

Vydrovská valley

VYDRA - Rural Development Activity seated in Čierny Balog has been working in rural Micro-Region Čierny Hron (MrČH) since 1997. It is voluntary, non-profit, civic association of young people from whole Slovakia and it works like an independent legal subject. OZ VYDRA was formed from Eco-centre “*Strom života*“ (Tree of Life) Vydra in Čierny Balog and has been working in rural MrČH since 1977.

Activity description

Vydrovská valley - a new touristic destination located in Čierny Balog, Brezno County. Vydrovská valley is the result of efforts and very good co-operation of four partners from all sectors - state, non-profit, business and municipality: the Municipality of Čierny Balog with rich, more than 400 years-old history, culture and traditions is one of the largest villages in Slovakia. A unique tourist attraction the narrow-gauge Čiernohronská railway (ČHŽ) that was used for wood transportation from deep valleys and forests is a part of its history. The local forests became home for families of skilled verderers and woodcutters. Jozef Dekrét Matejovie who is well-known for his contribution to sustainable forest management for the next generations was born here. Forestry open-air museum was built by the state forest enterprise Lesy SR, affiliated forest enterprise Čierny Balog. Vydra-Rural Development Activity supports actively the partnership with aim to contribute to the sustainable development of the rural region, preservation of traditions as well as cultural and natural values, mainly by means of tourism and voluntary works.

What concerns recreation Vydra-Rural Development Activity offers:

- Guide services for National nature reserve Dobročský primeval forests
- Accommodation mediation
- Complex insurance of some action of a company „Key-ready“
- Programme for the trips of school children
- Special programmes for children (Children's Day, St. Nicholas Day)
- Summer camps (for kids, youth, family with kids) with funny, educational, environmental, sport and creative activities aimed at enhancing positive relation of children to nature as well as field trips, (horses, swimming pool), Čiernohronská railway, forestry open air museum.

”History” of case study:

Current agent of the company was seeking for a new job as she was unable to find proper job with regard to her qualification (she studied at secondary medical school and graduated as a nurse). She left for England to find some job. There she worked and studied English language as well. After coming home she studied in a course on agrotourism, and later she has found job in Vydra.

Since 1983 a voluntary association of young activists for the preservation of Čiernohronská railway has been working in Čierny Balog in the framework of *Strom života*. But this form was not suitable due to its inflexibility as well as the distance from the centre of *Strom života* in Bratislava. Activists tried to develop other activities and to help the whole region development as well as to activate local population. At the same time state forest enterprise Lesy SR š. p. initiated a construction of forestry open-air museum in Vydrovská valley. Existence of this project and of Čiernohronská railway caused a need to build up information bureaus for tourists, what later resulted in the development of further activities in form of projects on recreation in this area, reconstruction and construction of new infrastructure, preparation of manual design for advertising materials etc.

The first more complex project was *Vrchárske putovanie* (Mountain wandering) prepared together with Cycling club Poľana and Slovakian Hucul Club that had to provide service for people loving hiking and travelling. But this project was not as a whole successful. Follow up of the project is *Vulkán Poľana*, which develops the programme of wandering successfully in smaller region. Positive side is development of networking between the providers of accommodation, chalets, folk craftsmen, producers of cheese, etc. At the same time there were built routes for cyclists, shelters and other small infrastructure. The project and trademark Vydrovská valley was formed based on the experience from this project.

Chronology:

1997	Establishment of OZ VYDRA
2000	First touristic information bureau (TIK Čierny Balog), project <i>Vrchárske putovanie</i>
2003	Construction of facilities in Vydrovo, buying of small house in the municipality
2004–2005	EU project for infrastructure development: railway platforms in Chvatimech,
2005	Opening of small house Vydra
2005–2006	Project <i>Vydrovská valley</i> , opening of further TIK bureaus, manual design, advertising brochures, touristic exhibitions, educational walking trail Hronec, information boards in Chvatimech
2007	Equipment for the museum in Čierny Balog and its opening
2008	Participation in the Ekopolis project <i>Jantárová cesta - Vitajte cyklisti</i> (<i>Amber Road/Welcome cyclists</i>), certification of services in tourism for cyclists

Women activists of Vydra brought from various courses and training held abroad, which are organized for the members of NGOs, know how on the networking of enterprises in tourism, on marketing and activation of local population (e.g. through LEADER initiative, Corsica). They started with new projects and obtained grants (in total they obtained already more than 433,000 € for the period of existence). In cooperation with other similarly oriented NGO they seek for new projects and they inspire themselves how to tackle problems, organize together study trips (Estonia, Portugal, and Lithuania). Last common initiative with one NGO from Banská Bystrica is *Jantárová cesta*. Critical stage was the period of covering the costs of infrastructure construction, when any of banks did not want to provide loan as to a civic association. At last they obtained finances by collecting small loans from about 13 volunteers from whole Slovakia. Now they carry out own survey of the needs of visitors for their further development as well as a source of new ideas for own work.

Annual turnover is more than 330,000 €. For last two years there have been financed from own sources two full time positions in Vydra and other 5 persons, about 140h/month work in TIK. Non-financial contribution is also in form of various advertising material that serves the advertising and promotion at tourism fairs (at the level of Self-governing territorial unit Banská Bystrica – Slovakia – Bratislava as well as abroad Budapest – Hungary).

Actors and their roles:

Main actors in Vydrovská valley are OZ Vydra, Lesy SR, affiliated forest enterprise Čierny Balog, municipality Čierny Balog and ČHŽ non-profit organization. Cooperation with ČHŽ, Lesy SR and the municipality contributed to functioning project and win-win situation. Lesy SR, š.p. ensure a complete maintenance of Forestry open air museum, organize common events, as e.g. every year Day of Tree (in 2008 with about 10,000 participants), participate in preparing advertising material and ensure guides. *European Forest School* will be a new project.

The municipality obtains symbolic sum 5 SKK (0.17 €) from the fees for accommodation, it covers the costs of the salaries of TIK employees, put on lease free of charge own facilities for organizing various events as well as covers a part of costs for exhibitions and advertising material.

ČHŽ provides transportation and area for other accompanying events. Successors of volunteers who started with the preservation have been among current volunteers working in summer camps for children in Vydrovská valley. The Museum of ČHŽ and TIK are seated in one building.

Other enterprises involved into the network are local entrepreneurs providing accommodation, meals, folk craftsmen making souvenirs, preparing cultural programme etc. In addition to TIK, being under the administration of Vydra, advertising is ensured also by TIK of other recreational centres (Poľana, Low Tatra Mts.) Promotion (advertising) ensured by Higher territorial unit – Banská Bystrica self-governing unit (VÚC BBSK), department for tourism in form of various recommendations to their visitors (e.g. forty two Chargé d'affaires working in Slovakia) was very significant as well.

Relevance of public opinion and programmes

As it follows from the tasks of actors, public policy on the level of municipality as well as Higher territorial unit is one of decisive factors of support. Department for tourism at Higher territorial unit/Self governing administrative unit BBSK as well as the municipality Čierny Balog have a priority interest in supporting recreational use of this area. At the same time cooperation on all levels is stimulated, employment rate and value added tax produced in this region is higher. In the course of the implementation of some projects financial support from the grants of Slovak institutions and EU programmes was used. Also other forms of cooperation with similar NGOs seem to be supportive in the exchange of information and know-how. Problem situations are prevented by common strategy of all partners of *Vydrovská valley* to reach the objective while the problems are solved operatively. Partial problems with cash-flow of some projects were identified as obstacles.