

Guidelines on public awareness and information

Jan Mogol
Information Officer
Lake Hornborga, County Administrative Board of Västra Götaland
Sweden

General public awareness raising, public involvement and information strategy

Goals

To create new and maintain old nature reserves we need the approval of the public. Otherwise the politicians *might* cut the foundings. A Swedish survey tells us that people expect three things above all when they visit a big nature reserve or national park. They want...

1. A good cup of coffee.
2. Clean and nice toilets.
3. A possibility to buy something.

When these needs are fulfilled we have a possibility to reach out with our interesting stories about...whatever it might be.

To attract people we need to think human. Not even devoted biologists have come to the nature reserve to read miles and miles of signs. Visitors in general want to *do* things. During doing (walking, drinking coffee at a nice place with proper tables and so on) we have a good opportunity to tell them a little bit. And – above all – answer the common questions.

There is a modern American word called "infotainment". Obviously a combination of the words *information* and *entertainment*. In some respects they are right, the Americans. Learning must be fun. And learning, when it comes to children, *must be* activities. You can't expect them to walk around in a museum with glass everywhere, sit on their butts and watch a *looooooong* and rather difficult video, then go down to the lakeside and be eaten by mosquitoes - and *enjoy* it. They might do it without complaining, but that is not our goal. We must be able to meet their needs with our own message.

Information and marketing strategy – is important. You need to sit down and write down what you want to do. Now, during the next year and within five and ten years. The strategy have to be evaluated every year.

Main target groups

1. Schools

We suggest you start with the schools – if you have made up your mind when it comes to schools. You have to do it – or not. Something in between is just not good enough. If the answer is yes, then invite teachers on a regular basis. Spend a day together, show them your activities and possibilities. And, of course, ask them about their thoughts and ideas.

2. Birdwatchers

We strongly believe northern european birdwatchers might be an interesting group. No large numbers, maybe, but quite possible to attract. Especially since you have interesting species as Aquatic Warbler and quite a few species that are normally quite rare in Western Europe/Scandinavia. Why don't you spend some time talking to the editors of big birdwatching magazines in Great Britain, Germany, Netherlands, Sweden and so on. Maybe they will write about Zuvintas?

3. Common people (adults)

This is, in some respects, the most important group. To attract this group, coming from cities around, you need good trails, an interesting exhibition, tables and benches in nice areas etc. And – of course – then you have to be open during the weekends. You can't be closed during Saturdays and Sundays. You have to find time and money to open up the building! At least during spring and summer.

Needed infrastructure

You need a lot – but start with the information centre. Make sure you create a good and interesting environment. With some good trails (doesn't have to be long), good signs (you can produce them yourself, with a few short sentences) and a small birdtower/platform. What you need, however, is create a new and nice atmosphere within the building. A lot of empty space at the moment. Shut down, open up and invite.

Later on you need a few good parking places/birdtowers/signs around the lake as well.

Parking places, better roads around the lake, bird towers, trails and signs (your own as well along the roads) are necessary.

Information materials

A good website on the internet. A website that will offer a lot – not only explain. In Lithuanian and English, of course. You also need a good brochure, covering the area. That's about it.

Well, what now? You've got the the brochure and a good site on the internet. How do you spread the word around? The answer is – you need to spend a lot of time marketing your brochure and your website. To schools, tourist offices, clubs, societies etc. Make a list – and make sure you follow what happen with your brochures.

The video, showed in June 2004, was a good example how you can produce a nice video and overkill with information. When it comes to schoolchildren, make it short and talk to the kids in their own language. When it comes to adults – make it short

and talk to them in their own language. Save the old one for the specialists. It's good!

Ask yourself and, most important, ask the public what questions they ask themselves when it comes to a nature reserve like Zuvintas. It's a famous reserve – sure they have some common questions. Make a survey in the schools! Make another one among adults. Ask the tourist offices to help out! When you've got the questions – make sure you answer them in and around the information centre. When you've done that you will have a good opportunity to them a little more.

Broschures, videos, websites. All good, all necessary – but nothing can ever compare with meeting someone. This is crucial! You must be there! Including weekends!

Visiting the reserve

Where

The information centre should be the first place to visit in the area. To make it number one you need to make sure you have a good parking place, bird tower (or something similar), a couple of trails (and they need maintenance!), signs and possibilities to visit the information centre indoors. And someone to talk to, no matter if it's a Tuesday or Saturday. If it's not possible to visit the information centre indoors (a cold Monday in December, for instance) you need some sort of outdoor information centre – close to the parking centre.

In the long run you also need a few other areas for visitors around the lake. There you might need a parking place, a bird tower and a sign – explaining where they are and the idea with Zuvintas.

What intensity

I don't think this will be a problem for a long time, Don't worry about it. At least not yet.

How to regulate

See above – where. You decide where you can accept a lot of visitors (the information centre area) and where you prefer people to stay away.

How to evaluate allowable number of visitors

This is difficult. You can count visitors in the information centre and in the parking place. The technical solution is not a problem, but the money might be. Is it worth the money at Zuvintas at this moment? We don't think so. Make a rough estimation instead.

Functions of the administration building

Opening hours are very important. The information centre must be open during weekends. Not throughout the year, but certainly during the most

important/interesting months. If you can't raise money for someone who will take care of the visitors – maybe you can move an office to the entrance. You also need to shut down big spaces, make it less educational and more social.

Functions of administration

What specialist are needed to ensure these functions

You need someone who will take care of the visitors – no matter if it is a school, an ordinary family from Vilnius or a group of birdwatchers from Germany. It doesn't have to be someone with a proper education as biologist. On the contrary, you need someone who understand the lake as well as the visitors. Someone who will be responsible for marketing, press, website, trails, signs, the exhibition, school children etc. It's a full-time job!

If you can't raise the money for Zuvintas, maybe you can do it for several nature reserves in the region – or in the southern part of Lithuania. Make sure he or she will have the office in Zuvintas! At the entrance!

You need, basically, someone who is educated in marketing/communication and with a great interest in nature.