

## **Learning Network Sustainable Tourism (LNST) for Tourism Education in Flanders, Belgium**

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### **Introduction**

Since 2002 the Flemish Tourism Board, the executive agency of the Flemish Ministry of Tourism, has implemented different actions to introduce the principles of sustainable tourism into tourism education in Flanders.

The general objective is to stimulate teachers, trainers and professors within the tourism education sector to fully integrate the framework and current knowledge on sustainable tourism development within their teachings. Once this integration process is implemented, a Learning Network will be developed so that these teachers, trainers and professors are able to meet on regular bases to exchange their experiences with this integration process and the teaching of sustainable tourism in general.

Because of the different structure and specific needs the High School level education and Higher Education Institutes were targeted separately.

### **A. Learning Network Sustainable Tourism for Higher Education Institutes**

For Higher Education Institutes, i.e. Bachelor Programs in Tourism and Hotel Management the following actions were gradually implemented:

#### *1. Collection and transfer of educational materials on sustainable tourism (2002-2007)*

The Flemish Tourism Board developed a list of already existing educational material on sustainable tourism and designed a separate page on their website easily accessible for teachers and trainers.

#### *2. Organization of seminars on sustainable tourism for tourism education (2002 – 2007)*

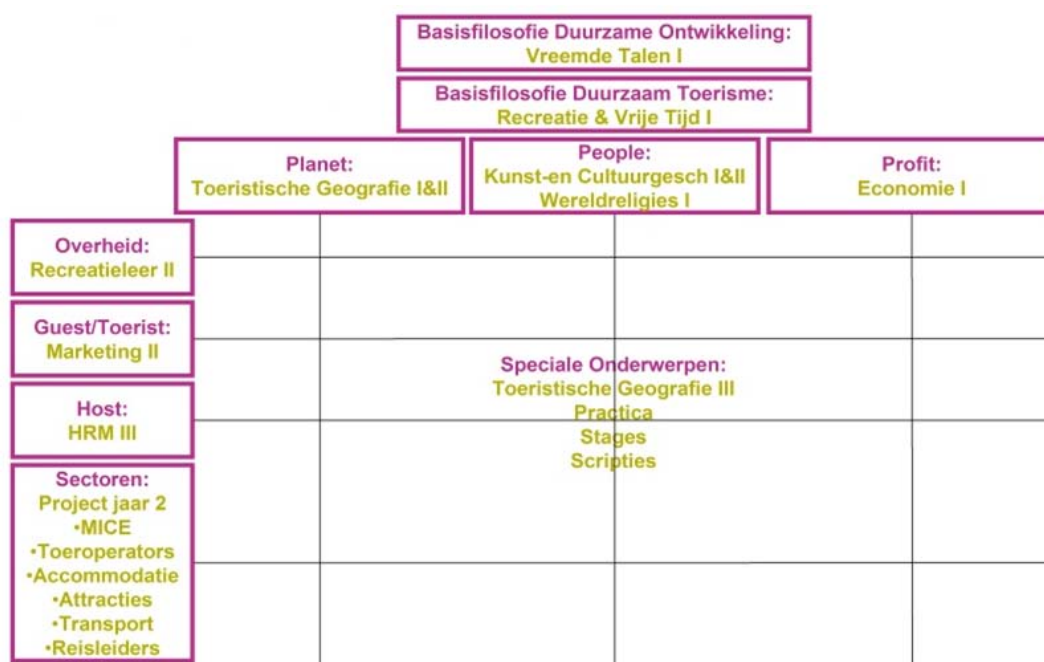
In order to create awareness and provide a constructive mindset, several seminars were organized for both public and private sector stakeholders to exchange knowledge with the educators on sustainable tourism and how it should be integrated within the educational programs.

3. *Integration exercise of the principles of sustainable development within the curricula (2007-2009)*

Once the right mindset had been developed the Flemish Tourism Board implemented a structural exercise in integrating the principles of sustainable development in a progressive way within a three-year tourism curriculum. Within all courses throughout the three years proposals were made on how to integrate these principles. Moreover, suggestions were offered on the manner of integrating the subject of Sustainability increasingly within research projects, fieldtrips and outplacements.

This first exercise was implemented as a pilot project within the Bachelor in Tourism and Recreation Management of the Mechelen College in 2007.

The final result of this integration exercise was a digital manual with hands-on, user-friendly information on sustainability in relation to the content of all courses and scholar activities (see figure beneath).



In 2008 the trajectory was introduced to all other Tourism Bachelor programs in Flanders.

4. *Start and organization of a Learning Network for Sustainable Tourism (2009 - ...)*

To be able to generate, exchange, and transfer further knowledge on sustainable tourism between teachers a Learning Network was created in 2009 together with the Department of Environment, Nature and Energy of the Flemish Government. Since January 1<sup>st</sup> 2010

though, the network is coordinated by the Flemish Tourism Board in cooperation with Living Stone Dialogue.

Living Stone Dialogue is a non-profit organization specialized in tourism education and sustainable development of the sector. Because of their experience in improving the quality of tourism education and supporting local tourism entrepreneurs in developing countries (Africa, Asia and Latin-America), they form an interesting partner to approach tourism education in Flanders.

The Learning Network Sustainable Tourism for Higher Education Institutes currently has approximately 90 members: teachers from all 8 Tourism Colleges, professors from the Catholic University of Leuven (Master in Tourism) and several interested private sector stakeholders.

Objectives of the Learning Network:

- Knowledge transfer and creation concerning the integration of the concept and basic principles of Sustainable Development and Ethical/Responsible Entrepreneurship within the curricula of the different higher education institutes specialized in Tourism and Hotel Management (i.e. through the exchange of didactical material and methodologies).
- Exchange of knowledge and experiences between the educational sector and the private tourism sector
- Collaboration towards a mutual benefit

Methodology of the foundation of the Learning Network:

- The department of Environment Nature and Energy of the Flemish Government launched the initiative of Learning Networks for teachers in 2007.
- They promoted the initiative amongst all higher education institutes and the different Departments of the Flemish Government.
- The Flemish Tourism Board saw this initiative as an opportunity to continue her process of introducing items of sustainable development into the courses of tourism education.
- The Flemish Tourism Board organized a conference on Sustainable Tourism for all teachers of the higher education institutes for tourism and hotel management where the Learning Network Sustainable Tourism was initiated. Those teachers who were

interested could register for the Learning Network and would receive invitations for the next gatherings.

- Meanwhile Tourism Board of Flanders and Living Stone Dialogue promoted the Learning Network Sustainable Tourism.
- The membership of the Network grew steadily because of growing interest and this not only with teachers but more and more also with public tourism officials, tourism entrepreneurs, educators outside higher education institutes...

#### Challenges of the process:

- The challenge of the Learning Network was to attract teachers from all tourism colleges and to bring around those who were not already convinced of the necessity to incorporate sustainable tourism. Sometimes some lobby work was necessary to meet these goals.
- The target group remains teachers but others are welcomed to join if they think the gathering will inspire them. If there no longer exists a balance between teachers and other interested people in the total amount of members, a new way to inform the broader public is to be found.
- The program of gatherings is carefully tuned to the strict time schedules of tourism educators. The members choose the theme of the gathering regarding the necessity of information on the topics. The organizers make arrangements wherein their proposals fit.
- Sustainable tourism became a hot issue in the tourism sector the last couple of years and teachers feel more the need to teach their students about this topic. The Learning Network supports them with finding accurate information.
- The gatherings are free for all who are interested to join them. For budget reasons the organizers appeal sometimes on the owners of the visited sites to sponsor logistical requirements.

#### Format of the Learning Network:

- 3 to 4 times per year a gathering is organized, each time centered around a specific theme or aspect within the Sustainable Tourism Framework,
- Experts from the sector are invited to participate,
- There is a moment of exchange or debate,

- If possible a field visit to a “Best Practice” or established Flemish stakeholder is organized,
- Last but not least at the end of each session the needs and opportunities in didactical applications on this theme are discussed and a work group is formed to create educational material for that theme.

Past and future themed gatherings:

March 11<sup>th</sup>, 2009: Introduction Learning Network & presentation educational game “Ethical Entrepreneurship on Cruise ships”

May 29<sup>th</sup>, 2009: The integration of Sustainable Development principles within the curricula of Higher Education in Tourism.

October 16<sup>th</sup>, 2009: Sustainable Transport & Climate Change, a presentation by Paul Peeters (NHTV)

December 15<sup>th</sup>, 2009: Cultural Tourism and Sustainability: Culture, more than an attraction, a presentation by Prof. A-M Van Broeck

May 4<sup>th</sup>, 2010: Tourism activities within the Social Economy: Case ‘t Roodhof, Oostkamp

October 28<sup>th</sup>, 2010: Forum Sustainable Tourism: Working tomorrow, acting today

February 10<sup>th</sup>, 2011: Sustainable Destination Management: Case-Study Ghent

June 2011: Sustainable National Park Management: Case-Study National Park Hoge Kempen

Sept/Oct 2011: Sustainability in Aviation: Case-Study Thomas Cook Airlines

## **B. Learning Network Sustainable Tourism for High School level Tourism Education**

Since the success of these initiatives the Flemish Tourism Board, i.c.w. Living Stone Dialog, is looking at supporting high school level education in tourism in the same way.

In 2004 the Flemish Tourism Board already participated in creating general competence matrices in sustainable development for high school curricula. These competence matrices mention the knowledge, skills and attitudes which should be taught to high school tourism students.

Together with Living Stone Dialog a similar procedure as for Higher Education Institutes has started beginning 2011. Firstly the principles of sustainable development will be integrated within all curricula and secondly a Learning Network for high school teachers shall be developed.