

Polesia's enormous potential for nature-based tourism

Expert analysis identifies huge opportunities in Polesia, but scope for nature-based tourism development will be lost if E40 waterway is constructed



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Summary

Polesia is home to pristine natural landscapes, a stunning flood season, the largest wetlands in Europe, rich traditions and cultural heritage, a myriad of biological species, and unique floodplain forests, meadows, and mires. An expert analysis of alternative nature-based tourism development scenarios found that there is enormous potential for the development of sustainable nature-based tourism in Polesia.

They found that:

- With the right roadmap, nature-based tourism has massive potential to underpin sustainable, low-impact and profitable tourism in the region.
- In particular, experienced travelers, families, and young people are key groups of tourists that could be attracted.
- Investment in nature-based tourism would be the best way to boost tourist numbers in the area, but requires coordination between stakeholders. Development of the E40 waterway would negate nature-based tourism opportunities.
- The region should be branded as 'Europe's Amazon'.
- A range of potential funding sources could help turn Polesia into a successful nature-based tourism destination.

Background: Polesia and the E40 waterway

Polesia is a vast wilderness area stretching across Belarus, Poland, Russia and Ukraine¹. The E40 waterway² is a transnational initiative aiming to link the Baltic and Black Seas by an approximately 2,000 km long navigable connection running from Gdansk in Poland to Kherson in Ukraine. This could have very serious impacts on the natural and cultural heritage and people of Polesia, as well as more wide-ranging effects on economies and the global carbon balance.

Although the planning of E40 waterway is still at an early stage, a feasibility study was published in 2015³. This proposes that the route would go through the river systems of Vistula, Bug, Pina, Pripyat and Dnieper (see figure 1). Along the majority of its course it would go through free-flowing rivers, and several parts would need to be straightened, dammed, dredged, or drained. While some shipping channels already exist, the extent of the proposed new development is so massive that it threatens an environmental catastrophe in the region.

¹ See factsheet "About Polesia – A unique wilderness of global importance"

² See factsheet "Polesia under threat – How a new waterway could destroy Polesia's natural environment"

³ Maritime Institute in Gdansk (2015) Restoration of Inland Waterway E40 Dnieper –Vistula: from Strategy to Planning. Final Feasibility Study Report – Corrected Report (According to the remarks and requirements introduced by Willem Zondag, Legal and Technical Consultant). Gdansk, December 2015.

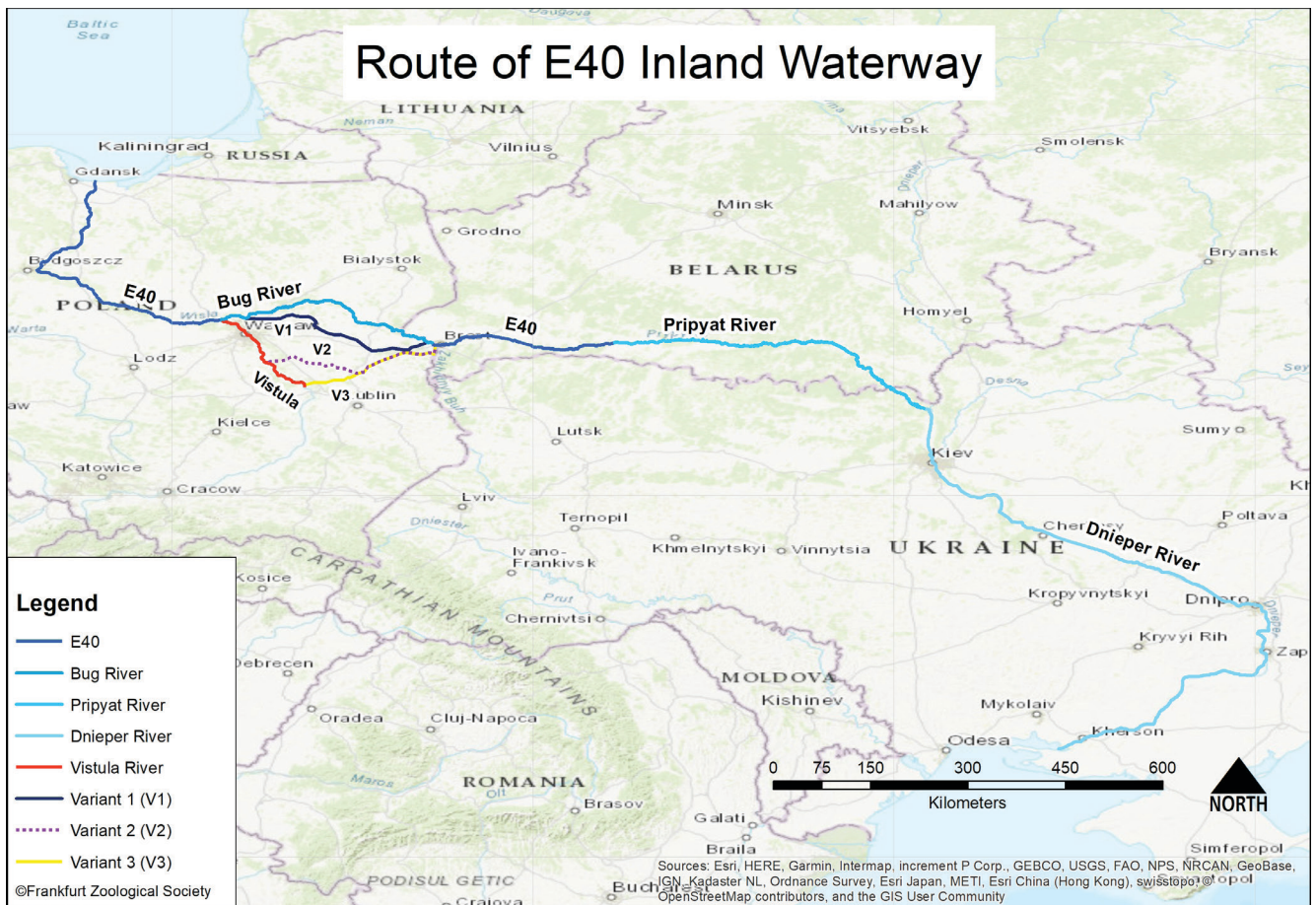


Figure 1: Outline map of the proposed E40 waterway

Expert studies

To better understand the potential impacts of the E40 waterway on Polesia we commissioned a range of experts to look at the factors including: hydrology, transport economics, radioactivity, and potential alternative development scenarios for Polesia. This factsheet summarises the findings of an analysis of nature-based tourism development scenarios. It was led by Aivar Ruukel, board member of the Global Ecotourism Network, who works as a local nature tour operator at Soomaa National Park in Estonia, with support from other experts. The full report is available [here](#)⁴.

What the assessment looked at

Experts examined the potential for nature-based tourism in Polesia.

The key issues considered were:

- Polesia's potential for nature-based tourism;
- the types of tourists that could be attracted;
- different tourism development scenarios;
- how Polesia might be branded;
- possible avenues of financial support.

⁴ Ruukel, A (2019) European Amazonia – Nature-based tourism development scenarios for Polesia. December 2019.

Findings

Polesia has massive potential for nature-based tourism

Currently there is only limited tourism in Polesia, primarily rural farm stays and 'nuclear tourism' concentrated around the site of the Chernobyl disaster. However, with its natural landscapes, wetlands, forests, wilderness areas, and unique cultural heritage, experts believe that Polesia has huge potential to become a top destination for sustainable nature-based tourism. There are many protected areas, such as the transboundary West Polesia biosphere reserve, where visitors can hike, canoe, birdwatch, or get up close to charismatic mammals like bison, bears and lynx. The region is particularly spectacular in the flood season, and local people welcome visitors wanting to explore their culture and traditions.

Experienced travellers, families, and young people could be attracted to Polesia

Adventure and nature-based tourism now accounts for about a fifth of all international travel⁵. Demand is increasing for destinations such as Polesia that are 'off the beaten track' and present opportunities for authentic cultural experiences. Experts identified significant potential to attract more nature-based tourists to Polesia, especially amongst groups of experienced travelers, families, and young people.

Investment in nature-based tourism would lead to a thriving tourism industry

Analysis of previous EU-financed projects to develop tourism in Polesia⁶ shows that the region's strongest asset is its natural environment. However, at present, funding for nature protection is in short supply, infrastructure and information services are poorly developed, and there is a lack of cooperation between park managers, tour guides and tourism service providers. Experts predict that this situation would be worsened by the development of the E40 waterway. They believe that it will severely damage the natural environment across the region, dramatically increase the number of people in the area, and impede the development of water tourism using small boats and kayaks.

On the other hand, experts indicate that investment in nature-based tourism would lead to a thriving tourism industry in Polesia. They suggest that to achieve this, it will be necessary to bring together key partners through the establishment of a Polesia Tourism Network, with local governance, transparency, monitoring, and commitment. Tourism development would need to be underpinned by a sustainable tourism development strategy, including zoning for tourism, and a tourism marketing plan.

Polesia should be branded 'Europe's Amazon'

To make Polesia distinctive and set it apart from all other nature-based tourism destinations, experts state that a strong 'destination brand' is needed to attract tourists. Polesia is often compared with the Amazonia region of South America and the study authors suggested branding the region as 'Europe's Amazon'. They stress that the successful development of Polesia's brand would require investment, collaborative development, and careful management.

They recommend the use of a brand-building methodology developed by European Tourism Commission and World Tourism Organisation⁷. The Polesia Tourism Network would act as an umbrella for development of local tourism clusters. The experts also recommend the establishment of a Polesia Cooperation Board to facilitate wider cooperation. This would bring together the park managers and local government, business and community representatives, including conservation organisations, the state forest management, local authorities, environmental NGOs, the Polesia Tourism Network, and village groups. The board should lead creation of a promotion strategy for Polesia which could be based on the strategy prepared for the western part of Polesia territory during the previous EU-funded project.

There are numerous potential funding sources

Financial support will be needed to turn Polesia into a successful nature-based tourism destination. The experts identify a range of potential funding sources which could be explored: donors (such as the EU, USAID, and the UN); sponsorship from private and state business; private business investments; private personal donations; crowdfunding; and state funding.

⁵ See <https://www.cbi.eu/market-information/tourism/nature-tourism/nature-eco-tourism-europe/>

⁶ Cross-border eco-tourism in the Euroregion Bug. Available from: <https://www.keep.eu/project/15929/establishment-of-informational-complex-in-the-sphere-of-cross-border-eco-tourism-in-the-euroregion-bug>

⁷ ETC & UNWTO (2009) Handbook on Tourism Destination Branding

Who is Save Polesia?

Our coalition includes six organisations from four countries.



APB – Birdlife Belarus

APB's mission is the conservation of biological diversity for the benefit of the present and future generations and involvement of people in active nature protection activities.



Bahna, Belarus

The aim of Bahna is to prevent further degradation of the environment and to preserve natural habitats and biodiversity of our country.



FZS – Frankfurt Zoological Society, Germany

FZS invests in wilderness areas of global significance – “legacy landscapes” – with aesthetic and natural values, pristine landscapes, important ecosystem processes or values, and endemic and endangered species.



NECU – National Ecological Centre of Ukraine

NECU is an NGO with branches in a dozen of Ukrainian cities. It works to bring environmental consideration into the core of any decision making.



OTOP – Polish Society for the Protection of Birds

OTOP's mission is to protect birds and their habitats and establish and manage new bird reserves. The organisation has strong educational work in order to increase public support for nature conservation.



USPB – Ukrainian Society for the Protection of Birds

USPB's mission is to conserve the biodiversity of Ukraine by saving birds, sites and biotopes.



Contact for more information

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Find out more on www.savepolesia.org

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