



A guide to plan and promote
ecotourism activities and
measure their impacts in
Mediterranean Protected Areas
following the MEET approach

DestiMED Project

in collaboration with the MEET Network



CREDITS

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PURPOSE AND ORGANIZATION OF THIS MANUAL



The purpose of this manual is to provide protected area managing bodies and the local ecotourism sector with a clear pathway to plan and enhance engaged conservation-focused ecotourism in their areas.

This manual intends to encourage and engage protected areas and sustainable local business in joint initiatives which contribute to protected area conservation – by enabling the creation of ecotourism products based on the approach and methodology initially piloted by the MEET project and later developed and refined by DestiMED project, and henceforth referred to as the “MEET approach”.

The MEET approach envisages the development of ecotourism products in Protected Areas through the establishment of a Local Ecotourism Cluster (LEC), a private-public tourism cluster supported by the protected area and composed of multi-sector stakeholders (see Chapter 2). The approach also helps involved actors in understanding and managing impacts of the product, and in proactively managing it through a series of criteria and supporting tools.

This manual is specifically focused on developing ecotourism products that satisfy criteria in order for the Protected Area to become a part of the Mediterranean Experience of Ecotourism (MEET) Network. The MEET Network is a network of Mediterranean Protected areas, born as a start-up from EU-funded initiatives (the MEET and later DestiMED projects) and designed to harness the potential of ecotourism in the region while being mindful of its conservation. Since its beginning as a cooperation project, MEET has involved nearly 40 protected areas in 11 countries. Today, as a formalized network, it continues to integrate new protected areas to expand the conservation and economic benefits of sustainable, respectful and nature-oriented tourism across the Mediterranean Basin.

Even though the manual specifically address ecotourism products that can meet criteria in order to be promoted through the MEET Network, most of the concepts, guidance and tools presented can be equally applied by any protected area that wants to promote ecotourism activities in its territory by adopting a robust participatory approach and by encouraging the development of products that meet a set of criteria in order to be really qualified as “ecotourism”. In this sense, this manual can be more generally regarded as a tool to initiate, or further promote, the planning and development of ecotourism in any Protected Area of the Mediterranean.

The following is a high-level chapter outline. Within each chapter, basic concepts are introduced along with their rationale. This is followed by an explanation of the process and/or its components in the MEET Network context. Chapters also include Case Study insets designed to highlight examples of successful application of the process and/or lessons learned by various participants throughout the establishment of the MEET Network.

CHAPTER 1

The MEET concept and its rationale. Includes a brief background on tourism in the Mediterranean and its protected areas.

CHAPTER 2

Establishment and maintenance of a Local Ecotourism Cluster (LEC) to satisfy MEET criteria and to manage the creation, monitoring and iteration of a MEET ecotourism product.

CHAPTER 3

The basic components and development of a MEET ecotourism product.

CHAPTER 4

Monitoring and measuring the quality and sustainability of MEET ecotourism products, including the application of the Ecological Footprint methodology.

CHAPTER 5

Marketing through the MEET Network. Addresses product, pricing and promotion specific to MEET ecotourism products.

CHAPTER 6

General sustainability and conservation considerations for protected area members of the MEET Network.

GLOSSARY

Lists working definitions of common terms which appear throughout the manual.

ANNEX

Contains working copies or links to available forms, applications and templates relevant to the MEET Network process.

REFERENCES

A brief bibliographic listing of scientific/technical materials and working documents referenced in the creation of this manual.



TABLE OF CONTENTS 1/3

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	4
PURPOSE AND ORGANIZATION OF THIS MANUAL	5
CHAPTER 1	
INTRODUCTION.....	11
Protected Areas as a Tourism Development Opportunity.....	9
The MEET Network.....	10
The Origins and Future of MEET	12
<i>Box 1: The European Charter</i>	
<i>for Sustainable Tourism in Protected Areas (ECST)</i>	13

CHAPTER 2	
DEVELOPING AND MANAGING	
A LOCAL ECOTOURISM CLUSTER (LEC).....	19
What is a Tourism Cluster and MEET Local Ecotourism Cluster (LEC)? ...	20
Tourism Cluster and MEET Local Ecotourism Cluster Definitions	20
Tourism Clusters and the Tourism Economy (Value Chain)	20
Benefits of a Strong Tourism Cluster.....	20
Local Ecotourism Cluster (LEC): Composition and Formation	24
LEC Composition and Participants	25
Forming a LEC: Existing vs. New Structures.....	27
<i>Box 2: Case Study: Sierra Nevada National Park:</i>	
<i>How MEET Complements the ECST Process.....</i>	28
LEC Formation: A Step by Step Process.....	28
LEC Roles and Responsibilities.....	30
Product Development and Improvement	31
Measurement and Monitoring	31
Ongoing Management of the LEC	32
<i>Box 3: Case Study: Successful formation and management</i>	
<i>of a LEC -- National Park of "Colline Metallifere Grossetane»</i>	
<i>Tuscan Mining UNESCO Geopark.....</i>	33

TABLE OF CONTENTS 2/3

CHAPTER 3

CREATING A MEET ECOTOURISM PRODUCT IN YOUR AREA	34
Tourism and Ecotourism Products	34
What is a Tourism Product?	34
Elements of an Ecotourism Product.....	35
A MEET Ecotourism Product's Unique Selling Proposition (USP).....	37
MEET Target Markets	38
Suggested Activities to be Included in a MEET Ecotourism Product.....	39
<i>Box 4: Case Study: The conservation activity</i>	
<i>in Camargue regional nature park, France</i>	<i>41</i>
How to Satisfy the MEET Criteria for an Ecotourism Product.....	41
Ecotourism Product Design	41
Conservation and Sustainability	42
Cultural Considerations	43
Guiding and Interpretation	44
Accommodation	44
Food & Drink	45
Safety	46
Communication Before and During the Tour	47
Describing Your MEET Ecotourism Product to the Market	48
<i>Box 5 Case study: How a small nature reserve in Italy created</i>	
<i>a unique ecotourism product</i>	<i>49</i>
The Importance of Interpretation and Guiding	
to a MEET Ecotourism Product	49
What is Interpretation?.....	50

<i>Box 6: How to write a theme.....</i>	<i>51</i>
<i>Box 7: Case Study: Using interpretation</i>	
<i>in the Azraq Wetland Reserve, Jordan.....</i>	<i>52</i>
The Role of Guides in Conservation	52

CHAPTER 4

MEASURING AND MONITORING MEET ECOTOURISM

PRODUCT QUALITY AND SUSTAINABILITY	54
MEET Ecotourism Standard and Its Pillars	54
Criteria and Indicators for Managing Quality and Sustainability	
of Ecotourism Products	55
Assessment of Product Suppliers	56
Measuring Sustainability: Ecological Footprint Methodology	57
Ecological Footprint Data Collection and Responsibilities	58
Ecological Footprint Calculation Tool and Results	59
<i>Box 8: General Ecological Footprint recommendations</i>	
<i>for all PAs and LECs.....</i>	<i>59</i>
<i>Box 9: Case Study: Evolving a MEET ecotourism product</i>	
<i>at Samaria National Park: Using the Ecological Footprint</i>	
<i>to achieve a lower food Footprint</i>	<i>61</i>
Measuring Quality of the Guest Experience: Satisfaction Surveys	62
Evaluation of Products for Inclusion into the MEET Guide	63
<i>Box 10: Case Study: Improving a tourism product</i>	
<i>after receiving feedback from testing. (Kornati National Park).....</i>	<i>65</i>
Performance Monitoring Report Card	67

TABLE OF CONTENTS 3/3

CHAPTER 5

MARKETING THROUGH THE MEET NETWORK.....	68
Pricing	68
Calculating the Cost and Profitability of your Product	70
MEET Branding.....	72
Brand Name	72
Brand Pillars.....	73
Brand Promise	73
Brand Values	73
<i>Box 11: Storytelling and MEET.....</i>	<i>74</i>
The MEET Guide	74
Purpose of the MEET Guide.....	74
Fine-Tuning of Products through Evaluation	76

CHAPTER 6

INCORPORATING ELEMENTS OF SUSTAINABILITY.....	78
Key Elements of Sustainability.....	79
Interpretation in Visitor Centers, Signs and Printed Materials.....	79
Visitor Impact Monitoring and Management	80
Zoning for Visitor Use	81
Visitor Management Strategies and Alternatives.....	81
Establishing Limits of Acceptable Change.....	81
<i>Box 12: LAC: a case study from Mingha-Deception Track</i>	
<i>in the Arthur's Pass National Park (New Zealand)</i>	<i>83</i>
How Tourism Supports Protected Areas.....	84
<i>Box 13: The Threshold of Sustainability</i>	<i>85</i>

CONCLUSIONS	87
REFERENCES.....	89
GLOSSARY	91
ANNEXES	92
Annex 1: MEET Membership Phases and Process Overview.....	93
Annex 2: MEET Ecotourism Standard	95
Annex 3: Example of content of an Ecotourism	
Strategic plan structure	98
Annex 4: Example of collaboration agreement	
among park and ITO.	99
Annex 5: Example of a MEET programme	

The Mediterranean : 1st worldwide tourism destination

Yearly tourist arrivals
are blooming

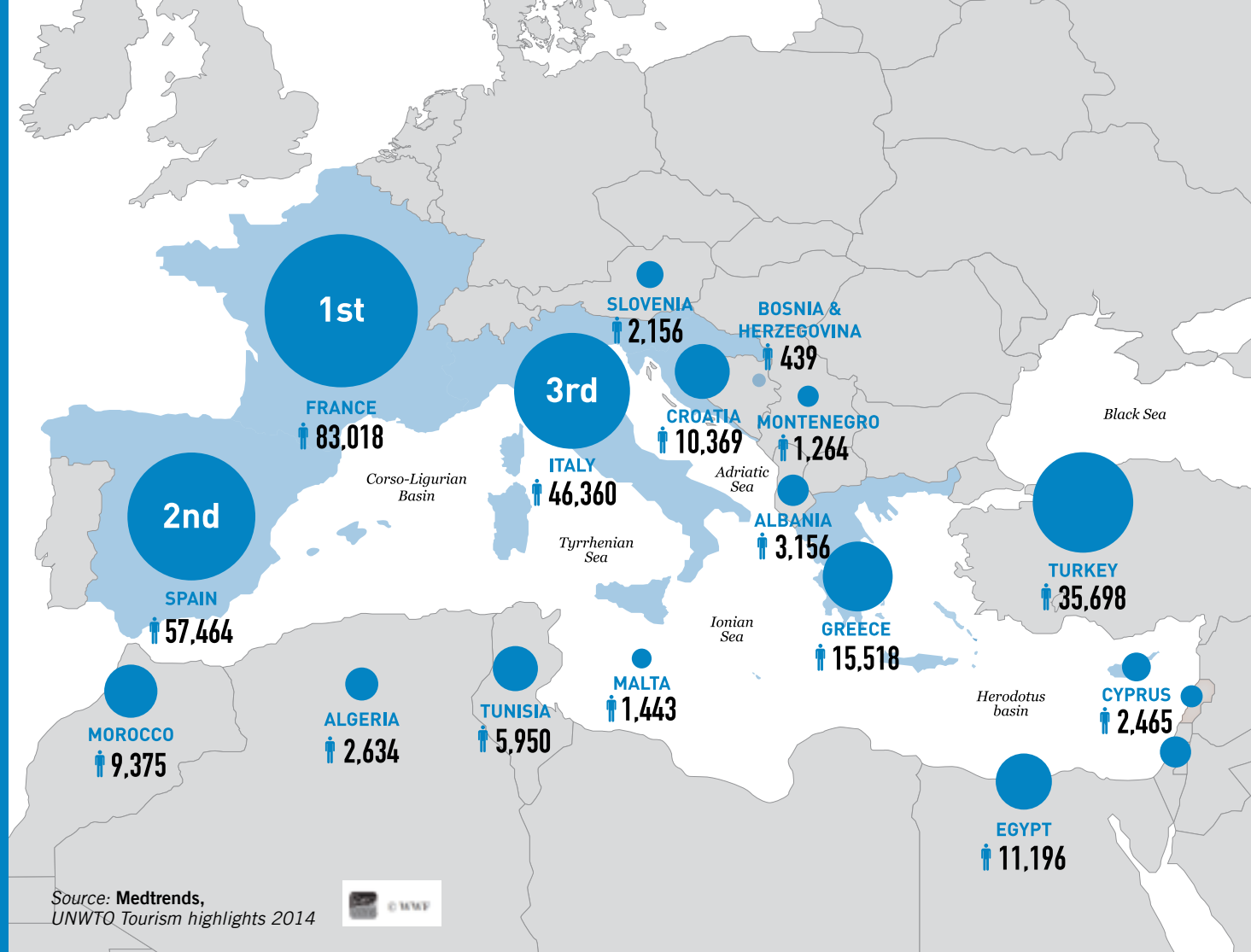
1970
58 millions



2014
300 millions
50 % in coastal zones



by 2030
500 millions



INTERNATIONAL
TOURIST ARRIVALS
BY COUNTRY IN 2012



X 1,000



Mediterranean
EU COUNTRY

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The Mediterranean Basin, which extends across two million square kilometers and 34 countries, east from Portugal to Jordan, and south from northern Italy to Cape Verde, is one of 34 biodiversity hotspots identified around the globe, and one of Earth's most biologically rich yet threatened areas. In addition to its biological and geographic wonders, the region is a treasure trove of human history and culture and is home

to some of the world's earliest civilizations. However, despite its importance, many immediate and long-term threats to biodiversity and local cultures persist, including the region's reliance on revenue from mass tourism. Growing population and increased tourist flow to the region only exacerbate this threat, causing further strains on limited marine and terrestrial resources.

Port-Cros National Park, France © PNPC

*“ Protected areas
in the Mediterranean
need a new model of tourism,
one that is offered as an
alternative to mass tourism. ”*

According to the UN World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), the Mediterranean is the world's leading tourism destination, in terms of domestic and international tourism. The region receives more than 300 million international tourist arrivals, representing 30% of total world tourists for 2014: half of these arrivals are in coastal areas. International tourist arrivals have grown from 58 million in 1970 to nearly 314 million in 2014, with a forecast of 500 million by 2030. Tourism in the Mediterranean region is highly concentrated, both spatially and seasonally, with most visits occurring during the summer months. Coastal tourism is the largest sea-related economic activity in the Mediterranean, with 11.3 of the regional GDP¹. It is evident therefore that tourism represents an important source of revenues and employment in the Mediterranean area. At the same time, it implicates enormous negative impacts for nature and society.

However, demand for alternatives to conventional, mass tourism is growing around the world as more tourists seek to experience nature and authentic culture in a respectful, low impact way.

With large numbers already flowing into Mediterranean protected areas, the obvious question is: Why develop even more tourism in the region?

Protected areas in the Mediterranean need a new model of tourism, one that is offered as an alternative to mass tourism.



Peninsula del Sinis - Isola di mal di ventre MPA, Italy © E. Trainito



Penisola del Sinis - Isola di mal di ventre MPA, Italy © E. Trainito

The new model should ensure that tourism's impact on nature can be minimized, local cultures are respected and economic benefits may be distributed among local communities. By creating a new paradigm for the development of ecotourism products, protected areas can benefit from the shift from conventional to sustainable tourism using mechanisms to monitor and manage tourism-generated impacts.

According to one of the most widely accepted definitions of this term², ecotourism is defined in this manual as: "Environmentally responsible visiting of relatively unspoiled natural areas, in order to enjoy and appreciate nature (and any accompanying cultural features - both past and present), that promotes conservation, has low negative visitor impact, and provides for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local populations."

Ecotourism is widely regarded as a form of tourism that respects nature and culture, engages local people, brings significant economic benefits to local communities, and minimizes the disruptive effects associated with mass tourism.

The MEET approach particularly considers ecotourism as taking place in and around areas which are protected, i.e. in any areas that can be identified as "a clearly defined geographical space, recognised, dedicated and managed, through legal or other effective means, to achieve the long term conservation of nature with associated ecosystem services and cultural values" (IUCN Definition 2008).

Ecotourism products in protected areas have the opportunity to integrate local communities with a wide array of stakeholders including local travel agencies, local guides, farmers, artisans, hotel and restaurant owners, nonprofit organizations, public sector agents, and protected area managers. If this integration is well executed, it creates strong incentives for local communities for nature conservation, by linking economic benefits to healthy, well-managed protected areas.



Port-Cros National Park, France @ G. Harmelin

Protected Areas as a Tourism Development Opportunity

“In the Mediterranean, protected areas are among the best examples of a balanced relationship between man and territory”

Around the world visitors are increasingly travelling to destinations where they can experience unique natural attributes and authentic manifestations of local culture. This phenomenon of market demand offers the potential to generate significant economic benefit for communities living in and around parks and other protected areas. These protected areas typically represent a country's most significant flora, fauna, landscapes and geological formations and, in the Mediterranean case, are among the best examples of a balanced relationship between man and territory. They provide opportunities for visitors to experience powerful manifestations of nature and culture and to learn about the importance of biodiversity conservation and local cultural preservation. When such opportunities are managed sustainably, they can:

Give economic value to ecosystem services that protected areas provide.

Generate direct and indirect income for local stakeholders, creating incentives for conservation in local communities.

Diversify conventional tourism models to include ecotourism.

Attract travelers, in niche market segments, who exhibit higher spending capacities.

Stimulate new business opportunities which directly and indirectly support ecotourism product experiences in and around protected areas (e.g. food, handicrafts, rentals, outdoor shops and wildlife guides).

Strengthen destinations through stakeholder collaboration in the development and/or consolidation of local clusters, thereby increasing economic benefits.

Gain the attention of local, regional and national government agencies, convincing them that protected areas are destinations worth promoting and supporting.

Generate local incentives to educate about protected areas and natural resources and to build local capacity in guiding techniques, customer service and foreign languages.

These and other opportunities illustrate the potential value of leveraging protected areas, particularly in lesser-known areas of the Mediterranean.



Al Shouf Biosphere Reserve, Lebanon © DestiMED project

The MEET Network

Ecotourism in the Mediterranean offers significant untapped potential. The high diversity of flora, fauna, landscapes, ecosystems, unique cultural mosaics, and rich heritage together provide exceptional conditions for the development of ecotourism products.

The Mediterranean Experience of Ecotourism (MEET) is a target-oriented network of protected areas and key organizations managing ecotourism products built around the natural and cultural attractions of protected areas and local communities.

MEET is a conservation effort at its core, designed to support parks in the Mediterranean which play a critical role in protecting the region's threatened biodiversity. The network intends to act as a Destination Management Organization (DMO) representing the involved protected areas and features a support structure that facilitates the design, management, marketing and sales of these products by incorporating them into unique destination portfolio (MEET Guide) with strong branding and professional support. The overarching shared objective of the network is to strengthen the conservation of protected areas while respecting the local culture and history of, and generating economic benefits for the communities that live in and around them.

The MEET Network has been developed to support ecotourism experiences which foster authentic exchanges between visitors, local people, and nature, in what is traditionally a mass-tourism 'sun, sand and sea' vacation region. Instead, MEET focuses on what we call 4C Tourism: Compassion, Connection, Community, and Conservation.

This is integrated into the MEET brand values as:



CONNECTION

We help to inspire meaningful connections with the people, places and culture of the region.



CONSERVATION

Conservation is at the heart of what we do: the long-term sustainability of people and places is fundamental to the brand experience.



COMPASSION

We engage with and strive to understand visitors, each other, and the region's biodiversity and heritage.



COMMUNITY

We embrace the concept of collective impact and the cooperative relationship between protected areas and the local communities.



COMPASSION



CONNECTION



COMMUNITY

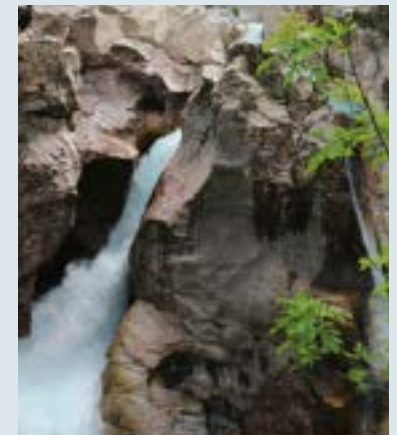


CONSERVATION

Thus MEET is about more than just creating a better holiday: the MEET Network wants to offer a range of itineraries which are designed to harness tourism in a way which contributes to the critical conservation of both protected areas and local cultures in the region. Each park has collaborated over several years with a team of local travel suppliers to design and refine the products. Itineraries in the MEET Guide have achieved high standards of quality and sustainability.

How does MEET support parks?

MEET supports Protected Areas with implementing the MEET Product Development Protocol at local level. What does this look like?



1

LOCAL ECOTOURISM
CLUSTER DEVELOPMENT

2

ECOTOURISM PRODUCT
DEVELOPMENT

3

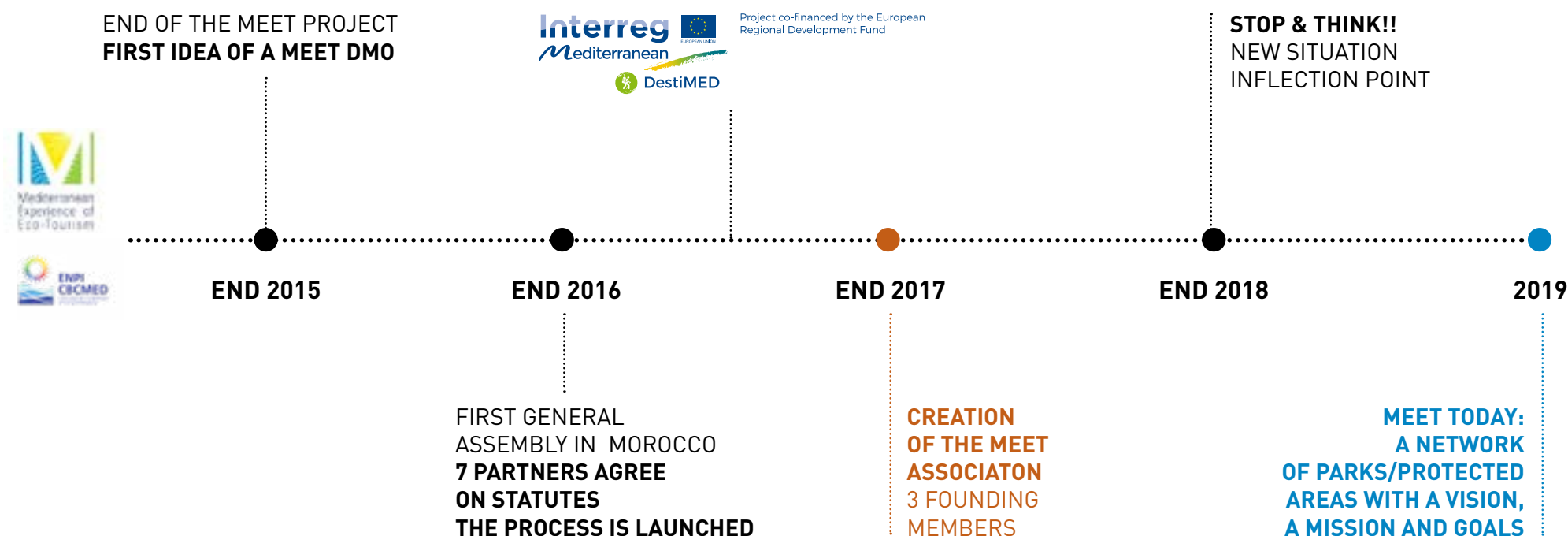
QUALITY AND SUSTAINABILITY
ASSESSMENT AND MONITORING

4

MARKET ACCESS THROUGH
COMMERCIAL ENTITY

The Origins and Future of MEET

The MEET Network is the result of two cross-border cooperation projects: MEET (2013-2015) funded by the European Neighborhood Policy Instrument (ENPI-CBC Med), and DestiMED (2016-2019), funded by the Interreg Med Programme. MEET's product development protocol is based on the principles of and designed to complement the European Charter for Sustainable Tourism in Protected Areas (ECST), created and managed by Europarc Federation (see Box 1).



Box 1

The European Charter for Sustainable Tourism in Protected Areas (ECST)

Created to increase awareness and support for Europe's protected areas and to improve the sustainable development and management of tourism in protected areas, taking account of the needs of the environment, local residents, local businesses and visitors.

The principles of the charter are:

- 1** To involve all those implicated by tourism in and around the protected area in its development and management.
- 2** To prepare and implement a sustainable tourism strategy and action plan for the protected area.
- 3** To protect and enhance the area's natural and cultural heritage, for and through tourism, and to protect it from excessive tourism development.
- 4** To provide all visitors with a high-quality experience in all aspects of their visit.
- 5** To communicate effectively to visitors about the special qualities of the area.
- 6** To encourage specific tourism products which enable discovery and understanding of the area.
- 7** To increase knowledge of the protected area and sustainability issues amongst all those involved in tourism.
- 8** To ensure that tourism supports and does not reduce the quality of life of local residents.
- 9** To increase benefits from tourism to the local economy.
- 10** To monitor and influence visitor flows to reduce negative impacts.

For more information: www.european-charter.org/home

The two projects involved 12 partners*, and managers from 44 Mediterranean protected areas across 10 countries of the Mediterranean (Italy, France, Spain, Croatia, Jordan, Lebanon, Greece, Malta, Albania and Tunisia) working with tour operators, local communities, local service providers, and conservation and tourism experts to develop unique ecotourism products.

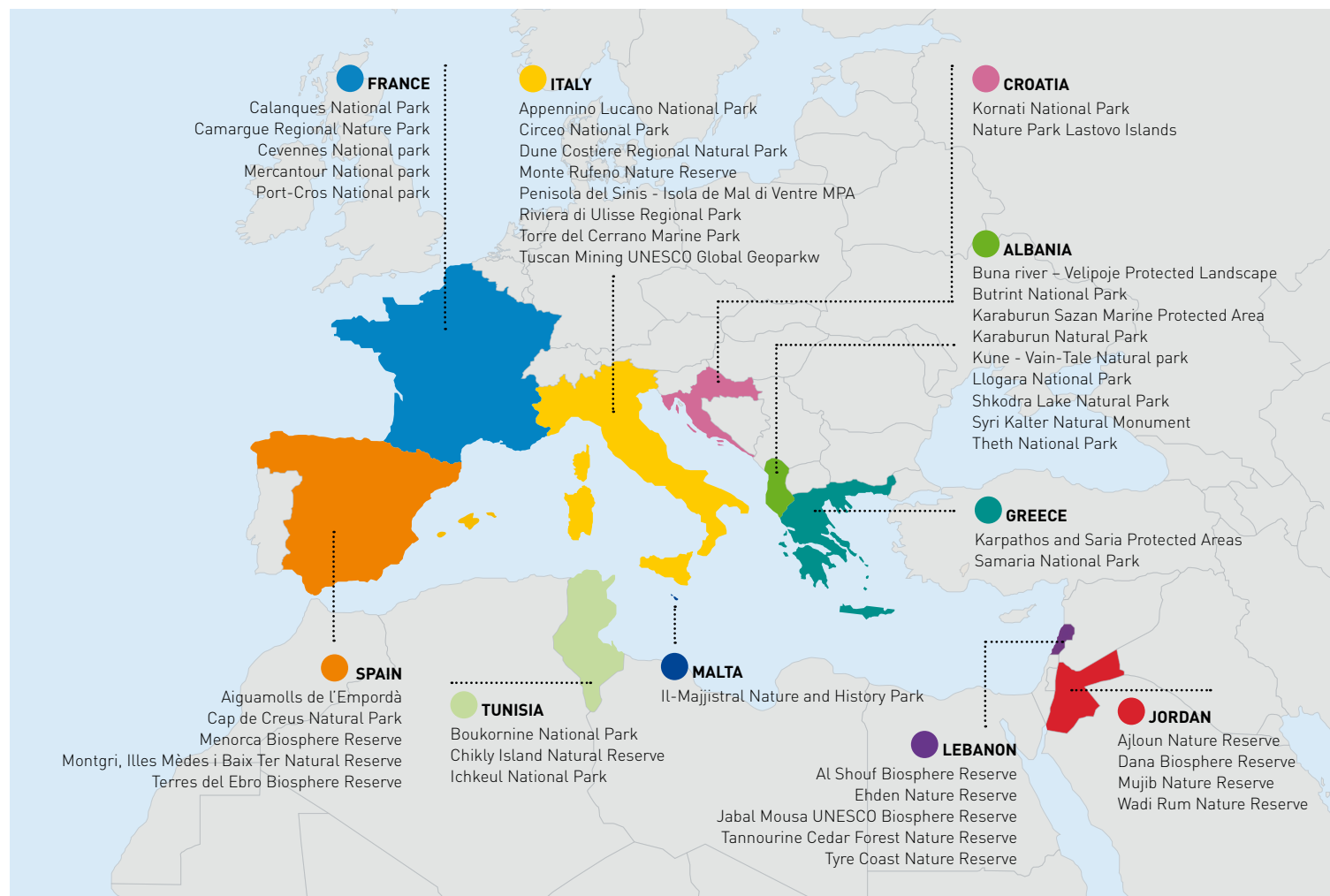
The MEET Network is now formalized as an Association and will continue operating under the supervision of the MEET Secretariat, established to coordinate and facilitate the work of the MEET Network. The MEET Network Secretariat is actually hosted and coordinated by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) – Centre for Mediterranean Cooperation based in Malaga, Spain.

More information about the MEET Network can be found here: www.meetnetwork.org

Details on benefits of being a member of MEET, and on membership process can be found in Annex 1.

**MEET and DestiMED partnership: Federparchi, Lazio Region, National Parks of France, MedPAN, Catalonia Region, IUCN Med, Royal Society for the Conservation of Nature, Al Shouf Cedar Society, IUCN ROWA, WWF Adria, WWF Mediterranean, and Albanian National Protected Areas Agency*

Protected areas involved in the MEET and DestiMED projects



CHAPTER 2

DEVELOPING AND MANAGING A LOCAL ECOTOURISM CLUSTER (LEC)



Dana Biosphere Reserve, Jordan © J. Fraser

Establishment of a Local Ecotourism Cluster (LEC) is one of the key elements of the MEET approach, and a requirement for MEET Network membership. Proper LEC operations are integral to the participatory approach embodied by MEET, including the collaborative development of local ecotourism products, the shared monitoring of their performance, and the effective promotion of those products through the network.

When developed effectively and in line with a few core principles, a LEC helps create opportunities for synergy and mutual reinforcement of the primary objective of a MEET destination: sustainable and competitive ecotourism products in protected areas. This ensures that

the protected area and conservation are at the core of the ecotourism product and are drivers of sustainable development.

This chapter will first look at the basics of a tourism cluster and then the specifics of forming and managing a LEC in the MEET context. The following rationale, composition guidelines, formation processes and ongoing management processes are all crucial to maintaining a robust tourism cluster or LEC.

NOTE:

Although all LECs across the MEET Network will share similar characteristics, each one may take a slightly different form based on local conditions and context.

What is a Tourism Cluster and MEET Local Ecotourism Cluster (LEC)?

The following outlines a basic working definition of a tourism cluster and the specifics of a Local Ecotourism Cluster (LEC) according to the MEET approach. This includes the principles and benefits of effective cluster composition, and how one operates a tourism cluster or LEC within the context of the wider tourism economy.



Tourism Cluster and MEET Local Ecotourism Cluster Definitions

A tourism cluster is a group composed of tourism attraction owners/managers within a limited geographic area (i.e., a destination), with services and activities delivered by local providers (e.g., local tour operators, hotel and restaurant owners, tour guides, tourism shops, transportation providers and the like).

For the purposes of MEET, a Local Ecotourism Cluster (LEC) is a private-public tourism cluster or group initiated or supported by the protected area and composed of multi-sector (private, public and NGO/community) stakeholders. This group acts together to collaboratively develop and manage ecotourism products according to a common vision. If the protected area and LEC members are interested, and specific criteria and standards are met, those products may then be effectively promoted under the MEET brand through the MEET Network. Additionally, the LEC may choose to develop other ecotourism products, and promote and sell them through other channels.

Tourism Clusters and the Tourism Economy (Value Chain)

A tourism cluster encourages engagement with the wider tourism economy. It can also harness the strength and diversity of its stakeholders to share local resources and technologies, form linkages and accrue benefits.

To understand how a cluster can accomplish this in the context of the tourism economy, it's important to understand the characteristics of the tourism value chain and how economic activities in the tourism industry differ from other industries.

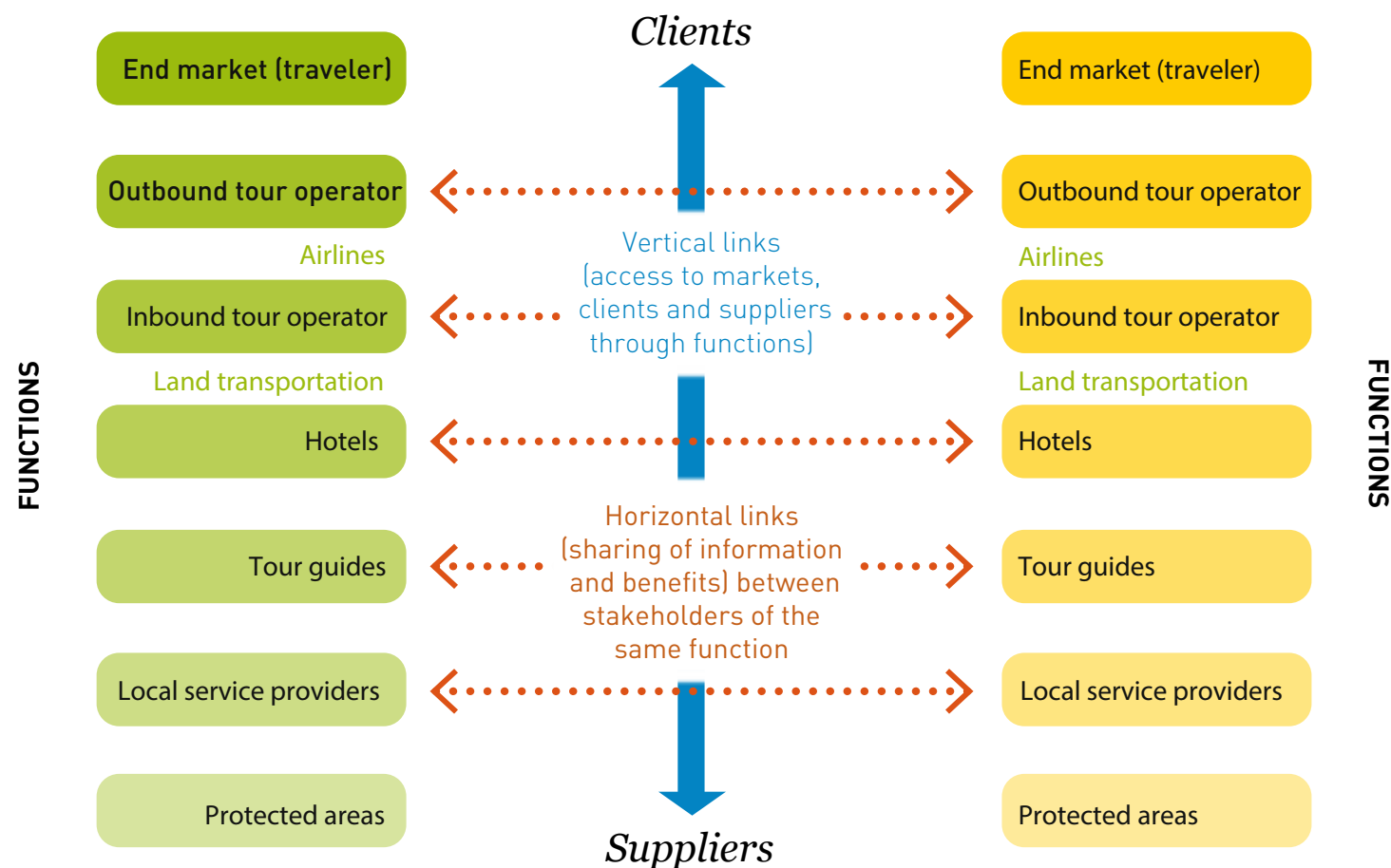
In most economic activities, the product reaches the consumer through a series of vertical linkages known as a value chain. In tourism, however, the flow runs opposite: the consumer “travels” towards the end product/service/experience through a chain of businesses (e.g., travel agents, outbound tour operators, airlines, inbound tour operators, protected areas). Because of this unique characteristic, tourism economy outcomes can heavily impact a destination detrimentally through a combination of environmental, cultural and socioeconomic degradation. On the other hand, proactive tourism development can catalyze local development, multiply the effect of tourist expenditure, disperse benefits across service providers and the community, and positively shape the economics of its protected areas.

In a tourism cluster, such as the LEC, the relationships are mostly horizontal, characterized by developing an ecotourism product together under a common vision and shared values. This includes sharing of benefits (e.g., “Let’s develop a new ecotourism activity that involves and benefits multiple local stakeholders”) and the sharing of information (e.g., “Where do you source locally produced and organic vegetables?”).

The vertical linkages in the tourism value chain provide better access to markets, clients and suppliers through functions. The stronger the linkages – either vertical or horizontal – the more competitive the destination will be, and the more optimized its benefits will be to the local community and its stakeholders. (Figure 1)

Benefits of a Strong Tourism Cluster

A tourism cluster composed of engaged and diverse stakeholders can play an important role in local ecotourism and sustainable development.



A robust tourism cluster can help community and destination stakeholders by:

Facilitating the identification and pursuit of a common set of goals and objectives.

Facilitating agreements between protected area managing bodies (in the case of a LEC), tourism businesses and local stakeholders.

Providing the basis of a governance framework.

Serving as a cooperative environment to encourage strategic alliances, synergies, capacity building and creating new opportunities for the community.

Encouraging innovation.

Offering economies of scale and the knock-on effects thereof: bargaining power, productivity, joint marketing, increased competitiveness and sustainable competitive advantage.

Figure 1: A simplified representation of a tourism value chain.



Local Ecotourism Cluster (LEC): Composition and Formation

The MEET LEC -- which is a tourism cluster focused on ecotourism products -- provides specific opportunities for existing suppliers to learn how to do ecotourism well and creates a platform for emerging businesses to develop their capacities. This simultaneously allows its stakeholders to pursue protected area conservation just as it helps them generate sustainable economic activity for local businesses and the community.

LEC Composition and Participants

One of the requirements of MEET membership is the establishment of a Local Ecotourism Cluster (LEC). Popular tourism destinations, such as many of the protected areas in the Mediterranean, often develop tourism clusters naturally. In order to pursue the MEET approach, and if applicable to satisfy the criteria for MEET membership, it might be necessary to strengthen these existing structures.

Although involvement of a diverse group of public-private stakeholders across the conservation, tourism and community sectors may be challenging and time-consuming, a LEC's strength and its potential positive impact will depend on that involvement. Failure to include all relevant stakeholders -- perhaps in an effort to reduce conflict in the short-term -- will only serve to undermine the long-term effectiveness of the LEC.

At a minimum, a LEC must include representation from the protected area and the selected Inbound Tour Operator (ITO) in order to fulfill the MEET requirements and the reality of tourism product development.

Examples of sector stakeholders for LEC composition include:

Conservation Sector:

Protected Area / Park Authority ensures conservation is respected and promoted, and is an integral part of the ecotourism product.

Tourism Sector:

Locally owned small and medium enterprises (SMEs) required for ecotourism product implementation. Their involvement can also help foster a sense of ownership of the destination. Economically, they serve as an entry point for economic gains from tourism for the local community. Local SMEs can also help keep tourism revenue within the destination, since they are more likely to purchase supplies locally and to use local infrastructure to deliver a product or service.

Relevant examples of local SME participants include but are not limited to local tour operators (ITOs), attraction owners/managers, accommodation providers, restaurant owners, tour guides/associations, shops, and local transportation providers.

Local Community Sector:

Local community organization(s) or representative(s): can act as facilitator(s) and ensure that the strengths, needs and concerns of the local community are comprehended in the design and implementation of the ecotourism product.

Local Destination Management/Marketing Organization (DMO) representative(s) can help align policy, regulation and marketing efforts with ecotourism product development, conservation and sustainable development.

Local government representative(s) can help remove barriers regarding infrastructure needs (e.g., trash collection, road maintenance, etc.).

Note:

Not all parks can rely on human and financial resources or political willingness to sustain this process. In these cases, the park authority may consider seeking support from civil society organizations in their local area.

In principle, all LEC participants must:

- ▶ Be willing to collaborate and invest in ecotourism development.
- ▶ Agree to and share the vision of developing one or more ecotourism products (see Chapter 3) following and adhering to the MEET Ecotourism Standard (see Chapter 4 and Annex 2).
- ▶ If interested in having their products promoted through the MEET Network, agree to be part of a wider Mediterranean network.
- ▶ Meet all applicable regulations regarding labour, health, safety, and human rights.



LEC Formation Process

Each protected area is unique and will go about forming a LEC in its own way. Some may build on or evolve an existing multi-stakeholder structure, while others may form a new structure solely to satisfy the MEET criteria.

The following section outlines a few basic steps to create and maintain a proper and robust LEC, in particular for the purposes of satisfying the MEET Ecotourism Standard (see Chapter 4). The aim of these guidelines is to provide some best practices for LEC formation while allowing flexibility to accommodate for local context and regulations.

Brief Overview of the MEET Ecotourism Standard

The MEET Ecotourism Standard serves as the foundation of the MEET methodology as it outlines the criteria which must be satisfied in order for a MEET ecotourism product to be approved for the MEET Guide. The MEET Ecotourism Standard includes the following pillars.

- Enabling Conditions
- Sustainability of Product
- Quality of Guest Experience
- Supplier Expectations

Note: *Enabling Conditions are addressed in detail in Annex 1, whereas the other three pillars are addressed in detail in Chapter 4, in the context of measurement and monitoring to ensure sustainability and quality. The complete MEET Ecotourism Standard is available in Annex 2 of this document.*

Forming a LEC: Existing vs. New Structures

Case 1: Forming a LEC from an existing structure

Some Protected Areas may already have an existing structure (e.g., cluster, forum, charter, product club, etc.) -- in which they are represented -- operating for the benefit of the park and the local tourism industry prior to engaging with MEET. In this case, protected areas may find it more effective to use these existing structures as a foundation and adjust accordingly to satisfy the MEET criteria and methodology (see Box 2).

For example, protected areas already using the European Charter for Sustainable Tourism (ECST) approach with the existing charter forum can create a special working group with selected private-public stakeholders to focus on satisfying the MEET participatory product development criteria. In this way, the MEET methodology can be used to complement existing approaches such as ECST.



Box 2**Case Study:
Sierra Nevada National
Park: How MEET
Complements
the ECST Process.**

Sierra Nevada National Park has been a member of the European Charter for Sustainable Tourism (ECST) since 2004. During this time, public and private stakeholders involved in national park tourism have worked together to create and execute action plans and to resolve sustainable tourism development issues in the territory.

Although Sierra Nevada National Park has continually followed the ECST process, its protected area managers found the MEET approach and the process of becoming a MEET Network member attractive because it complemented the ECST process while offering the following additional benefits:

- ▶ A participatory approach to bring together local tourism businesses in addition to traditional stakeholders such as protected area managers.
- ▶ A heightened awareness of what ecotourism is and how it differs from ordinary rural tourism.
- ▶ A framework to help local businesses and the wider community better understand and value the work performed by the protected area.
- ▶ A greater understanding among local businesses that conservation and the protection of nature is in their own interest.
- ▶ The successful conservation of nature and demonstrable examples thereof.

The MEET Network employs a market-centric approach to developing commercially viable and conservation-focused ecotourism products. Sierra Nevada National Park noted that the greatest differentiating feature of the

MEET Network is its inclusion of marketing and sales in the earliest stages of the process, including the integration of a commercial partner. To enable commercial viability in alignment with ECST and conservation principles, the MEET process:

- ▶ Facilitates the creation of a complete ecotourism product.
- ▶ Trains guides in conservation and storytelling.
- ▶ Provides market access – through the MEET Network and its commercial partner -- for local ITOs who would otherwise find it difficult to connect with specialised international tour operators and sell their ecotourism products abroad.

Together, these features of the MEET Network process deliver a measurable return on investment (ROI) and a kind of participatory return to the local community. As in the case of Sierra Nevada National Park, if the protected area can realize tangible results in practice vs. promises in theory, local businesses will be encouraged to continue supporting protected areas in their journey of developing ecotourism in the region.

Case 2: Creating a New LEC

For those protected areas without an existing structure already in place, a LEC must be formed. In this case, the LEC formation process below can be followed from LEC inception to completion.

LEC Formation: A Step by Step Process

In most LECs, especially those in the early stages of development, sourcing financial, technical and human resources can be a challenge. Creating alliances between the LEC and public-private stakeholders working in the conservation, tourism and community sectors is an important consideration for securing the long-term sustainability of the LEC.



Montgrí, Illes Medes and the Baix
Ter Natural Park, Spain
© DestiMED Project

1

Initiation of the LEC

The protected area or park management body should initiate and lead the initial meetings of the LEC, even if the idea was primarily promoted by other stakeholders such as NGOs.

2

Select and invite key stakeholders

The first step includes identifying and inviting different key public-private stakeholders (see “LEC Composition and Participants” above) to an introductory meeting where the purpose and role of the LEC and the rationale for inviting each stakeholder are all clearly explained.

3

Establish a common vision

The different stakeholders next need to establish a common vision so that everyone in the LEC is aligned and knows what the group is working to achieve. To this end, it is recommended that the common vision follows the MEET values (see Chapter 5) that balance stakeholder interests, economic benefits, and protects natural, cultural and community assets. Minimum operating standards should also be noted. For example, local businesses and service providers must adhere to laws, regulations, licenses and permits to operate tourism in the region.

4

Use the results from the LEC Product Self-Assessment

This tool and framework can be used to create goals around what the LEC needs to work on in order to satisfy the MEET Ecotourism Standard. It can enable the facilitation of common decision-making and guide how to work collaboratively towards finalizing an ecotourism product. If desired, and resources are available, a MEET representative can also help facilitate this discussion.

5

Clarify Roles and Responsibilities

For any initiative to be successful and long-lasting, dedication and clarity of what is expected from stakeholders is needed. Groups and initiatives require coordination and help to maintain focus. The best approach is to identify a member or small group of members that commits to managing the coordination role.

6

Local Governance

When identifying local stakeholders that will potentially be part of the ecotourism product, local identities, traditions and concerns of the local community (or rural groups/individuals with a close connection to the area) should be assessed and informed.

7

Transparency

Identify the mechanisms that ensure effective engagement and sharing of information (e.g., meeting announcements, calls for input, and decisions made).

8

Create an action plan

Once a common vision and a commitment to the MEET values has been agreed upon among participants, specific goals and activities can be set in a mid-term plan (ideally a one to three-year plan) for ecotourism product development in the protected area. This ecotourism action plan should respond to and comply with the self-assessment and, in case of MEET membership has been applied for, with corresponding MEET Network feedback from the membership application. This includes: defining the type of product(s) that can be developed, identifying service providers, characterizing training and capacity building needs, and identifying potential partnerships and alliances. An example of the primary contents of a strategic ecotourism plan can be found in Annex 3.

9

Agree upon an ecotourism product

The LEC can then move to formally agree on at least one main product idea, refine it together, and integrate it into its action plan. If the application process for membership of MEET Network has been initiated, this can start from the draft ecotourism product that was submitted to satisfy the enabling conditions to become a MEET member. More details on the criteria of a MEET ecotourism product can be found in Chapter 3.

10

Agree on legal framework

To enable flexibility and adaptability to local contexts and regulations, formal registration of a LEC is not required to satisfy the MEET criteria. However, each LEC is encouraged to execute a formal agreement among its members in order to support their long-term partnership – particularly the commitment of the following parties:

- Protected area managers and Inbound Tour Operators (ITO): formal agreement required (see one example in Annex 4)
- ITOs and service providers (following the procedures of the ITO)
- Protected areas and the MEET Network: formal membership agreement required
- ITOs and MEET commercial partner (once a product has been approved for commercialization)

11

Schedule periodic meetings

Periodic scheduled meetings are important for continuity. They also help in monitoring the progress of any action plans and ongoing adjustments that may be required.



LEC Roles and Responsibilities

The MEET Network works with each LEC for the development and promotion of MEET ecotourism products. However, the LEC's role and responsibilities do not end once a product has reached the market.

The LEC is also responsible for ongoing monitoring of product performance vis-a-vis the MEET Ecotourism Standard and Ecological Footprint (see Chapter 4), as well as improvement of the product as needed. A LEC may also wish to engage additional actors and/or create additional new ecotourism products as the destination grows and develops. These ongoing management responsibilities of the LEC are addressed in the following section at a high level. For greater depth, please consult Chapters 3 and 4 devoted to product development, measurement and monitoring.

Product Development and Improvement

Regarding product development, the LEC is responsible for the MEET ecotourism product – its inception, development, iteration and market readiness. Tasks associated with this responsibility include:

- ▶ Building out a full ecotourism product which satisfies the MEET criteria and is aligned with MEET values (see Chapter 5). Creating a database of local tourism suppliers qualified to execute and deliver an ecotourism product. The supplier self-assessment tool is used to vet and select suppliers to ensure that all selected ones satisfy the MEET Ecotourism Standard.



- ▶ Accepting feedback from product testers/auditors.
- ▶ Developing and implementing an action plan whose aim is to improve upon the initial product concept, and whose content is based both on auditor feedback and in response to measurement and monitoring results.
- ▶ Iterating and continually improving upon the ecotourism product for quality and sustainability to optimize simultaneously on traveler demands, Ecological Footprint, benefit to local businesses and impact on protected areas.
- ▶ Select additional ITOs and suppliers for subsequent new product development.

Measurement and Monitoring

The LEC also commits to a system of measuring and monitoring the quality, environmental and social impacts of its tourism activities (see Chapter 4). When making decisions regarding ecotourism product composition and itinerary development, the LEC identifies and considers all potential positive and negative impacts and agrees to a plan for their monitoring, measurement, and proactive management.

Monitoring takes place during the initial product development process and also annually to ensure that the ecotourism product continues to improve and reduce its Ecological Footprint. To execute this and to satisfy the MEET criteria, the LEC is responsible for organizing and collecting stakeholder surveys, including:

1. **LEC Product Self-Assessment:** used as a baseline the MEET Network will refer to later when assessing the readiness of the product for market.
2. **Supplier survey and self-assessment:** used to ensure suppliers satisfy the MEET Ecotourism Standard.

3. **Ecological Footprint assessment:** used to measure environmental impact and sustainability of product. It is organized in the following categories: Accommodation, Food & Drink, Mobility & Transfer, Activity & Service
4. **Satisfaction Survey:** used to ensure quality in the delivery of the experience from the traveler's perspective.

The results of these assessments will be collected via a Report Card (see Chapter 4). The LEC will use these tools to:

- ▶ Provide recommended actions, adjustments and improvements to ITOs and suppliers.
- ▶ Ensure that the recommendations are implemented and managed.

Ongoing Management of the LEC

The LEC should meet regularly not only to tend to its responsibilities regarding its MEET ecotourism product, but also to strengthen ties between the various stakeholders in the community and those engaged in ecotourism product development (see Box 3). The recommended requirement is two meetings per year.





Box 3

Case Study: Successful formation and management of a LEC National Park of **“Colline Metallifere Grossetane” - Tuscan Mining UNESCO Geopark**

Establishment of a Local Ecotourism Cluster (LEC) is not only a requirement of being a MEET Network member, but it's also the cornerstone to develop in a participatory way an ecotourism product and monitor its sustainability. How National Park of “Colline Metallifere Grossetane” Tuscan Mining UNESCO Geopark (Colline Park) (www.parcocollinemetallifere.it) formed and continues to manage its LEC offers an excellent example of how to involve a diverse set of stakeholders in the management of a destination and what a truly collaborative ecotourism product development process looks like.

Colline Park, prior to joining MEET Network, already created a participatory decision-making committee to support the park management body in planning its tourism offer and managing tourism flows: the “ECST (European Charter for Sustainable Tourism) Forum”. This consists of around 60 members drawn from local economic operators, public administrations and associations.

For the creation of the LEC, Colline Park invited from the ECST Forum main public and private stakeholders to be involved. These included the park management body, an association of local guides, a representative from the food and beverage and accommodation sectors (in rotation every six months), a local Inbound Tour Operator (ITO), and an ECST facilitator. One aspect that made the Colline Park's LEC unique was the extent to which the

park management body and ITO worked closely and collaboratively to create the ecotourism product, each bringing its unique strengths and expertise. The park's active role ensured that environmental conservation was taken in consideration in the design of the product and that the park's “inspirational” story and awareness of environmental issues played an important role in the traveler experience. The ITO's professionalism and expertise ensured that the ecotourism product had a market-centric perspective, was commercially viable and that the itinerary was well executed.

Key factors in the Colline Park LEC's success included a shared vision, a joint definition of tourism-related goals specific to a protected area, and agreement to embark upon a collaborative process to negotiate and resolve issues. Because a broad set of stakeholders was involved, it was important to pay special attention to a cooperative learning approach and conflict negotiation techniques. And, to recognize that such a process has to be guided by a skilled facilitator rather than trusting on the group facilitating itself.

The thoughtful and deliberate [LS1] LEC formation in Colline Park involved multiple stakeholders and fore-

saw strong collaboration between the park management body and the ITO in product development. These factors were not only essential in satisfying MEET membership requirements, but also in drafting four ecotourism products in two years, two of which were successfully tested for inclusion in the MEET Guide. Using the effective structure and methods offered by the LEC, six additional ecotourism products were created independently of MEET and successfully proposed to the market (<https://www.traveltoday.it/viaggi-in-maremma/itinerari-ed-esperienze/>).

In this way, the Colline Park LEC provided the framework to manage additional commercial opportunities within the conservation framework of a protected area. This approach and result help fulfill the MEET Network's broader goal of ecotourism development with protected area-driven conservation at its core.





CHAPTER 3 CREATING A MEET ECOTOURISM PRODUCT IN YOUR AREA

One of the primary ways that the MEET Network works towards the goal of conservation and sustainable development in the Mediterranean region is through the development of competitive ecotourism products in protected areas. With a common vision shared among the stakeholders of the local tourism cluster and a protected area committed to adopting a form of sustainable and low impact ecotourism, the next step is to develop a MEET ecotourism product.

It's important to note that the MEET Network represents a geographically heterogeneous region spanning a broad range of natural and cultural attractions, services, protected area management frameworks and cultural circumstances. This means that each of the network's ecotourism products are therefore specific and adapted to the attractions and conditions of a particular area. This provides ample opportunity for the creation of innovative, unique, authentic and market-oriented products.

Karpathos and Saria protected area, Greece © DestiMED project

Before analyzing the conditions for an ecotourism product to be incorporated into the MEET Guide, let's understand what is meant by the concept of 'tourism product,' how that concept integrates with the values of the MEET brand to create a MEET ecotourism product, how to describe this for the market, and the importance of guiding and interpretation as a product differentiator and to help fulfill MEET's goals of conservation and sustainable development.



Tourism and Ecotourism Products

What is a Tourism Product?

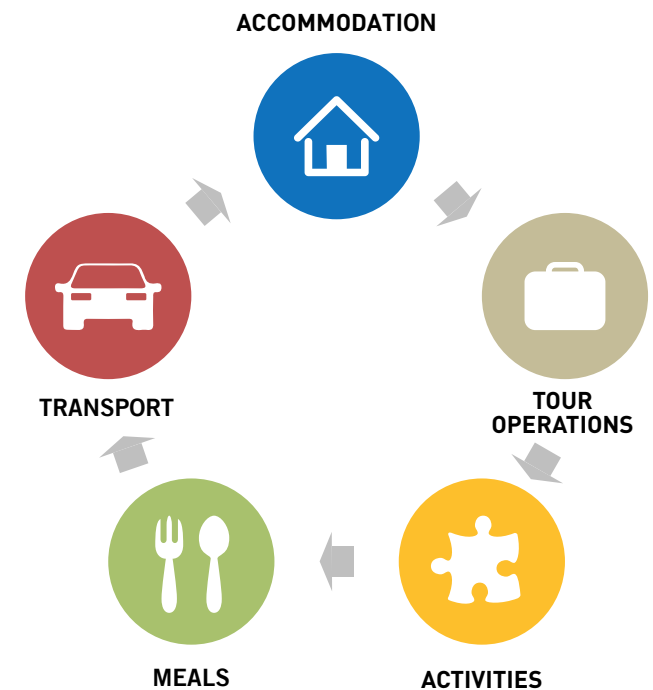
A product is anything offered to a market that might satisfy a want or need. Generally speaking, products can be divided into two broad categories of goods: tangible (e.g. computer) or intangible (e.g. services such as internet access).

A tourism product is composed of both tangible components (e.g., food) and intangible ones (e.g., a guided walk in a protected area). Each of its components is delivered individually, and together they're also delivered as a single, coherent experience for the traveler.

As you consider a tourism product and its value, it's useful also to differentiate between the product of tangible and intangible goods and services customers purchase (e.g., tour, accommodation, meals, guided walks, and transportation) and the value delivered by the experience – both at the time of its delivery (e.g., during one-week holiday), and long after it's over (e.g., memories of the one-week holiday).

It's also important to note that in tourism, customers purchase the product before acquiring it. This feature will impact how the product is packaged, positioned and marketed to prospective customers.

Components of a Product



Elements of an Ecotourism Product

When developing an ecotourism product it's important to conduct an assessment of the destination – not only the protected area, but the communities around it -- to understand its core natural, cultural, historical, culinary and other strengths. Ecotourism products should aim to highlight, promote and preserve the features unique to that destination. In addition, focusing on local strengths helps differentiate the ecotourism product from other offerings in the region.

The following chart indicates how infrastructure, tangible goods and services come together in the delivery of an ecotourism product.



TABLE 1: ECOTOURISM PRODUCTS: COMPONENTS AND RELATIONSHIPS

Physical (tangible) goods...	plus human resources e.g. guides, drivers.	..create activities or services (experiences)
Attractions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Natural attractions: e.g. a lake Cultural attractions (e.g., a building) 	➤	Activities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Swimming, kayaking, fishing Sightseeing, visiting a museum
Facilities and equipment <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A restaurant A hotel A bus 	➤	Services <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dining Accommodation Transportation
Infrastructure: Underpin (e.g. communications, roads, electricity, airports) and help to facilitate the development and execution of any tourism business.		
MEET branding and promotion: To be an ecotourism product, it must clearly contribute to conservation while benefiting local communities, as stated in the MEET values. This element of product will be essential to positioning and differentiating it in the market		
Price: Pricing the product should take into account value in the market, pricing of similar offerings in the market, and the total cost of delivering the product.		

Notice that an ecotourism product is an integration of attractions and facilities together with the effort of human resources to deliver services and facilitate activities. Altogether, this process creates and delivers an experience which fulfills the needs and expectations of travelers.

Key recommendations for developing a MEET ecotourism product

TIP



- It is important to have quality activities and services featured in the product, otherwise you might lose credibility.
- Be honest and critical. Not every aspect or attraction of a destination makes for a successful tourism product. You must choose itinerary elements which best fit the market and traveler demands.
- Know your target market segments, and their differing travel styles (e.g., the difference between European and American travel styles).
- It is important to manage clients' expectations. You must deliver what you promise. When in doubt, under-promise and over-deliver.
- Make sure you are sustainable throughout the supply chain (accommodation, restaurants, transportation, etc.). MEET consumers and trade partners will all cast a critical eye on this aspect. (See Chapter 4)
- When determining a price for your product, it's important to survey or benchmark similar products in the market. Understand also that the price will impact how the product is perceived. In this respect, it's just as important to avoid underpricing a product as it is to avoid over-pricing it. (See Chapter 5)
- Invest in high-quality visuals (e.g., photographs, videos) and high-quality copy when describing and marketing your product. (See Chapter 5).



A MEET Ecotourism Product's Unique Selling Proposition (USP)

For each MEET branded ecotourism products an important part of the MEET process is devoted to the development of a “Unique Selling Proposition” (USP). A USP is what differentiates a product from others, particularly those which may look similar (e.g., in or near the same destination). In other words, it’s the reason why a tour operator decides to buy and sell your product or why a traveler chooses to book your tour – rather than to book an experience somewhere else.

The MEET USP reflects the following key elements:

MARKET DIFFERENTIATION:

One of the core differentiators of MEET ecotourism products, but this can apply to any product developed at park or reserve level, is that they are based in and feature protected areas. This is integrated with local communities and local service providers, thereby creating a unique niche-market product in the Mediterranean that supports conservation.

TARGET MARKET:

The initial focus of the MEET Network is on English speaking nature-oriented travelers interested mainly in soft adventure and cultural tourism, seeking alternatives to the kind of mass tourism typically associated with the Mediterranean region.

CRITERIA, STANDARDS, AND QUALITY ASSURANCE:

A set of minimum ecotourism product standards and criteria which guides product development and delivers a level of quality and sustainability which matches traveler demand

trends and meets or exceeds expectations. More information on this is available in Chapters 3 and 4.

PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT AND TRAINING:

Provides support and training to small and medium-sized local tour operators who are new or cannot afford to cover these costs themselves.

MARKET ACCESS:

The most difficult challenge for small destinations is to access international markets. MEET branding provides invaluable support for startups and well-established business alike by providing the opportunity to be included in the MEET Guide and to reach international markets.

A key component of the successful commercialization of MEET is the development of a strong MEET brand (see Chapter 5) with embedded market value for both inbound and outbound tour operators and destination management companies.

In addition, defining your local USP is an important first step in the ecotourism product development cycle. The LEC should be able to answer the following questions and then build an ecotourism product around this local USP.

- ▶ What features or characteristics does your protected area, park or destination have that others do not? (Think: nature, culture, history, cuisine, people, etc.)
- ▶ What does your product offer specifically for the MEET target audience?
- ▶ Can you deliver on those expectations?



Monte Rufeno Nature Reserve, Italy © DestiMED project



Camargue, France
© DestiMED project

MEET Target Markets

A target market is a specific group of consumers at which a product or service is aimed and marketed. In tourism, target markets can be further characterized and segmented by geography, demographics (e.g., income, age, gender, etc.), travel style, and psychographics (interests, lifestyle, values, etc.) and more.

In the MEET context, the main target markets for its ecotourism products are experiential travelers focused on soft adventure and culture who reside mainly in English-speaking countries. These markets include large nature and culture-oriented segments who value an experience that is conservation-oriented and who have a mid to high expenditure capacity when traveling.

Travelers from segments within these markets tend to avoid the mass “sun and sand” forms of tourism popular in the Mediterranean region. Instead, they choose experiential travel in small groups, prioritizing spending on experiences, activities and meals. In general, they are tech savvy, possess a higher level of education, and are often experienced in traveling to both traditional and exotic destinations.

“In the MEET context, the main target markets for ecotourism products are experiential travelers focused on soft adventure and culture who reside mainly in English-speaking countries.”

Travel motivations include experiencing nature, discovering the destination, cultural exchanges, local cuisine, authenticity, and the opportunity to explore. They are active, curious, and environmentally aware at home and when traveling. They embrace bucket lists and like to find the next “new thing.”

Further segmentation includes target age groups: Baby Boomers (born in 1940s to 1960s) and Gen X (1960s to 1980s). Millennials (1980s to 2000s) are also an ever-growing and important market.

Regarding expenditure, MEET target market travelers expect comfort and cleanliness, but not luxury. It is not advisable to compromise quality to offer lower prices.



Riviera di Ulisse Regional Park, Italy © DestiMED project

Suggested Activities to be Included in a MEET Ecotourism Product

Soft adventure and culture-focused activities are the central theme of MEET ecotourism products and reflect a strong convergence between market-driven analyses, travel trends and the target market.

MEET has also identified activities within the selected target markets that should be strongly considered in the ecotourism product design. These activities include, in order of relevance:



Camargue Regional Natural Park, France © DestiMED project

1

Soft adventure

A very popular and growing tourism market segment that involves physical activities with little physical risk and that requires little to no prior experience. Priority is placed more on comfort and convenience vs. difficulty of the activity. Examples of soft adventure activities include: recreational cycling, hiking, sit-on-top kayaking in calm waters, snorkeling and recreational skiing.

What is the difference between soft adventure and hard adventure? And which is more appropriate for a MEET product? Hard adventure encompasses a higher element of risk, and more importantly requires that the traveler be in excellent physical condition. The inclusion of hard adventure activities in ecotourism products must consider that this market niche is specialized and excludes a large number of ordinary travelers due to the physical requirements needed to undertake them. Examples of hard adventure activities include: mountaineering, whitewater rafting/kayaking, multi-day treks, etc.

MEET products should avoid hard adventure activities and replace with soft adventure activities as these are better suited to the target market.

2

Cultural and culinary activities

This includes several forms of respectful interactions with local people in or around protected areas. Travelers now are interested in more “hands on” cultural activities that are interactive and participatory vs. passive and observing³. Examples of cultural activities include: sleeping and eating at agro-tourism farms, visiting local architecture, taking a cooking class and enjoying local food, art and handicrafts.

3

Wildlife-watching

Wildlife (non-bird) watching is one of the largest and fastest growing tourism sectors. However, large fauna -- mammals in particular -- are not particularly conspicuous in most protected areas of the Mediterranean. Therefore, it is hard to compete with protected areas in East and Southern Africa or Australia on the basis of wildlife-focused tours. Of course, if a specific species of large mammal is easily visible on a regular basis, then it is worth mentioning. However, if wildlife is hard to see, then it is best to not include it in order to avoid setting false sighting expectations. Consider including instead local small fauna and flora as a learning opportunity, even if they are not the central theme of the product.



Appennino Lucano National Park, Italy
© DestiMED project

4

History and archeology

Several protected areas offer important archeological remains and historical monuments, as well as historical accounts that can be interpreted to make them relevant and interesting to travelers. Although it's worth integrating these into the ecotourism product, especially if they are highly engaging "hidden-gems", they should not serve as the central organizing attraction of the offering.

5

Birdwatching

Bird watching is a large, very specific market segment and the biggest niche within nature-oriented tourism. It involves travelers with high expenditure capacity visiting remote areas in search of unique and unusual bird species. Bird watchers in general are not interested in other activities, and therefore do not respond to MEET goals.

However, there are very important birding areas and unique species in protected areas of the Mediterranean. As such, bird watching products are definitely worth developing as one activity of the ecotourism product. However, given the niche nature of this market it is not recommended to make birdwatching the central theme of the product.

6

Beach-related (Sun and Sand)

Beach-related activities have a large market in the Mediterranean region, mainly made up of mass-oriented tourists looking for nice beaches. Since the MEET brand is focused on ecotourism involving conservation and interpretation, beach-oriented activities should only be included as a complement to the main theme of the product. Some exceptions are if the beach-related activities are associated with natural phenomena such as turtle nesting or bird watching. Regardless, product offers and activities should always represent the MEET spirit.

Important!

MEET values suggests that the ecotourism product explore the incorporation of practical and non-invasive conservation activities (see box 4) to be undertaken by travelers (trail cleaning, species monitoring, etc.). These activities must be planned and agreed with protected area management in the product planning phase and should not result in an extra burden for protected area manager, but instead serve as a support. If the activities do not meet these requirements, they should not be included. See a positive example from a MEET product in Annex 5.



Aiguamolls de l'Empordà, Spain © DestiMED project



Aiguamolls de l'Empordà, Spain © DestiMED project



Samaria National Park, Greece © DestiMED project

Box 4**Case Study:
The conservation activity
in Camargue regional
nature park, France***Camargue Regional Natural Park, France © M. Lang / MedPAN*

As part of the ecotourism package tested during the DestiMED Project, the Camargue regional nature park in France invited visitors to take part in a conservation activity. This had the dual objective of raising their awareness on the need to conserve flamingos and promoting the actions being deployed for their conservation.

During their stay, the aspiring birdwatchers were offered the opportunity to visit preserved areas to observe the greater flamingo, an iconic species of Camargue. Listening to the precious information delivered by their guide, the visitors gained knowledge on the behaviour of the flamingos and learn more about the monitoring programme taking place in the Mediterranean.

Marking individual birds is a technique that involves equipping each flamingo (only the chicks) with a ring on which is engraved a unique code, readable with a telescope. These rings are an important source of information since they will make it possible to study the movements of the flamingos around the Mediterranean and therefore to know their age, their life span, their breeding areas, their foraging sites, etc.

The visitors experienced by themselves the observation of birds and understood the delicate work scientists do when they monitor species. The task is not easy

considering that the rings are very small and the birds are observed with telescopes from a distance so as not to disturb them. The group collected the data about the observations and reported the information to a database. Some weeks later, the history behind each ring was unveiled and information about the age, place of birth, previous observations made around the Mediterranean, were shared with the group. The visitors actively participated in the monitoring of the population. “The bigger the database is, the better our knowledge of the species is”, explained the Tour Leader.

Today, the population of flamingos is monitored throughout the Mediterranean thanks to an international network of researchers. The objective of the scientists in charge of the project is to encourage the protection of wetlands and to promote actions for the sustainable conservation of this species in Mediterranean countries.



Kune - Vain-Tale Natural Park, Albania © DestiMED project

How to Satisfy the MEET Criteria for an Ecotourism Product

In this chapter we've already learned the basics of an ecotourism product, MEET's Unique Selling Proposition (USP), target market and the types of activities that should be considered in a MEET ecotourism product.

The following section outlines best practices and the minimum criteria an ecotourism product must satisfy in order to be incorporated into the MEET Guide. In addition, the product must reflect the MEET philosophy, values and branding principles (see Chapter 5).

Important!

These are basic and generic principles borne of the experience of the MEET and DestiMED projects and applicable to any area. MEET sees this list as a flexible instrument, to be improved upon and adapted through new experiences.

Ecotourism Product Design

The following are best practices for designing an ecotourism product which also satisfies the MEET Ecotourism Standard. You can find an example of a MEET tour programme in Annex 5.

NOTE!

The general and detailed suggestions below are relevant for any ITO products and activity centered on a protected area, irrespective of whether it is a MEET product.

A MEET ecotourism product in particular must:

- ▶ Be created in collaboration and agreement with all the stakeholders of the Local Ecotourism Cluster (LEC), including at a minimum the conservation sector (protected area) and tourism sector (Inbound Tour Operator or ITO).
- ▶ Reflect that the core of the product should be delivered in a Mediterranean protected area. Note: Portions of the product could also be carried out in its surroundings.
- ▶ Take place in the shoulder season (i.e., not in the high season).
- ▶ Contain elements of the MEET brand (see Chapter 5).
- ▶ Include and integrate suitable conservation activities as and if identified by protected area management.
- ▶ Incorporate a "Conservation Contribution" as part of the product price for conservation activities benefiting the relevant protected area. This contribution must be noted in the product description so travelers understand that part of their tour fee goes directly towards conservation activities.

- ▶ Meet the demands and trends of the target markets identified by MEET and include the above suggested activities (mainly soft adventure, culture- and nature-oriented activities).
- ▶ Integrate active interaction with the local community (i.e., clients should participate in activities, not merely observe them).
- ▶ Be adaptable to various durations, but at a minimum of 3 days/2 nights long (Note: the MEET Guide does not focus on day-trip tourism offerings).
- ▶ Be able to adapt to different numbers of participants. Groups should be small with a maximum of 12 people in a group and led by a tour leader.
- ▶ Consider alternative activities in case those that are weather-dependent are cancelled. It is recommended to have a reliable set of alternative service providers to respond to any unexpected events (i.e., mitigate this risk by identifying alternative accommodation options).
- ▶ Consider allowing for free time. This ensures that guests have enough time to rest, shop, and explore on their own.
- ▶ Consider including optional components or activities (e.g. optional visit into town, free time, etc.).
- ▶ Assure that economic benefits remain

TIP



To make meals interactive and participatory, ask travelers to take part in cooking, harvesting the ingredients for lunch, preparing artisanal food, etc.

Find out where and when the best sunrises and sunsets can be watched and photographed. Many guests from MEET tours expressed their desire to be free for or in a desirable location to enjoy sunset or sunrise.



Sierra Nevada National Park, Spain © DestiMED project

local (i.e., at least 80% of the service providers in the package are locally owned and operated).

- ▶ Have a specific programme or itinerary for each season (focusing on low-season), number of participants, and duration with the activities and pricing adjusted accordingly.
- ▶ Have its description and itinerary written in English. It is strongly recommended that a native English-speaker (or equivalent) review the text of the product description.

Conservation and Sustainability

The following best practices are to ensure that MEET ecotourism products support conservation and sustainability.

- ▶ Ensure that all the components of the tourism supply chain (restaurants, accommodation providers, transportation providers, tour operators, etc.) are complying with the environmental sustainability criteria (see Chapter 4).
- ▶ Protected area rules for visitors, designated trails, park goals, management measures, etc. should be shared with and explained to travelers in advance.

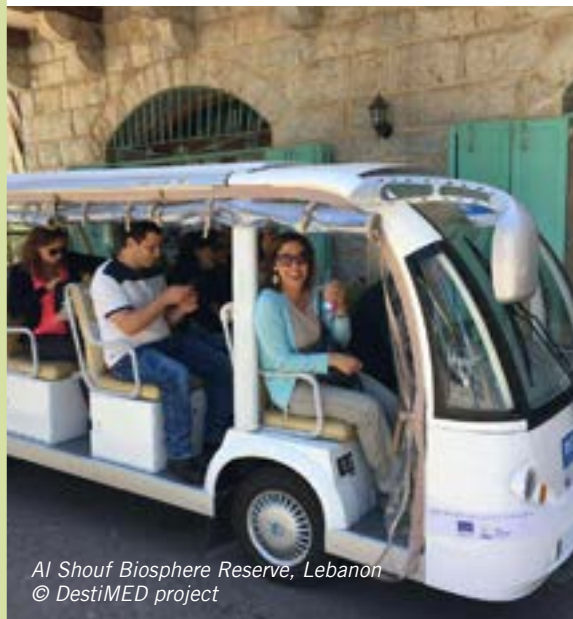
- ▶ Whenever possible, fossil fuel-powered transportation should be avoided and sustainable transportation preferred (e.g. electric cars, bicycles or walking).
- ▶ The tour operator and service providers should always minimize the generation of waste (e.g., by avoiding the use of disposable plastic bottles and over-packaging). Everyone in the LEC should implement the Three R's: Reduce, Reuse, And Recycle.
- ▶ The use of energy and natural resources should be minimized, where possible (e.g., LED lamps, water-saving shower heads, reducing laundry, etc.).
- ▶ Avoid taking travelers to any location (e.g., restaurant, store, amusement park, market, etc.) that sells endangered or rare wild animals and plants or products elaborated from them⁴.

TIP



If the use of sustainable transport is logistically impossible, inform the travelers of the situation and offer possible compensation measures (e.g., carbon offsets).

Provide a simple and visual document on the rules and appropriate behaviour the visitors should follow in the park, one that features an engaging presentation or interpretation of the subject.



Al Shouf Biosphere Reserve, Lebanon
© DestiMED project

Cultural Considerations

The following best practices promote respectful and educational cultural engagement and interaction.

- ▶ Cultural attractions and activities are critical elements of most itineraries. However, it is very important to maintain authenticity. This is not only to conserve and protect local culture, but also to meet traveler demands for “authentic” and “local” experiences. Avoid manufacturing visitor experiences that might negatively impact local culture and communities.
- ▶ If you plan to bring travelers to a local cultural event, contact the organizers in advance to confirm that bringing tour groups is appropriate and welcomed.
- ▶ A set of cultural guidelines should be shared with and explained to travelers on how to follow local habits and customs (e.g., rules regarding photography, appropriate dress, restrictions on alcohol, interaction with people, etc.).
- ▶ Provide a “cheat sheet” with some basic greetings translated into the local language for travelers so that they can improve their ability to communicate with local people. Even simple phrases and conversation are useful and demonstrate respect.
- ▶ When a group is encouraged to purchase goods from local markets or similar, make sure a fair distribution of income is foreseen. Inform and agree with the community about this in advance so that there are no perceptions of unequal benefit from local ecotourism development.



Karpathos and Saria Protected Areas, Greece © E. Agapiou

Guiding and Interpretation

Guiding and interpretation, especially during conservation and cultural activities, are crucial to the MEET ecotourism product and to the traveler experience. The following best practices for guides and tour leaders help support MEET values and the goals of conservation and sustainable development. For additional background and information on this topic, see 4.7 below.

- ▶ MEET ecotourism products should include a combination of a tour leader (responsible for organization, logistics and general information) and local guides (subject matter, destination, or naturalist experts).
- ▶ Every MEET product must have a tour leader who remains with the group the majority of the time, including arrival from and departure to the airport. The tour leader is responsible for organization and ensuring that all logistics run smoothly.
- ▶ The tour leader must be fluent in English and be able to help tourists participate in all the activities and in conversations with local people. The tour leader should also support local guides in interpretation, when necessary.
- ▶ Local guides and experts are preferred. They should be contracted by the local tour operator and trained by the protected areas, when necessary. Local guides serve as a connection to the community, culture, history, cuisine and nature of a destination.
- ▶ Guides must contribute to minimizing the impact of tourism in protected areas by following designated trails, not disturbing wildlife, etc. They should explain to travelers the reasons for any park-related prohibitions and rules, indicating what the limits and prohibitions help to preserve.
- ▶ Guides must be professional and highly knowledgeable about natural history, local culture, human history and management of the protected area.
- ▶ Information provided by the tour leader and local guides must follow the techniques of environmental interpretation. This means spreading meaningful messages for the conservation of natural and cultural resources (see Chapter 6).



Camargue Regional Nature Park, France © C.Ser



Samaria National Park, Greece © DestiMED project

Accommodation

Accommodation plays an important part of a traveler experience and it can help connect travelers more to local culture, cuisine and nature. The following are best practices for selecting accommodation according to the MEET brand and ensuring that travelers enjoy the best experience possible.

- ▶ Local, “authentic” and small-scale accommodation is preferred, where possible. Mass tourism type structures, buildings or experiences should definitely be avoided.
- ▶ Inform guests in advance if they need to share a room or bathroom, and during which nights on the tour (if not for the entire tour).
- ▶ Accommodation staff must exhibit and ensure a high standard of professionalism.
- ▶ Some minimum comfort-related standards should apply to selected accommodation – e.g. private bathrooms, hot water. If the tour foresees some overnights in low-comfort accommodation, travelers must be informed in advance and their expectations managed accordingly.

Food & Drink

Food and the exploration of local cuisine has become more and more important to a traveler experience and satisfaction⁵. In the Mediterranean region where food plays a big cultural role there is an opportunity to highlight local cuisines and customs.

- ▶ Local cuisine should be a very important dimension of the product and really highlight local Mediterranean features.

Where possible, the tour leader (or cook) should share with guests “the history behind the meal” or a personal story connected specifically to that meal.

- ▶ Meals and beverages should be locally sourced, sustainable, varied and authentic.
- ▶ Be sure to collect information about travelers’ dietary needs (vegetarian, food allergies, Halal, etc.) in advance of the tour and communicate this to all food service providers beforehand so they can adapt meals accordingly.
- ▶ Good vegetarian, vegan or food allergy (e.g., lactose-free, gluten-free, etc.) options should be always available.
- ▶ Timing of meals must be appropriately organized around activities and at the same time should respond to traveler expectations. If a meal will be early or late because of a planned activity, this should be communicated in advance to the traveler.
- ▶ Consider including some picnic or packed lunches in the itinerary. This avoids spending a lot of time each day around the table and also avoids travelers feeling as if they are over-eating due to one big meal after another.
- ▶ Local cuisine is a crucial part of the ecotourism product, but it’s important to vary the meal offerings and coordinate this with different food service providers. Travelers don’t like to eat the same meal for lunch and dinner during their entire stay.
- ▶ Although it is in Mediterranean culture to serve lots of food and a variety of dishes, it’s important to find the right balance regarding food quantities in order to avoid unsustainable food waste. See Chapter 4 for more information on how to reduce the Ecological Footprint of food during a tour.





Al Shouf Biosphere Reserve, Lebanon © DestiMED project



Al Shouf Biosphere Reserve, Lebanon © DestiMED project

- ▶ If food packaging is required, it should be re-usable or at least recyclable. Although buying recyclable packaging and products (e.g., utensils, food containers, etc.) may be more expensive, this can be incorporated into the price. This deliberate choice should be explained to travelers as a representation of MEET values in action.

Safety

Natural areas and adventurous activities pose a certain risk to travelers. It's essential to the MEET Network that health and safety risks be minimized for travelers experiencing a MEET ecotourism product. Tour operators, transportation providers and tour guides are requested to follow health and safety standards mandated by local and national authorities. In addition, they must observe the following MEET criteria:

- ▶ MEET Inbound Tour Operators (ITOs) must have a release of liability policy. This form must be signed by the traveler before starting the tour.
- ▶ An emergency plan (what to do if) needs to be developed by the ITO in conjunction with tour leaders, guides and drivers.
- ▶ Tour leaders and guides must follow designated trails
- ▶ Guides leading excursions in natural environments or difficult mountainous terrain must possess a solid knowledge and experience of the area, orientation skills, and also be in good physical condition in order to deal with any kind of difficulty which may arise.
- ▶ Tour leaders and guides must be able to communicate with the driver/tour operator in the event of an emergency.
- ▶ The tour leader and guides must be trained in first aid procedures.

- ▶ The tour leader must always carry a first aid kit.
- ▶ Tour leaders and guides should brief clients on emergency procedures before any risky activity (e.g. kayaking, horse-back riding), and advise clients of any health risks in the area (e.g. water, food or insect-borne diseases).
- ▶ All drivers must hold a professional driving license, be familiar with the area and have extensive experience and knowledge of the mechanical and driving characteristics of the vehicle being used to transport travelers. Driving style should be extremely cautious and the driver should adapt accordingly to the customer's needs and expectations.
- ▶ Life jackets must be used at all times by passengers on boats, kayaks, rafts and while canyoning.
- ▶ Appropriate safety equipment (e.g., helmets) must be used for adventure activities, including biking and horseback riding.



Terres del Ebro Biosphere
Reserve, Spain
© C. Ser - PNRC

TIP



Laws are designed to establish the minimum standards for traveler safety. By conforming to these standards, you are also complying with the law. However, the law can't anticipate everything that might happen on your tour — that's your job to be prepared!



Camargue Regional Natural Park, France
© DestiMED project

NOTE!

Some of the MEET products are located in countries with unique security-related issues such as terrorism or political instability

The MEET initiative wishes to contribute to a better relationship between people from different cultures and religions through the MEET values (travel as exchange, respect of local culture, etc.). Nevertheless, travelers from MEET target markets may have concerns about some MEET destinations. The tour programme description cannot avoid tackling this issue, but must give concrete proof (e.g. updated news from official institutions – e.g. Ministry of Foreign Affairs) that the product-related destination is a safe area, and that any foreseen activity is organized in a way where any security concerns have been addressed or eliminated. If the tour requires armed guards to accompany the group, note that this requirement may be unsettling for travelers unaccustomed to it. Duly inform and communicate with participants in advance and where necessary throughout the experience.

Communication Before and During the Tour

Clear and active communication with customers before and during the tour is essential for managing expectations, ensuring that MEET values and story are understood. Continual communication also aids in quicker resolution of any problems or issues as they arise.

In the case of a MEET product the advance communication with the traveler prior to the trip will be done by the commercial partner.

- ▶ The communication between the ITO and the commercial partner or traveler must be efficient and reflect MEET brand values (see Chapter 5). An ITO must respond to the commercial partner within 48 hours of an inquiry.
- ▶ ITOs should collect traveler information on any medical conditions or allergies in advance so that it can modify the itinerary and activities, if necessary. For a MEET ecotourism product the commercial partner will take care of this.
- ▶ The commercial partner, by coordinating together with the ITO, should consider giving travelers the possibility to fine-tune some activities of the product prior to their arrival. This type of engagement can help travelers feel as though they are active participants in MEET experiential product development.
- ▶ Guides and tour leaders need to communicate the MEET values and story to travelers, and connect them to the protected area, its specific conservation issues throughout the experience and how travelers can play an important role in conservation.
- ▶ The tour leader should introduce himself/herself to clients prior to arrival or prior to facilitating the group.

- ▶ Guides should be trained to take special care of client safety and customer whereabouts at all times. A briefing should be provided prior to each activity previewing what will happen and any possible risks.
- ▶ Always brief travelers about planned activities at the beginning and end of each day. A quick debrief/review of the day can also be included to reinforce the experience.

TIP



Manage expectations. Detailed and honest communication with your client can avoid most misunderstandings and bad experiences. Remember: under-promise and over-deliver.



Terres del Ebro Biosphere Reserve, Spain
© DestiMED project



Lebna beach, Korba, Tunisia © S. Gentili.

Describing Your MEET Ecotourism Product to the Market

Once you have designed your MEET ecotourism product, it is time to describe it in writing. When travelers are looking for tourism products or tours they often don't know the exact details of their trip, but they most likely do know what they like to do and are scanning descriptions for those activities. For example, if they want to hike, enjoy the local cuisine or visit cultural sites.

This means you need to include the important details of what the potential traveler is looking for in a short and catchy description that will attract the traveler so that he will contact you and ideally book the product. This includes: main experiential highlights and activities, places visited, style of tour, length, and seasons/time of year the tour runs.

In order to make an ecotourism product description engaging, you'll need to ensure that it is well written, formatted so it is easy to read and features engaging imagery.

The tourism industry is highly competitive. If your product description does not engage a prospective traveler, they will move on to the next brochure or website.

The following is an example of a product description developed by the cluster at Monte Rufeno Nature Reserve in Italy (see Box 5).

An ecotourism product description also includes a more detailed itinerary or programme, one which must be developed prior to bringing the product to market. However, do not include the itinerary in your marketing channels (website, brochure). This is only required when the potential customer asks for additional details.

And lastly, a product description also includes the price. Travelers will be much less likely to select an ecotourism product if the price is not indicated and there is a message saying: "Call for a quote." The potential traveler (your customer) needs to see the price tag of the product to see if it is within their budget. Keep it simple, such as "prices start at €290 per day." Even if your prices vary depending on the size of the group or time of year. You can provide more details later.

More details on product descriptions, pricing and marketing are provided in Chapter 5.

Box 5

Case Study: How a small nature reserve in Italy created a unique ecotourism product

Monte Rufeno, a MEET member, participated in a number of training sessions to develop an ecotourism product. Here is how participants from this cluster came up with an effective description, using the MEET methodology and the profile of the target market:

A nice title ▶

**Hike the hidden Italy,
cooking with flowers!**

A catchy pitch ▶

Sense the perfumes and colors of nature, wandering from medieval towns to beautiful forests in an unspoiled land between Rome and Florence.

And a great product ▶

Start with a hike to the summit of the Monte Rufeno Nature Reserve (▶ *destination*). Relax on the top of the mount with a glass of local organic wine while stargazing (▶ *activity*) the cloudless skies at the green heart of Italy.

Take a basket from the Museum of Flowers (▶ *attraction*), and walk (▶ *activity*) in silent forests, harvesting edible herbs and flowers (yes, flowers!) (▶ *attractions*).

Mix them with organic vegetables and olive oil and cook (▶ *activity*) an Italian meal you will never forget at an old, working farm.

Continue immersing yourself in history, walking (▶ *activity*) along Etruscan paths, visiting medieval castles (▶ *attractions*). Meet organic farmers and old charcoal makers (▶ *people*). Finish your day enjoying a strikingly beautiful sunset behind the gentle hills of Monte Rufeno, before an evening hike to your locally owned boutique hotel (▶ *facility*).

This program supports the conservation of the wolf, Monte Rufeno Reserve being one of the last habitats in Europe, involving locals from surrounding communities who are actively helping to preserve this high-biodiversity area. (▶ *MEET branding*)

Prices start at (▶ *price*) per person.



Monte Rufeno Nature Reserve, Italy
© DestiMED project



Monte Rufeno Nature Reserve, Italy
© DestiMED project

The Importance of Interpretation and Guiding to a MEET Ecotourism Product

Central to any guided tourism product – and the traveler experience thereof – is the concept of interpretation. In the context of a MEET ecotourism product, interpretation and the quality of the guided experience are not only important to establishing the value or USP of the product to the consumer/traveler, but they also play a role in helping a traveler understand the importance of conservation and the preservation of the Protected Area which he is visiting. This is one of the core goals of the MEET Network and its ecotourism products.

Guiding and interpretation isn't only about providing facts and information. It also generates interest, enjoyment and satisfaction. When done well, it promotes learning, encourages appropriate behavior, and can help transform a traveler's perspective of conservation and preservation. Effective interpretation and guiding makes a point without having to state it: "This Protected Area that you have chosen to visit is an ideal context in which to comprehend the importance of conservation, not only to this place, but also to the world."

The quality and depth of this connection delivers impact not only at the time of the traveler's visit to the protected area. It can also enable the traveler becoming a kind of informal ambassador both for the Protected Area and for conservation and sustainability after he returns home. In this respect, interpretation is a key differentiator of a MEET ecotourism product.

What is Interpretation?

There are techniques for communicating ideas and concepts to a group of disparate people. Interpretation is among the most important. Most people understand interpretation as the process through which a person translates one language into another. At a very basic level that's effectively what interpretation is: translating. In a tourism context, however, environmental interpretation involves translating the technical language of natural science or related field into terms and ideas that people who aren't scientists can easily understand⁶.

Many guides struggle to understand that their job is not to "teach" their audiences in the same way they were taught in school – by relating facts and information. Ecotourists want to learn about their destination, but their attention has to be earned by the guide who must transmit concepts and information in an interesting way and avoid technical terms, lists of dates and numbers recounted by rote or in an overly academic fashion.

In order to effectively deliver information to ecotourists, guides should rely on the interpretive approach of communication, which has four essential qualities:

- ▶ It's pleasurable. Although entertainment isn't interpretation's primary goal, it's one of its essential qualities (e.g. using the appropriate tone of voice, using game-like activities, incorporating humor, using active verbs, showing cause and effect, etc.).
- ▶ It's relevant. Information that's relevant to us features two qualities: it's meaningful (we're able to connect it to something already inside our brains) and it's personal (new information has to be linked to something we already know, like or care to be personal).
- ▶ It's organized. Information and stories must be presented in a way that is easy to follow or does not require a lot of effort for the audience to comprehend them.

- ▶ It has a theme. This is the most important quality of interpretation. Theme is the principal message about the subject that you want to relate to your audience. (See Box 6)

Easy as it sounds, interpretation is however a difficult form of communication to master. The MEET Network has provided training for its members and guides, who shifted from transmitting factual information to delivering comprehensive and meaningful information, creating awareness about the importance and the challenges of conserving a nature reserve (see box 7).



Port-Cros National Park, France
© M. Lang / MedPAN



Box 6

How to write a theme

1

*Select your general topic
(for example “aquifers»)
and use it to complete
the following sentence:*

This morning, we will walk around this
lake to learn about (aquifers).

2

Complete the theme:

This morning, we will walk around this
lake to learn about the importance of
aquifers.

3

Complete the message:

This morning you will understand, as
we walk around this lake, about the
importance of aquifers and how their
overuse for irrigation and drinking wa-
ter have dried out this lake, displacing
animals and local people.⁷

Box 7**Case Study:
Using interpretation
in the Azraq Wetland
Reserve, Jordan**

The Azraq Wetland Reserve is a nature reserve located in the eastern desert of Jordan. Azraq has, since ancient times, been the crossroads of both human trade routes and bird migrations. Millions of cubic meters of freshwater attracted caravans of camels carrying spices and herbs while millions of migrating birds stopped in Azraq between Africa and Europe. However, in the 1960s, water began to be pumped to support the booming population of Amman, Jordan's capital city. In 1978, the Royal Society for the Conservation of Nature (RSCN) established Azraq as a wetland reserve. By 1992 however, the springs had dried up, and the aquifers that had once gushed ceased to provide any water at all. Most water buffalos of Azraq died and most migrating birds visited the Sea of Galilee instead. The Azraq wetlands have been described in many textbooks as an example of human-created ecological collapse. RSCN continues to fight an uphill battle against rising population and a growing demand for water.

In 2015 the MEET Network organized a training program on interpretation, and Azraq was chosen because of its history and the conservation challenges faced by the managers of the area. Participants were introduced to the various concepts of interpretation, including the importance of delivering meaningful messages to the visitors. Among those messages: the importance of conserving an area, supporting local communities, supporting the conservation or particular programs, and encouraging visitors to continue supporting the area after their visit.

By the end of the program, guides were able to provide information, organized in topics and themes, using interpretation tools. They understood how to deliver the appropriate messages about conservation, including ways to support the area after their visit, using examples from the Azraq Wetland Reserve and its conservation challenges.

The Role of Guides in Conservation

Naturalist guides play a central role in the implementation of the ecotourism concept and to a MEET ecotourism product. They are the principal providers of the educational element of the ecotourism activity. Their capacity and commitment ensures that the negative impacts of tourism are minimized.

At the same time, guiding is an obvious economic opportunity for members of local communities. These and other important benefits underline the importance of a protected area establishing and implementing a naturalist guide training and licensing program.

Tour operators rely on guides to provide experience-enriching interpretation of natural and cultural attractions to add value to the tourists' itinerary. Tourists look to the naturalist guide for information and insight about the places they are visiting; including through formal briefings and information talks which prepare them for their visit. Naturalist guides are also generally expected to serve as friendly, knowledgeable intermediaries to and between unfamiliar places and people.

Protected area authorities should look to the guides as extensions of the park ranger staff – in their effort to educate visitors, to protect the natural and cultural resources of the area visited, to participate in monitoring programs and to generally support the conservation objectives of a protected area.

In addition to these roles, a guide should seek to inspire visitors to become supporters of conservation, thereby fulfilling one of MEET's main goals.



CHAPTER 4

MEASURING AND MONITORING MEET ECOTOURISM PRODUCT QUALITY AND SUSTAINABILITY

Ecotourism is often proclaimed as a “green” or environmentally friendly alternative to traditional tourism. How do we know if that is accurate? Can we actually measure it? How?

That is what the Ecotourism Standard and online monitoring platform, developed during the DestiMED project and adopted also by MEET Network (and henceforth referred to as Mediterranean Ecotourism or MEET Standard and monitoring platform), aim to do. The Standard outlines the criteria while the monitoring platform provides the tools to ensure compliance with the Standard. Together,

they help combat greenwashing through data and analysis, just as they guide continual product improvement.

Since MEET-branded ecotourism products must also be market competitive, it's imperative to find a balance between quality and sustainability. Although a LEC should always try to improve the sustainability of a product by reducing its impacts, it should not do so in a way that significantly reduces the quality or satisfaction of the experience. Throughout the product development, testing and delivery process, decisions will need to be made about ecotourism product design to ensure that traveler expectations are met or exceeded.

Jabal Mousa UNESCO Biosphere Reserve, Lebanon © DestiMED project

In this chapter you'll learn:

- ▶ How the MEET Network measuring and monitoring requirements relate to the MEET Ecotourism Standard and its pillars
- ▶ How the Ecological Footprint is used to measure and reduce the environmental impact of the product
- ▶ How products are evaluated for inclusion in the MEET Guide, and
- ▶ How the Performance Monitoring Report Card is used.

For more information on the research and methodology that helped created the MEET Ecotourism Standard read: Global Review of Monitoring Programs for Tourism in Protected Areas by George Washington University (link).



*Calanques National Park, France
© JP Durand / CEN*

Pillar	Aim and Criteria	When
Enabling Conditions	<p>To ensure that all members satisfy MEET enabling conditions, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Local Economic Cluster (LEC) ▶ Basic product conditions and alignment with brand ▶ Annual monitoring 	During the application phase of membership (see Annex 1)
Assessment of Product Suppliers	<p>To select suppliers for the ecotourism product who satisfy the criteria, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Local ownership and compliance ▶ Fair and equal employment 	During the ecotourism product development phase + annual monitoring
Quality and Sustainability of the Product	<p>To measure and manage product quality and sustainability, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ socio-economic, cultural and conservation aspects of package ▶ environmental impact (Ecological Footprint) 	Once an ecotourism product is finalized + if the product is adjusted + annually
Quality of the Guest Experience	<p>To ensure that ecotourism products are market competitive and meet or exceed the expectations of travel consumers. This includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Quality of transportation, activities, accommodation, food, and tour guides 	Each time travelers experience a product. During the testing phase, satisfaction surveys will be completed by MEET reviewers.

MEET Ecotourism Standard and Its Pillars

The MEET Ecotourism Standard is a comprehensive set of criteria and indicators for protected areas and LECs to manage the quality and sustainability of the MEET branded ecotourism products they offer to the market. All MEET members and ecotourism products must satisfy these criteria for inclusion in the MEET Guide. The Standard can however be taken as a reference and guidance tool by any protected area, irrespective of whether it has already planned to join the MEET Network.

The MEET Ecotourism Standard comprehends the following pillars and supporting criteria. These criteria take into account socio-economic, cultural, conservation and environmental considerations.

Note: The complete MEET Ecotourism Standard can be found in Annex 2.

Section 5.2 outlines how these pillars and criteria are measured and monitored. Furthermore, the MEET Network provides training and support to its members on the MEET online platform to ensure they are prepared to undertake the data collection, analysis and management required.

Note:

Prospective MEET members may find the early stages of the MEET Network engagement process resource intensive (e.g., the investment of financial and human resources in product development, testing and improvement). However, once a MEET ecotourism product has been accepted for inclusion into the MEET Guide (see Chapter 5), a member's resource commitment ought to be reduced, drawing resources to support annual measurement and monitoring and product iteration.

Criteria and Indicators for Managing Quality and Sustainability of Ecotourism Products

Protected areas that are, or want to be members of the MEET Network agree to undertake the measurement and monitoring of their MEET ecotourism products. This section describes how each of the pillars of the MEET Ecotourism Standard – Assessment of Package Suppliers, Sustainability of the Product, and Quality of the Guest Experience – is measured. Each sub-section addresses how measurement and monitoring is conducted, including who performs the data collection, and when and how often the measurement is performed.

Assessment of Product Suppliers

Any ecotourism product, and any MEET product in particular, is comprised of different components (e.g., accommodation, meals, activities, transport) and suppliers of those components (tour operators, lodging, restaurants, etc.). Therefore, it's necessary to measure and manage the sustainability and quality of each supplier against the MEET Standard to ensure that only suppliers who satisfy the criteria are selected. This is accomplished through a series of surveys and self-assessments.

In the product development phase the LEC creates a database of all the local suppliers (e.g., lodges, restaurants, transportation providers, activity providers, etc.) who can provide the services and experiences required to deliver the ecotourism product. Then, the LEC sends the Supplier Self-Assessment



Torre del Cerrano MPA, Italy © DestiMED project

survey to all suppliers to determine which ones satisfy the MEET criteria. The information and results from the surveys are collected in the MEET online platform. The suppliers who satisfy the MEET criteria can then be selected to be part of the MEET ecotourism product. Even if a supplier is not selected initially it may be included later as the ecotourism product evolves.

In addition to indicating local ownership, all selected suppliers must also be able demonstrate to the LEC that they operate in accordance with local laws, provide fair and equal employment, comply with health and safety regulations, and adhere to a sustainability plan and animal welfare policy. The details for these criteria can be found in Section 4 of the MEET Ecotourism Standard (see Annex 2).

This supplier assessment should be completed at minimum on an annual basis to ensure that previously selected suppliers continue to meet the minimum criteria and do not slip or fall short of these requirements. The survey may also need to be repeatedly administered within a period of time should a supplier not initially meet the criteria, yet later make considerable improvements in order to satisfy them.

Note:
MEET encourages LECs not only to consider suppliers who are already the established and leading tourism companies in the community, but also to include small or less-established local suppliers in the process. Although some suppliers may not initially satisfy the MEET criteria, they could eventually meet those criteria with LEC support and training. This approach supports a MEET goal of ecotourism products enabling widespread economic benefit and sustainable development in the community.

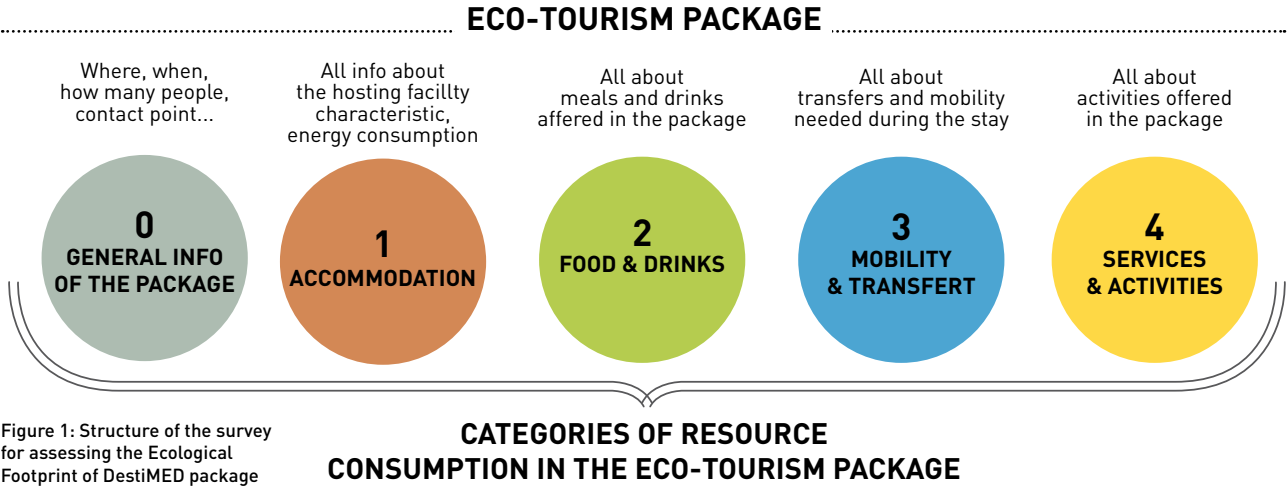
Measuring Sustainability: Ecological Footprint Methodology

The Ecological Footprint is an environmental accounting tool conceived in the early 1990s by Mathis Wackernagel and William Rees at the University of British Columbia. The tool measures the human appropriation of the biosphere's capacity to provide renewable natural resources (i.e. crops) and key ecological services (i.e. carbon sequestration). Ecological Footprint analyses are measured in global hectares (gha), which are hectare-equivalent units of land with world-average biological productivity.

Global Footprint Network (GFN) is the official research organization founded and directed by Mathis Wackernagel. GFN has established and continues to advance the standard methodology for Ecological Footprint accountings at different scales, including from global to national, from cities to industries, and from individuals to products.

GFN was contracted to provide technical support in the analysis of the Ecological Footprint of packages developed by DestiMED project partners, and now collaborates with the MEET Network for monitoring the environmental sustainability of MEET Ecotourism products. It does this by measuring the environmental impact in terms of resource consumption necessary to support all the services provided to travelers during delivery of the ecotourism product (i.e., accommodation, food, transportation and activities). This Ecological Footprint assessment provides quantifiable data to enable LECs to identify tangible interventions in order to reduce the environmental impact (in terms of natural resource appropriation) of their products.

The Ecological Footprint measurement is organized and managed through an online system, referred to as the MEET Online Platform. When a protected area becomes a MEET member, it is provided access to this online platform in which all relevant surveys, data collection forms and other documents will be stored. Data collected will automatically populate this online system so they may be analyzed and acted upon.



Ecological Footprint Data Collection and Responsibilities

In order to assess the Ecological Footprint of ecotourism products, an online tool (the “Ecotourism Footprint Calculator”) has been developed that can process the very detailed information and data needed from the service providers involved in each product data and gathered through specific queries. This process aims to facilitate and streamline both the data collection, which must be completed when the ecotourism product has been finalized, and the consequent analysis.

To accurately measure the Ecological Footprint, data collection queries target the following areas:

- ▶ **Accommodation**
- ▶ **Food & Drink**
- ▶ **Mobility & Transfer**
- ▶ **Services and Activities**

Note:

For a supplier to be included in the delivery of a MEET product, they must agree to be available and to gather and provide the requested data in a timely manner.

It is the responsibility of the PA and LEC to administer and collect data by appointing a representative (the surveyor) who takes on this task and collaborates closely with each supplier to ensure the proper answers to all questions.

Role of the Surveyor

The surveyor is committed to helping service providers understand which data are necessary and how to collect them. In addition, he/she agrees to make data collection a participatory

process and, for PAs that want to be part of MEET Network, to complete the data collection within the timeline indicated by the membership process. To this aim, it is recommended that the surveyor conduct an informal orientation training on the queries of the online system and pay in-person visits to each service provider to help collect data. A digital or paper copy of the overall questionnaire will be made available or sent in advance of that meeting, thus allowing the service provider enough time to prepare and coordinate internally among its managers, workers or technicians the gathering of the exact requested data.

Role of the LEC

The LEC, through the surveyor, is committed to upload the collected data in the provided on-line system (e.g., eco-tourism Footprint calculator). It must be available and reply in a timely manner to the data verification process conducted by the MEET Network. The LEC agrees to take into consideration the provided EF-based recommendations and do its best to implement remedial actions.

Ecological Footprint Calculation Tool and Results

For protected areas that are members of MEET, before Ecological Footprint results are obtained and finally analysed, a verification process is conducted by GFN on quality and completeness of the background data. Should collected data not be complete or reliable, GFN must contact the surveyor to consolidate and resolve this issue.

Once the dataset is complete and valid, Ecological Footprint results are released and can be utilized by the protected area and LEC to evaluate the impact of the product. MEET members can also receive a set of specific recommendations (see Box 8), all of which enable the LEC and service providers to evaluate current operations and make improvements (see Box 9).





Box 8

General Ecological Footprint recommendations for all PAs and LECs

Based on the Ecological Footprint analysis of MEET ecotourism products to date, the following general recommendations or lessons can be drawn in each of the following categories:

Food & Drinks

The Ecological Footprint of a product may be reduced by:

- ▶ Shifting to lower protein-intensive food (e.g., vegetables, legumes and cereals).
- ▶ Reducing the amount of food calories provided to tourists.
- ▶ Increasing the share of local food products.
- ▶ These suggestions could be particularly important in the re-shaping of lunch meals.

Several testers that evaluated packages during MEET and DestiMED projects commented on the excessive length of lunch breaks. Shorter and lighter lunches could free up time for the tourists (thereby increasing the quality of the product) while also contributing to reducing its Ecological Footprint (thereby improving the sustainability of the product).

Accommodation

Small-scale traditional facilities with a particular attention for the use of alternative energy sources (e.g., photovoltaic, etc.) should be favored in the design of ecotourism products.

Mobility & Transfers

The Footprint for a product can generally be reduced by making use of local public transportation systems (e.g., trains) for transfers of tourists to and from the airport (or harbour) or, when not possible, by opting for hybrid electric vehicles or highly efficient motor vehicles.

Activities & Services

Avoiding the use of motor vehicles and limiting the number of employees involved in the activity helps to reduce the Ecological Footprint.



Each LEC will receive the Ecological Footprint results, both on the basis of the whole ecotourism product as well as on a per tourist per day basis:

► **Ecological Footprint of the whole ecotourism product (gha per itinerary):** this result measures the overall Footprint impact -- in terms of total resource demand -- of the entire ecotourism project, given the specific number of tourists and duration of that product. This is useful for LECs to understand the overall impact of their product. Note: since each ecotourism product (including iterations of the same product) might vary in the number of tourists, duration, type of facilities and meals served, as well as activities and plans conducted, this result should not be used for comparison across protected areas or comparison among different iterations of the product. You can see an example of the Ecological Footprint of MEET Ecotourism Products here.

► **Ecological Footprint per tourist per day (gha per tourist per day):** This result measures the Footprint impact caused by each single tourist during one average full day of the product. It therefore enables comparison across protected areas as well as between two possible phases of evaluating (or iterations) of the same product. Also, this measure is used to understand the general trends of MEET products and to identify best practices among all the protected areas.

A background image showing a rugged, rocky mountain trail. Several hikers are visible on the path, which is surrounded by steep, rocky cliffs. The scene is outdoors, likely in a national park.

Box 9

Case Study: Evolving a MEET ecotourism product at Samaria National Park: Using the Ecological Footprint to achieve a lower food Footprint

Continual monitoring of a MEET ecotourism product is a crucial element in understanding the measurable impact of its activities on the environment. This methodological rigor differentiates a MEET ecotourism product experience. It underpins the relevance and role of the product in protected area conservation and lends legitimacy to low impact (or “green”) claims when communicating the MEET brand and product portfolio to trade partners and consumers.

How Samaria National Park adjusted its ecotourism product in response to Ecological Footprint findings offers an excellent example of why and how this process works in action.

After the initial collection of specific data by the Samaria National Park LEC, Global Footprint Network (GFN) first checked such data for quality and then performed its Ecological Footprint analysis on the data and submitted to MEET results and related set of recommendations. MEET then communicated this to the LEC. Of all the components of the ecotourism product, food provision was found to play a key role, representing more than half of the total product Footprint (56%).

Recommendations from Round 1 Ecological Footprint in the Food & Drinks category included:

- 1 Choose a more balanced diet, low in protein and rich in vegetables, cereals and legumes
- 2 Reduce the number of calories and increase the share of local food products
- 3 Limit the consumption of meat to one serving per day
- 4 Choose low trophic-level seafood (e.g., sardines, prawns, mussels, etc.)
- 5 Provide shorter and lighter lunches

GFN noted that recommendations were not to be implemented in isolation, but instead considered and balanced with traveler quality satisfaction feedback to ensure the best trade-off between quality and sustainability of the product.

Samaria National Park and its LEC indicated to GFN that recommendations were useful, helping stakeholders and service providers understand the relationship between specific product activities and their measurable impact on the environment. Stakeholders indicated particular surprise in realizing that the major contribution to the overall

Ecological Footprint was food. This provided the background and rationale to conversations between the LEC and individual service providers regarding why and what types of changes were necessary.

Samaria National Park, in conjunction with the LEC and its ecotourism product service providers, implemented the following changes to the product:

- 1 Most food served was produced on farms or locally (up to 60 km away)
- 2 Meat and protein-based food,

while essential, was reduced to one meal per day

- 3 Fish-based dishes were offered in only one meal of the product and based on low-trophic level seafood

- 4 Vegetable and legume consumption recommendations were implemented, with a focus on “on farm” and local organic food

- 5 Lunch breaks were slightly reduced in time and portions

Changes were also implemented with an eye on traveler experience. All

lunches are now served picnic-style in the context of other activities (e.g., during a nice hike in nature and consumed in front of stunning landscapes) and based mainly on vegetables, cheese, fruits and nuts. As a result, traveler experience improved (e.g., by reducing the amount of time being seated at a table) just as the environmental impact of the product was reduced. The updated product was re-evaluated by GFN. As a result, the Food & Drinks Footprint was reduced by 33%.

It’s important to keep in mind, however, that the overall product Footprint needs to be considered and optimized on as a whole. Whereas the food Footprint decreased thanks to the changes implemented by the LEC, other areas (e.g., Mobility & Transfer and Activity & Service) didn’t, due to needs of the product schedule. Nevertheless, the final impact resulted in an overall net EF decrease of 14% at the product level.

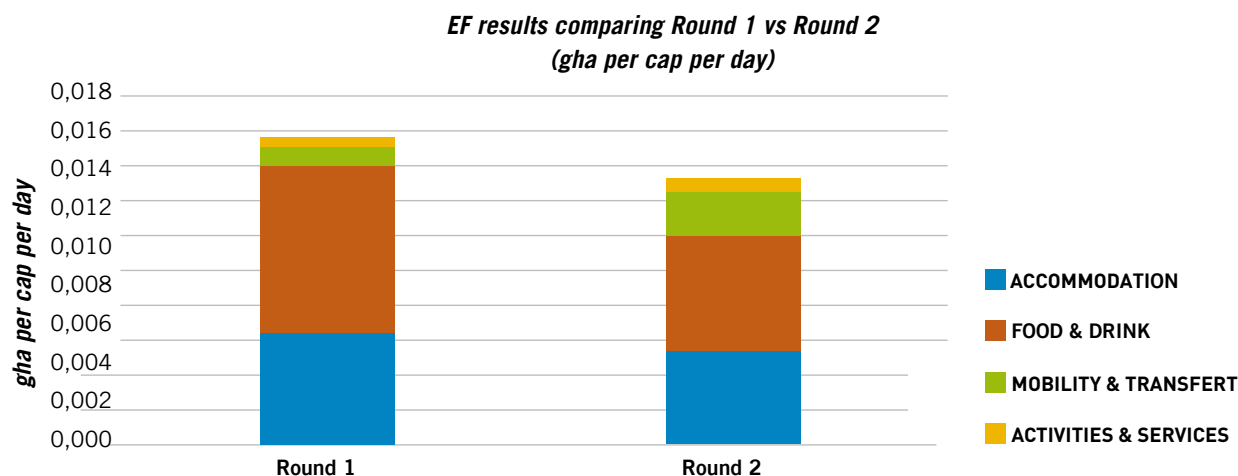


Fig 1: Ecological Footprint measurements, Round 1 vs. Round 2



Measuring Quality of the Guest Experience: Satisfaction Surveys

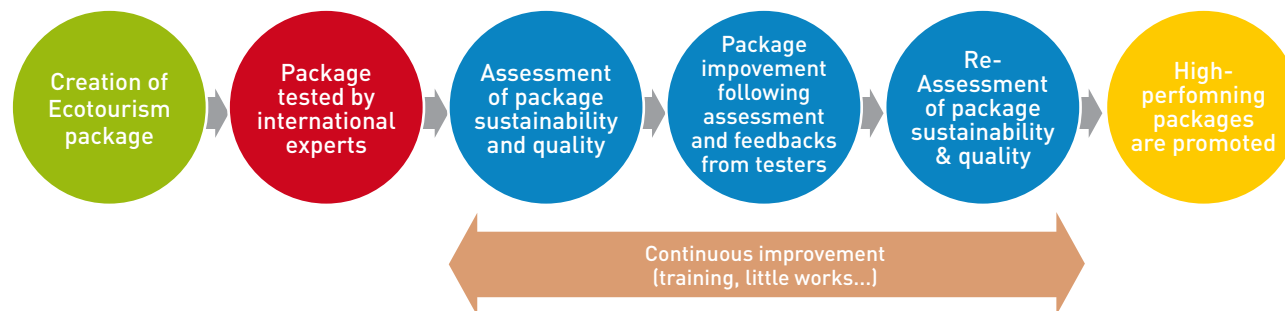
Any ecotourism product, and any MEET product, must be market competitive. This means that its delivery and experience must meet or exceed the demands and expectations of travel consumers. This aspect of product quality is measured and managed by analysing feedback contained in traveler satisfaction surveys collected after the experience of a MEET ecotourism product.

These surveys focus on the quality of tour operations (e.g., logistics, tour leader, and local guides) and suppliers (e.g., accommodation, food and drink, transportation and activities). from the perspective of a traveler. Travelers are the end consumers of MEET ecotourism products. Their feedback plays an important role in the monitoring and management of product quality and experience.

NOTE:

When a protected area is a MEET member, while a product is still in its development stage, satisfaction surveys will be completed by MEET reviewers whose feedback is intended to guide product improvement to the ultimate goal: inclusion of the product for promotion in the MEET Guide.

Managing Quality, Sustainability and Impact



Evaluation of Products for Inclusion into the MEET Guide

Another important component of the MEET methodology and ecotourism product development process is evaluation of the product for product quality and commercial viability. The MEET evaluation framework consists of three different types of evaluation, as outlined in the following table.



Menorca Biosphere Reserve, Spain
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The 3 types of evaluation in the MEET process

► Review:

REQUIRED once, but highly recommended that it be performed at least twice. Performed by an approved MEET Network expert when the ecotourism product is deemed to have been finalized. Purpose and outcome: to verify that the product adheres to and satisfies the MEET criteria and is thus ready for inclusion in the MEET Guide.

► Test:

OPTIONAL but highly recommended. The full itinerary is experienced and tested by a group of MEET-approved experts. Purpose and outcome: an assessment of the entire ecotourism product experience to surface issues in the delivery, logistics, and execution of the itinerary. The test substitutes the second review (See also Case Study Box 10)

► Audit:

REQUIRED once. An independent 3rd party site visit and test performed by the commercial partner, whereby the partner coordinates with the Inbound Tour Operator (ITO) a partial or full experience. Purpose and outcome: the commercial partner deems the product to be market-ready for international offer and inclusion in the MEET Guide.

A review performed by MEET or ecotourism experts not only serves as a verification tool for the measuring and monitoring processes and data, but it also provides a “test run” of the product which allows feedback on the quality of the delivery, organization, activities, services and overall experience. A satisfaction survey is used to collect this information and determine whether the ecotourism product satisfies the quality criteria of the MEET Ecotourism Standard.

The reviewers take this information, together with the results from the Ecological Footprint assessment, to evaluate whether the ecotourism product is ready for inclusion in the MEET Guide. At this point, the commercial partner performs its final audit to ensure that the MEET product truly is ready for market (Chapter 5).

If it's determined that the ecotourism product is not yet ready – indicated either by the MEET auditors or commercial partner -- the LEC will take this feedback and data to create and implement, together with MEET support, an improvement plan to resolve any remaining issues. This cycle will repeat itself until MEET auditors and the commercial partner have both determined that the ecotourism product has indeed met or exceeded all of the MEET sustainability and quality criteria and has a low Ecological Footprint.



Box 10

Case Study: Improving a tourism product after receiving feedback from testing. **(Kornati National Park)**

The testing of a prospective MEET eco-tourism product is critical to developing and evolving it to be market-ready and commercially viable. Besides identifying areas of improvement with the product and experience itself, the testing process can also be helpful in surfacing issues and points of failure further upstream in the Local Ecotourism Cluster (LEC) management processes. In this way, the testing process serves multiple functions at once: identifying and remediating gaps in capacity development and education, stakeholder alignment and engagement and in ecotourism product delivery and operations.

In the case of Kornati National Park in Croatia (Kornati), this included the fundamental understanding of the eco-tourism product and the selection of the Inbound Tour Operator (ITO) partner. How Kornati adjusted its ecotourism product in response to an initial product test – and responded thoroughly to tester feedback – provides an excellent example of why and how two full rounds of testing a MEET ecotourism product is so important. It also demonstrates how an effective LEC response to product testing feedback works in action.

Testing Feedback:

Although tester feedback showed that a number of individual components of the product had strong potential, the overall itinerary experience was unsatisfactory. In fact, the Kornati product received the lowest product score across all DestiMED testing in the first round.

The following product issues and weaknesses were identified by the testers:

1. The experience did not feature an overall tour leader.
2. The skipper of the sailing boat barely spoke English and knew little about the project context or the story regarding the importance of conservation. He made no effort besides navigating the boat, provided no guidance regarding ongoing and subsequent activities and made no apologies for doing only that.
3. Overall pre-trip and on-trip information failed to provide the testers with what they could expect (what kind of clothing and gear to bring, level of physical fitness required, etc.) and what would be expected of them regarding participation in activities on the boat (assisting the skipper, contribution to meal preparation, washing the dishes, etc.).
4. Information on the vision, mission, role and features of the protected area was not provided. As a result, testers emerged from the experience without the knowledge of why it was a protected area, why the landscape was important and what made it valuable from both a biodiversity and cultural perspective.
5. The overall itinerary story line was weak. Included activities did not flow, particularly in respect to that story line.

Based on the testing feedback, the following root cause points of failure were identified and understood by the LEC:

1. The ITO was supposed to have been chosen by the LEC, a multi-stakeholder group. It was instead chosen only by the protected area itself, which was not in a position or had the proper capacity to choose an appropriate ITO.
2. None of the ITOs considered by the LEC, including the one eventually chosen, had experience in organizing multi-day tourism products. Their prior experience was limited only to sourcing accommodation and organizing local day trips for mass tourists.
3. The LEC and its stakeholders -- WWF Adria, the public institution running the protected area, and the ITO -- all lacked the capacity to successfully bring a product to market on their own. And they didn't ask for help when they began to run into challenges.
4. There was a broad-based misunderstanding of the extent of experience and expertise needed to assemble a market-ready product and itinerary -- by WWF Adria as project partner, the public institution running the MPA as contracted party and eventually the LEC itself. Although it was initially understood that individual LEC members would possess this capacity, it became clear through testing that this expertise must reside in the ITO -- through experience in developing multiday tours, preferably in the sustainable tourism or eco-tourism sectors.

This was in fact a lesson learned not only in the case of Kornati, but also several other pilot locations in the DestiMED project. ▶ ▶ ▶

►►► Box 10

Remediation guided by the LEC included:

1. The LEC replaced the ITO responsible for the product. The new, replacement ITO had experience with ecotourism products and had been profiled as offering a different kind of tourism product which could fit with the MEET brand. The LEC was convinced that the ITO understood the nature and values of the product it was trying to create.
2. The ITO examined the feedback to ensure that their revised version of the product would address issues and points of failure identified during the test. The ITO paid particular attention to logistics, organization and the role of the tour leader.
3. The major changes to the product included changing accommodation from on-board a sailing catamaran to sleeping in the renovated homes of local fishermen. In addition, the itinerary now began with a visit to Šibenik, the oldest town founded by Croats and home to two UNESCO World Heritage sites. While many of the other activities remained the same (e.g., olive and herb picking, honey making), the flow of the itinerary was re-organized to ensure a higher-quality and more contextual traveler experience.
4. More attention was paid to building and evolving the LEC so that product quality and sustainability could be actively maintained and improved. New ideas were now generated by the LEC and fed to the ITO.

Additional major lessons learned through product testing:

1. The LEC must use a participatory approach in the creation of the ecotourism product. The LEC and its members must also understand why this approach is used, and what the dangers are when it is not used. It's important to note that when public institutions are involved or when the region has a history of decision-making which is authoritarian or non-collaborative, participation can be lost. And with that, a lack of visibility regarding how decisions are made and hidden points of failure which reveal themselves later in the process.
2. Although creating a MEET-compliant product may initially appear simple, it requires continual attention to detail. Previous related ecotourism experience is essential, ideally in the initial creation of the product or in the revision of the product after testing. If this capacity does not exist, a significant investment in capacity building of the LEC and ITO will be needed.
3. A LEC takes time to develop and evolve, and can only do so through participation, meeting and resolving issues together. A LEC must be clear regarding its role, including that it is a steward of the entire MEET process, including selection of the ITO. A LEC does not have to organize the final product. That is the role of the ITO. However, product requirements, vetting of product components and activities, and the overall story, ought to be guided by the LEC. This approach must be insisted upon, as it is the essence of community-based tourism product development.
4. The most important aspect of the ITO: that it recognizes the opportunity and value of a MEET ecotourism product. It's more important to have an ITO which recognizes this but is not local, than to have a local ITO which does understand the MEET approach and does not possess a real interest in ecotourism.
5. Any stakeholder in doubt should ask for help. Despite the initial ITO and the protected area indicating in the first phase of product development that no additional help would be necessary in creation of the product, advance assistance and facilitation in this process could have avoided several points of failure identified during the initial product test.

The response by the Kornati LEC and its stakeholders to testing feedback ensured that when testers returned months later, the feedback they provided to the revised product gave it the highest score among all DestiMED project tests (and in fact among all MEET Network tests) performed to date.

Altogether, this journey of improvement helped build rapport among the various members of the LEC and gave them a better understanding of the rationale and engagement of the MEET process. This allowed them to bring their product ideas and response to feedback to implementation.

Performance Monitoring Report Card

For protected areas that are part of the MEET Network, the more critical and relevant information from the data collection and analysis process is collected via a Performance Monitoring Report Card. This provides the protected area and the LEC a snapshot of the sustainability and quality of the MEET ecotourism product at a specific time so that areas of improvement can be easily identified and a plan created to resolve them.

This also allows the ability to monitor the measured improvement (or decline) of the product due to the implementation of an action plan. In other words, this is a process of continual measurement and improvement.

The Performance Monitoring Report Card includes the results from:

- ▶ LEC Product Self-Assessment is divided into two sections: Enabling Conditions and Quality and Sustainability of the Product. This allows the LEC to measure its baseline score and then its progress from year to year in improving these scores.
- ▶ The Supplier Sustainability Self-Assessment Results shows the level of sustainability and quality of all suppliers involved in the ecotourism product and where improvements can be made, either by changing suppliers or in making changes within a supplier.
- ▶ Product Satisfaction Results shows the score from the traveler (or reviewer) on the quality of the experience and delivery.

- ▶ Ecological Footprint scores per sector and as a total for the product. This illustrates where there are opportunities for improvement in the product (e.g., food, transport, activities, etc.) so as to reduce its environmental impact.

Annual monitoring is another requirement of MEET membership. The Performance Monitoring Report Card should be used for performance comparisons to the previous year's report card and for continual improvement of ecotourism product quality and sustainability.



Butrint National Park, Albania
© DestiMED project



CHAPTER 5

MARKETING THROUGH **THE** **MEET NETWORK**



Mujib Nature Reserve, Jordan © Y. Omar

Once the ecotourism package is developed, assessed and fine tuned, it can enter into the subsequent phase of marketing and promotion. This is a key step, which can greatly influence the success of the efforts put in place by the LEC. Often marketing and promotion require the investment of substantial resources. One of the distinct advantages of being part of the MEET Network is the opportunity to place and promote your product in international markets without incurring the expense of costly individual marketing campaigns.

The MEET Network acts as a Destination Management Organization (DMO) to promote the Mediterranean as a destination with a specific focus on ecotourism products in protected areas, and with the goal of conservation. The MEET brand is a B2B (business-to-business) brand that represents and markets its portfolio of ecotourism products and destinations to outbound tour operators and other interested tourism businesses. It does this by attending tourism trade shows, meeting with tour operators and marketing itself online and through other channels.

The MEET Network has partnered with a commercial partner to manage the marketing and commercialization of the MEET Guide. This means that MEET branded ecotourism products are sold and contracted through the commercial partner. This also applies to B2C (business-to-consumer) sales of MEET ecotourism products directly to consumers. The MEET Network together with the commercial partner and Inbound Tour Operators (ITO), assures:

1. Strategic planning
2. Market-aware pricing and sales
3. Promotion and advertising of tours and services

There are some basic but important elements of marketing using the MEET Network as a platform that are important to consider when submitting your products for consideration. Many of these elements are important also when considering marketing of any ecotourism product, irrespective of whether the area is already part of the MEET Network.

Pricing

Pricing is a complex subject as there are many factors to consider, both short- and long-term. Prices need to:

- Reflect the value provided by the product, and take into consideration prices of similar products offered by competitors
- Consider what the market is truly willing to pay for the product
- Enable the business to reach its financial goals

When dealing with pricing and commission structures it is important to understand the difference between a Net Rate and a Retail/Gross Rate.

The Net Rate is the absolute minimum for which the Inbound Tour Operator (ITO) can sell the tour product.

It is calculated by adding together all the fixed and variable costs of operating the tour and the profit margin that the ITO needs to make per sale to have a viable business (Net Rate = product cost plus ITO profit margin).

If your product will be included in the MEET Guide, this will be the price that you will have to negotiate with your service providers and the MEET commercial partner.

The MEET commercial partner will then factor in the costs of the specific distribution channel it will use to sell the MEET product, in order to calculate the Retail/Gross Rate (Retail Rate = Net Rate + distribution costs).

Distribution costs are the commissions that are paid to third parties to help you reach your target markets and to sell the product on your behalf. In the case of the MEET Guide, distribution costs will be endorsed by the commercial partner.

This Retail/Gross Rate is the price that the consumer (or the Outbound Tour Operator) will pay for the product, and must be the uniform price that will be quoted in all consumer-facing catalogues, brochures, promotional materials and website content.

Research has been conducted by MEET to understand what the minimum, maximum and average small group tour prices are for MEET's varied destinations.

It must be noted that the prices indicated should be used as a general guideline. Retail prices (careful, not net rates!) of similar small group tours in MEET destinations are as follows:

Due to variations in competitive tour pricing standards in the destinations, tour product activities, accommodation quality, transport and meals it is not possible for the MEET Network to have a common fixed price applicable to all its products.

This costing exercise will require that the commercial partner and ITO negotiate what their reasonable profit margins should be to ensure that the final retail rate is competitive with similar products in that specific destination.



Terres del Ebro Biosphere Reserve, Spain © DestiMED project



FRANCE
 MIN (retail price/day in €): 132
 MAX (retail price/day in €): 297
 AV (retail price/day in €): 175

SPAIN
 MIN (retail price/day in €): 107
 MAX (retail price/day in €): 287
 AV (retail price/day in €): 157

TUNISIA
 MIN (retail price/day in €): 133
 MAX (retail price/day in €): 185
 AV (retail price/day in €): 146

ITALY
 MIN (retail price/day in €): 135
 MAX (retail price/day in €): 253
 AV (retail price/day in €): 180

GREECE
 MIN (retail price/day in €): 105
 MAX (retail price/day in €): 210
 AV (retail price/day in €): 161

MALTA
 MIN (retail price/day in €): 100
 MAX (retail price/day in €): 250
 AV (retail price/day in €): 163

LEBANON
 MIN (retail price/day in €): 210
 MAX (retail price/day in €): 297
 AV (retail price/day in €): 253

JORDAN
 MIN (retail price/day in €): 116
 MAX (retail price/day in €): 310
 AV (retail price/day in €): 198



Calculating the Cost and Profitability of your Product

There are some basic financial components common to most ecotourism products. This section explains the most important concepts and includes a formula to calculate the price of the product.

Fixed costs

Fixed costs are those costs which DO NOT vary based on the level of activity. Fixed costs remain the same no matter how many rooms you let or tourists you carry. It does not matter if you carry 1 or 20 guests the costs will STAY THE SAME. It does not matter if you let out 1 room or 10 the costs will STAY THE SAME.

Examples of fixed costs:

fuel for a bus, cost to charter a boat, wage of a guide. Although considered as a different category, labor may also fall within the concept of a fixed cost.

Variable costs

Variable costs are those costs which change or vary depending on the number of clients. Variable costs are dependent on how many tourists you carry. If you carry 10 guests the costs will be different than if you carry 20.

Examples of variable costs:

meals, entrance fees to museums or national parks, 3rd party bike or gear rentals.

Annual business costs

These costs are incurred whether you have passengers on your tour or not. This is why they are considered fixed. For example: insurance, marketing, lease payments, recurring monthly bank fees, accounting fees, etc.

“Conservation Contribution” to the Protected Area

The main objective of MEET and its ecotourism products is to strengthen the conservation goals and initiatives of a PA. Although in most protected areas in the Mediterranean, tour operators and visitors do not pay an entrance fee, there are some mechanisms that can be implemented to contribute financially to the protected area. One way that MEET aims to achieve this: each ecotourism product will include a “Conservation Contribution” as a percentage of the price, proceeds of which will be paid to the protected area. The mechanism on how to contribute this money will need to be negotiated on an individual basis with each protected area as the legal framework for accepting donations differs across the region.

Markup percentage

One of the main aims of a business is to make a profit. The only way to do that is to correctly price your product while understanding your costs and factoring in markup. There is no set figure for markup; however, the markup you set needs to make you a profit on the one hand, yet be competitive on the other. You don't want your price to be radically different to similar products offered by your competitors. If the price is too expensive and doesn't clearly offer added value, you may lose customers. If the price is too low, prospective customers may question your professionalism.

Commission

Commission is typically the major source of revenue for retail travel agents, wholesalers, inbound operators and DMOs. Tour operators need to understand how commissions are divided between the different levels of sellers and allow for the payment of commission in their prices.

With these elements you can calculate the final price of your product:

Variable cost/client

+

Fixed cost

(including labour, yearly, divided by the estimated number of clients in a year)

+

Annual business costs yearly, divided by the estimated number of clients in a year.

+

A percentage for the contribution to protected areas.

+

A mark-up percentage (multiplied by the expected number of clients in a year, this will be your profit before taxes).

All these values equal the Net Price.

+

The commission for the MEET DMO, commercial partner and Outbound Tour Operators.

=

Retail Price (which should not be higher than the recommended price of the product, as explained in the previous section).



MEET Branding

First, let's clarify the difference between branding and marketing. Marketing is the active action of promoting a tourism product. It is tactical, it is mostly time-limited and it contains a message aimed to get sales results: "Book with us now and get 10% discount on all our tours!" "10 reasons our trips are better than our competitors"; and, "have the experience of your lifetime! This is not branding.

Branding both precedes and provides the foundation of any marketing strategy. Consequently, marketing is a part of branding, but it is branding that allows companies to communicate the characteristics, values and attributes that define what is and what is not associated with them and their products and services.

The MEET Network operates with the purpose of creating a strong brand to differentiate itself from other offerings in the Mediterranean (and elsewhere).

This MEET branding needs to be incorporated into each MEET ecotourism product in order to be coherent with other products offered in the MEET Guide.

The MEET branding that we previously introduced when talking about Unique Selling Proposition (USP) in Chapter 3 has the following characteristics.

Brand Name

MEET – Mediterranean Experience of Ecotourism

Brand Pillars

The MEET brand is sustained by 4 pillars that are its most important core attributes:

1. First and foremost: the conservation of nature in protected areas.
2. Authentic cultural encounters: meeting locals, experiencing their lifestyles and contributing to the wellbeing of people living in or around protected areas.
3. The Mediterranean mosaic: nature, cultures, landscapes, heritage, food, the links between human beings and territory.
4. Active tour programmes: soft adventure and experiential traveling.

Brand Promise

The brand promise defines the MEET Guide Unique Selling Proposition (USP):

"MEET products foster authentic and active exchange between visitors, local people, and protected areas, promoting the conservation of natural and cultural resources and revitalization of less developed communities."

Brand Values



The values of MEET are reflected in the 4C's (Connection, Compassion, Conservation and Community):

Connection: We help to inspire meaningful connections with the people, places and culture of the region.

Compassion: We engage with and strive to understand visitors, each other, and the region's biodiversity and heritage.

Conservation: Conservation is at the heart of what we do: the long-term sustainability of people and places is fundamental to the brand experience.

Community: We embrace the concept of collective impact and the cooperative relationship between protected areas and the local communities.

The MEET brand strategy was developed during by the partnership of the MEET project and by MEET ITOs, and was further assessed during the DestiMED project implementation. These stakeholders agreed that the brand assets are well aligned with MEET's overall positioning and product portfolio.

The MEET Network will work on brand training with its partners (see an example about storytelling in Box 11) to ensure that the voices of all those involved in MEET and all service providers in the supply chain are aligned to create a singular, clear and compelling voice and deliver a unique offering.

Box 11

Storytelling and MEET

Storytelling is an essential element of MEET strategy, helping breathe life into the MEET brand and the MEET Guide. By creating and sharing stories that are authentic and inspirational, MEET will forge an emotional connection with its target audience. This will help them to learn about MEET values, understand what makes MEET special, and inspire them to purchase and to engage.

It's easy to understand why stories work so well in marketing. Think about those moments when you've been captivated by a story, or connected with a character that helped you to learn about the world in a memorable way. Customers are no longer interested in itinerary features and facts alone. They prefer to be transported to a time and place, in a way that sparks their imagination and helps them to envision their own experience.

Brand stories work best when they are told with a clear understanding of the audience, their values and what they care about. When this is done effectively, potential partners and visitors will feel an emotional connection to the product, understand how MEET can benefit them, and be compelled to take action.

Storytelling provides MEET with an opportunity to share the inspiration behind the products. Share your creative efforts: think first-person blog posts from local people, short videos of authentic experiences, stunning Instagram images, or interesting and informative infographics.



MEET locals ready to teach you their traditional songs and dance routines. Don't be surprised if you're up until the wee hours of the morning creating your own rendition!



MEET a local fisherman's family, and sit down to a quiet dinner where you will be regaled with stories of life on the Mediterranean sea and traditionally prepared dishes.



MEET a local winemaker in Port-Cros national Park own organic and biodynamic winery. Learn all about his technique and exchange stories over a glass (or two) of excellent rosé.

The MEET Guide

Purpose of the MEET Guide

If you have followed all the previous steps and satisfied the MEET criteria, you will have MEET branded ecotourism product. Congratulations!

Your product may also be marketed and sold as a stand-alone offer. So, what are the advantages of being included in the MEET Guide?

Being part of the MEET Network (and therefore having the possibility to integrate your product into the MEET Guide) confers the following benefits, among others:

- ▶ training in product design, marketing, interpretation, customer service and elements of sustainability
- ▶ the opportunity to share experiences and lessons learned with other protected areas in the Mediterranean
- ▶ the ability to market yourself through a recognized and respected international logo, brand and commercial partner
- ▶ improved quality and sustainability of your product through adherence to a set of minimum standards
- ▶ reduced costs in marketing to target segments

MEET is more than a product line. Together, as a collective of protected areas, local tour operators and civil society, we are stronger and we are able to reach our targets and ensure our efforts contribute to long term sustainability and conservation.

Having a single MEET Guide with the elements of the MEET brand facilitates the marketing of small, individual products located across a broad geographic region.

Your ecotourism product will go through a thorough assessment by the MEET Network (see Chapter 4) in order to verify its

The image shows a webpage for the MEET Guide. At the top, a blue banner reads "Nature and Culture Itineraries Designed by Mediterranean Parks". To the right is the MEET logo, which consists of three circular icons (a heart, a person, and a leaf) and the word "MEET" in large blue letters, with a small "GUIDE" tag below it. Below the banner, the title "ITALY: MONTE RUFENO NATURE RESERVE" is displayed in blue. The page features three images: a group of people in a kitchen, a large stone cathedral, and a dramatic mountain landscape. To the right of these images is a section titled "Central Italy's Hidden Beauty (5 days)" with a description and a list of activities.

**Nature and Culture Itineraries
Designed by Mediterranean Parks**

MEET
GUIDE

ITALY: MONTE RUFENO NATURE RESERVE

Central Italy's Hidden Beauty (5 days)

Sense the perfumes and colors of nature, wandering from medieval towns to beautiful forests in an unspoiled land between Rome and Florence.

- Explore the life of a farmer while staying at the guesthouse of a local agriturismo
- Harvest edible wild plants, fruits and mushrooms while hiking, then learn how to prepare them from local chefs
- Enjoy a guided walk through the fairytale Sasseto Woods in the shade of monumental trees along a carpet of moss-covered stones
- Meet the woman whose family has owned a medieval castle for 400 years, then dine on regional wine and cuisine inside her fortress.

Figure 7 Example of The MEET Guide offering test tours; more information online (www.meetnetwork.org/meet-guide).

compliance with the MEET Ecotourism Standard, the MEET brand and its principles. Once this happens the ecotourism product is approved by the MEET Network for inclusion in the MEET Guide. At this point, the commercial partner does its own audit to ensure that the ecotourism product is truly market ready and meets all of its commercial requirements. Only then will it be included in the MEET Guide for promotion and sales.

If your ecotourism is not compliant or market ready, then a “MEET Product Improvement plan” will be prepared by MEET and the commercial partner, and agreed with you. After implementation, the ecotourism product will be audited again and this cycle will continue until both MEET and the commercial partner approve it for inclusion into the MEET Guide. The commercial partner will have a contract with the ITO to sell the product and will work directly with the ITO to manage bookings, logistics, insurance, coordination, and anything else related to delivering the ecotourism product.

Fine-Tuning of Products through Evaluation

It's important to note that challenges, development needs and the expected structure of MEET ecotourism products are resolved through a process of continual refinement and iteration before inclusion into the MEET Guide. For example, the MEET Network can organize rounds of test tours, whereby products and concepts are executed and delivered by protected areas and ITOs, and the resulting experiences evaluated by ecotourism experts.

To better understand the market, MEET also can organize familiarization (or FAM) trips with tour operators to evaluate and provide feedback on the marketability and viability of

products. Below is an example of the Guide (Figure 7), showcasing an example of a finalized, market-ready product. Thanks to the feedback and constructive criticism of more than 200 experts and tourism businesses involved in and experiencing the tours, the MEET Network is able to continually improve and adapt each of its ecotourism products – and the collective essence of those products represented by the MEET brand -- to market demand.

Organizing familiarization and test trips for a tourism product can be expensive. Invited participants are typically not requested to pay for the tours; it is understood that they participate free of charge in exchange for their feedback and expertise. However, these familiarization and test trips – when strategically organized and well-planned – can provide valuable feedback on the product and its viability in the market while also receiving exposure to desirable distribution channels, audiences, and prospective customers.

If you wish to consider a test or familiarization trip as part of your product development or marketing strategy, the MEET Network will help you to identify participants and manage the feedback.

You can see in the figure below (Figure 8) a collection of the most common terms used by test trip and familiarization trip participants to describe their experiences with MEET ecotourism products.



Figure 8: Word Cloud of MEET products participant's tour feedback.





CHAPTER 6 INCORPORATING ELEMENTS **OF** **SUSTAINABILITY**

With the fundamentals of the MEET process having been covered earlier in this manual, this chapter considers some of the more important components of sustainability which protected area management should make special efforts to address. In various cases, these components' effects may influence – or be impacted by -- the design and management a MEET ecotourism product.

NOTE:

This chapter is primarily intended for park managers, conservation authorities, and conservation NGOs operating in protected areas which offer a MEET ecotourism product.

Nature Park Lastovo Islands, Croatia © DestiMED project

Key Elements of Sustainability

Nature-oriented tourists are attracted by natural landscapes which often feature significant biodiversity. Tourists in coastal areas enjoy watching seabirds or swimming and snorkeling among the fish in clean waters, while others go on walks to enjoy views, wildflowers and wildlife. To deliver ecotourism customers a satisfying, enjoyable and educational experience, each of these activities requires intact, healthy and functioning ecosystems. In this way, well managed tourism can be a sustainable, conservation-focused alternative to economic activities which are intended to bring economic benefit to the local community yet may unintentionally harm the ecosystem and its biodiversity.

Tourism -- particularly when it is inadequately managed -- can have a variety of negative impacts on biodiversity. Irresponsible and unsustainable tourism can damage nature through habitat destruction, overexploitation of local resources, waste and pollution, invasive alien species, infrastructure development and the collective negative impact on local culture.

This section highlights some of the key strategies and actions that should be implemented by protected area managers in close coordination with members of the Local Ecotourism Cluster (LEC) in order to ensure the protection of biodiversity and continued respect of local communities.

Interpretation in Visitor Centers, Signs and Printed Materials

NOTE:

Additional information regarding the intersection of interpretation and the importance of effective guiding to the execution of a MEET ecotourism product can be found in Chapter 3, creating a MEET ecotourism product.

Sound interpretive planning is essential for visitor facilities (such as visitor centers, contact or information stations, environmental education centers or camps, trails, wayside kiosks, and scenic overlooks), signs and printed materials. Interpretive planners should be involved in the planning and schematic phases of development, and work closely with designers, cluster stakeholders and protected area staff in adapting facilities and printed materials to the needs of visitors and resources.

It is especially important to establish the goals and functions of interpretative elements -- and the criteria for variables such as location and appearance -- before options or solutions are considered.

Effective and sustainable interpretation centers generally exhibit the following characteristics or incorporate the following elements. Specifically, they:

- ▶ Follow the elements of interpretation and follow a theme.
- ▶ Exhibit a design which evolves over time to keep the visitor center current, fresh and innovative.
- ▶ Understand the audience (e.g. tourists, children, elders) to ensure that visitor, protected area management and local tourism cluster needs are met.
- ▶ Clearly identify resources and indicate whether the visitor center is to be self-, partly-, or fully-funded

- ▶ Foster effective partnerships to provide support and referral.
- ▶ Consider ongoing operational and maintenance costs, and actively communicate with organizations that can provide the resources required for continued operations.
- ▶ Provide distinct and innovative designs to inspire visitors.
- ▶ Use current multimedia tools in order to be consistent with the usual ways the visitor gains information.
- ▶ Create distinct and authentic experiences which are specific to the destination and deliver a unique sense of place.
- ▶ Be innovative because visitors seek new, distinct and interesting experiences.

When incorporating interpretation in printed materials (e.g., brochures) or in signage (e.g., on self-guided trails), follow the same interpretation guidelines. For example, use specific themes, ensuring that no more than one theme is addressed at a time in a brochure or trail sign.

TIP



It is sometimes difficult for park management to ensure proper staffing in interpretation centers and museums. MEET suggests taking advantage of the Local Ecotourism Cluster (LEC) to discuss and explore collaboration opportunities with local NGOs or community members willing to perform these roles on behalf of the park.



Dune Costiere Regional Natural Park, Italy © DestiMED project

Visitor Impact Monitoring and Management

Note: For additional information regarding the measurement and monitoring of tourism activities and a MEET ecotourism product – including explanations of and links to specific tools -- please see Chapter 4, Measurement and Monitoring.

Each time a visitor sets foot in an ecotourism site, he impacts the environment. This fact is unavoidable. The job of protected area managers is to minimize these impacts and ensure that, via ecotourism management strategies, the positive impacts outweigh the negative ones.

Monitoring and managing visitor impact is fundamental to ecotourism management. As important as it is, however, it is frequently left unattended. If the effects of ecotourism activities on a natural environment and the communities which surround it are unclear or unknown, then success cannot be measured. Careful monitoring of impacts, both positive and negative, needs to be a primary activity of any tourism activity in protected areas or culturally-sensitive sites.

Zoning for Visitor Use

The appropriate zoning of a protected area is fundamental to all other management strategies. Zoning is the division of a site into a number of different sectors, or zones, for the purpose of distributing different types of use or non-use (e.g. protection) in the most appropriate places. The number and types of zones depends on:

- ▶ the management objectives and priorities of the site;
- ▶ the quality and variety of the natural and cultural resources and the degree of alteration they have suffered; and
- ▶ the types of use that have been planned (many types of use conflict with one another and thus must be separated geographically).

Each zone is managed to maintain or achieve a particular natural setting within which ecotourism and other activities take place, and thus, each zone has its own set of rules and regulations for activities carried out within its boundaries. Typically, a protected area contains one or two zones marked or dedicated for public use, such as ecotourism.

Visitor Management Strategies and Alternatives

The first methods developed to address tourism impacts evolved from the concept of carrying capacity, which originated in the field of range management. Initially, it was used only to indicate how much tourism activity was too much. Recently researchers began to realize that looking only at numbers of visitors was necessary yet not sufficient. They demonstrated that what visitors did, when they did it and several other considerations were frequently more important in determining visitor impact than simply the number of visitors.



Carrying capacity is a figure representing the number of visitors who can be supported in a given area within natural resource limits, and without degrading the natural social, cultural and economic environment for present and future generation. Carrying capacity may be useful when considering solutions for mitigating impacts in a restricted location. However, it may be less effective for protected areas or in large ecotourism site situations.

The Limits of Acceptable Change (LAC) model has evolved specifically to allow tourism to address the shortcomings of the carrying capacity concept, and has also been applied to more general management situations.

Establishing Limits of Acceptable Change

LAC is a process model which accepts that change is inevitable but sets limits on what degree of change is acceptable. The basic concept involves determining a common vision of what a site's conditions should be, setting indicators and standards related to the amount of change stakeholders deem to be acceptable in those sites, and then monitoring to continually assess where you are in terms of visitor impacts upon the previously-determined standards (see one example in Box). When standards are not met, then management must adapt to mitigate negative impacts.

These are the basic steps in determining LAC⁷:

- ▶ **Identification of area issues and concerns:** Involving all stakeholders, identify an ecotourism site's unique values, attractions, opportunities, threats and problems. for the management parameters that most concern you at a given site in a given zone. These indicators should be direct
- ▶ **Define and describe the types of desirable activities:** This step should be performed in the abstract, without

consideration of any specific location. Consider all of the different types of activities that ecotourism might involve. The desirable activities should then be applied to specific sites/zones.

- ▶ **Select Indicators:** These indicators should be selected for the management parameters that most concern you at a given site in a given zone. These indicators should be directly related to visitor activities that can be controlled
- ▶ **Establish standards for each indicator:** The standards should set some limit of acceptable change. Some impacts are inevitable, but managers must be willing to say how much impact they will tolerate before changing the standard or limit.
- ▶ **Monitor conditions and implement actions:** If acceptable limits have been exceeded, make management changes that will bring resource, social or economic conditions back within acceptable limits.

Box 12: LAC:**LAC: a case study from
Mingha-Deception
Track in the Arthur's
Pass National Park
(New Zealand)**

The LAC process has been used in several protected areas of New Zealand. Mingha-Deception Track is a very popular trail, hence subject to heavy use. Park managers have used the LAC methodology to identify key threats and to take actions to mitigate negative impacts. The values, issues and concerns held for the Mingha-Deception trail were investigated through semi-structured qualitative interviews with stakeholders – from managers to users -- of the trail.

The tables below outline the key indicators and the results of the Analysis⁸.

The main results of the LAC process for the Mingha-Deception trail are presented in the next table which shows the current impact levels occurring on the trail, the acceptability level for each impact, and whether acceptability levels have been exceeded.

Impact Category	Issue/Concern	Indicator*
Social impacts	Conflict	% of visitors bothered by visitors or large groups
	Displacement	% of visitors being put off visiting track due to others undertaking activities other than their own
	Crowding	% of visitors experiencing some degree of crowding
Biophysical impacts	Track/vegetation damage	% of visitors bothered by track widening % of visitors bothered by vegetation damage % of visitors bothered by human toilet waste
	Extent of formed track	% of visitors who think more sections of formed track/boardwalk are needed
	Provision of facilities	% of visitors who think more directional signage is needed % of visitors who think more huts/bivouacs are needed % of visitors who think there are insufficient toilets on the track
Track/facilities impacts	Standard of track/facilities	% of visitors who comment negatively on the standard of the track or facilities
*All indicators relate to visitor experiences during their visit to the Mingha-Deception track		

Impact	Current impact level (%)	Impact acceptability level (%)	Acceptability level exceeded
Crowding	17	29	No
Conflict	6	11	No
Displacement	4	29	No
Displacement past and future	23	29	No
Visitors bothered by vegetation damage	15	18	No
Visitors bothered by track widening	17	29	No
Visitors bothered by human toilet waste	7	←10	Probably
Visitors who think more tracks/boardwalks needed	21	42	No
Visitors who think more directional signage needed	39	34	Yes
Visitors who think more huts/bivs needed	4	39	No
Visitors who think there are insufficient toilets	24	36	No
Visitors who comment negatively regarding facilities	28	35	No

How Tourism Supports Protected Areas

The main objective of many protected area efforts , as well as of the MEET Network, is to create new models of tourism in the Mediterranean which can increase incentives among local stakeholders to conserve their territories -- by linking protected areas to increased socioeconomic benefits for the communities.

Tourism in protected areas is both a demand on their human and financial resources (to ensure monitoring and management of impacts) and an opportunity to generate significant revenue for conservation. Several protected areas in the Mediterranean have very high visitation rates.

Often, and particularly in EU countries, the charging of visitors entrance fees is not possible, and even where protected areas have established mechanisms for generating revenue and fees are close to fair market value, those revenues are not reinvested to cover even minimal protected area management. Consequently, the demand for access to a protected area often exceeds an area manager’s capacity to manage it. Most protected area managers in those countries have reported negative impacts caused by over-visitation. Data on ecosystem health are non-existent and it is difficult or impossible to assess how much an area has been degraded over time by excessive tourist use. The lack of controls at the entrance points of most areas aggravates the situation even more, since not even data on number of visitors are available.

A number of relatively simple market-based mechanisms to generate tourism revenues for conservation have been

developed and work in many countries (table 2). However, the implementation of such mechanisms require changes in the legislation, which is critical to avoid the erosion of the natural capital of the protected areas,

Fee Type	Description
Entrance fees	Allows access to points beyond the entry gate.
Admission fees	Collected for use of a facility or special activity, e.g., museum or photography class.
User fees	Fees paid by visitors to use facilities within the protected area, e.g., parking, camping, visitor centers, boat use, shelter use, etc.
Licenses and permits	For private tourism firms to operate on protected area property, e.g., tour operators, guides, transport providers and other users.
Royalties and sales revenue	Monies from sales of souvenirs.
Concession fees	Charges or revenue shares paid by concessionaires that provide services to protected area visitors, e.g., souvenir shops.
Taxes	Such as on hotel rooms, airport use and vehicles.
Leases and rent fees	Charges for renting or leasing park property or equipment.
Voluntary donations	Includes cash, ‘in-kind’ gifts and labor, often received through ‘friends of the park’ groups.

TABLE 2: Types of Fees and Charges in Protected Areas

During the development of the MEET project, and later through DestiMED, various solutions were tested to ensure MEET Ecotourism products really helped the conservation of protected areas also in the parks where charging entrance fees or receiving donations is not allowed.

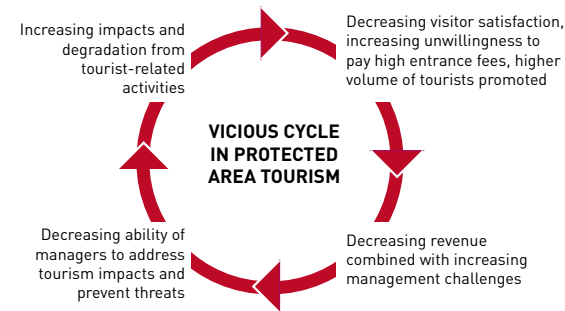
The MEET Network agreed to implement a system based on voluntary donations, having a % on the sales of the MEET products (from 2 to 5%) focusing on a conservation activity benefitting the park and linked with the product. The park has to identify such activity in agreement with the local cluster and report to MEET Network the advancements and monitoring of it.



Box 13

The Threshold of Sustainability

The point at which the management capacity of a protected area is sufficient to mitigate the most critical tourism-related threats, so that public use is limited to the parameters of sustainability of the natural capital within the site is called the threshold of sustainability.



This threshold is reached by ensuring that protected area managers have a minimum annual operating budget to maintain a critical level of specific tourism management activities. A central idea to the concept of the threshold of sustainability is that in order to address the growing threats from tourism, managers must identify these threats and develop effective ways to address them, while policy makers must create an enabling environment in which tourism generates the necessary level of funding for effective management. Once the threshold of sustainability is reached, tourism can begin to realize its enormous potential benefits to communities, to local economies, and to the protected areas themselves.

The threshold of sustainability is about putting in motion a feedback loop for tourism, visitor satisfaction, investment and management capacity that creates a “virtuous cycle.”

CONCLUSIONS



CONCLUSIONS

Becoming a partner of the MEET Network is a business strategy that involves taking the steps to convert a beautiful area into a successful, sustainably managed development opportunity for local enterprises and parks.

For most underfunded protected areas, SMEs and small communities, developing and launching an ecotourism product is a challenging enterprise: defining the target client, finding the right tour operator, writing a product and, perhaps the most difficult part, placing the product in the market and selling it.

Being part of a Mediterranean-wide regional ecotourism network, with a strong brand and able to reduce marketing and operating costs is a great opportunity for tourism businesses and protected areas alike. Having your product included in a catalogue will greatly increase your chances of success. And with training opportunities and the ability to share information and lessons learned with other areas, you can learn from the challenges already experienced by others in other areas.

The keys to success are:

- ▶ Understanding the principles of MEET, based on the European Charter for Sustainable Tourism in Protected Areas.
- ▶ Developing and strengthening a local cluster, in order to have a common vision, support the conservation of the protected area, reduce internal competition and increase economic benefits for the local community.
- ▶ Developing an ecotourism product focused on a protected area of the Mediterranean region, following the MEET Network criteria.
- ▶ Develop strategic alliances with private and public sectors, NGOs and development agencies, to gain access to financial and human resources, marketing and technology.
- ▶ Developing an innovative, well-structured ecotourism product, with an edge over traditional tours offered in the Mediterranean by incorporating the elements of the MEET brand.
- ▶ Incorporate key elements of sustainability and conservation in the protected area and in the product, including interpretation, zoning for visitor use, visitor management strategies, and contributing to the financial needs of the protected areas.
- ▶ Measuring and monitoring the sustainability and quality of the MEET ecotourism product on a regular basis using the MEET Ecotourism Standard and Ecological Footprint so as to continually minimize environmental impact and maximize quality.
- ▶ Understanding and taking advantage of the MEET Destination Management Organization (DMO) and its capacity to reach international markets, thereby reducing your marketing costs.
- ▶ Applying to become a partner of the MEET Network and to have your product included in the MEET Guide.

Protected area managers and local stakeholders face the challenge of limiting the impacts of uncontrolled forms of tourism while at the same time deciding where and how to plan adequately for the development of tourism as a compatible economic development option for the region: the MEET Network has many of the answers to overcome this challenge.



*Peninsula del Sinis - Isola di mal di ventre MPA, Italy
© Sinis MPA*

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GLOSSARY

Ecotourism¹¹: Environmentally responsible visiting of relatively unspoilt natural areas, in order to enjoy and appreciate nature (and any accompanying cultural features - both past and present), that promotes conservation, has low negative visitor impact, and provides for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local populations.

Biodiversity Hotspot: A biogeographic region with significant levels of biodiversity that is under threat from humans.

Protected Area (PA): A clearly defined geographical space recognized, dedicated and managed, through legal and other effective means, to achieve the long-term conservation of nature with associated ecosystem services and cultural values.

Carrying capacity (CC): Refers to the number of individuals who can be supported in a given area within natural resource limits, and without degrading the natural social, cultural and economic environment for present and future generations.

Destination Management Organization (DMO): organization which leads the coordinated management of all the elements that make up a destination (attractions, access, marketing, human resources, image and pricing).

Commercial Partner: MEET's commercial partner is a Destination Marketing Company that handles the marketing, commercialization, and sales of the MEET Guide and its branded ecotourism products.

Inbound Tour Operator (ITO): A locally-based company receiving travelers from another country that are traveling into the country where it operates. For example, an Italian Inbound Tour operator would sell trips to USA Outbound Tour operators and travelers coming to Italy.

Outbound Tour operator: A company sending travelers from the country they operate in to another country. For example, an US Outbound Tour Operator would sell trips to US travelers looking to travel to Italy.

Target Market: A target market is a specific group of consumers at which a product or service is aimed and marketed.

Business to business (B2B)¹²: This refers to marketing and selling products or services chiefly to other businesses (e.g., outbound tour operators in the case of MEET), rather than selling them directly to consumers.

Business to consumer (B2C): Business to consumer. This refers to marketing or selling products or services chiefly to consumers (e.g., travelers), rather than selling them to businesses.

ANNEXE 1

MEET Membership Phases and Process Overview

MEET is a network of Mediterranean protected areas working together to conserve the region's natural and cultural mosaic while promoting a new model of ecotourism to the destinations and the market. This is done through the development of high-quality community-based ecotourism products and innovative tools to manage their impacts. The long-term vision of MEET is to support protected area staff working in tourism development by establishing a well-supported governance system and promotion platform for ecotourism products in Mediterranean protected areas.

To achieve these objectives, MEET Network builds on the actions and support of its members. This annex will provide an overview of the three phases of the MEET membership.

Phase 1: Applicant Phase

Phase 2: Membership Phase

Phase 3: Promotion Phase

The greatest investment of time and financial resources is required during the early stages of MEET Network engagement, as a protected area aims to satisfy the enabling conditions for membership and develop an ecotourism product according to the MEET Ecotourism Standard and process. Once these efforts are completed, ongoing measurement, monitoring and product iteration typically proves less resource intensive.

What are the benefits?



Support and coaching throughout MEET process



Training and capacity-building opportunities



Annual General Assembly and other members exchanges



MEET Brand, communications and storytelling



Advocacy and awareness building



MEET Conservation Fund



Full voting and leadership rights



Joint fundraising



MEET Guide

Applicant Phase

In order for an interested protected area (PA) to become a MEET member it must fulfill several application requirements and adhere to the MEET enabling conditions (see step 6 below), including:

- ▶ Formal Agreement between Park and ITO Established
- ▶ Draft Ecotourism Product Collaboratively Developed
- ▶ Agreement to Implement Annual Monitoring
- ▶ Adherence to MEET Values and Obligations

It's important to note that even if a PA is not fully ready yet to fulfill all enabling conditions and requirements of membership, MEET still encourages it to apply. The application and membership processes are aimed at improving local skills and building capacity. In this way, protected areas can use the MEET application process and its related trainings, action plan development, and support as tools for better understanding and undertaking local ecotourism development.

The application phase is an important step for a candidate park to understand the expectations and commitments of membership. Becoming a MEET member includes taking part in a collective that not only plans and designs quality ecotourism products, but also promotes them under the same brand. To that end, membership entails a collective responsibility for all member efforts.



Figure 2: MEET membership phases

Below is the step-by-step process required for the application process – one which typically takes between three to six months to complete, depending on the starting conditions of the protected area.

1

An interested protected area formally initiates their engagement with MEET by sending an email and Expression of Interest to the MEET Secretariat indicating interest in becoming a MEET member and requesting further information.

2

The MEET Secretariat responds to the protected area applicant by formally initiating the application process by sending the MEET Self-Assessment Form and access to relevant online materials and application folder.

3

Applicant completes the Self-Assessment Form and uploads the completed form for review.

4

The MEET Secretariat evaluates the Self-Assessment and uses it to understand the situation locally and to see where the protected area might need help going forward both in terms of achieving enabling conditions and successfully managing ecotourism in its territories. It then provides the protected area applicant with a first suggestion of an “Action Plan towards MEET Membership” which outlines the path the protected area should take towards becoming a MEET member, including satisfying all enabling conditions (see step 6).

5

A MEET representative organizes an orientation meeting between the protected area applicant and MEET to discuss and launch the “Action Plan towards MEET Membership.”

6

The protected area implements “Action Plan towards MEET Membership” and demonstrates adherence to all four enabling conditions above, including:

- a. Protected area establishes relationship and signs an agreement (e.g., a Memorandum of Understanding) with an Inbound Tour Operator (ITO). Each protected area will need to follow its own local requirements for procurement and contracting, but should select an ITO with the following characteristics: minimum qualifications, knowledge and expertise, local connections, collaborative, adaptable, and passionate with personality. Guidance on the Terms of Reference (ToR) and agreement with an ITO can be found here. A copy of a formal agreement containing the points as per the ToRs must be provided to the MEET Secretariat.
- b. The protected area defines and collaboratively develops with the ITO a draft MEET ecotourism product. This document must be sent to the MEET Secretariat.
- c. The protected area receives an initial orientation training on MEET values and obligations, including monitoring expectations, in order to understand what they will commit to as MEET members and partners. A certificate of attendance from this training will be submitted by MEET.

7

The protected area becomes a candidate for membership, and their membership dossier is reviewed by the MEET Board of Directors (BoD).

8

Identified protected areas will be informed of the decision of the MEET BoD and invited to submit a MEET membership registration form.

9

Protected area submits an official MEET membership registration to the MEET Secretariat, which includes commitments toward:

- a. Agreement to implement annual monitoring. (see Chapter 4)
- b. Adherence to MEET values and obligations. (see Chapter 5)
- c. Payment of membership fees.

10

After a detailed examination of documents by the MEET Board of Directors, the MEET General Assembly reviews the membership registration materials for completeness and votes on the acceptance of the protected area applicant as a MEET member. If it is decided that the PA is not yet ready or cannot comply with all requirements then MEET will provide guidance on how the PA may resolve any remaining issues in order to achieve acceptance and MEET member status.

Membership Phase

This section provides an overview of MEET membership obligations and processes required to finalize a MEET branded ecotourism product, formally evaluate, monitor and approve it for inclusion in the MEET Guide, and prepare it for the next phase: Promotion.

MEET provides its members with support, advisory and other services to assist them with the successful creation of MEET ecotourism products and their ecotourism development journey. Specific core services are included as a benefit of membership. However, members also have the option to request additional advisory and support from MEET and its team of experts on a fee-for-service basis (indicated as “Optional” below).

► 1. Creation and Convening of the MEET Local Ecotourism Cluster (LEC)

An engaged Local Ecotourism Cluster which meets on a regularly scheduled basis is one of the requirements of MEET Membership. The process of how to create and manage a MEET LEC -- together with its rationale, benefits, roles and responsibilities – is covered in detail in Chapter 2.

MEET provides to members the LEC Self-Assessment, a baseline appraisal tool whose questions indicate actions needed to fulfill the MEET ecotourism product expectations and may point to potential areas of improvement and recommended actions. **(1)**

► 2. Refinement, Testing and Validation of the MEET Ecotourism Product

Although a draft ecotourism product is included as part of the application process, one of the first responsibilities and tasks of the LEC is to further define and finalize this. The ecotourism product will then be reviewed, monitored, and improved until it reaches the next phase, Promotion, whereupon it is then included in the MEET Guide (see Chapter 5). **(2)**

A unique aspect of the MEET methodology is its evaluation framework, the testing and improvement processes to ensure that ecotourism products are ready for market. At a minimum, one review of the product should be completed by a MEET ecotourism expert.

Depending on the resources made available by the member, a test can be organized that includes a group of ecotourism experts identified by MEET to experience the full ecotourism product as it would be delivered to travelers. Ideally, two tests are completed to ensure that proposed MEET ecotourism products are truly ready for market. Only products which are approved by MEET experts, thereby indicating adherence to the MEET criteria, are eligible for inclusion in the MEET Guide.

MEET Support to Member	PA / Member Actions
Provide LEC facilitation tool-kit	Convene and manage the LEC
Participation/facilitation support in LEC meetings (Optional)	

(1)

MEET Support to Member	PA / Member Actions
Remote training on Product development for LEC	LEC to define MEET product
On-site training on Product Dev for LEC (Optional)	Organize and cover the costs for a MEET audit visit
Support in the organization of review or test(s), as needed	Put in place, at your cost, requested improvement actions
Identification of experts for MEET testing of entire product (Optional)	
Analyse quality questionnaire and submit improvement plan on product quality	
Final validation of MEET product for Guide inclusion	

(2)

► 3.

Ecological Footprint Data Collection; Monitoring Platform and Improvement Plan

Another core requirement of MEET membership is the assessment and management of both the sustainability and quality of the ecotourism product using the Ecological Footprint (EF) and the MEET Ecotourism Standard (see Chapter 4). This data is assembled into a monitoring dashboard so that protected areas and LECs can work toward improving the product by reducing its environmental impact while still maintaining quality standards. **(3)**

Promotion Phase

At this stage, the ecotourism product has been approved by MEET for inclusion in the MEET Guide. However, it still must be audited and approved by the commercial partner, a Destination Marketing Company (DMC) that handles the marketing and sales of the MEET Guide and its branded ecotourism products. This approval indicates that the product is ready for offer to international markets. It is then added to the MEET Guide and promoted under the MEET brand (see Chapter 5).

In addition, the MEET ecotourism product must also undergo annual monitoring (see Chapter 4) in order for it to adhere to the MEET criteria and continually iterate toward improving its sustainability and quality. **(4)**

MEET Support to Member	PA / Member Actions
Remote training on Monitoring and data collection (Ecological Footprint)	Collect specific data from suppliers, ITO and LEC
On-site support on data collection (Optional)	
Analyse EF questionnaires and submit EF improvement plan	Put in place, at PA cost, requested improvement actions
	Annual monitoring – collection of specific data and managing EF results for continual improvement

(3)

MEET Support to Member	PA / Member Actions
Final product improvements with commercial partner (audit)	Cover travel costs for final visit
Market readiness actions	ITO and commercial partner establish a formal agreement for sales
In depth on-site intervention (Optional)	Cover costs of in-depth intervention, if needed
Inclusion in MEET Guide	
Marketing and promotion to international market	

(4)

ANNEXE 2

MEET Ecotourism Standard

1. *Enabling Conditions*

1.1 Collaborative Product Development	The ecotourism package is created in collaboration and agreement between Protected Area (PA) and the private sector tourism value chain (the LEC).	1.1.1	The LEC facilitates ongoing discussion with the Protected Area, private sector partners and other stakeholders to develop the package tour.
		1.1.2	The LEC has established a transparent process for identifying a tour operator and service providers.
		1.1.3	The LEC identifies a tour operator that can, and is willing to, organize and execute the MEET ecotourism package and the required monitoring procedures.
1.2 Sound Design of Ecotourism Product	The ecotourism package is focused on a Protected Area and complies with MEET brand and regulations.	1.1.4	The tour operator has consulted with and obtained approval, where appropriate, from local community leaders regarding cultural experiences to be included in the package tour.
		1.2.1	The tour package is focused on the Protected Area and the itinerary incorporates several activities related to the Protected Area.
		1.2.2	The tour package is targeting MEET target markets.
		1.2.3	The tour operator has established appropriate group leader to guest ratio.
		1.2.4	The tour operator has agreed to provide a group leader that stays with the guests for the duration of the package.
		1.2.5	The LEC has agreed to operate primarily in the off-season and has agreed on a weekly maximum capacity for travelers.



1.

Enabling Conditions

1.2 Sound Design of Ecotourism Product	The ecotourism package includes experiential activities that ensure that tourists are active participants in the heritage experience.	1.2.6	The tour package includes at least two experiential nature-based activities in the package tour.
		1.2.7	The tour package includes experiences that feature non invasive traditional and living local culture activities.
		1.2.8	The tour package includes at least one experience meeting local chefs or food providers.
	The ecotourism package takes sustainability into consideration throughout all aspects of the experience.	1.2.9	The tour package includes at least one sustainable form of transport (if feasible).
1.3 Identification and management of impacts on Conservation	The ecotourism package contributes to the conservation of the protected area.	1.3.1	The LEC has identified a conservation activity within the protected area that will receive a monetary benefit from total package revenue.
		1.3.2	Total spending for activities directly related to the Protected Area (e.g. entrance fees) and conservation-related activities (e.g. voluntourism) is submitted by the tour operator and approved by the LEC.
		1.3.3	Total spending on local suppliers used in the tour package is submitted by the tour operator and approved by the LEC.
	The ecotourism package activities taking place in the protected area are discussed with, and approved by, the protected area managers.	1.3.4	The tour operator understands, and complies with, existing local, national and international regulations and guidelines concerning wildlife interactions, including wildlife viewing
		1.3.5	The tour operator complies with rules of the protected area concerning access to specific areas during specific periods of time (zoning of the protected area).

2.

Quality and Sustainability of the Product

2.1 Supplier Assessment	The ecotourism package integrates MEET coherent accommodations and cuisine.	2.1.1	80% of accommodations are small-scale lodging that are integrated with the natural environment and more deeply connected with the area's local culture.
		2.1.2	100% of meals presented throughout the package feature primarily local ingredients, dishes, and cooking methods.
	The ecotourism package includes low impact transportation and sustainable tour activities that are proven to be high quality.	2.1.3	100% of package transportation has existing high (80th percentile) customer satisfaction.
		2.1.4	100% of package activities have existing high (80th percentile) customer satisfaction (if already operative).
	The ecotourism package service providers are locally owned and operated.	2.1.5	At least 80% of service providers in the tour packages are locally owned and operated.
	The ecotourism package service providers comply with existing local, national, and international regulations and guidelines concerning wildlife interactions, including wildlife viewing.	2.1.6	100% of service providers confirm they do NOT buy, trade, or sale endangered, rare wild animals and plants or products.
		2.1.7	100% of service providers confirm they do NOT have captive wildlife unless there is evidence of a registered rehabilitation program and or documented management plan addressing animal welfare.
		2.1.8	100% of service providers confirm their activities do NOT disturb free roaming wildlife and contact with endangered, threatened, rare, and or dangerous wildlife.
	The ecotourism package service providers have agreed to provide necessary data for Global Footprint calculations.	2.1.9	100% of service providers in the package have completed the sector specific GFN form.



2.

Quality and Sustainability of the Product

2.2 Ecological Footprint	The ecological footprint of the tour package is measured and actions are taken to improve the results.	2.2.1	The LEC can provide the footprint for each accommodation and as a sum total.
		2.2.2	The tour operator can provide the footprint for each transport and as a sum total.
		2.2.3	The LEC can provide the footprint for each food and drink experience and as a sum total.
		2.2.4	The LEC can provide the footprint for each activity and as a sum total.
		2.2.5	The LEC can provide the individual footprint for each service provider.
		2.2.6	The tour package suppliers have a combined average index score of ←TBD→or higher.

3.

Quality of the guest experience

3.1 Tour Operations Quality Assurance	The tour operator delivers a consistent and high quality MEET ecotourism package tour.	3.1.1	The tour operator is professional, responsive, reliable and communicates clearly with visitors before and during the tour.
	The group leader is qualified to lead MEET ecotourism packages.	3.1.2	The group leader is local, experienced, and demonstrates extensive knowledge of nature, culture, and/or traditions. He or she is fluent in English.
		3.1.3	The group leader has applicable qualifications and licenses necessary to fulfill their role.
	The excursion guides are qualified to lead MEET packages and activities.	3.1.4	The excursion guides are local, experienced, and demonstrate extensive knowledge of nature, culture, and/or traditions.
		3.1.5	The excursion guides have applicable qualifications and licenses necessary to fulfill their role.
	The group leader enhances the tour experience through accurate storytelling.	3.1.6	The group leader provides insights, context, and deeper understanding of conservation objectives of the protected area and cultural heritage.
		3.1.7	A group leader remains with visitors throughout the entire package.
		3.1.8	Visitors are able to demonstrate knowledge of the Protected areas conservation objectives.



3.

Quality of the guest experience

3.2 Service Providers Quality Assurance	Ecotourism package meets and/or exceeds the expectations of visitors.	3.2.1	Accommodations are considered small scale lodging that is integrated with the natural environment and more deeply connected with the area’s local culture.
		3.2.2	Meals presented throughout the package are considered to primarily feature local ingredients, dishes, and cooking methods.
		3.2.3	Ecotourism package transportation is sustainable and of quality.
		3.2.4	Ecotourism package activities are of high quality and sustainable.

4.

Assessment of Package Suppliers

4.1 Local Ownership and Employment	←TBD→	4.1.1	At least 50% of the service provider's business is owned by local residents
		4.1.2	At least 80% of service provider's staff were hired from the local community or are national residents
4.2 Legal Compliance	←TBD→	4.2.1	The service provider is in compliance with all local, national, and international regulations and maintains up-to-date labor, land use, environmental, health and safety, operational permits/licenses and approvals as required by law within the regions of operation.
4.3 Sustainability Planning	←TBD→	4.3.1	The service provider has a written sustainability policy and action plan to continuously improve sustainability impacts
4.4 Fair and Equal Employment	←TBD→	4.4.1	The service provider offers salaries at or above national minimum wage or national living standard.
		4.4.2	The service provider does not discriminate in hiring or career promotions by gender, race, religion, disability, age, political affiliation, or in any other way.
		4.4.3	The service provider does not exploit women, children, and ethnic minorities.
		4.4.4	The service provider has a system in place for deriving feedback from employees and keeps a record of the results.



4.

Assessment of Package Suppliers

4.5 Health and Safety	←TBD→	4.5.1	The service provider tracks all environmental, health, and safety incidents and accidents.
		4.5.2	The service provider has implemented a safety plan designed to create a safe working environment for employees and experience for the guests.
		4.5.3	The service provider keeps first aid supplies on site that are readily available to employees and guests.
4.6 Environmental Resources	←TBD→	4.6.1	The service provider has a waste management plan that addresses reduction of waste and increasing recycling.
		4.6.2	The service provider has a water management plan that addresses improving efficiencies, reducing consumption, and changing behaviours.
		4.6.3	The service provider has an energy management plan that addresses maximizing use of renewable energy, reducing consumption, and changing behaviours.
		4.6.4	The service provider is aware their operations have a carbon footprint and are taking actions to reduce and or mitigate carbon emissions.
		4.6.5	The service provider makes every effort to purchase non-toxic chemicals to the extent possible.



4.

Assessment of Package Suppliers

4.7 Biodiversity and Conservation	←TBD→	4.7.1	The service provider does NOT buy, trade, or sale endangered, rare wild animals and plants or products.
		4.7.2	The service provider does NOT keep captive wildlife unless there is evidence of a registered rehabilitation program and or documented management plan addressing animal welfare.
		4.7.3	The service provider's activities do NOT disturb free roaming wildlife or come into contact with endangered, threatened, rare, and or dangerous wildlife?
4.8 Purchasing	←TBD→	4.8.1	The service provider has purchasing guidelines that give preference to local, responsibly sourced and eco-friendly products.
4.9 Customer Feedback	←TBD→	4.9.1	The service provider collects guest feedback and has a system for documenting the feedback.

ANNEXE 3

Example of content of a Strategic Plan for Ecotourism¹⁴

This plan is organized in Strategic lines, meaning the main components that have to be tackled to ensure a proper development of tourism in a territory and in set of Actions to be achieved per each strategic line, in a five years life span.

Both the strategic lines and the actions are selected and developed on the basis of local stakeholders' inputs and taking into account experiences of similar works in other protected areas (especially the methodology of the ECST). They are drafted involving key stakeholders, through consultations, interviews and various local meetings.

Below, a hypothetical table of contents of a Strategic Plan for Ecotourism is detailed, presenting as headlines the Strategic Lines and below the related Actions (1.1, 1.2, etc.). At the end of the document and example of the content collected per each Action is also presented.

EXAMPLE OF TABLE OF CONTENTS

STRATEGIC LINE 1:

Ensure local participation and institutional collaboration

- 1.1 Establishment of the Local Cluster for Sustainable Tourism
- 1.2 Promotion of collaborative partnership (associations, tourism clusters) among tourism related stakeholders

STRATEGIC LINE 2:

Improve the organization, planning and management of the park

- 2.1 Updating and implementation of the Park Management plan or other existing management instruments
- 2.2 Inventory and screening potential resources for the development of ecotourism in the park including the threatened natural capital, and evaluation of critical threats and key management weaknesses
- 2.3 Developing tourism management plans (LAC method, etc.).
- 2.4 Evaluation of the quality and improvement of facilities for public use of the park, including interpretation resources
- 2.6 Analysis of Park visitors and demand

STRATEGIC LINE 3:

Create an image of quality and sustainability of the tourist destination

Strategic Sub-line 3.1: Improve the quality and sustainability of public and private tourism services

- 3.1.1 Improvement of environmental sustainability of the facilities for public use of the park area
- 3.1.2 Evaluation and improvement of the quality of the facilities for public use of the park area

- 3.1.3 Approval and implementation of criteria or quality standards for tourism services
- 3.1.5 Approval and dissemination of codes of conduct or good practice guides
- 3.1.7 Training on quality and sustainability
- Strategic Sub-line 3.2: Improve the quality and sustainability of the tourist destination*
- 3.2.1 Diagnostic and improvement of the quality of the tourist destination
- 3.2.2 Diagnostic of the sustainability of the tourist destination and definition of an improvement plan
- 3.2.3 Implementation of quality and environmental improvement programs in the tourist destination
- 3.2.4 Management of a tourist information point

STRATEGIC LINE 4:

Create, promotion and marketing of ecotourism experiences

- 4.1 Market analysis
- 4.2 Permanent knowledge of tourist demand in the destination
- 4.3 Identification of the tourist destination with the Park
- 4.4 Organization of the offer ecotourism
- 4.5 Developing a Marketing Plan for Ecotourism in the park

STRATEGIC LINE 5: AWARENESS

- 5.1 Sensitization of children and youth in the area on ecotourism and sustainability
- 5.2 Awareness of the local population in the area on ecotourism and sustainability
- 5.3 Sensitization of visitors to the Park values

EXAMPLE OF INFORMATION NEEDED PER EACH OF THE ACTIONS

The Actions can be organized in “Implementation Sheets” containing at least the information presented below:

- ▶ Strategic line of reference
- ▶ Objective of the action
- ▶ Name of the action
- ▶ Justification of its need
- ▶ Description/Methodology
- ▶ Implementing actors/contributors
- ▶ Involved actors/contributors
- ▶ Time span
- ▶ Budget
- ▶ Financial source
- ▶ Monitoring and indicators

ANNEXE 4

Example Cooperation Agreement between Protected Area and ITO

This is an adaptation of an agreement signed among a protected area and a Tour Operator during the implementation of MEET Project that can be taken as an example for similar purposes; of course, in each country specific jurisdiction applies and the document should be modified accordingly.

COOPERATION AGREEMENT BETWEEN THE MANAGEMENT BODY OF (NAME) PARK AND TRAVEL AGENCY (NAME)

Date and place:

1. The Management Body as duly represented by (name)
2. The Travel Agency (name) as duly represented by (name)

PREAMBLE

The Parties taking into account that (example of content):

Around the world visitors are increasingly travelling to destinations where they can experience unique natural attributes and authentic cultural manifestations. This phenomenon has the potential to generate significant economic benefits for communities living in and around parks and other protected areas. The Mediterranean Experience of Ecotourism (MEET) is a target-oriented network of people and organizations managing ecotourism products built around the natural and cultural attractions of protected areas and local communities. The overarching shared objective of the network is to strengthen the conservation of protected areas while respecting the local culture and history and generating economic benefits for the communities that live in and around them. The MEET Network has been developed to support ecotourism experiences that foster authentic exchanges between visitors, local people, and nature, in what is traditionally a mass-tourism 'sun, sand and sea' vacation region.

Reference to existing local regulations or programmes for ecotourism or local development can be included in this section. Have concluded in the following

ARTICLE 1

Basic Principles

The Park Management Body and the (name) Travel Office agree on the principles of ecotourism and sustainable development and will cooperate with the MEET Network for the elaboration of the Ecotourism offer in the Park area by signing the present Cooperation Agreement.

ARTICLE 2

Object of the cooperation

The object of this cooperation is the joint planning and development of a/several MEET Ecotourism product/s in the territory, in collaboration with the Local community and following the principles as stated in MEET Manual.

The characteristics of the product, as detailed in the Manual, can be detailed here or presented in an annex. If already agreed, the characteristics of the product can be described below.

ARTICLE 3

Obligations and Rights of the signatory parties

3.1 The Park Management Body:

- ▶ will lead and facilitate the creation and implementation of a Local Cluster of target stakeholders;
- ▶ will identify (if not present) a system of monitoring and assessment of the impacts of the product in the protected area;
- ▶ will cooperate closely with the Travel Agency for the definition of individual parameters (duration of the product, itinerary within the park, number of groups etc.);
- ▶ will notify the Travel Agency for any needed modification to the product for reasons that are unable to be determined at the present and especially during the time of signature;
- ▶ will make verbal and written communication with the MEET Network and communicate these information to the Travel Agency;

- ▶ will make all necessary arrangements for the identification of a conservation activity and its funding through the product;
- ▶ will coordinate with the Travel Agency and the rest of the cluster for disseminating and promoting the Ecotourism product

3.2 The Travel Agency (name):

- ▶ will cooperate closely with the management body for the definition of individual parameters (duration of the product, itinerary within the park, number of groups etc.);
- ▶ Agrees to develop a tourism product following the principles, characteristics and requirements of MEET Network;
- ▶ Agrees to be part of and uphold the interests of all MEET Protected Areas as part of a Common Ecotourism Destination;
- ▶ will make verbal and written communication with the MEET Network/DMC and communicate these information to the Management Body;
- ▶ will coordinate with the management body and the rest of the cluster for disseminating and promoting the Eco-tourism product

ARTICLE 4

Funding

If the elaboration of the product is based on an existing funding (i.e. from projects or administration resources) specific conditions can be detailed in this section

ARTICLE 5

Duration of the Agreement

The duration of this agreement is for XX year following the signature and can be altered if both parties agree upon that.

ARTICLE 6

Modifications

The provisions of the Agreement may be modified if necessary after common agreement of the signatory parties.

ARTICLE 7

Special Terms

- ▶ 7.1. The travel agency cannot delegate its services to a third party. In case this happens then the Travel Agency is fully responsible for any misdemeanor of the third party while the present Agreement will be terminated
- ▶ 7.2 about copyrights and information...
- ▶ 7.3. about insurance and liability...

ARTICLE 8

Conflict resolution

All conflicts between the signatory parties will be dealt in a friendly manner, through dialogue and consultation, and generally under the prism and spirit of the MEET Network.



ANNEXE 5

Annex 5 Example of a MEET Programme

CENTRAL ITALY'S HIDDEN BEAUTY

Sense the perfumes and colors of nature, wandering from medieval towns to beautiful forests in an unspoiled land between Rome and Florence.



*Monte Rufeno Nature Reserve, Italy
© DestiMED project*

ORIGIN STORY

Nature conservation, authentic eco-tourism activities, soft adventure, genuine food & wine, and the relation between man and nature are the pillars of “Central Italy’s hidden beauty” eco-tourist package, in and around Monte Rufeno Nature Reserve.

Package was designed thanks to the passionate and active participation of local service providers gathered within the framework of Nature Reserve’s European Charter for Sustainable Tourism (ECST) project.

Landscapes, experiences, colors, a scent of wild flowers, a taste of organic olive oil, a soft carpet of autumn leaves that cover the hiking trail under your shoes... During your stay we would like to bring to surface emotions through all your senses, and much more.

The small dimension and slow pace of the site facilitate sound experiences and close links with the local community, through low impact activities and infrastructures. Habitat conservation and a shared care of Nature Reserve’s precious biodiversity are the main priorities at every level.

Financial contributions from package incomes will benefit monitoring and active protection of several scattered isolated wetlands inside Nature Reserve. Specifically, to safeguard their ecological function which is essential for endangered plants and animals linked to water such as many species of amphibians, the water violet, the European pond turtle.

5 DAYS 4 NIGHTS PROGRAM

DAY 1

- ▶ Arrival in Rome Leonardo da Vinci International Airport and meet your guide. Transfer by train and minibus in the Monte Rufeno Nature Reserve area (130 km from Rome) to the “Pulicaro” sustainable rural guesthouse, close to the village of Torre Alfina.
- ▶ Brief presentation of the program and dinner.
- ▶ Overnight in Agriturismo Pulicaro.

DAY 2

- ▶ In the morning visit of the Pulicaro farm accompanied by the house owners Marco and Chiara. This young couple, starting from a dream that soon became a project, moved from Italy’s biggest cities (Rome and Milan) to create an organic farm and a totally sustainable guesthouse in the area.
- ▶ Short visit of the Museum of Flowers in the very heart of the Monte Rufeno Nature Reserve. Hands-on activities connected to traditional plant uses of the area. Lunch in the nearby Botanical Garden with farm products and short rest in the early afternoon.
- ▶ Hike along protected area’s trails with a skillful local guide. During the walk you will harvest edible wild plants, fruits or mushrooms that you will later use to prepare your dinner. A pleasant stopover close to an astonishing waterfall will allow you to enjoy the “music” of a creek in the woods. 5 km (3 miles) walk for the whole day.

- ▶ Arrival at the “Tesoro” rural guesthouse. Cooking class with the natural products harvested during the walk and dinner.
- ▶ Overnight in Agriturismo Pulicaro.

DAY 3

- ▶ Easy hike in the northern part of Nature Reserve to reach the “Felceto” farmhouse (“House of Rural Traditions”). Seasonal hands-on activities connected to rural life and visit to the reconstruction of an old charcoal burner’s settlement.
- ▶ Lunch in the farmhouse prepared following the tradition of local farmers.
In the afternoon, activities at the Monte Rufeno Astronomical Observatory: sun, stars and planets observation, planetarium, curios facts about stardust.
- ▶ Show cooking in the Observatory yard led by a local chef with the unforgettable view of the sunset above the valley and the hills of the nearby Tuscany region. Stargazing with the telescope. 5,5 km (3,4 miles) walk for the whole day.
Overnight in Agriturismo Pulicaro.

DAY 4

- ▶ In the morning guided walk through the Sasseto century old wood. In this fantastic forest you will breathe the atmosphere of the woods of the fairy tales, walking in the shade of monumental trees along a carpet of stones covered with moss. The site is fully protected due to its unique features and is considered a reservoir of biodiversity. 4 km (2.4 miles) walk.
- ▶ Lunch in a local, family-run restaurant in the village of Torre Alfina.

- ▶ In the afternoon, short transfer to the Medieval hamlet of Civita di Bagnoregio (“the dying village”), a place known for its striking isolated position on top of a plateau of friable volcanic tuff-stone. Take time to sense the silence of the alleys and squares of this unique settlement which has recently been proposed to become a UNESCO World Heritage Site. A view and a walk right to the heart of the lunar landscape of the Valle dei Calanchi (Valley of Badlands) will give you further stunning and unforgettable emotions 4 km (2.5) miles walk.
- ▶ In the late afternoon transfer to the ancient village of Proceno. Visit to the “Castello”, guided by lady Cecilia Cecchini, whose family owns the Medieval fortress since almost 400 years.
- ▶ Dinner in the castle facilities.
- ▶ Overnight in the Castello di Proceno boutique hotel.

DAY 5

Breakfast in Castello di Proceno. Transfer to the city of Orvieto, visit to the Medieval Cathedral (“Duomo”) in the town centre and free time to wander around for shopping or sight-seeing. Lunch in a typical restaurant and transfer to Rome Airport by train or minibus.

NOTES

Pricing is based in low season months (September to November, March to June).
Designed for groups from 2 to 6 participants in double rooms.

NET COSTS PER PARTICIPANT

2 pt	3 pt	4 pt	5 pt	6 pt
2 000 €	1 500 €	1 250 €	1 100 €	1 000 €

- ▶ € 60 single room surcharge
- ▶ € 800 for children aged 7 to 12, for minimum 3 participants groups
- ▶ € 600 for babies aged 3 to 6, for minimum 3 participants groups

The cost includes:

- ▶ Transfer service by train plus minibus from Rome International Airport, or Florence, to Torre Alfina for the first day
- ▶ Hospitality in double rooms and all meals, including drinks, for the whole program
- ▶ Internal transport for the whole program
- ▶ A tour leader at your disposal for the whole program
- ▶ Specialized guides for all program hikes and activities
- ▶ Entrance tickets to all the facilities
- ▶ Insurance
- ▶ Transfer service from Orvieto to Rome International Airport, or Florence



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