

The Curonian Spit: Identity and Cultural Heritage

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In 1809 the renowned German geographer Wilhelm von Humboldt traveled through East Prussia along the Old Postal route that connected Königsberg with Sankt Petersburg. Remembering his passage on the Curonian Spit (Lithuanian Kuršių Nerija) he later wrote to his wife: "The Curonian Spit is so peculiar that if you don't want your soul to be missing a wonderful impression, you must see it, just like Spain or Italy." (Gorys, 2005, 196, translated by the author) With this statement we may call von Humboldt the discoverer of the unique scenic beauty of the peninsula. In the centuries to come many were to follow his advice. Today the Curonian Spit – a UNESCO world heritage site since the year 2000 - is totally dependent on a seasonal tourism which comes with economic and social challenges to the nature and host community.

1. Setting the scene: Geography, History and Cultural heritage

The Curonian Spit is an elongated stretch of sand-dunes extending over 98 km with a width varying from 400 meters at its narrowest point to 3.8 km. (Kursiu Nerija National, 2001b) It separates the Curonian Lagoon (Lithuanian Kuršių Marios) from the Baltic Sea. The northern part of the spit belongs to the Republic of Lithuania, the southern part to the Kaliningrad district of the Russian Federation.

Some seven thousand years ago the Curonian Spit was formed of sand grains, which accumulated into an embankment and then developed into a peninsula. However, the landscape that we see today is the result of human activity. Forest clearings between the 16th and 19th centuries were followed by coastal erosion and the appearance of traveling dunes, which threatened the settlements of the spit. Entire villages were buried beneath the sand. From the end of the 18th century, protective measures were started: People constructed the low dune near the seacoast and planted the moving "great dunes" at the coast of the lagoon. These large dunes rise up to 60 m and thus are amongst the highest dunes in Europe. Forest, predominantly pine and birch trees, covers 70% of the dry land. There are rare plant species, some of them protected. The wildlife is also distinctive. The pride and symbol of the spit is its elk. In addition, the peninsula is a favorite place for birds, among them the sea eagle. During the spring and autumn up to 1 million birds migrate over the spit. In 1991 the Kuršių Nerija National Park was established in order to protect the varied, unique and very fragile nature.

The first inhabitants, fishers and hunters of the Narva culture, arrived to spit around 5000 B.C., when it was still a string of separate islands. (Strakauskaitė, 2005) The most famous archaeological find, the so called Amber Treasure of the village of Juodkrantė (German Schwarzort) – a collection of jewelry and small sculptures - gives

testimony to the local Narva cultures' achievements. Younger settlements from the Late Neolithic and Early Bronze Age were also discovered. The first historical records of the Curonian Spit, however, date back to the middle of the 13th century. They are connected with the conquests of the German Teutonic Order on its crusades through the lands of the Baltic tribes. The Order built a castle on the mainland side of the Curonian Lagoon, where later the city of Klaipėda (German Memel) would be situated, and laid the foundation for 7 centuries of German domination of the region. Since 1328 a diocese border between the Orders' lands of Memel and the neighboring Sambia divided the Curonian Spit into a northern and a southern part.

In the 13th century the peninsula was inhabited by the Baltic tribes of Sambians and Curonians. (Kursiu Nerija National, 2001a) Germans are documented from the 14th century, and Lithuanians appeared 200 years later. All of the mentioned ethnic groups, together with the other peoples that left their traces on the spit, were subjects of the different lords of the region: the Duke (1525-1701) and later the king of Prussia (1701-1871) and subsequently - as Prussia became a part of the German Reich - the German emperor (1871-1918), only shortly interrupted by the rule of the Swedes (1629–1635) and the Russians (1757–1762).

Through the centuries of cohabitation, the ethnic groups blended and developed a distinct local culture. Since the 19th century Curonian was spoken while fishing (the prevailing occupation for the inhabitants of the spit), German in state institutions, German and Lithuanian in church, and Lithuanian in the market places on the other side of the lagoon (where they were selling their fish). Language was still more a sign of social rather than national belonging. For example Fritz Froese, a fisherman, registered himself as Curonian. A few years later the same person, now owner of a shop, talked of himself as being a German. (Peleikis, 2004) Throughout the 19th century the Curonian language was reduced to the fishermen's working language. As a result of World War II most of the inhabitants of the Curonian Spit immigrated to Germany and beyond and took with them the Curonian language.

Even if the intangible cultural heritage of the Curonian Spit left with the refugees and immigrants, some of its material traces prevailed. In the old Nida cemetery visitors can see the archaic wooden grave markers called "krikštai" (Mukienė, 1998). They were planted at the feet of the deceased for it was believed that this would help them to stand up when the time for resurrection came. Specific to the spit is also the picturesque architecture of the wooden fishermen farmsteads, with their dark red walls, white window-frames and bright blue eaves. Symbols for the Curonian Spit became the "kurėnai" and weathervanes. "Kurėnai" are the typical flat-bottomed fishing boats, whose shape was developed to suit sailing conditions in the lagoon. Weathervanes, serving as boat and fishing ground identification, were attached to the mast tops of the "kurėnai".

Tourism entered the Curonian Spit already in the middle of 19th century. The most popular destination today, Nida (German Nidden), was discovered by artists around 1880 and developed into a meeting point for intellectuals, artists, writers and photographers. It flourished also in the interwar period, when the spit belonged to the independent Lithuania. The Nobel prize winner Thomas Mann came to Nida in 1929 and built his summerhouse there. His and other cottages from this time period still remain, even if most of them were rebuilt during Soviet rule. In Juodkrantė, the most bourgeois of the resorts, many Villas remained. There are no traces, however, of a very interesting part of the resort's history. In the 1930s, after the Nazis seized power in the neighboring German Reich, the village became popular among Jewish holiday-makers. There were restaurants that served kosher food and even a summer synagogue! (Leiserowitz, 2005)

The Second World War and the following incorporation of Lithuania into the Soviet Union caused a decisive break in the history of the Curonian Spit. (Thomo manno kultūros, 2004) In January 1945 the remaining inhabitants had to flee the approaching Russian front line. Many people died during the chaotic flight and most of the others went on to Germany. For the few who returned to the Soviet Republic of Lithuania, approximately 16% of the former population, identifying oneself as German meant to expose oneself to repression, as Germans were classified as “unreliable” citizens by the new rulers. The Curonian identity now became the key to an arrangement with the regime. People from all over the USSR and later also from Lithuania were settled in the deserted homesteads. A treaty between the Soviet Union and the Federal Republic of Germany in 1958 made it possible for all citizens of the USSR who could prove they were of German decent to immigrate to West Germany. Almost all of the remaining native inhabitants of the Curonian Spit left for good.

Lithuania got its independence in 1991. The 4 villages of the Curonian Spit are administratively joined into the city of Neringa, which has 2.600 residents. As was shown, the cultural heritage of the Curonian Spit is a result of the multi-ethnic history of a borderline country. Unfortunately, a major part of it has been lost. Since 1991 this history is being rediscovered, partially driven by the development of tourism.

2. From mass tourism to cultural tourism

In the beginning of the 20th century the Curonian Spit was annually visited by about 4000 people. At present we count over one and a half million visitors per year (Dikšaitė, 2004). After Lithuania became independent, the fishing industry, where most of the spit's inhabitants were employed, dramatically declined. At the same time, tourism rapidly grew, resulting in a total economic dependency on this sector. More than three quarters of the visitors come during the peak season of July and August. Lina Dikšaitė (2004) from the Kuršių Nerija National Park believes that the high volume visiting in this two month period, exceeds what both nature and the host community can bear without causing irretrievable damage. To give but one example: on any visit to the Great dunes in August one can observe masses of people walking directly past a sign that prohibits trespassing and carelessly trampling down the fragile edges of the dunes, admiring the beauty of the landscape. Tourism also affects the social structure of the community; people have to earn their annual income in a two month period of time. After the season there is almost no work, but many abandoned cottages, closed down shops and cafes. The cost of living is three times higher on the spit than it is on the mainland, however, the wages are the same. The youth are leaving, because there is no prospect to find qualified and well paid work for the whole year.

The sustainable development of cultural tourism offers alternatives to meet these challenges. By sustainable development we mean a development that empowers the people of the community, improves the economy, and treats the environment responsibly in order to meet the needs of the present without compromising the needs of future generations. Cultural tourism is defined as travel with the purpose of experiencing cultural environments, including landscapes and local lifestyles, arts, traditions, as well as other ways of creative expression. (UNESCO, 2003a, 12)

Tourism is now regarded as the largest industry in the world, ahead of automobiles and chemicals. (UNESCO, 2003b) Cultural tourism - as a distinct part of it - is an economic sector with great growth potential. Thus a specific cultural profile might become the decisive win-factor in the growing competition between destinations. Cultural tourism answers to the requirements of sustainability: it improves the economic and social conditions of the destination and its host community as a whole and creates jobs and increases income in often peripheral regions. It is strongly connected with other branches of economy; it increases the activeness of entrepreneurs and the participation of the host community and creates a market for local products. It also

improves the demographic situation by providing opportunities to youth and increases the quality of life for the host community. (UNESCO, 2003a, 17-18)

Furthermore, cultural tourism creates new travel seasons and thus helps to diminish the overabundance of tourists during the traditional peak season thus lessening the negative impact on nature. It would attract also people with higher education and living standards, who tend to treat nature and culture in a respectful way. The cultural tourist might also spend more money, and stay longer at the destinations than the average tourist, thus increasing benefit to the host community.

3. Identity as a key issue in regional development

With its rich cultural heritage the Curonian Spit has an excellent prerequisite for the development of cultural tourism as a part of a sustainable regional development. However, most of the adult inhabitants living on the spit are in the first generation and the community's common collective memory of the region only reaches back 50 years. Local identity has no roots in the history and culture of the spit. This lack of identification with the surrounding cultural landscape reinforces the above mentioned negative tendencies of regional development, especially on a social level.

To a certain part these shortcomings of the social structure of the community may have resulted from the "Soviet experience". An inherent feature of the Soviet system was the extensive use of natural resources without taking into account ecological damage. People had to adhere to a value system that contradicted their sense of responsibility towards the land. As was described above, under Soviet occupation the German aspect of the identity of the region was suppressed while the Curonian aspect of the identity was allowed to be passed on as folklore.

After 1991, it was possible for former inhabitants of the Curonian Spit and their relatives to visit the places of their decent. The "new" residents were confronted with busloads of "nostalgia tourists" from Germany, wandering around in their front yards. In reaction to this some of them developed an aversion of "German" topics related to the spit. On the other hand a growing number of tourists is interested in the whole story, not only of "the Curonians" or "the Germans". Cultural tourism for the Curonian Spit opens up possibilities to establish a positive identification with the whole past. Economic profit is an incentive to rediscover local culture and history, but outside interest from also is an essential element in enhancing local pride and spirit. It raises awareness of the uniqueness of the cultural heritage of the spit and the need to preserve it.

In conclusion it is agreed that cultural tourism – and identity management – could be utilized for the greater benefit of nature and the host community of the Curonian Spit. Nevertheless, is it not problematic when a business sector, even if it is connected to culture, undertakes identity building? Who decides what kind of identity is "built"? Is there a danger that only cultural heritage that is compatible with profit making will be promoted? In the measurement of sustainability it is important not to overemphasize economic success in comparison to the benefit to man and nature.

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