



**WONDER
SEEKERS**
EXPANDING
MINDS

SCITOUR Network Strategy

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Introduction

The SCITOUR network strategy is a strategy that outlines the future full-scale development of a transnational SCITOUR network, which has as its main purpose to promote the SCITOUR concept, products and partner SMEs. In order to further the dissemination and sustainability of the SCITOUR concept and network, the Hornafjörður Research Centre developed a strategy for constructing the network and its management, as well as for the recruitment of new SCITOUR entrepreneurs. The strategy functions as a guideline for developing the SCITOUR network and is an outcome of the scientific tourism network piloting and testing in Iceland.

The network strategy is based on the pilot scientific tourism network in Hornafjörður, southeast Iceland. This network has been established and gradually extended in a relatively short and challenging period and this has its implications for the design of the network strategy. First, the SCITOUR project received an initial grant for only a two-year operating period (later extended to 29 months due to COVID 19) which is clearly too short a time period for the development of a full-scale and fully operational organization model. Second, during the project period the COVID 19 pandemic had a strong negative effect on the network development, especially with regard to the partner SMEs, who were all tourism enterprises. All these network partners had to cease operations and lay-off staff, some even closed their company for more than a year. When the pandemic started to come to an end and the related restrictions were lifted, most of the original network partners re-started their activities. However, the inactivity of many partners in the network during such a large extent of the SCITOUR project period makes it difficult to elaborate assumptions and strategic measures regarding the generic development of a scientific tourism network. Therefore, this report only summarizes the main steps for constructing, maintaining and extending a scientific tourism network. This report is divided into three parts, each describing the different phases of the development of a scientific tourism network.

Initial phase

Networks are established as a way of developing a more collaborative approach to working with related organization in order to tackle challenges and obtain opportunities. Therefore, a first step in the network development process is to explore the existing demand and interest with regard to cooperation in scientific tourism development and innovation. This includes (but is not limited to):

- Disseminating science-based knowledge to a wider audience
- Provide business opportunities for local tourism SMEs to develop products for niche markets
- Authentication of science information used in tourism practices
- Responding to existing demand for learning, curiosity and exploring natural and cultural phenomena during leisure time or on vacation.
- Stimulate tourism innovation in rural areas

Another step in the initial phase is mapping the key challenges of scientific tourism development in rural regions that establishing a network is intended to overcome. These challenges may e.g., include:

- Lack of or limited access to scientific tourism resources and services in the region
- Lack of scientific knowledge providers
- Lack of skills to develop science-based tourism products and services
- Lack of knowledge to communicate science in tourism products
- Lack of skill to promote scientific tourism
- Competing interests of other tourism related developments
- Difference in language between academics and practitioners

A third step is to take stock of available and accessible services and resources required to overcome these challenges in the region. In the case Hornafjörður different governmental agencies located in the village of Höfn, sometimes under one roof, provide different resources and services that support scientific tourism such education, innovation and research information.

In the initial phase a networker broker needs to be appointed. This is normally the initiator of a scientific tourism network. This can be a governmental agency as well as a commercial actor or a selected group of organizations. This network broker will initiate and coordinate the establishment and maintenance of the network.

Starting up phase

A first step of the network broker is to establish contact with representatives from the key support agencies in the region and members of existing entrepreneurial networks. In rural communities hybrid organizational networks with local SMEs and regional governmental organization have a certain degree of commitment and mutual trust that constitute an important foundation for a local organization network. A network broker should start connecting to those existing networks and invite representatives for a first meeting. A face-to-face roundtable meeting may be appropriate, as this will provide the opportunity for all participants to consider more broadly all the issues that can be linked to scientific tourism and whether any other agency may have an interest or be affected by the issues or services raised. During these initial meetings key considerations that found the local network should be identified and confirmed. Considerations such as member diversity, decision making procedures, network spatial demarcation, and necessary level of experience.

After the first initial discussions with potential network members an initial working group should form that plans the establishment of the local network. The workgroup should start with a limited number of participants to consolidate ideas and commence planning for expansion, while at the same time not becoming overwhelmed with too many voices that may hinder progress at this important stage in the process. The main objectives of the working group are:

- Define key objectives of the local network

- Identify resources, services and skills will be required to support the local network to achieve those key objectives
- Identify conflicts of interest in membership make-up and the role members play in the governance of the network
- What kind of formal arrangement are needed to suit an agreement between the different network members

The working group provides a starting document in which the objectives and scope of the network are described and defined.

Formalization phase

After the establishment of the network a set of criteria that will be used as a basis from which to invite potential members to their local network needs to be developed. These criteria can differ considerably between networks. General criteria to invite potential network members are for example the location of the organization or the operation area, particular skills or knowledge, organization size or thematic focus. For example, in the case of the Hornafjörður network, an important selection criterion for inviting potential network partners was the type of supporting services organizations provide (table 1).

Table 1: Required services and providing organizations

Services	Organizations
Science and local knowledge provision	Research centers, museums, protected areas
Science and local knowledge communication and performance support	Research centers, education institutions, museums
Scientific tourism product development and marketing support	Incubation centers, Destination marketing organizations
Scientific tourism product customers supply	Universities, Secondary schools, specialized travel agencies, hobby associations/societies

Furthermore, a regular meeting cycle between the network partners needs to be set up. It is important that there is a good balance in the quantity of the number of meetings per year to create continuity in cooperation but also to prevent unnecessary meetings. The meetings should be chaired by the network broker from the start, but the chair position can circulate among other network members at a later stage.

It is important for the local networks to formalise their arrangements by documenting what members agree to. These formal arrangements record the terms and conditions of the collaboration between the members, clarify roles and responsibilities, and maintain consistency of the services and practices of the network. Different formal arrangements will vary in how “binding” they are on their members, and it is up to each network to decide how they want to operate. These arrangements can range from non-binding documents such as guidelines, project plans or memoranda of understanding to more binding agreements such as letters of intent or signed contracts.



A third element of the formalization phase is the establishment of channels of communication to promote the network and maintain collaboration and conservation among participant members. These channels can range from simple social media accounts to interactive websites.

Alternative network development

Once regional/national networks have been established in partner countries, it should prove relatively easy to combine them into a larger, international network, as the formation of each individual network should be based on the same basic principles, conceptual framework and quality standards.

There is, however, an alternative route to creating an international SCITOUR network (or coalition) which, at least for the most part, 'bypasses' the need to first create regional/national networks in individual countries. Steps towards this route have actually already been taken with the creation of the wonderseekers.com website where tourism enterprises themselves can provide and market tour products, regardless of whether they are members of an established network or not. The creation of this website was, of course, a direct outcome of the transnational SCITOUR partnership, not in the least the interactive dialogue with groups of tourism operators in the partner countries. Or, in other words, it is highly unlikely that a website such as wonderseekers.com could be successful unless there was already an initial 'market' for it, among the SMEs which were part of SCITOUR. The success of the website is thus founded on the existence of groups of stakeholders in individual partnerships, regardless of whether they have formed a formal network around their cooperation or not.

The two approaches are not mutually exclusive and could indeed reinforce each other. Even if a regional/national network is established, it will be difficult to maintain this after project funding comes to an end. This is especially true for the institutional partners who do not have a financial stake in the continued existence of the network and may actually be hard pressed to continue supporting it after the project development period comes to a close. The SME partners have more reason to extend the lifetime of the network, in particular if they have developed successful scientific tour products within the project framework and desire to continue with similar development in the future. For the SMEs, having access to a multi-national brand and marketing site could be crucial in sustaining their interest in scientific tour product development.

Likewise, the tourism SMEs that have joined up of their own accord, i.e. without first becoming part of a regional/national network, might see opportunities in forming partnerships, formal or informal, with either other SMEs from the same region or country or SMEs in other countries which have similar products or approaches to scientific tourism. In other words, smaller networks (regional and/or thematic) could potentially 'bud off' from the consortium of individual tour companies that have, for one reason or another, seen an opportunity in joining up with the wonderseekers.com website.

However, it is not clear how this informal coalition currently forming/constituting the wonderseekers.com website can be sustained in the future, without a 'backbone' of pre-existing regional/national networks. In this regard it is important to remember that the networks are (or should be) developed according to principles of cooperation, a shared, co-created purpose, and the mutual desire to attain certain important goals. Such networks should also include non-commercial partners who can support the development of novel, innovative tour products by small-scale local entrepreneurs, based on the principles and goals jointly set out. A coalition based solely on commercial principles – i.e., the anticipated corporate benefit of being able to use the Wonder Seekers brand and having access to its multi-national marketing website – might be likely to 'disintegrate' if there is nothing else holding its members together.

On a final note, these two processes have now been set in motion, i.e., an existing network in southeast Iceland and a multi-national consortium of tour operators who have 'signed up' to the wonderseekers.com website. Only time will tell how these processes will develop in the future, but ideally the trajectory of both should be systematically followed, as many (if not most) of these considerations also apply to tourism innovation and development in other fields, not only with regard to scientific tourism.

