From NIMBY to PIMPY! ... from "not in my backyard" to "please in my backyard"

Genk, Belgium
Ignace Schops

Project Summary

Elevator Pitch

Concise Summary: Help us pitch this solution! Provide an explanation within 3-4 short sentences.

Biodiversity is under pressure! Prosperous and densely populated counties, like Belgium, urgently need to take responsibility and leadership! Because why should we ask developing countries to protect the rain forest if we even can't project our own environment. The establishment of the first National Park in Belgium in 2006 is based on a new model that interlinks sustainable geotourism with the sustainable protection of biodiversity. It's about smart regional development and thinking out of the box! Over 100 million euro were found to create the Hoge Kempen National Park and in 2007 over 650,000 visitors came over. Working along with this model it is also able to do a quick scan of other ...
Regionaal Landschap Kempen en Maasland

Organization type
NGO

Annual budget/currency
+/- € 1,500,000

Your idea

Street Address
Winterslagstraat 87
City
Genk
State/Province
Genk
Postal/Zip Code
3600
Country

Geotourism Challenge Addressed by Entrant
Quality of tourist experience and educational benefit to tourists.

Organization size
Small (1 to 100 employees)

Indicate sector in which you principally work
Conservation/Preservation organization

Year innovation began
1990

Indicate sector in which you principally work
Nature.

Place your video embed code here from YouTube, Google Video and other video sharing websites. How to embed a video from YouTube. http://www.goldmanprize.org/2008/europe

Innovation

What is the goal of your innovation? Please describe in one sentence the kind of impact, change, or reform your approach is intended to achieve.

finding new ways for protecting biodiversity, based on sustainable regional development, together with society

Please write an overview of your project. Include how your approach supports or embodies geotourism or destination stewardship. This text will appear when people scroll over the icon for your entry on the map located on the competition homepage.

Biodiversity is under pressure! Prosperous and densely populated counties, like Belgium, urgently need to take responsibility and leadership! Because why should we ask developing countries to protect the rain forest if we even can't project our own environment.
The establishment of the first National Park in Belgium in 2006 is based on a new model that interlinks sustainable geotourism with the sustainable protection of biodiversity. It's about smart regional development and thinking out of the box! Over 100 million euro were found to create the Hoge Kempen National Park and in 2007 over 650,000 visitors came over. Working along with this model it is also able to do a quick scan of other possible projects in the world. The IUCN now wants to implement this model in several parts of the world.
Due to these kind of innovative projects, the director won the Goldman Environmental Prize in 2008 and became an Ashoka Fellow in 2008.

Explain in detail why your approach is innovative

The keys to success are: thinking out of the box & chasing dreams & working together!
Our approach tries to create awareness for biodiversity combining the sustainable preservation our natural heritage with geotourism - cycling network-hiking paths-horsback riding // B&B // ... It's about regional development based on the quality of the region & bottom up approach, connection nature to nature, connection people to nature and connecting policy with practice! Most of the funding was money that wasn't earmarked as nature conservation money! So it can be seen as a new way of financing biodiversity. Combined with innovative actions like the Visitor Payback System and a constant survey of the visitors (electronic calculation of cyclists and hikers combined with questionnaires), we're able to have numbers of the economic benefit of projects! The knowledge of the economic benefits proves that biodiversity, combined with sustainable tourism/geotourism is an opportunity for economic development of a region!
My name is Ignace Schops. I'm nearly 45 years old, happily married with Carine and we have one daughter called Merle (French for Black Bird).

We live in a municipality called Heusden-Zolder in the province of Limburg, Flanders, Belgium. My profession is nature conservation and I'm also the vice president & secretary of the largest nature conservation organisation in Flanders, named "Regionaal Landschap Kempen en Maasland". We were founded in 1997. My main focus was to create a network of cycling routes, which were called "the Hoge Kempen Ecological Cycle Route Network". This project was focused on the restoration of natural landscapes and the promotion of sustainable tourism. We also aimed to raise awareness for the conservation of biodiversity and to promote the ecological cycle route network as an asset to create awareness for our natural heritage.

Impact:
- Establishment of the Hoge Kempen National Park in 2006!
- A cycling network was established in 1995 with a budget of over 5 million euros, and an immediate success. Now, every year an average of 850,000 cyclists come over to walk on bare feet in a local gateway.
- The landscape was as important as the cycling network. We were able to establish the Hoge Kempen National Park by working with lots of partners, municipalities and governments.
- Community involvement is top priority for us (cf. raising awareness). The investment money we found came for a huge part or the municipalities.
- Besides the National Park we work on several other projects! Two boundless landscapes "Kempen-Broek" and the valley of the River Maas" are currently really going on! We work together with schools, business people ... all to convince them of a sustainable future!

In what ways are local residents actively involved in your work, including participation and community input? How has the community responded to or benefited from your approach?

Community involvement is top priority for us (cf. raising awareness). The investment money we found came for a huge part or the municipalities. The Hoge Kempen National Park is seen as one of the best practices in Belgium. The success of the rangers is a good indicator: over 10,000 people were guided into the National Park & Bare foot path: over 65,000 people came over to walk on bare feet in a local gateway.

How does your program promote traveler enthusiasm, satisfaction, and engagement with the locale?

We have a strong communication policy. Working with partners is the emphasis... The best way - and this happens - is when other partners tell the successful story of the Hoge Kempen National Park. It really from NIMBY to PIMBY nowadays ...

Describe how your work helps travelers and local residents better understand the value of the area's cultural and natural heritage, and educates them on local environmental issues.

Communication policy: at least 2 times a year we communicate with all inhabitants of our working area (> 300,000) with a landscape newspaper - every year we as an organisation have more than 800 meetings with partners on several projects in our working area. Besides the National Park we work on several other projects! Two boundless landscapes "Kempen-Broek" and the valley of the River Maas" are currently really going on! We work together with schools, business people ... all to convince them of a sustainable future!

The Story

What is the origin of your innovation? Tell the Changemakers and media communities what prompted you to start this initiative.

We - 5 friends - started with a dream in 1997! Let's make nature sexy!

In our NGO we created first an innovative cycling network, as an asset to create awareness for our natural heritage. So the restoration of the landscape was as important as the cycling network. We were able to establish the cycling network in 1995 with a budget of over 5 million euros... and an immediate success. Now, every year an average of 850,000 cyclists come over to our region (12 municipalities - ~ 75,000 ha).

Impact: biodiversity (ongoing + scientific survey + report in 2006 - again in 2012) - culture: ongoing relationship with all layers of society (= also goal of the NGO) - sustainable tourism: work to do // in progress to convince other partners - negative impact: if we define negative impact we discuss on this with experts etc. and if needed we review our actions.

How does your initiative currently financed? If available, provide information on your finances and organization that could help others.

Annual budget: +/- € 1.500.000 depending on the projects we do. Annual revenues: rather small (NGO) - all revenues are invested in projects.
Staff: (25) - is changing every year a bit ... most of them full time, some have time or less

Is your initiative financially and organizationally sustainable? If not, what is required to make it so? Is there a potential demand for your innovation?

Our organisation is sustainable for a part (~ 5 staff members) - rest is working on projects. We currently succeed in finding new projects after ending other projects.

What are the main barriers you encounter in managing, implementing, or replicating your innovation? What barriers keep your program from having greater impact?

The impact is going to a greater extent due to the international recognition (Goldman Prize 2008/ Ashoka fellow 2008/ ...), ideas are easily picked up for the moment. Finances are more difficult and depending on the local possibilities.

What is your plan to expand or further develop your approach? Please indicate where/how you would like to grow or enhance your innovation, or have others do so.

Working in networks (Ashoka, IUCN, Europarc, etc) & convincing believers in change (everybody can what I and my colleagues could) - now we are trying to make a sort of a quick scan for other regions and a tool to easily implement our model.

Sustainability

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Next step in our dream was 'creating the first national park in Belgium'! With lots of difficulties! But also with a fantastic team & an enormous network of partners we created by lobbying during the years... In difficult moments, we often remembered Martin Luther King. He never started with "I've a nightmare, but, I've a dream ... that kept us going on. In 2002 we got an approval of the Flemish government to develop our dream and we established the Hoge Kempen National Park in 2006!

Please provide a personal bio. Note this may be used in Changemakers' marketing material.

My name is Ignace Schops. I'm nearly 45 years old, happily married with Carine and we have one daughter called Merle (French for Black Bird).

We live in a municipality called Heusden-Zolder in the province of Limburg, Flanders, Belgium. I'm the director of an NGO called Regionaal Landschap Kempen en Maasland, based in a part of the province of Limburg, Flanders, Belgium. My true love goes to "herpetology" (frogs, lizards, snakes)... wrote a book once on herpetology in my region and hundreds of articles. Locally, I'm very involved in nature conservation and I'm also the vice president & secretary of the largest nature conservation organisation in Flanders, named Regionaal Landschap Kempen en Maasland.
Describe some unique tourist experiences that your approach provides. Be specific; give illustrative examples.

The Hoge Kempen National Park works with 5 local gateways (~ a kind of innovative visitor centres) located "outside" the boarders of the National Park to prevent too much pressure. All gateways have a different content and visitors have the opportunity to enjoy for at least half a day! In one local gateway we tell the story of the Macro cosmos, with a Planetarium, in another the Micro cosmos (insect centre and bare foot path), the Nobel history (castle), the coal mining history, and the story about biodiversity. We work we "rangers", volunteers who guide visitors trough the park and it's possible to book them online! In the national park we created systems of sustainable tourism: hiking paths, cycling paths, horseback riding. And we work together with all tourism entrepreneurs as our ambassadors.

What types of partnerships or professional development would be most beneficial in spreading your innovation?

The innovation we created is a possibility to protect biodiversity for the future interlinking & reconnecting all aspects of society. We never focus on the national park as such, but on a regional development where the natural heritage is essential! It provides proof that working with our natural heritage easily can win from only economic development (industry, unsustainable business, etc.). It can be used for national parks but also for smaller nature reserves