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Sucha Beskidzka,

Babia Gora National Park, Poland



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Case study

Ecotourism in Berezinsky Biosphere Reserve
Belarus

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Contents

<u>History of protection</u>	4
<u>Description of ecosystems</u>	6
<u>Forestry</u>	8
<u>Hunting</u>	10
<u>Ecological tourism</u>	13
<u>Ecological education</u>	15
<u>Key tourism principles and issues</u>	18
<u>Main problems of tourism:</u>	19
<u>Practical recommendations on tourism development in the reserve</u>	21
<u>List of literature</u>	24

History of protection

Berezinsky nature reserve was established January 30, 1925 to protect the remaining population of beaver as well as rare species of fauna, typical and unique nature ecosystems of the southern taiga. The materials of the expedition led by A. V. Fediushin were the basis for its foundation.

During the war period (1914 – 1921) forests died on vast areas, the numbers of many wild animals went sharply down. The following species were on the brink of extinction: elk, red deer, roe deer, wild boar, bear, otter, pine marten; capercaillie, black grouse became very rare. The unique finding by professor A. V. Fediushin of a beaver colony, considered extinct by then, expedited the process of declaring the territory a protected area. January 30, 1925 by the Decree of the Council of Peoples' Commissars the first in Belarussian Soviet Socialist Republic's state hunting reserve was created, its goals being protection and multiplication of valuable wild animals and game birds, especially beaver. This Decree banned "any hunting activity all year long, except cases when a special authorization from Narkomzem was obtained for scientific purposes". Tree cutting was stopped, except for the necessary removal of dead wood. To enact proper protection of the territory, flora and fauna, timber floating on the rivers was forbidden. Provisions were made to "allot and relocate from the territory of the reserve such inhabitants of the villages and farm-steads which were situated in places detrimental to the reserve or did not answer the purposes of the reserve".

Initially the area of the reserve equaled 43345 dessiatinas¹. Narkomzem elaborated on the statute of the reserve. The reserve included two forestries, Velikorechsky and Berezinsky. The outer borders were designated along the existing roads. In 1928 the first forest organization and colonization of hamlets took place. Forests were planted there. Scientific research work gradually started at the reserve. A beaver farm and an elk nursery were created here in the 30s. A museum was built. Animal stock-taking began. Protection strengthening led to increase in numbers of many species of animals, particularly beaver, elk, and wild boar. The beaver from the Berezinsky reserve was not only preserved but also reintroduced in many other regions of the country.

In the war period, from 1941 to 1945, the reserve's activities stopped. During Nazi occupation the reserve suffered great losses, all scientific materials were gone, the beaver farm, the elk nursery, the museum and collections were destroyed. Residential and administrative constructions were ruined. The territory of the reserve became the base for guerilla movement, the place of formation, hiding and resting for numerous partisan regiments and brigades.

After liberation of Belarus in July 1944, the Government of the Republic passed a special Decree concerning resumption of reserve's activities. Residential and administrative constructions were precipitately rebuilt, protection of the territories was renewed, the stock of wild animals was taken on a regular basis, a beaver farm and an elk nursery were built. The Scientific Department was started anew. The task of the Scientific Department was to develop principles of beaver breeding in cages to use them subsequently in other animal breeding.

In 1951 the Berezinsky Reserve was liquidated. A republican game reserve was organized on its territory. The forests underwent intense exploitation. Substantial logging of grown trees resulted in decrease in quantity of game animals.

The Berezinsky reserve was renewed in its former boundaries by the Decree of the Council of Ministers of BSSR issued May 5, 1958. During the first decade after renewal scientists from the National Academy of Sciences carried out successfully zoological and forestry-botanical research here. They took inventory of flora and fauna.

In 1965 following additional complex forestry and hunting organizational measures the lands of two kolkhozes that were situated within the boundaries of the reserve were acquired by the reserve. Total area of the reserve was then 76.2 thousand hectares.

In 1969 the reserve became accountable directly to the USSR's Main Directorate of Nature Protection, as having all-Union importance. From this time the reserve is turning into a full-fledged nature protecting scientific research establishment. The scientific research reaches a new level and is accorded with the aims of the reserve. The number of scientists increases.

¹ (= approx. 2 3 / 4 acres)

Description of ecosystems

Located in European-Siberian region of Palearctics the reserve now occupies an area of 1140 sq. km. Berezinsky reserve is a part of the Berezina, the Dnieper's tributary basin, and partially of the river Esa basin, which is a tributary of the Ula that runs to the Western Dvina. Thus, the reserve is situated at the watershed of the Baltic and the Black seas. The shortest way of Vikings from Scandinavian countries to Byzantium ran through this territory. The main river of the reserve, the Berezina, starts 45 km away from its northern border. The length of the river within the reserve is 110 km. Here the Berezina takes in 70 tributaries. There are a lot of former riverbeds and flood-lakes in the valley of the river. At the southern border of the reserve there is a natural broadening of the riverbed. This is the biggest lake Palik. All the lakes of the reserve are surrounded by large masses of forest and become overgrown very quickly. All types of forest swamps can be found here. Nowhere in Western Europe can one see swamp systems with vegetation as varied as here. What is more, they almost haven't changed their natural look.

The richness of the virgin flora is due to the long-term protection. There are about 800 species of vascular plants, 216 species of moss, 198 species of lichen, 463 species of fungi in the reserve. It is an ideal place for many rare animals. Among vertebrates there are 52 species of mammals, 230 species of birds, 5 species of reptiles and 9 species of amphibians. There are 34 species of fish in the rivers and lakes. Animal species of the reserve include brown bear, lynx, wolf, otter, beaver, elk and others. Since 1974 a herd of bison have been reintroduced at the reserve.

Birds are a special pride of the reserve. Overall there are 230 species of 18 orders. Among them 179 nest, 31 are the birds of passage, 14 appear sporadically and 6 stay for winter. In the reserve there are a lot of grouses. Up to twenty wood-grouse families and about thirty families of the black grouse gather at mating places in spring. Abundant food explains the variety of species and the number of predators. In spring and summer thousands of migrants find an ideal place for rest and feeding near the Berezina, small rivers and lakes. 56 out of 75 species of birds listed in the Red book can be found here.

The Berezinsky reserve abounds in places reminiscent of historic events and also in places redolent of legends and traditions.

An ancient place of interest is the Serguchsky canal, which forms part of a water system connecting the Berezina with the Zapadnaya Dvina and consequently the Black Sea with the Baltic Sea. In 1797, Emperor Paul I's special ukaz (decree) enjoined that "a water-way between the Dnieper and the Zapadnaya Dvina be built through Berezina". Its construction was

completed in 1804. Using mere axes, wooden spades and wheelbarrows, the serfs made cuttings in the forest, dug the canal and built locks. There were three locks having gates in the Serguchsky canal amidst the wood in swamp country near the villages Kraitsy and Kvetcha. Their slopes are covered with squared stone slabs. Even a few years back there was a remainder of a massive gate and iron chains. The Berezina water system was in operation for 150 years. Today we look upon it as a kind of memorial to the labor and engineering genius of Russian people.

In 1979 Berezinsky nature reserve was given the status of a biosphere reserve. In 1995 it was awarded a Diploma of the Council of Europe. In 2000 the reserve celebrated its 75th anniversary.

Forestry

The first forestry organization of the reserve was performed in 1928 three years after its establishment. The results of this first forestry organization have been lost. It is known that at that time the territory of the reserve was 60.0 thousand hectares. There were two forestries, Berezinsky and Velikorechsky.

In 1945-1950 another forestry organization took place. Forestry organization bureau Rosorgles carried it out. A quarter network 1 x 1 kilometer was introduced. Tasks on location were performed utilizing black and white air photos of the 1:10000-1:15000 scale. Forest estimation was not preserved due to the fact that the reserve was liquidated in 1951. In January 1959 the reserve resumed its activities and in 1961 a new forestry organization was completed by the Minsk Expedition. The total area of the reserve by then reached 71.5 thousand hectares and was divided into six forestries. The whole territory was provided for with black and white air photos of the 1:12000 scale. Geodata from the previous forestry organization, 1948-1961, as well as materials of the own instrumental survey of map-case frames served as the basis for applying map-cases. During this forestry organization a universal numbering system of the quarter network was adopted, it still measures 1 x 1 kilometer.

To correct exploratory survey allowances, standard squares sums of sections and allowances tables of the Central Research Institute of Forestry were used. The data of this forestry organization was preserved but not entirely.

In 1965-66 a Moscow Expedition of the Institute Soyuzgyproleskhoz developed what it called a "complex" organization and development project for the Berezinsky Reserve, which in essence was only faunistic. The forestry organization data of 1961-69 served as a foundation for it. Only activities to take numbers of the main fauna species and to some degree survey their habitats were performed. These organizational efforts resembled more a hunting ground organizational project.

In 1976 the Second Minsk Expedition of the Belarussian Forestry Organization Institution carried out another forestry organization, that was aimed at a more complete characterization of forest formations using the data of the object's fauna. This forestry organization covered the whole area of the reserve (76201 hectares) and used the method of on-land taxation according to the forestry organization Instruction of 1964.

The present forestry organization was likewise performed by the Second Minsk Expedition of the Belarussian Forestry Organization Institution. It is already the fourth forestry organization in

the post-war period. Unfortunately due to the lack of financing the reserve had to turn down the proposal to implement a complex forestry organization of the reserve, including pathology examination of all the forests, detailed soil examination of the territory, additional geobotanical and hunting organization activities, revealing the natural fodder supplies of ungulates, their optimal and factual quantity, advisability of biotechnical actions, competent answers to the problem of wood-eating ungulates' influence on vegetation and natural regeneration of the forest, possibilities and numbers of removal of animals to regulate the quantity, habitats dynamics and marking out of rare flora species' habitats, detection and mapping of forest cenosis unique in composition, age, production and other aspects, as well as separate trees and their groups, laying of new and renovating the old scientific permanent plots and settling other issues.

Hunting

Hunting tourism has been practiced in the reserve since 1982 when the hunting ground Barsuky was organized. The reserve has a substantial experience in organizing hunts for foreigners, this form of hunting tourism started in 1992. Due to enlargement of the area of the hunting ground in 1998, the area now is 29.3 thousand hectares, and organization in 2001 of a new hunting ground Berezina (34.2 thousand) the potential of hunting tourism increased significantly. Until 1998 the reserve had only one contract and organized no more than 10 tours a year, gaining annual revenue of 18 – 25 000 German Marks from foreign hunters. Unaware of the market prices and due to the lack of competition from hunting agencies the effectiveness of hunting activities in that period was low. Starting from 1999 new contracts have been signed with Western European hunting agencies, their conditions being more profitable for the reserve, the number of offers from hunting agencies went up, thus the efficiency of hunting tourism increased (likewise from one-time contracts).

In 2001 the number of such tours rose to 28, 59 foreign hunters were received; the reserve earned more than US\$ 34 thousand. The analysis of tours shows that the efficiency of tours depends to a large degree on trophies. And the hunting grounds' capacity in this respect has not been exhausted yet. For the last five years the trophy animals yearly quota was not used for more than 60%. From the nature conservation point of view this is good, remembering the fact that the hunting grounds border on the territory of the reserve, migration of species and influence of hunting on the population structure on the territory of the reserve. Still the economical aspect of hunting ground management is to be kept in mind.

Hunting tourism data for the years 1997 – 2001.

Year	Area of rented hunting territories, thousand hectares	Licenses sold, #	Number of contracts	Number of hunting tours	Number of hunters received (foreign)	Revenue				
						Total, million rubles	Including hard currency			
							DM	US\$	C	Total in US\$ equivalent
1997	16,5	21	2	10	36					
%	100	100	100	100	100					
1998	16,5	26	3	17	59					
%	100	124	150	170	164					
1999	29,3	26	4	22	45					
%	176	124	200	220	125					
2000	29,3	41	4	20	55					
%	176	195	200	200	153					
2001	63,5	72	5	28	59					
%	384	343	250	280	164					

The data shows that in the structure of revenue from hunting tours for foreign hunters for the last five years the trophies account for 60-65% of it. Accommodation and meals account for up to 40%. A big potential here lies in organization of hunting on ungulates as bird hunting is not so effective. It must also be kept in mind that the contract prices of the reserve as compared with such of the European hunting agencies are on the higher end and are not acceptable for the average hunter. Hunters have many options and one way to attract them is to lower prices. Yet organization of hunting tourism remains to be most economically viable compared to other forms of tourism.

Ecological tourism

Ecological tourism does not conflict with hunting tourism; should the two be properly balanced it may substantially optimize utilization of the hunting ground territory. In theory one can continuously show an animal and charge money for it or loose the animal in one hunting. It is likewise unobjectionable to conduct ecotourism activities on the territory of the reserve since it does not violate the nature protection legislature, is similar to scientific research and brings in finances.

Ecological tourism as organized observation of species in natural environment has been practiced in the reserve since 1994, after a visit of a French tourism agency Phrapna. In 1995 due to cooperation with the Vosges du Nord biosphere reserve and assistance on the part of Council of Europe experts an assessment of the reserve's ecotourism potential was performed and recommendations were given. At the same time the reserve invited journalists from France who later published promotional information in a number of nature publications. All these served to attract tour operators, including ecological tourism operators from France Cap Nature and Atalante and Great Glen Wildlife from Great Britain for the year 1996. For less than two months the reserve conducted six tours (received 45 persons) and earned more than US\$ 25 000, thus starting in a new activity. Polls performed among the naturalists showed those first tours results were a complete success. Western agencies and tourists donated different equipment such as telescopes, binoculars, spotlights as well as recordings of bird and animal sounds, field guides, etc. to the reserve. The reserve gained experience in operating field excursions, tackling organization issues, due corrections were made to the tour programs and schedules. As it was, 6 persons, only two of them being permanent employees, working under stressful conditions managed to provide a sizeable revenue for the reserve; yet they did not receive the promised compensation from the reserve's authority, nor compensatory holidays that the law provides for in such cases. The following year, unaware of the European ecotourism market prices, the reserve suggested overcharged prices to the Western agencies (US\$ 70 and higher per person a day). All above mentioned combined to result in situation where in 1997 there was not a single tour conducted. To persuade the reserve's authority to adopt reasonable prices Mr. David Kent, a tour operator from Great Britain, spent a lot of time and effort. He provided the reserve with an analysis of the ecotourism market in 24 European countries. After making a comparison with the prices in those countries, the optimum charge for the reserve was established to be US\$ 40-50 per person per day. In an effort to revive ecotourism Berezinsky Reserve together with the Vosges du Nord biosphere reserve of France and the Atalante agency prepared and published in France a package of promotional documents, which were circulated among 120 European tour-operators afterwards.

During the last three years the reserve organized twelve ecological tours and received sixty-three foreign naturalists. Economic analysis shows that the average earning capacity of the ecological tours is 67%.

Ecological education

Alongside with nature protection and scientific research, ecological education is considered a priority in the activities of the reserve. Analysis of results suggests a noticeable increase in the flow of visitors, including those from abroad. In 1997 the Museum of Nature received 13 000 tourists, 444 lectures were given to them. In 2001 the number of tourists was 26 241, 1 180 lectures. In the yearly visitor flow, school groups account for 75,2%, of those 40% being in May. A typical excursion in the reserve includes visits to the museum, open-air animal cages and optionally and infrequently to the Ecological Path. Until 1998 the Home of Ecological Education was used for the purpose, which now functions as the basis of systematic ecological education and awaits the conclusion of repair activities.

Excursions and related activities in 1997-2001

Year	Tourists received, persons		Number of excursions		Organization			Radio and television broadcasts	Information leaflets	Souvenirs and literature sold	Total earnings, million rubles
	Totally	Foreigners	Totally	Foreigners	Seminars	ecoevents, practices, ecotours	Exhibitions				
1997	12884	208	444	46	5	4	3	6	7	4048	
1998	16042	332	600	64	11	9	2	7	4	1200	
1999	19218	623	718	112	7	9	3	8	2	14436	
2000	21720	628	891	115	14	7	2	3	2	3037	
2001	26241	719	1180	106	6	2	2	3	4	1050	

Ecological department of the reserve participates in organization of seminars and workshops. This work as well as ecological propaganda in the media needs improvement. On the average there are less than two excursions a day per a museum worker which shows that there is a good deal of unused potential here. It should be noted that even at the beginning of the 90s the museum served about 40-45 thousand visitors a year. Likewise the quantities of souvenirs and literature sold at the museum dropped nowadays. Yet such items are popular with the tourists and account for a substantial percentage of the total revenue. On the whole total earnings of the museum in 2001 were 9 658 million rubles, which covers approximately 75% wild animals open air cages alimentation costs. The resource base of the ecological education is sustained by sporadic investments from the Ministry of Natural Resources but evidently a special development program built on sound economical principles is necessary.

Key tourism principles and issues

Based on the legal framework, tourism on the territory of the reserve must be ecological, nature-oriented. It is the nature aspect that attracts visitors. In most European national strategies (likewise in Australia, USA, Canada etc) ecotourism is regarded not as an end in itself but as an activity helping to preserve natural biodiversity. In a broader perspective ecotourism might be considered as a nature based activity, exploring and explaining the nature and organized in such a way as to be ecologically sustainable. Ecotourism presupposes responsible visitation of protected nature territories. Its fundamental principles being: no damage no natural resources, organization in natural environment where anthropogenic influence is minimal, high level of education without involvement of outside structures, high level of scientific knowledge, powerful emotional impact. Expectations of ecotourists: environment quality (mostly unaltered or slightly altered nature), quality of guides' and other involved personnel's work, quality of accommodation and meals, encounter with new cultural traditions.

The key advantages of ecotourism lie in: control of visitor flows on protected territories, new employment opportunities for local population, additional financing for nature protection and new investment opportunities and a means of scientific research and ecological education development.

In the opinion of foreign experts who visited the reserve to provide consultation in tourism development the reserve's potential for tourism development is exceptional and in the long run the reserve could become a most attractive site among protected territories in Europe.

The host of elements which combine to create the reserve's tourism potential can be roughly divided into two groups:

Natural and cultural landscapes and their components;

Means and conditions of conducting tours (programs and excursions).

The first group is the basis for attracting tour operators and selling services packages in the market. To assess the ecotourism resource of a territory one must have the characteristics of landscapes, primarily their origin, history, uniqueness, state of preservation (deterioration), attractiveness, biodiversity, including wealth of flora and fauna species. The second group includes tourism infrastructure, presence of information materials, qualified guides, maximum allowable pressure on the nature, transportation facilities, field equipment and so on.

When the above-mentioned principles are applied to the conditions of the reserve, we have:

- Permanent itineraries and natural object developed and controlled by the reserve;
- Various educational and consulting services;
- Organization of rehabilitation tourism;
- Special ecological and socio-ecological tours;
- Rural tourism of B#B type;
- Hunting tourism;
- Excursion services, including outside the territory of the reserve;
- Conducting of exhibitions, seminars and workshops;
- Production and distribution of audio-, video-, photo- and movie materials.

A critical analysis of tourism in the reserve, together with the first experiences (mistakes made) allows to point out certain issues that must be dealt with in order to further develop tourism activities.

Main problems of tourism:

- Insufficiency of floating funds (as a result of general budget shortage) and impossibility of target investment in tourism, which financially covers the functioning of unprofitable departments of the reserve;
- Inadequate financial motivation of personnel involved in tourism;
- Low professionalism of people involved with tourism, including hotel staff;
- Incompatibility of prices with the quality of services (accommodation, meals, transportation);
- Ineffective information exchange leading to a loss of clients;
- Combining tourism and tour operating activities;
- Absence of flexibility in pricing (no group, seasonal, promotional discounts);
- Economic problems (cost accounting, calculation procedures, immediacy of analysis and planning);
- Advertisement (including networking);
- Absence of comprehensive management plans (optimum personnel structure);
- Ecological problems on the national scale.

Recreational tourism:

- Lack of understanding from the hotel management of the main goals of the reserve and the role of tourism in it;
- Deficit of quality services, yet the quality of accommodation is high enough;

- Absence of feedback (testimonials of tourists, questionnaires, monitoring of clients opinions);
- Unjustified transfers of clients from one hotel to another;
- Lack of understanding of partnership role of local population;
- Low quality of meals (deficit of high-qualified personnel);
- Uneconomical transportation;
- Heating and electricity failings;
- Low logistical support (including computer systems);
- Other human factors (taking in consideration personnel's psychological state, hospitality).

Hunting tourism:

- Absence of forest and hunting activities optimization projects;
- Organization of local hunts prior or alongside with foreign tourists;
- Disturbance (driving in, dogs, noise from mushrooms and berries pickers);
- Inadequate biotechnical measures;
- Transportation problems (absence of snowmobiles);
- Complicated entry into the country;
- Absence of investment;
- Lack of understanding of market price policies;
- Possible conflicts with ecotourism.

Ecological tourism:

- Bad preparation;
- Absence of dependable and comfortable transportation;
- Competition with hunting for territory;
- Anthropogenic press on nature complexes (fishing, mushroom and berry picking);
- Low ecoculture;
- Low logistical support (absence of field communication facilities);
- Lack of scientific information adapted for ecotourism;
- Undeveloped itineraries and objects;
- Lack of flexible programs;
- Lack of variety in souvenir production;
- Weak communication with local population.

Practical recommendations on tourism development in the reserve

Information Exchange

The nature-oriented tourism in the reserve requires specific marketing of the offered tours. Below are the main guidelines for information exchange and advertisement:

- Uncovering and systematization of tourism potential and available resources;
- Collection and coordination of specific ecologically-oriented information, which is needed to clients as well as to the reserve's management;
- Determining and targeting the clientele most likely to be interested in reserve's resources and potential;
- Exploring the possibilities for additional services;
- Developing a system to monitor clients' opinions;
- Locating and attracting partners to develop tourism (inside and outside reserve);
- Development of an integral advertisement strategy and specific advertisement programs.

These objectives are essential yet some of them do not belong singularly to the marketing or advertisement, as they are elements of tour-operating and scientific-research activities. Since reserve's staff is somewhat limited, the personnel involved in tourism must possess qualifications outside their proper scope of occupation.

Development of permanent contacts with tour-operators and agencies

There are certain specific traits in tourism marketing for protected natural territories. Unlike tour-operators and agencies reserves and national parks always possess not only original tourism products but also own tourism resources that no outsider can develop without their participation. Market segmentation allows protected natural territories to have a particular type of clientele; thus people involved in organization of tourism striving to attract appropriate visitors need to define products and services they can offer. The reserve's advantages lie in the ability to operate its own tours and form stable partnerships with national and foreign agencies and retain the leadership position. This circumstance is of strategic import as it enables to form long-term programs.

Intercourse with tour-operators and agencies requires from the reserve's staff special professional skills. Such relationships are most productive when tourism resources are discovered and characterized and the services to be offered to the tourists are prepared.

When establishing contacts with tour-operators and agencies one must keep in mind both the areas of similar interests such as to earn money selling products and services, and certain differences in the interests of these two groups of partners. Thus generally the former and the latter seek new opportunities and a wide range of products and services. Yet among tour-operators there are often those who are interested in a very specific and narrow market segment and looking for particular ways to form specialized tours. Tour-operators are ready to invest their money to form and develop a new product; whereas tour-agents' primary objective is to earn revenue selling somebody else's product and they are not willing to invest. Tour-operators first of all have to make sure that all ingredients necessary to form a tour are present (transportation, accommodation, meals, main objects to show or key recreation resources and entertainment). Tour-agents in the first place want to identify among offered products and services such that they can sell most profitably or easily. It is well to point out here that these distinctions are not as apparent in the national tourism as they are abroad.

Tourism itineraries development and management

Tourism itineraries are one of the main services offered to visitors. For the ecological tourism, based on the fact that an average tour lasts 7-10 days it is necessary to have at least 15 itineraries as part of the program that should give the chance to appreciate landscape and biological diversity of the territory. For a guaranteed demonstration of species the infrastructure of the hunting grounds (high-seats, observation posts, etc.) must be utilized as well as the system of biotechnical fields, biotopes with high fauna concentration, and breeding places. Taking into consideration a very high interest towards raptors, good results may be obtained by putting out enticements and artificial nests. As of now, recommendations to attract golden eagle, white-tailed eagle and other eagles as well as different owls have been developed. Forest protection department could help significantly by providing the data from their observation diaries. Tour results would improve if 2-3 specialists combined into a separate organization department did the preparation for the tours. The migration of species should also be kept in mind, thus good results may be obtained through simultaneous observations, that is, several guides observing birds and animals in different locations and communicating by radio. Such factors as unaltered nature and absence of humans in the forest (mushrooms and berry pickers, hunters, etc) should be taken into consideration when building itineraries. Both clients and tour-operators notice anthropogenic disturbances and questions are asked concerning the status of the reserve and the prospects of its nature conservation to which it is difficult to give satisfactory answers. It is necessary to utilize appropriate materials belonging to a particular site, which blend easily into the surrounding landscape and do not alter the behavior of the wildlife or to which wildlife adapts quickly. Each itinerary should include 2-3 guaranteed objects (usually breeding places) and maximum territory with wildlife tracks associated with their feeding

and behavior. Alongside with nature observation, all such information is essential for explanation of species' ecology. Itinerary maintenance activities ought to be elaborated during field preparation of a tour and are the responsibility of respective forestries.

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