

GOOD PRACTICE WEBINAR



Highlights report

Sustainable rural tourism

Introduction

The webinar explored how sustainable rural tourism can foster rural development by strengthening local economies, preserving cultural heritage, enhancing biodiversity protection, and supporting community-led initiatives.

Organiser: Rural Pact Support Office, jointly with RURALTOUR, DG AGRI and DG REGIO



07 May 2025



Online



Approximately 150 participants from 27 EU Member States and 10 non-EU countries, including representatives of NGOs, Local Action Groups (LAGs), tourism professionals and entrepreneurs, public authorities, and researchers.



Presentations & recordings ([here](#))



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Main highlights from the event

Innovation, economic development and diversification in rural tourism

- > **Strengthening skills and enhancing awareness across the rural tourism value chain:** initiatives to upskill producers, service providers and intermediaries are essential to address communication gaps and raise the quality of rural tourism offers.
- > **Facilitating access to flexible and long-term funding:** limited and short-duration funding schemes constrain development; multi-period, and locally managed funding models can better serve small operators and support product diversification.
- > **Reducing bureaucratic burdens and enhancing destination-level coordination:** excessive administrative complexity and rigid rules limit entrepreneurial initiatives. More autonomy for local actors, backed by enabling local governance structures can foster innovation and coherence across tourism offers.

Community participation, cultural heritage, and destination management

- > **Building stakeholder capacity and fostering trust:** effective collaboration requires investment in facilitation, partnership-building, and community engagement skills. Bridging initiatives are needed to strengthen connections among diverse local actors. Professional Destination Management Organisations can give voice to micro and nano providers.
- > **Improving data systems to assess local impacts:** local authorities and stakeholders lack tools and resources to monitor the social and cultural impacts of tourism. Improving data collection can inform strategy development and increase community involvement.
- > **Developing integrated, locally driven strategies for sustainable tourism:** long-term, bottom-up planning rooted in local identity and co-creation enhances the sustainability and resilience of destinations. Supporting peer learning and horizontal networks can reinforce these approaches.

Climate friendly, resilient, and sustainable rural tourism

- > **Facilitating a transition to regenerative tourism models:** the lack of shared understanding around regenerative and climate-resilient tourism remains a major barrier. Awareness raising and peer learning should be prioritised to build a common language and support informed decision-making across sectors.
- > **Addressing the infrastructure gap in rural areas:** basic services such as mobility, broadband access, health services, education and waste management are essential for both local wellbeing and low-impact visitor access. Sustainable infrastructure should be planned with long-term resilience in mind, with an emphasis on multifunctional and inclusive design.
- > **Aligning funding and policy with local sustainability goals:** small rural actors face administrative and financial barriers to implementing sustainable tourism models. Cascade funding, flexible incubator schemes, and supportive regulations are key to unlocking innovation and ensuring measurable social, cultural, and environmental impacts.

EU initiatives supporting sustainable rural tourism

The EU rural vision and sustainable rural tourism: building resilient and thriving communities

Haude Blanc, European Commission, DG AGRI [\(PPT\)](#) 



Sustainable rural tourism plays a strategic role in achieving the objectives of the European Commission's [long-term vision for rural areas](#), having been identified as a key opportunity for economic diversification, territorial cohesion, and attractiveness of rural life.

Within the rural vision, two main instruments support this objective: the rural action plan, which coordinates EU policy initiatives to address rural challenges, and the Rural Pact, which offers a platform for structured cooperation across all governance levels, civil society, businesses, and citizens. Stakeholders are encouraged to join [thematic groups](#), exchange and learn from [good practices](#) and promote their voluntary [commitments](#) to support sustainable rural tourism and local development.

European Union Sustainable Tourism Strategy

Andreea Staicu, European Commission DG MOVE ([PPT](#))



Tourism accounts for around 4.5% of direct gross value added in the EU, supporting 20 million jobs and 3.5 million enterprises – mostly SMEs, many of which in rural areas. In 2022, rural regions hosted 43.9% of accommodation bed places and 34% of overnight stays, with average stays three times longer than in urban areas.

However, demand must be met with strategic planning. The [EU Transition Pathway for Tourism](#) sets out 70 stakeholder-driven actions on sustainability, digitalisation, and resilience. Skills development is supported through the [Pact for Skills](#) and [Blueprint for Sectoral Cooperation on Skills – Tourism](#), with ten national and regional partnerships established to support reskilling and upskilling in the tourism workforce.

A new [EU Sustainable Tourism Strategy](#) will be published in 2026, preceded by an open consultation. The [EU Tourism Stakeholders Platform](#) offers a centralised portal for [funding](#), good practices, and personalised support tools.

Cohesion policy and interregional support for sustainable tourism

Anton Schrag, European Commission DG REGIO



In the 2021–2027 programming period, the EU's cohesion policy allocates over EUR 4.2 billion to sustainable tourism through the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and Interreg programmes. The funding targets under-visited regions, including many rural areas, supporting green and digital transitions, cultural heritage, and social inclusion through integrated territorial strategies.

ERDF-funded examples can be found in the [Kohesio](#) database, such as the [smart tourism in inland Veneto](#) (Italy), focusing on rural areas to improve tourism management and access to heritage sites, helping relieve pressure on Venice.

An Interreg example is the [BASCIL project](#) which promotes culinary tourism by linking rural food producers across eight Baltic Sea countries to set up farm visits, tasting events, and local food experiences.

Framing the debate: tourism & rural development – a policy perspective

Key results from the study on 'Tourism and Rural Development' of the Committee of the Regions and UN Tourism

Radim Sršeň, European Committee of the Regions



The [study](#) highlights the role of rural tourism in supporting Europe's green and social transformations – provided it is planned and managed strategically. Rural areas, which cover over 80% of EU territory and are home to nearly a third of the population, are becoming increasingly attractive to visitors seeking authenticity, sustainability, and a slower pace of life. Post-pandemic trends such as longer stays, off-season travel, and proximity tourism have reinforced the appeal of European rural destinations.

However, tourism is not a universal solution. If unmanaged, it can cause environmental degradation, housing shortages, displacement of traditional activities, and a loss of local character. The growth of short-term rentals and emerging signs of overtourism in some rural areas require early attention and regulation.

Key recommendations include:

- > Embedding tourism within broader rural development strategies;
- > Improving transport and digital connectivity;
- > Supporting skills development so local communities can benefit from tourism while recognising its risks;
- > Using data to assess both impacts and opportunities; and
- > Simplifying access to EU funding.

With 14 EU programmes currently relevant for rural tourism, more tailored, visible, and accessible support – especially for micro-enterprises – is needed. The role of LAGs and LEADER programmes is essential to implement tourism-related projects on the ground.

Challenges & opportunities for tourism as a driver for rural development

Stakeholder panel: insights from EU networks on tourism as a driver of sustainable rural development

The panel featured four distinguished speakers, each shedding light on different dimensions of sustainable rural tourism, from economic viability and regulation to community participation, cultural identity, climate adaptation and sustainability.

Klaus Ehrlich, European Federation of Rural Tourism ([RURALTOUR](#))



The relevance of rural tourism is growing – it now accounts for an estimated 15% of overall tourism volume in Europe. Although the sector gained visibility during the COVID-19 pandemic, it remains structurally marginalised within a tourism system largely designed around large-scale, industrial models.

Key challenges include disproportionate regulation for micro-enterprises, limited access to training, underdeveloped infrastructure in some areas, and lack of clear definitions and data on rural tourism.

Recommendations involve: applying rural proofing to tourism regulation; expanding cascade funding to better reach small operators; reinforcing destination management structures and professional associations at local and regional levels; improving access to territorial socio-economic and environmental data; and rethinking policy frameworks to enable the integration of small-scale, place-based providers.

Nancy Duxbury, [University of Coimbra \(IN SITU project\)](#), coordinator of the [Rural Pact Community Group on Culture and Creativity](#)



Culture and local identity are central in developing sustainable rural tourism. Rural communities need to prioritise their own cultural and creative ecosystems, involving local artists and organisations as equal partners rather than content providers. Inclusive asset-mapping of tangible and intangible resources and co-created tourism offers rooted in place are key.

Piotr Michalowski, [European Network of Cultural Centres \(ENCC\)](#), coordinator of the [Rural Pact Community Group on Culture and Creativity](#)



Market-driven, extractive tourism models carry risks – a value-based approach centred on community leadership, time for reflection, and access to small-scale, flexible funding is necessary. Deeper alignment between cultural policy and community-led development in rural areas is essential. Frameworks such as the [Budapest Declaration on World Heritage](#) can provide guidance for embedding community participation and values into heritage and tourism strategies.

Vincent Nijs, European Regions for Competitive and Sustainable Tourism ([NECSTouR](#))



A shared, long-term vision is needed to guide sustainable tourism development. An example from [Flanders](#) (Belgium) centres around the transition from destination marketing to destination management, with a focus on social, ecological, and economic balance. Tourism should not be seen solely as an economic driver, but as a tool to foster flourishing communities.

NECSTouR promotes a holistic ecosystem approach centred on five principles:

- 1) impact-driven decision-making to consider the impact on locals and visitors;
- 2) meaningful community connections that build bridges between tourists and residents;
- 3) quality and innovation of the destination offers;
- 4) data-based strategies, and
- 5) long-term governance.

NECSTouR helps regions apply this vision by supporting strategic governance, data-driven planning, and tools to measure and reduce the climate impact of tourism.

Learning from inspirational local projects and practices

Sustainable rural tourism and heritage preservation in the Vidzeme region at the Latvia–Estonia border

Eva Koljera, Vidzeme Tourism Association, Latvia ([PPT](#))



The [Vidzeme Tourism Association](#) showcased several initiatives fostering rural tourism through the valorisation of cultural and natural heritage.

- > The [Greenways project](#) repurposes former railway lines into year-round tourism infrastructure, promoting eco-friendly mobility and supporting small businesses located along the routes.
- > The [Garden Pearls](#) is a network of 85 gardens developed through cross-border partnerships, promotional campaigns, small-scale investments and training to promote garden tourism in Latvia and Estonia.
- > The [Vidzeme Creative Hives](#), developed under the Interreg Europe [Cult-CreaTE project](#), support creative tourism by linking traditional crafts with younger audiences and tourism markets. Heritage buildings have been revitalised into 'creative hives' – shared workspaces for craftspeople and artists to offer workshops and exhibitions.
- > The [Zaube Wildfood Festival](#) is an annual event that has become a major cultural attraction. The festival attracts a wide range of stakeholders, boosts visibility, improves tourism infrastructure, and fosters a renewed sense of pride. The initiative has encouraged many informal local entrepreneurs to formalise their businesses.

Lika Quality Label: integrating culture, gastronomy, and sustainability in the Lika Destination, Croatia

Petra Kovačević, Lika Destination, Croatia ([PPT](#))



The [Lika Destination Cluster](#) developed an approach to setting up a smart, sustainable tourism destination in a sparsely populated region where over 50% of the territory is a protected natural area.

Tourism in Lika is closely tied to natural and cultural landmarks, such as the Plitvice Lakes National Park and Nikola Tesla Memorial Centre. Through its regional certification system, the [Lika Quality label](#) supports over 60 producers and promotes 164 local products across 12 categories.

The strategy focuses on balancing visitor inflow with conservation and economic development, including short-stay tourism management and promoting certified local goods as key to destination branding.

Food Zone: supporting rural entrepreneurship through regenerative tourism and green competences in Extremadura, Spain

María Márquez, Chamber of Commerce Cáceres, Spain (PPT)



The [Food Zone project](#) builds local capacity in regenerative food tourism through [training](#), incubation, and the development of business tools such as the 'Regenerative Business Model Canvas'.

[Pilot experiences](#) include a regenerative restaurant, [O Palco](#), and a nature-focused rural accommodation project, [LIDENEX](#). The project promotes community engagement, environmental protection, and sustainable entrepreneurship.

[Policy recommendations](#) of the initiative emphasise the need for regulatory support, accessible funding, and education tailored to regenerative practices. A ten-point [manifesto](#) outlines key principles for creating a regenerative rural tourism ecosystem.

Local TOUR: gastronomy and culture routes for sustainable tourism development in Greece

Eva Katsaraki, Heraklion Development Agency (PPT)



The [LOCAL TOUR project](#), supported under LEADER/CLLD, develops cross-regional gastronomy and culture routes to promote sustainable rural tourism across 21 regions in Greece.

The initiative integrates local food heritage, authentic products, and experiential tourism to enhance regional identity and economic diversification. Project activities include the development of digital applications, thematic workshops, and cross-border exchanges.

RURITAGE: co-creating rural heritage-based tourism experiences

Claudia De Luca, University of Bologna (PPT)



The Horizon 2020 project [RURITAGE](#) explored how cultural and natural heritage can act as a driver of sustainable rural regeneration. Through the creation of [Rural Heritage Hubs](#), communities co-designed strategies and tourism experiences rooted in their own identities.

Rather than treating tourism as a standalone driver, the project integrated it across six thematic areas: pilgrimage, rural food, migration, art and festivals, resilience, and landscape. The ongoing Horizon Europe project [RURACTIVE](#) builds on this legacy, and is supporting new communities – '[Dynamos](#)' – to develop local action plans around sustainable tourism, culture, mobility, and energy.

UN Tourism's 'Best Tourism Villages': community-led approaches to rural sustainability

Ibrahim Ahmed Abdou, UN Tourism (PPT)



The '[Best Tourism Villages](#)' initiative recognises rural destinations that harness tourism as a driver of inclusive and sustainable development. Alongside the award, the initiative features a structured [monitoring and evaluation framework](#) designed to assess progress over time across nine areas, including environmental, social and economic sustainability, cultural heritage, governance, and tourism value chains.

Results from the first monitoring cycle, including data from 43 awarded villages, 10 of which are in the EU, show strong implementation in areas such as environmental sustainability and tourism development, but also highlight the challenges of advancing social and economic sustainability. Case examples from [Slovenia](#), [Cyprus](#), and [Spain](#) demonstrate how local communities are actively engaged in preserving heritage, creating smart tourism strategies, and fostering transnational collaboration.

Regenerative nature tourism for community and environmental resilience



Pia Smeds, Natural Resources Institute Finland (Luke) ([PPT](#))



This Interreg-funded [Aurora project](#) promotes regenerative nature tourism in Finland and Sweden. Unlike sustainable tourism, regenerative tourism actively seeks to restore and improve social, cultural, and ecological systems.

Through collaboration with 20 reference companies, the project explores how tourism can create net positive impacts. The approach focuses on building local capacity, shifting mindsets, and developing models that align visitor engagement with community wellbeing and environmental restoration.

Next steps for the Rural Pact Support Office ([PPT](#))

- upcoming [Rural Pact activities and events](#)

Join the Rural Pact Community and online platform

https://ruralpact.rural-vision.europa.eu/become-member_en



<https://ruralpact.rural-vision.europa.eu>



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