Present state and prospects of development of ecological tourism in National park Vodlozerski

Vladimir Tigushkin
Vodlozero National Park, Parkovaja str. 44
185007 Petrozavodsk, Karelia, Russia

Not so long ago in the Soviet time Karelia was very popular among the tourists. In 1989 more than 1.5 million people visited the republic. Its main attraction was the abundance of crystal clear lakes and fast rivers, pristine taiga forests and remarkable monuments of culture, history and northern architecture.

With the collapse of the Soviet empire many traditional ties between the regions were broken. Economic problems, low living standards of people and other well-known factors, including the unwise state policy in the sphere of tourism, brought disastrous results. The tourist traffic reduced ten-folds. Revival of tourism industry had to be started from zero in the absence of any state support. Analyzing the situation the administration of National park Vodlozerski has come to the conclusion that it needed to work out a concept of the tourism development in a specially protected nature territory and modern methods of its implementation. In spite of the lack of experience of such work by 1994 the Park had prepared the basic document: “Organization and development of tourism in National park Vodlozerski”, which served as a sound foundation for working out of a concept of tourism development in the Park. Oleg Chervjakov – the director of National park Vodlozerski – was the chief driving force in that effort.

The selected strategy was further elaborated in the General plan of development of tourism in National park Vodlozerski and in the Business-plan of tourism development. These documents envisaged three stages of development of tourism and its infrastructure till 2010:
- Organization (1996-1999)
- Building-up (1999-2001)
- Development (2002-2010)

The first stage is being finalized at present. It includes planning and organization of the tourism structure, training of personnel, creation and marketing of the Park’s tourist products.

Today the Park has two tourist camps, several stations, dozens of special camping sites, a summer field centre on Kolgostrov island which arranges summer ecological camps for children. There is a sufficient stock of tourist equipment and transport vehicles, including snowmobiles “Lynx”, vans, motorboats and rubber boats. The Park’s special pride is a motorized sailing boat – a replica of traditional Russian boat of 17th century – custom-made at Petrozavodsk wharves. The Park has built the first in the northwest Russia visitors’ centre equipped with modern appliances and interesting exhibitions, which can provide extensive information about the Park. Thousands of local citizens and guests of the republic have already visited the visitors’ centre. Similar centres will be commissioned soon in Vodlozerski and Onezhski branches of the Park.
The Park is already offering various types of tourism: rafting, hiking and skiing trips, tours on snowmobiles, vacationing on Vodlozero, fishing and educational tours. Scientific research and various forms of ecological education in the wild nature have become very popular in the Park.

There is a stable tendency of growth of the number of visitors in the Park: from 400 in 1994 to 600 in 2000. New interesting tours are commissioned each year. For example, a 40-km hiking trail along the ancient pilgrim road to the White Sea is being completed.

The Park has a license for international tourist business, and the Park’s tours have state certificates.

Lack of trained staff was one of the serious problems. To resolve it, 4-month courses for guides to work in National park Vodlozerski were organized in 1996 in Petrozavodsk state university with two weeks of field training before exams. The courses were very popular and free of charge: more than 200 students graduated. The State committee for employment of the republic of Karelia financed them.

In the result of the courses dozens of specialists are now available in the summer to work in the Park. Several students after summer field practice were permanently enrolled.

Since 1997 National park Vodlozerski in cooperation with Kuru Forest school (Finland) and Harpurry (UK) organize annual international courses for specialists in ecological tourism. During the study period from August to June the students get advance level professional training to work in the wild nature and an international certificate permitting to work in tourist firms and various ecological and nature protection organizations. In the course of training the students get practice in tourist companies in Finland, UK, in National park Vodlozerski, Lapland and Wales. They get skills of guides, orienteering, rafting, first aid, driving, etc. The courses are very popular in Russia and abroad. The courses provide free education, accommodation, scholarship of 200 euro and other benefits.

During the last two years the Park was also sending trainees to special educational institutions: Petrovski college, tourist school and Academy of tourism. In 2000 National park Vodlozerski together with Petrovski college has started a 2-year course for specialists to work in the specially protected nature territories in the northwest Russia. Negotiations are going on with Karelian pedagogical university to start a special course in ecotourism at its faculty of physical training.

Another important task is marketing of the tourist product. National park Vodlozerski is one of the few tourist organizations in Karelia which have state certification to provide services to tourists on its territory. Actually the Park almost from its inception was participating in the bigger annual tourist exhibitions – fairs, both domestic and international. It has concluded agreements with reliable tour operators. Today we can state that the Park has proved itself as a reliable partner. The traffic of visitors from Moscow, St. Petersburg and abroad is constantly increasing. The park has built an attractive image in the mass media in Russia and abroad. For that purpose it has arranged autumn tours for journalists of Karelia and Russia to the territory of the Park. Much attention is given to the publishing of booklets, postcards, calendars, newsletters, video films and CD-ROM. Press-conferences and briefings are a custom. The Park is a constant participant in the domestic and international conferences and seminars on ecotourism, where exchange of ideas and new solutions to common problems and development strategies take place. A good example of it is the participation of the Park in the activities of the Association of nature reserves and national parks of the northwest Russia.

Now we have started the implementation of the next phase – building up of the tourist infrastructure in the Park.

It envisages reconstruction of the existing facilities, such as tourist camps “Ohtoma” and “Novguda”, completion of the tourist shelters in Koskosalma, Pilmasozero, construction of new ones in Ragunovo and Luza. At this stage, the construction of a
tourist village in Varishpelda and a stationary field camp on Malyi Kolgostrov will be finished. Restoration work in Iljinski Pogost – a historical and cultural monument of wooden architecture of the 18th century will be also finished. It is also planned to complete the construction of a hiking trail Varishpelda – Luza and some other projects, like establishing of a commercial entity, possibly with a foreign partner, to service tourists in the Park. We hope to attract large investments in the Park’s tourism business and create domestic market of products and services. Much is expected from the implementation of a large-scale program of state support of National park Vodlozerski in 2001-2005.

The ultimate goal of this phase is the creation of the necessary prerequisites for sustainable growth and development of the Park.