences, increasingly at non-traditional destinations. Polesia has all of this, and more to become a top destination for nature based tourism.

Such vast corners of wildlife that have been preserved in the Polesia are few in Europe today. Polesia has a huge nature tourist potential, the backbone of which is a great network of protected areas. It is only necessary to make a good use of this natural wealth, and how to make ecotourism a viable economy for the next decade in Polesia.

Today adventure and nature tourism accounts for about a fifth of all international travel, making it a key segment. What motivates these tourists is the natural environment of the places they visit. They like to learn about the lifestyles of people living there. Nature tourism is based on experiences directly related to nature. This study suggests three target groups for nature-based tourism in Polesia: a) Silver adventurers, b) Younger nature lovers, c) Green families with kids.

Nature tourism is especially popular with older Europeans, which are its largest target group. Tourists in this segment are between 50-70 years of age, many are experienced travellers who enjoy natural, quiet environments and look for new experiences. They expect high value for money and are willing to pay more for authentic experiences. Europe's growing senior citizen population makes this a promising source market.

18 to 44-year-olds are the second largest segment for nature tourism. Most of them have travelled a lot and are increasingly interested in exploring new destinations. Families with kids is also an important, growing segment of nature-based tourism. Eco-awareness already starts in school, making children very interested in ecotourism.

Tourism development analysis of previous EU financed projects in Polesia have indicated that the strongest assets of Polesia is the natural environment, and the weakest points are poorly-developed tourist and technical infrastructure and insufficient cooperation, and tourism marketing. Without taking a tourism cooperation to the next level it is likely that next ten years tourism development will follow the model of the last decade, and the problems of today will continue. Three scenarios for nature based tourism have developed by this study: a) Business as usual continues, b) Building E40 and destruction of Polesia nature values, c) European nature tourism champion scenario.

Business as usual scenario means the lost opportunities to build a successful ecotourism economy, based upon great natural potential of Polesia. The root causes for such poor tourist

development are the unclear definition of roles between park managers, local tour guides, service providers and other types of private businesses. Lack of understanding leads to the weak collaboration for tourism development and marketing. Some naturally attractive spots become overcrowded, wild uncontrolled development cause the overuse of nature in these places and disturbance of wildlife in their sensible habitats. There are several threats to the natural wealth of Polesia, however the most dangerous is the planned E40 waterway. The straightening of Pripjat will lead to the drainage and actual destruction of Polesia as a natural region.

While being aware of problems, it is necessary to develop an alternative (sustainable) scenario for Polesia, a region rich in nature, which was recently recognized as a “*threatened landscape*” as part of the Cambridge conservation program. Polesia is still a little known on tourism markets, but it has the potential to become European nature tourism champion. This includes research visits for the development of science, and observation tourism for wildlife, such as birdwatching, educational tourism with educational excursions and programs, adventure tourism that does not contradict the ecological value basis, and sustainable agritourism, which supports the local community in the development of ecologically certified products and projects of green socially-oriented business. This approach is widely implemented today around the world after recognizing the multiple losses of biodiversity and sometimes the complete disappearance of valuable ecosystems.

The scenario of Polesia becoming European nature tourism champion involves more cooperation in various levels creation of local tourism clusters, Polesia Tourism Network as umbrella for clusters, and Polesia Cooperation Board for wider political decision making. There is an urgent need for better connection between various tourism stakeholders and greater cooperation among tourism businesses and stakeholders of Polesia. A good base for this are the tourism clusters created by previous projects.

Also a good base is the promotion strategy of the western part of Polesia territory, that was created by EU financed project. Now, highly important is to include tourism stakeholders of Easter part of the region, and work together with whole Polesia. The strategy should be created with the Polesia Cooperation Board which will be established as the main participatory mechanism inside cross-border region of Polesia. This panel brings together the park managers and local government, business and community representatives, including conservation organizations, the State Forest management, local authorities, the environmental NGOs of three countries, the Polesia Tourism Network, and village groups. As a result of better cooperation, we'll get not just income, but high quality jobs, support the preservation of the natural and cultural heritage and create a common brand of Polesia region in a global context.

Very often Polesia is compared with Amazonia region of South-America, and rivers of Polesia are compared with Amazon River. For the nature tourism target groups that have been identified by this study it sound very attractive. But branding of Polesia requires cooperative efforts. A destination brand generally cannot be manufactured like a consumer product brand. It inherits Polesia's core assets: the landscape, people, culture and history. It exists in the way in which

these assets are perceived by potential visitors and the emotional value they attach to experiencing them. We have proposed in this study a brand building methodology developed by European Tourism Commission and World Tourism Organization.

Financial support for making Polesia into a successful Nature Tourism Destination is important. There are six types of financial sources that could be used in Polesia region: a) Donors' support; b) Sponsorship of private and state business; c) Private business investments; d) Private personal donations; e) Crowdfunding as a form of private sponsorship; f) State budget. The main donors who can generate funds for Polesia are the EU, USAID, the UN and other institutions of developed western countries.

The inspiration and heart of the study is an understanding of the uniqueness of the place and history that the partner initiative is trying to preserve. Natural pristine landscapes; flood season; the largest wetlands in Europe; living cultural heritage of the region, including, for example, the use of dugout boats, special type of beekeeping for wild bees mancraft that disappears; wealth of untouched natural places; a myriad of biological species and rare ecosystems (for example, unique floodplain forests and floodplain meadows, mire complexes) – all this connects the local offer to the world market and attracts a global tourist and traveler.

The territory of Polesia is a potential World Heritage nominee, that's why we are sure that Polesia will have an unbelievable number of organized visitors, strong scientific background, earn exclusively ecological tourism and be a visiting card of three countries, Belarus, Ukraine and Poland in the near future -- this is our vision on which we insist and for which we worked in.

**Come visit Polesia – the Amazon of Europe – and help us protect it!**

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# Glossary

**Adventure** tourism: A holiday may be classified as an “adventure” trip if it combines two of the following three elements: interaction with nature, interaction with culture, an outdoor activity ... while the ideal core of adventure travel involves all three elements.(Adventure Travel Trade Association 2013).

**Agritourism:** involves any activity that brings visitors to a farm. It includes a wide variety of activities, including buying produce direct from a farm stand, picking fruit, feeding animals, or staying at a bed and breakfast (B&B) on a farm. See also Rural tourism.

**Biodiversity:** The variability among living organisms from all sources including, inter alia, terrestrial, marine and other aquatic ecosystems and the ecological complexes of which they are a part; this includes diversity within species, between species, and of ecosystems.

**Biosphere reserves:** Protected areas forming an international network of ecosystems by UNESCO, and which promote biodiversity, conservation and its sustainable use, along with interdisciplinary approaches to understanding and managing changes and interactions between social and ecological systems.

**Brand** refers to the collection of perceptions that a person has of a product (or destination) based on the product’s (or destination) observable characteristics, which differentiate it from all other products (or destinations), thereby endowing it with a competitive advantage over other similar products (or **destinations**).

**Brand advocate:** Someone who champions the cause of the brand within his/her own organisation or sphere of influence. They are generally people who have executive authority for deciding whether or not to use the brand in their own organisation’s marketing communications. They are usually recruited by the TO brand manager. They operate at a less senior, less public level than brand champions. See **Brand champion** and **Brand ambassador**.

**Brand ambassador:** A generic term, covering brand champions and brand advocates, to describe people (usually destination stakeholders) who have been officially appointed or asked to promote awareness and adoption of the brand amongst organisations in their sectors of influence. The term is sometimes also more loosely used to refer to the way in which people’s behaviour reflects, or doesn’t reflect brand values (e.g. “That sort of behaviour does not make him a great ambassador for the brand”). See **Brand advocate** and **Brand champion**.

**Brand champion:** Someone who commands widespread respect within a broad community (e.g. across sectors and communities at national, regional or city level), who has been appointed (by the NTO steering group or government) to passionately champion the cause of the brand at the highest level in public. See also Brand advocate and Brand ambassador.

**Branding:** The process of building a competitive identity, or brand, for a destination or product.

**'Bucket list' or 'last chance' tourism:** Travel for the specific purpose of seeing places, including protected areas, before they are destroyed or irretrievably altered by climate change, or of seeing wildlife species before they go extinct.

**Cluster** <http://polesie-turystyka.pl/en/cluster/>

**Community:** A social group of any size whose members reside in a specific locality, share government and may have a common cultural and historic heritage/s. It can also refer to a group of individuals who interact within their immediate surroundings, exhibits cohesion and continuity through time, and displays characteristics such as social interaction, intimacy, moral commitments, multi-faceted relations, and reciprocity.

**Demarketing:** A strategy in which protected area managers intentionally discourage tourist demand for a particular location or service to reduce environmental impacts or enhance visitor experiences.

**Destination:** Refers to a country, region or city specifically as a tourism destination: a place that people wish to visit.

**Destination brand:** A destination brand refers to the collection of perceptions that a person has of a destination based on the destination's observable characteristics, which differentiate it from all other destinations. It is also referred to as the destination's DNA – its core defining characteristics. See also **Brand**.

**Ecotourism:** A responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and sustains the well-being of local people, and creates knowledge and understanding through interpretation and education of all involved (visitors, staff and the visited)". Global Ecotourism Network, 2016

**Long distance trails:** In Europe also "E-paths", a network of long-distance footpaths that are designated by the European Ramblers' Association. In general the routes connect and make use of existing national and local trails (European Ramblers Association 2019). See also **Nature trail**.

**Nature-based tourism:** All forms of tourism that use natural resources in a wild or undeveloped form - including species, habitat, landscape, scenery and salt and fresh-water features. Nature based tourism is travel for the purpose of enjoying undeveloped natural areas or wildlife (Goodwin 1996).

**Nature trail** (or **study trail** or **educational path** or **eco-walk**) is a specially developed **walking trail** or footpath that runs through the nature area, along which there are marked stations or stops next to points of natural and/or cultural interest. These may convey information about, for

example, flora and fauna, soil science, geology, ecology or cultural history. See also Long distance trails.

**Non-disturbance zone** are **limited management zone** in nature reserves. A disturbance is a temporary change in environmental conditions that causes a pronounced change in an ecosystem. Limited management zone includes the entire area of land and water, which remains outside the special management zones and strict prohibits its visiting. In such special management zone all human activities might be harmful for the environment. Camping, making bonfires and driving motor vehicles is permitted in designated locations only. Nature trails and other visitor facilities have been built in such a way that people would not have to go through areas, where their presence might harm the environment. On nature trails and in their vicinity one should not step off the trail, otherwise the surrounding area would be damaged, especially in bogs and elsewhere on wet ground. As a rule, one person does not cause particular damage to wildlife, which, however, may easily happen if a lot of people occur in the same place at a time. See also **Zone; zoning**.

**Ramsar Sites:** An international system of protected wetlands recognised as globally important under the Ramsar Convention. (Ramsar is the name of a city in Iran where the convention was adopted.)

**Rural tourism** is a form of tourism taking place in rural areas or settlements, providing employment and income to local population, and offering individualised holiday products to consumers. Rural tourism is based on accommodation service which is complemented by additional services/facilities relying on the local social, cultural and natural resources.

**Sense of place:** The overall 'feel' of a place (whether a city, region or country), which reflects its core brand values. This mostly associated with: its physical appearance and cultural heritage – from its built and natural environment to the way that it manages and presents its public realm and the type of events it puts on; the products it makes or is associated with; and the way its citizens behave.

**Slogan:** A word, or more usually set of words, attached to a logo to describe a product (or destination). Slogans usually attempt, but often fail, to convey a destination's characteristics succinctly and uniquely.

**Sustainable tourism:** Tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities (UNEP and UNWTO 2005).

**Undertourism:** Inadequate levels of tourism. In parks and protected areas inadequate funding and maintenance leads to low visitation which leads to declining social and financial investment which leads to abandonment (Planeta 2019)

**Voluntourism:** Organised programmes through which visitors come to a protected area specifically to work on an activity that supports its conservation objectives.

**World Heritage Sites:** An international system of protected areas, created under the World Heritage Convention, which is intended to include the world's most outstanding examples of natural and cultural heritage.

**Zone; zoning:** A portion of a protected area that is managed for a specific objective. For example, a protected area may have a zone in which motorised recreation is prohibited, while also having a zone where it is allowed. Zoning used in this way creates a range of tourism and recreation opportunities. On a more general level, sometimes protected areas have a core zone with a high level of restrictions on human activity in order to promote nature protection, surrounded by a buffer zone where restrictions are looser. See also **Non-disturbance zone**.