



Mediterranean EXPERIENCE of ECO-TOURISM

MEET MANUAL

A guide to discover the MEET approach

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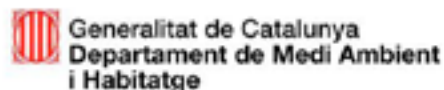
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Cover Image: Greece, Samaria, © Samaria National Park

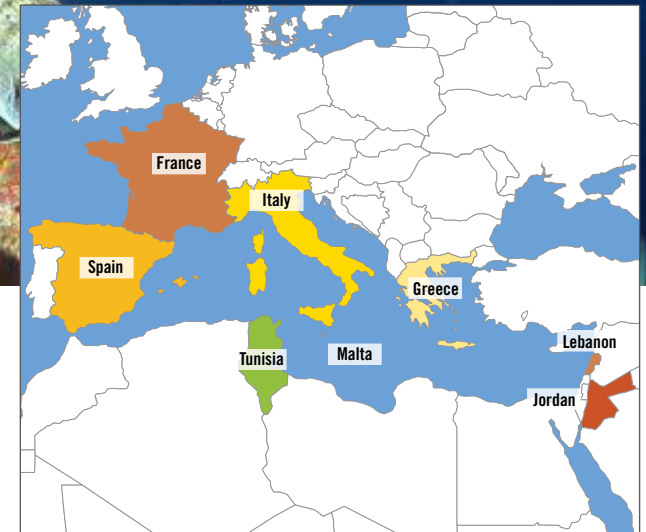
INTRODUCTION

Mediterranean marine biodiversity, Port Cros National Park, France

THE **MEDITERRANEAN BASIN**, WHICH EXTENDS ACROSS 2 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, Earth's most biologically rich yet threatened areas.¹ In addition to its biological and geographic wonders, the region is a treasure trove of human history and culture and it 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. This will be exacerbated as tourism

flows towards this region are increasing and as human populations grow, causing further strains on the limited marine and terrestrial resources.

Around the world, there is a growing demand for alternatives to conventional, mass tourism, at the same time more and more people are looking to experience nature and authentic culture in a respectful, low impact way. Ecotourism has been demonstrated to be a form of tourism that is respectful to nature and culture which engages local people and brings significant economic benefits to local communities without the disruptive effects that mass tourism brings in its wake.



Mediterranean countries participating in MEET initiative.

¹ A **Biodiversity Hotspot** is a biogeographic region with significant levels of biodiversity that is under threat from humans. To qualify as a biodiversity hotspot (see Myers 2000), a region must meet two strict criteria: it must contain at least 0.5% or 1,500 species of vascular plants as endemics, and it has to have lost at least 70% of its primary vegetation. Around the world, 34 areas qualify under this definition. These sites support nearly 60% of the world's plant, bird, mammal, reptile, and amphibian species, with a very high share of those species as endemics.



Above left: Italy MPA Sinis; Above right: France, Portcros; Left: Lebanon Tyre coast; Below: Italy Sinis, local fishermen ©Egidio Trainito



The Mediterranean Experience of Ecotourism (MEET) is an EU-funded initiative, designed to harness the potential of ecotourism in the region. Having recently completed its three-year project life at the end of 2015, and involved 25 protected areas in 8 countries, MEET's goal is to continue integrating new protected areas to expand the conservation and economic benefits of sustainable, respectful and nature-oriented tourism across the Mediterranean Basin.

With large numbers already flowing into Mediterranean protected areas, the obvious question is: Why?

Protected areas in the Mediterranean need a new model of tourism alternative to mass-tourism. A new model where tourism's impact on nature can be minimized, local cultures respected and economic benefits can be fairly distributed among local communities. By creating a new paradigm for the development of ecotourism products, protected areas can benefit from reduced impacts when shifting from conventional to sustainable tourism, using mechanisms to monitor and manage tourism-generated impacts.

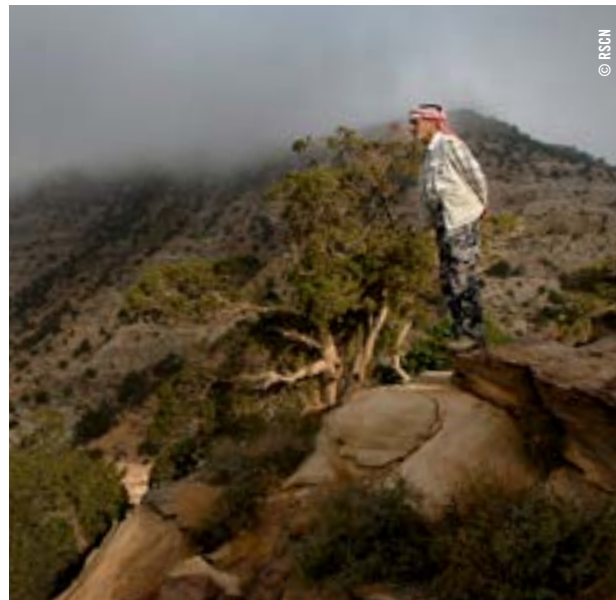
Ecotourism products in protected areas integrate local communities with a wide array of stakeholders, including local travel agencies, local guides, farmers, artisans, and hotel and restaurant owners, Non Profit Organizations, and public sectors, and protected area managers. This creates strong incentives for local communities for nature conservation, by linking economic benefits to healthy, well-managed protected areas.

Protected areas as a tourism development opportunity

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. These areas are typically places that represent a country's most significant flora, fauna, landscapes and geological formations and, **in the Mediterranean case, among the best examples of 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 cultures enhancement. When these opportunities are managed sustainably they:

1. Give economic value to ecosystem services that protected areas provide.
2. Generate direct and indirect income for local stakeholders, creating incentives for conservation in local communities.
3. Diversify conventional tourism models to include ecotourism.
4. Attract new market niches, with higher spending capacities.
5. Stimulate new business opportunities in and around protected areas (e.g. food, handicrafts, rentals, outdoor shops and wildlife guides).
6. Strengthen destinations, with stakeholders collaborating in the development or consolidation of local clusters, increasing economic benefits.
7. Gain the attention of local, regional and national government agencies as destinations worth promoting and supporting.
8. Generate incentives locally to educate about protected areas and natural resources and to learn new skills — like guiding techniques, customer service or new languages.

These and more opportunities illustrate the potential of protected areas for local communities, particularly in less-known areas of the Mediterranean.



Dana Biosphere Reserve, Jordan



Cooking with local community, Ichkeul Protected Area, Tunisia

The MEET Network

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

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 network acts as a **Destination Management Organization**² of the involved protected areas and has a support structure that facilitates the design, management, marketing and sales of these products, by incorporating them as a unique destination 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 and generating economic benefits for the communities that live in and around them**. Becoming a partner of the MEET Network is instrumental to establishing the Mediterranean Ecotourism Destination.

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.

But MEET is about more than just creating a better holiday; the MEET Network offers a range of itineraries which are designed to harness tourism to contribute to the critical conservation of both protected areas and local cultures in the region.

FIGURE 1: The 4 pillars of the MEET Network



The roots of MEET

The MEET Network is the result of a three-year cross-border cooperation project funded by the European Neighborhood Policy Instrument (ENPI-CBC Med), selected under the strategic Call for Proposals of Promoting sustainable tourism for the socio-economic development and enhancement of territories and it is based on the principles of the European Charter for Sustainable Tourism in Protected Areas (see **Box 1** on the following page), created and managed by Europarc Federation.

The project has involved 9 regional organizations³, and managers from 25 Mediterranean protected areas, across 8

countries of the Mediterranean (Italy, France, Spain, Jordan, Lebanon, Greece, Malta, and Tunisia), who have worked with tour operators, local communities, local service providers, conservation and tourism experts to develop unique ecotourism packages.

The EU ENPI-CBC Med project funding which has catalyzed MEET Network came to an end in December 2015. The MEET Network is now being formalized in 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 hosted and coordinated by International Union for the Conservation of Nature — Centre for Mediterranean Cooperation based in Malaga, Spain.



MEET network group picture during 3rd General Assembly, Sinis, Italy

² A Destination Management Organization leads the coordinated management of all the elements that make up a destination (attractions, access, marketing, human resources, image and pricing). It takes a strategic approach to link-up very separate entities for the better management of the destination.

³ Federparchi, Lazio Region, National Parks of France, MedPAN, Catalunya Region, IUCN Med, Royal Society for the Conservation of Nature, Al Shouf Cedar Society and IUCN ROWA



BOX 1

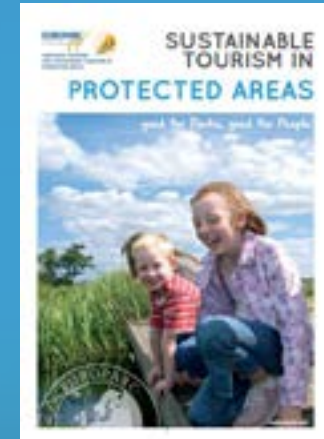
The European Charter for Sustainable Tourism in Protected Areas (ECST)

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: <http://www.european-charter.org/home>



How this manual is organized

Chapter 1 INTRODUCTION

SECTION 1

Chapter 2
**Developing a Local
Ecotourism Cluster**

Chapter 3
**Creating a MEET Ecotourism
Product in Your Area**

Chapter 4
**Marketing Through
the MEET Network**

SECTION 2

Chapter 5
Key Elements of Sustainability

Chapter 6 CONCLUSIONS

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ANNEXES

SECTION 1

Developing a MEET ecotourism product

In Section 1 we discuss how to create the product and how the MEET network will support its sales and promotion.

Section 1 is mostly directed to:

- Park managers
- Local development agencies
- NGOs
- Local inbound tour operators
- Local service providers

Topics that are analyzed:

- How to develop a local ecotourism cluster
- How to create a MEET ecotourism product
- How MEET supports promotion of the products

SECTION 2

Incorporating elements of sustainability

Section 2 will look at the most important and transversal components of sustainability each of the packages should refer to and which ones protected area management should make special efforts to address.

Section 2 is mostly directed to:

- Park managers
- Conservation authorities
- Conservation NGOs

Purpose of the manual

The purpose of this Manual is to provide local people, businesses (including hotel owners, restaurants, tour operators, and other tourism-related enterprises like artisans), NGOs and especially protected area managing bodies with a clear pathway to plan and enhance ecotourism in their territory by engaging. It is a guide to encourage and engage sustainable local business initiatives which contribute to protected area conservation in the creation of an ecotourism product — the MEET product — and, at the same time, becoming part of the MEET network.

The Manual is structured in two main sections. Within these two main conceptual components, further sub-components are identified, as explained at the beginning of each section and in the explanatory scheme on the left.

By the end of this Manual you will have learned what it takes to establish a local cluster of complementary partnerships and create a successful Mediterranean ecotourism product that will dynamize visitor demand to your area; at the same time it will contribute to conserving your protected area in a way that meets the MEET criteria which will open the way for you to become a partner of the MEET Network.



SECTION 1

Developing a MEET Ecotourism Product



DEVELOPING A LOCAL ECOTOURISM CLUSTER

Example of sustainable accommodation, Jordan Dana

IN MOST ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES, IT IS THE PRODUCT THAT REACHES THE CONSUMER THROUGH A SERIES OF **VERTICAL LINKAGES** KNOWN AS THE **VALUE CHAIN**; but when it comes to tourism, it is the opposite, i.e. the consumer “travels” towards the product through a chain of businesses, e.g. travel agents, outbound tour operators,⁴ airlines, inbound tour operators⁵ and hotels and so on down to the protected areas.

Because of this characteristic, tourism can have a heavy impact on a destination. It can catalyze local development, by multiplying the effect of tourist expenditure among the

service providers of the area, as well as on the economics of protected areas.

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

In a cluster, the relationships are mostly horizontal, characterized by *sharing of benefits* — e.g. “my hotel is already

booked, I’m passing some clients to yours”; and *sharing of information* — e.g. “how much do you pay your guides?”, “Is it worth participating in this or that tradeshow”?

⁴ *Outbound Tour operator: a company sending travelers from the country they operate in to another country. Example, a US Outbound Tour Operator would sell trips to US travelers looking to go to Italy.*

⁵ *Inbound Tour Operator: receive travelers from another country that are traveling into the country where the tour operator operates. Example, an Italian Inbound Tour operator would sell trips to USA Outbound Tour operators/Travelers coming to Italy.*

Both the **vertical** linkages in the tourism value chain — and the mostly horizontal links within the cluster work in parallel and the stronger the linkages — either vertical or horizontal — the more competitive the destination. (Figure 2)

Strong, well developed clusters yield several benefits to destination stakeholders: economies of scale, bargaining power, a special attention on cooperation and innovation, increased synergies and productivity, knowledge transfer, joint marketing, increased competitiveness and sustainable competitive advantage.

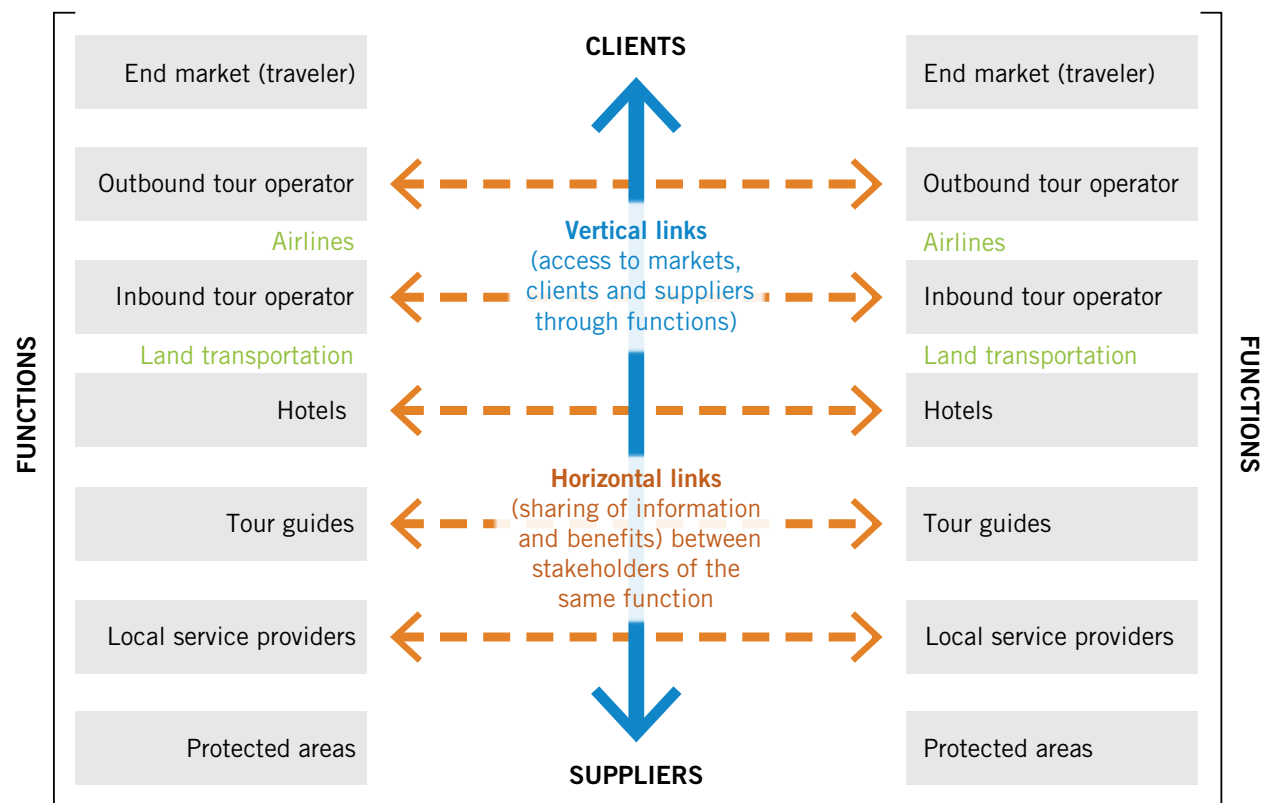
All these create opportunities for synergy and mutual reinforcement to achieve the main aim of a MEET destination: **sustainable and competitive ecotourism products in protected areas**.

In order to be effective, a sustainable cluster should have at least:

- A common vision
- A system of actual governance
- An environment that facilitates strategic alliances
- Economic incentives generated by the tourism activity
- A strong collaboration between the protected area managing bodies and the tourism business

A tourism cluster with a common vision and objectives also facilitates agreements between the protected area managers and local stakeholders.

FIGURE 2: A simplified representation of a tourism value chain.



Basic steps for cluster development

Popular tourism destinations develop clusters naturally, yet in most cases they still need to be strengthened.

Developing a new or incipient cluster requires at least one stakeholder able to initiate a **participatory process with service providers and key stakeholders in the destination**.

In the case of parks, and as suggested by the ECST approach, ideally the protected area management body should impulse and lead the initial meetings, after identifying and inviting key stakeholders. **Failure to include all relevant stakeholders within a cluster — including the ones that may be in conflict with the protected area managers or other stakeholders — is the most common cause of discord and ultimately, failure of a tourism cluster.** Inclusion of stakeholders in the planning process is critical, although not always the easiest way of ensuring that the needs of each stakeholder are developed in a manner that fosters economic benefits and protects the natural and social environment.

TIP **Not all parks can count on human and financial resources or political willingness to be able to conduct this process; in these cases, the park authority can search for support within civil society organizations of the area.**

Regardless of the size of the cluster, **locally-owned small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) play a key role in its development.** These businesses serve various purposes, such as providing an entry point to the economic gains for



Example of Participatory Training during MEET project, Malta.

the local community, helping to foster a sense of ownership of the destination, or providing the tourist with alternative services (like biking tours or horse-back riding). Additionally, SMEs are the key to maintaining tourism revenue within the destination, as they are more likely to buy locally what they need in their business and use local infrastructure to develop their product or service.

TIP **Involving private sector and local actors can be challenging and take lots of time, but creating a good synergy and trust among the members of the cluster is vital for its good functioning.**

The **second step** to developing a tourism cluster is to **establish a common vision** among the different stakeholders, in our case following the MEET values (see **Chapter 5**).

Once a common vision and a commitment to the MEET values has been agreed among participants, specific goals and activities can be set in a mid-term plan (ideally a one to three-year plan), while defining roles among the stakeholders, defining the type of product(s) that can be developed, identifying service providers, needs for training and capacity building and potential partnerships and alliances. An example of the main contents of strategic ecotourism plan can be found in **Annex 1**.

Once the plan has been developed, it is important to schedule periodic meetings to monitor the progress of the plan, and make adjustments if needed.

It is at this stage where the development of MEET Ecotourism product(s) should be agreed among the Local Cluster and integrated in the plan. More details on what it means being a “MEET Ecotourism product” at **Chapter 4**.

In most clusters — in particular those in early stages of development — finding financial, technical and human resources can be a challenge. **Again, creating alliances between the cluster and NGOs, and the private and public sectors — even if they are not located in the area — is important to guarantee the long-term sustainability of the cluster.**

Lastly, **an appropriate legal framework is vital to cluster development.** Not omitting that local businesses and service providers have to adhere to laws and regulations and licenses and permits to operate tourism in the region. It is suggested that the local cluster creates a formal agreement among members, in order to favor a long-term partnership.

TIP For any initiative to be successful and long lasting, dedication 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.

To recap below, the basic steps for the creation and functioning of a Local Ecotourism Cluster:

TABLE 1: **Basic steps for a Local Ecotourism Cluster**

ACTION	RESPONSIBILITY
Identify local tourism stakeholders	➤ Park authority (with support of civil society if needed)
Convene and facilitate the Local Ecotourism Cluster	➤ Park authority (with support of civil society if needed)
Establish a common vision, a strategy and an action plan (including MEET product)	➤ Local Ecotourism Cluster
Schedule periodic meetings to monitor the action plan implementation	➤ Local Ecotourism Cluster

The Local Ecotourism Cluster in the MEET Network

The MEET Network works with the **Local Ecotourism Clusters** for the establishment and promotion of MEET Ecotourism products.

For MEET, a “virtuous” Cluster involves at least the **park authority**, ensuring conservation is respected, **the private sector** — local TOs and service providers — aiming at regional development and the civil society representatives — **NGOs and local communities** — making sure their requirements are heard.

While structuring a Cluster that will work towards the establishment of MEET Ecotourism product(s) in a park, these aspects should be taken into consideration by the “promoter” of the idea (ideally the park management body):

a. Right partners: Identify a/ various appropriate local Inbound Tour Operator (ITO) that should, at least:

- Be willing to collaborate and invest in the sustainable development of the destination following a participatory approach both at local and international scale.
- Agree to develop a tourism product following the principles, characteristics and requirements of the MEET Network.
- Agree to be part of and uphold the interests of all MEET Protected Areas as part of a Common Ecotourism Destination.
- Meet all applicable legislation and regulations with respect to labour, environmental, and human rights, health and safety issues and professionalism.

Keep in mind that the ITO will not only represent your destination but the group of destinations composing the MEET offer.

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

c. Transparency: Make sure the sharing of information, announcement of meetings, publicizing and calling for inputs on joint decisions is transparent.

d. Monitoring: When deciding the activities, identify, assess and discuss all potential positive and negative impacts and agree on a plan for their monitoring and management.

e. Ensuring commitment: The MEET Network strongly advises to formalize the commitment of the involved parties in the process, at least between:

- Protected area managers and Inbound Tour Operators (ITO).
- Inbound TO and service providers (following the normal procedures of the ITO).
- Protected area managers and the MEET Network

In **Annex 2** you can find an example of Terms of Reference for collaboration established between a park authority and an ITO during the MEET project.

To sum up, a destination wishing to collaborate with the MEET Network will have to first achieve the following milestones:

- The Local Cluster consisting of the PA (Protected Area), the local ITO (Inbound Tour Operator), the service providers and civil society is put in place.
- The Local Cluster has applied for membership of the MEET Network.
- The park and Local Cluster commit to establishing a system for monitoring the environmental and social impacts of the tourism activities (see **Chapter 6**).

In the next chapter you will learn about MEET Ecotourism product features that should be taken into account.



MEET cedar, Shouf Biosphere Reserve, Lebanon

BOX 2

Case Study: The Local Cluster of Shouf Biosphere Reserve

The MEET Network and its Secretariat strongly support the creation of local ecotourism clusters to foster collaboration between key stakeholders. From 2013 to 2015 the MEET Network worked on the development and strengthening of 25 clusters in 8 countries in the Mediterranean. This was done through participatory workshops where members of local communities, protected area managers, private businesses (such as local inbound tour operators) and public sector bodies — e.g. local chambers of tourism, tourism departments of regional and municipal governments — and NGOs actively participated in defining the activities, discussing options to promote conservation, exploring alternatives to support protected areas while integrating local communities and small businesses in the tourism products.

The goal of these workshops was making sure MEET parks and related local clusters had a common understanding of the product, its sustainability, potential, expected benefits to the protected areas and local communities, possible impacts and marketing and operating mechanisms.

The Shouf Biosphere Reserve is the largest nature reserve in Lebanon stretching from north to south and covering about 50.000 Has.

The Reserve is under the responsibility of the Lebanese Ministry of Environment and coordinated through the Appointed Protected Area Committee (APAC) which has many members including the Al-Shouf Cedar Society (the NGO responsible for Park management), the mayors of the surrounding villages, local NGOs, development agencies and scientists. The Reserve is the home of the Cedar of Lebanon, symbol of the country and now an endangered species.

This strategy has created a strong cluster, with a very dynamic relationship between the protected area management body and the 92 villages in and around the Reserve that actively participate in its conservation and are involved in several productive projects that generate an income for locals and the reserve alike. There are shops in the reserve selling products including honey, olives, olive oil and handicrafts, creating strong incentives for conservation by generating economic benefits for the local communities through tourism. Frequent meetings and workshops facilitate the flow of information between the stakeholders, and agreements are easily reached thanks to a common vision developed by the members of the cluster.



Locally-produced products displayed in the shop of the headquarters of the Shouf Biosphere Reserve.

The Shouf Biosphere Reserve is a great example of how a common vision can increase the benefits for artisans and small businesses by overcoming the sense of competition, reducing marketing and operating costs by offering unique places to sell handicrafts and food. This is a very effective strategy that could serve as a model for other clusters.

Photo right: Lebanon, Tyre Protected Area





CREATING A MEET ECOTOURISM PRODUCT IN YOUR AREA

© Agapiou Evangelia - Marina

Small group hiking activity during MEET Karpathos tour, Greece

WITH A COMMON VISION SHARED AMONG THE STAKEHOLDERS OF THE LOCAL CLUSTER AND A PROTECTED AREA COMMITTED to adopt a form of sustainable and low impact ecotourism, the next step is to develop a **MEET Ecotourism product**.

The MEET network represents a very geographically heterogeneous destination with a broad range of natural and cultural attractions, services, protected area management frameworks and particular cultural conditions.

The network's ecotourism products are therefore specific, adapted to the attractions and conditions of a particular area. The creation of innovative, unique, authentic and market-oriented products is always welcome.

Before analyzing the conditions to have an ecotourism product that can be later incorporated into the MEET's offerings, let's understand what it is meant by *tourism product* and how it integrates with the values of the MEET brand.



Karpathos Island

Product

What is a tourism product?

A product is anything that can be offered to a market that might satisfy a want or need. Generally speaking, products are either tangible goods (e.g. a computer) or intangible services (e.g. Internet access). **A tourism product is more complex and unique in the sense it includes tangible goods (e.g. a hotel) and — mostly — intangible services creating an experience for the traveler.**

When thinking about a tourism product, it's important to differentiate between what the customers actually buy (the promise of a product) and the product — mainly a service — that they receive *weeks or months after* the purchase, unlike tangible goods like cars or computers (or most of the traditional services).

In tourism the potential customers “buy” the product before “acquiring” the product. This is very important, because the tourism product in the market is just a text on a brochure or website and some pictures or a video. In order to increase the chances to sell it, it needs to contain certain elements, as explained in the next sections.

Elements of an ecotourism product

An ecotourism product can be broken down into some basic components, and you should incorporate all of these when describing your product (see next section), which is the starting point of any tourism marketing campaign. Take a look at the table to the right:

TABLE 2: **The components of an ecotourism product**

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. local architecture 	➤	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"> • Drinking and eating • Lodging • Traveling
Infrastructure: (e.g. communications, roads, electricity, airports) help to facilitate the development of any tourism business.		
MEET branding: To be an ecotourism product, it has to clearly contribute to conservation while benefiting local communities, as stated in the MEET values.		
Price: No price, no clients. Do not expect clients to call or send you an email to find out how much their next vacation is going to cost, but you have to determine the total cost of your product taking into account average market prices of similar offers;		

Notice that **physical goods are nouns** while **activities** (as well as most services) **are verbs**. Also, notice that human resources (i.e. guides, drivers, cooks, etc.) are needed to create an experience — which should fulfill the needs and expectations of the travelers — through a physical good.

Unlike a conventional tourism product, an **ecotourism product** is nature-oriented, and contributes to the conservation of a natural area and the well-being of local communities.

Lastly, **a product must have a price** (for more detailed information regarding pricing your product see **Chapter 5**).

TIP

Key Recommendations for developing a MEET Product

- ✓ It is important to have good quality activities and services featured in the product, otherwise you might lose credibility.
- ✓ It is important to manage clients' expectations — make sure you can deliver what you promise. It is better to promise less and deliver more.
- ✓ When determining pricing, make sure you are not too cheap but also not too expensive. That sounds easy but defining the right price for the right market is difficult.
- ✓ Make sure you know your customers — people from the US travel completely differently to Europeans, for example.
- ✓ Make sure you are sustainable throughout the supply chain (Hotels, restaurants, transportation etc.) MEET customers have a critical eye on this aspect.
- ✓ Use good photographs and invest time and money in strong visual language. This is often underestimated!
- ✓ Be honest with yourself: not every product is a successful tourism product. You have to choose the ones that best fit into the itinerary.



Intangible experience of fun during MEET Samaria tour, Greece

Describing your product to the market

With all these elements it is time to describe your product in writing. When describing your product, you need to **include the important details of what the potential traveler is looking for in a short description** that is easy to read and will attract the tourist enough so that they want to contact you and ask for more information. In order to make a post engaging, you'll need to ensure that it is well written and formatted, has interesting photos and/or videos.

When tourists are looking for tourism products, they often don't know the exact details of their trip, they most likely do know if they want to hike, enjoy the local cuisine or visit cultural sites. Consequently, **if your product description does not match with the expectations of the potential travelers, most will simply click on to the next web page or grab the next brochure.**

As discussed in the previous section, an ecotourism product must contain at least one attraction, activity, facility, service/

equipment and human resource, a clear statement of alignment with MEET's principles, and its description to be short and catchy...and include a price. Take a look at the great example of the product description developed by the cluster at Monte Rufeno Nature Reserve in Italy in **Box 3**.

An ecotourism product description also comes with a more detailed itinerary that needs to be developed before launching the product to the 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 also includes the **price**. People will be much less likely to select an ecotourism product online if the price is not indicated and there is a message saying: "Call for a quote." The potential traveler (your client) needs to see the price tag of the product and match it with their budget. Keep it simple though — such as "prices start at €290" — even if your prices vary depending on the size of the group. You can provide more details later.

BOX 3

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

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

(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.



Italy, Monte Rufeno

(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.



Photo right: Italy, Monte Rufeno

The MEET product's Unique Value Proposition

An important part of MEET is devoted to the development of a **“Unique Value Proposition” (UVP)** for the product. A UVP is what differentiates a product from the rest; it is the promise of value to be delivered. It's the reason why a tour operator decides to buy and sell your product or a traveler to visit you.

MEET market value or UVP is composed by the following key elements:

- **Market differentiation:** Products are based in protected areas, with local communities and local service providers creating a unique niche-market product in the Mediterranean that supports conservation.
- **Target market:** English speaking nature-oriented tourist, interested mainly in soft adventure and cultural aspects, looking for an alternative to the mass-tourism associated with the Mediterranean region.
- **Criteria, standards, and quality assurance:** A set of minimum standards and criteria to create sustainable tourism products with a quality that meets the demand expectations.
- **Product development and training:** Provides support to small and medium-sized local tourism operators who are either new or cannot afford to cover these costs.
- **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 catalogue and reach international markets.



Lebanon Shouf landscape old cedar tree

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.

MEET Target markets

MEET target markets are mostly English-speaking countries, because of their large nature and culture-oriented segments, with mid to high-expenditure capacity when traveling.

Travelers form segments within these markets avoid mass, *sun and sand* forms of tourism, and choose **experiential traveling**, in small groups. Specific nature-oriented activities like bird-watching are traditionally popular segments in these markets.

Further segmentation includes target age groups: Baby boomers (born in 1940s to 1960s) and Gen X (1960s to

1980s) being the main cohorts but also Millennials (1980s to 2000s).

In general, MEET target clients are tech savvy, with higher education, already experienced in traveling to both traditional and exotic destinations.

Motivations include experiencing nature, discovering the destination, cultural exchanges, local cuisine, authenticity, and the opportunity to explore. They are active and curious, and environmentally aware. They like bucket lists, and like to find the next new thing.

Regarding expenditure, target travelers can spend between €250 and €300 per day⁶ all included, except for international air transportation. Remember, it is not advisable to compromise quality to offer lower prices.

⁶ European Community, Travel Business Portal

Suggested activities to be included in a MEET product

MEET has also **identified activities** within the selected markets — a strong consideration in the product design.

The activities recommended by the MEET Network are, **in order of relevance:**

1. Soft adventure

A very popular tourism market segment that involves physical activities with little physical risk, and that requires little to no experience and offers more convenience with regard to comfort and cuisine. Examples of soft adventure include recreational cycling, hiking, sit-on-top kayaking in calm waters, snorkeling and recreational skiing.

2. Cultural activities

Include several forms of respectful interactions with locals in or around protected areas, such as sleeping/eating at agro-tourisms, visiting local architecture and enjoying local food, art and handicrafts.

3. Wildlife-watching

(Besides birds) is one of the largest and fastest growing tourism sectors, but large fauna — mammals in particular — are not particularly conspicuous in most protected areas of the Mediterranean and therefore it is hard to compete with protected areas in East and Southern Africa or Australia. If a specific species of large mammals are easily visible, then it is worth mentioning, but if wildlife is hard to see, it is best

to avoid creating false expectations. On the other hand, the MEET product can include local fauna and flora watching and learning opportunities, even if they are not the central theme of the package.

4. History and archeology

Several protected areas offer important archaeological remains and historical monuments, as well as historical accounts that can be interpreted. Although worth integrating in the product, especially if they are “hidden-gems”, they should not be the central attractor of the offering.

Soft adventure and culture-focused activities are the central theme of the MEET packages with a strong convergence between the market-driven analyses.



Photo above: Wood artisan visit at Dune Costiere Regional Park, Italy.
Photo below: Biking in Dune Costiere, Italy.





© Port Cros National Park

5. Scuba diving

Differs from snorkeling in being a far more complex activity, which requires equipment, appropriate training and certified guides. The Mediterranean sites offer great underwater attractions suitable for scuba diving, including underwater caves, submerged archaeological sites and marine life.

Scuba diving is a very specific market niche. Although it could be included in the MEET Catalogue, the marketing efforts of the MEET are not intended to cover these type of highly-specialized markets.



© F. Belsario

Photo above: Scuba diving in Port Cros National park, France. Photo right: Orchid Identification Activity at Monte Rufeno Regional Park. Photo below: Natural beach in Karpathos, Greece.

6. Hard adventure

Hard adventure encompasses a higher element of risk, but more importantly the traveler needs to be in excellent physical condition. Hard adventure activities include mountaineering, whitewater rafting/kayaking, multi-day treks, etc. The inclusion of these activities in the products must take in account that this market niche is highly specialized.



© Karpathos Protected Area

7. Birdwatching

Birdwatching 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 the search of unique avian species.

There are very important birding areas and unique species in protected areas of the Mediterranean, and birdwatching products are definitely worth developing. Just keep in mind that birdwatchers are in general not interested in other activities, hence these products are specific to this market niche.

8. Beach-related (sun and sand)

Beach-related activities have a large market, mostly mass-oriented, for tourists looking for nice beaches. Since the MEET brand is focused on ecotourism involving conservation and interpretation, beach-oriented activities can be important as complement but not the central theme of the offering, unless of course they are associated with natural phenomena such as turtle nesting or bird watching etc., and should always represent the MEET spirit.

IMPORTANT!! MEET values include the requirement that the product explores the incorporation of practical and non-invasive conservation activities to be undertaken by the travelers (trail cleaning, species monitoring, etc.). But attention!! These activities must be planned and agreed with Protected Area Management in the planning phase and should not result in an extra burden for PA management but serve as a support. If the activities do not meet these requirements, they should not be included. See a positive example from a MEET package in **Box 4**.



BOX 4

Samaria National Park and MEET clients monitoring a population of wild goats



Wild goat in Samaria National park

atic animal closely linked to the National Park was chosen as one of the activities. Traditionally, monitoring is carried out by Park scientists. But with a little guidance and a lot of enthusiasm, this activity can be implemented by visitors as well, sometimes even leading to more results since a visitor may recognize an element more easily as something new than a scientist who is used to the area and the target element.

The cooperation of the management body with the COBWEB — Citizen Observatory Web Project gave us the opportunity to engage ecotourists, including MEET clients, in this activity. Through the use of regular smart phones and tablets, visitors were able to gather data such as number of animals observed, gender, location, behavior, ecosystem features and photographs. The data assembled may seem very simple but were nevertheless very important to gather information regarding the goat's population status and trends, ecosystem preferences, and potential pressures and threats.

This is truly a straight forward conservation activity that ecotourism can contribute to besides all other potential economic aspects related to this sustainable form of leisure.

Photo left: Samaria-Kri-Kri, Samaria Gorge, Crete

How to meet the MEET criteria

We learned i) what an ecotourism product is ii) what is the value proposition of MEET, and iii) what is the MEET target market and the types of activities that should be considered in a MEET product.

The following section presents a check list of the **minimum criteria an ecotourism product has to meet to be incorporated into the MEET portfolio** (the MEET Catalogue, see **Chapter 5**).

In order to qualify for inclusion in the MEET catalogue, and after having accomplished the criteria for establishing a cluster (see **Chapter 2**), a product needs to include some basic elements that follow the MEET philosophy and branding principles:

Product design

- ✓ The product has to be created in **collaboration and agreement** with all the constituents of the Local Cluster.
- ✓ The **core of the product should be a Mediterranean Protected Area**⁷ but the package could include also the surroundings.

IMPORTANT!! These are basic and generic principles born from the experience of the MEET project and applicable to any area; MEET sees this list as a flexible instrument, to be improved and adapted with new experiences.



Example of conservation activity Lebanon Tyre Coast, digging sea turtle nest.

- ✓ The product should contain elements of **MEET's Brand** (see **Chapter 5**).
- ✓ The product price has to incorporate a “**Conservation Contribution**” for conservation activities benefiting the relevant protected area, and this contribution must be quoted in the product description.

TIP **Park management has to identify suitable conservation activities to integrate with the product, and the implementing actors with whom to establish a cooperation agreement**

- ✓ The product should be addressed to the target markets identified by MEET and include above suggested activities (mainly soft adventure, culture- and nature-oriented activities). See **Chapter 3, Suggested activities**.

⁷ We consider a protected area to be 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.



Cooking activity during Cevennes's MEET Tour, France

- ✓ Interaction with the **local community has to be active** (clients should *participate* in activities, not merely watch them).

TIP **Have guests taking part in cooking or harvesting the ingredients for lunch, preparing artisanal food, etc.**

- ✓ Be able to **adapt your product to various durations** but make it at least 3 days/2 nights long (we are not focusing on day trip tourism).
- ✓ Be able to **adapt your product to different numbers of participants**; groups should, in any case, be small: no more than 12 people in a group led by a Tour Leader.

TIP **You need to have a specific programme for each season (focusing on low-season), number of participants, duration and adapt the activities (and pricing) accordingly.**



Relaxation and contemplation during Dana Tour, Jordan.

- ✓ The product has to **consider alternative activities** if some are weather-dependent.
- ✓ All packages should **allow for free time**: ensure that guests have enough time to rest, shop, and explore on their own.

TIP Consider where and when the best sunsets could be watched (many guests from various MEET tours already expressed their desire to be free or in a good location for the sunset)

- ✓ The product should **include optional components** (e.g. optional visit to town A, or free time).
- ✓ The composition of the package has to **assure economic benefits** (at least 50% of the package's costs) for **local service providers**.

TIP Consider having a reliable set of alternative service providers to respond to any unexpected events (i.e. it is risky to count only on one accommodation)

- ✓ The product description and programme should be written in English.

TIP We strongly recommend having a native English-speaker (or equivalent level of knowledge of the language) reviewing the text of the product description.

Conservation and sustainability

- ✓ Whenever possible, fossil fuel-powered transportation should be avoided and **sustainable transportation** preferred (e.g. electric cars, bikes or walking).

TIP If using sustainable transport is logistically impossible, inform the travelers about the situation and about compensation measures adopted (e.g. CO₂ off-set mechanisms)



- ✓ 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 cluster should implement the *Three R's: Reduce, Reuse, And Recycle*.
- ✓ The use of energy and natural resources should be minimized (e.g. LED lamps or reducing laundry etc.).

TIP Make sure all the components of the supply chain (restaurants, hotels, stores etc.) are consistent with environmental sustainability criteria

- ✓ Avoid taking your client to any location (restaurant, store, amusement park, market...) that sells **endangered or rare wild animals and plants** or products elaborated from them.⁸
- ✓ **Protected area rules** for visitors, designated trails, park goals, management measures etc...should be shared in advance with clients.

TIP Provide a simple and visual document on the rules and appropriate behaviour the visitors should follow in the Park and include an engaging presentation on the subject.

Photo left: Electric buses for moving inside Shouf Biosphere Reserve.

⁸ For more information see: IUCN Red List of endangered species <http://www.iucnredlist.org/> or WWF Buyer Beware campaign <http://www.worldwildlife.org/pages/buyer-beware> or

Cultural aspects

- ✓ Cultural attractions and activities are critical elements of most itineraries. However, it is very important to maintain authenticity and **avoid manufacturing visitor experiences that might impact negatively on the cultural manifestations.**

TIP

If you plan to bring your clients to a local cultural event, contact the organizers in advance to understand if it is appropriate.

- ✓ A **set of guidelines** should be shared with travelers to follow **local habits** and customs (e.g. rules regarding photography, suggested clothing, restrictions — i.e. alcohol — interaction with people and so on).
- ✓ When a group is encouraged to purchase goods from local markets or similar, make sure a **fare distribution of income is foreseen**. Inform and agree with the community about that in advance.

TIP

Provide a “cheat sheet” with some basic greetings translated into the local tongue for guests, to improve their ability to communicate with local people (even if it is a very simple conversation).



Cultural aspects should be always respected. Helping an elderly woman in Karaphos, Greece.

Guides and interpretation

- ✓ Every MEET tour must have a **tour leader that stays with the group the whole time**, including arrival and departure to/from airport.
- ✓ The tour leader must be fluent in English and be able to help tourists participate in all the activities and conversations. S/he should also support the local guides in interpretation.
- ✓ **Local tour guides should be preferred**, hired by the local tour operator and trained by the protected area.
- ✓ Guides must contribute to **minimize the impact of tourism in protected areas** by following designated trails, not disturbing wildlife, etc.

TIP

Make sure you always explain to your clients the reasons for the park-related prohibitions and what they 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 the guides must follow the techniques of **environmental interpretation** — spreading meaningful messages for the conservation of natural and cultural resources (see **chapter 6**).

Communication before and during the tour

- ✓ The communication of the ITO with the customer must be efficient and reflecting **MEET brand values**.

TIP

Try to give the customers the possibility to fine-tune some activities of the product with you before their arrival, to involve them in the MEET experiential product since the beginning.



Port Cros Tour leader and local guides with MEET tourist, France.



Al Shouf protected area staff introducing the park to tourists.

- ✓ Guides and tour leaders need to communicate the MEET values and story to guests, and **connect guests to the PA/conservation issues throughout the package.**
- ✓ The Tour Leader should get in touch with clients before arrival to introduce him/herself and start facilitating the group.
- ✓ If possible, and if not interfering with protected area management, foresee an official ‘welcome’ by a protected area staff member in the package programme, where guests will receive a short presentation of the protected area, its goals.

TIP Remember to always brief guests about planned activities at the beginning and end of each day. A debriefing of the day visit can also be included at the end of the day.

- ✓ Guides should be trained to **take special care of client safety** and whereabouts at all times. **A briefing** should be provided **prior to each activity.**

TIP Most of the time a detailed and honest communication with your client can avoid misunderstandings and bad experiences. Walk the talk and make sure you do not over-promise!

Accommodation

- ✓ **Local and “authentic” accommodation should be preferred** when possible and mass tourism type structures should definitely be avoided.

TIP Some minimum comfort-related standards should apply — e.g. private bathrooms, hot water — and if the tour foresees some overnights in low-comfort accommodation, travelers must be informed in advance.

- ✓ Ensure that **guests are informed in advance if they need to share a room.**
- ✓ Accommodation staff have to ensure a high standard of professionalism.



Example of accommodation in Monte Rufeno, Felceto. Farmhouse dedicated to Rural Traditions.

Food & beverage

- ✓ **Local cuisine should be a very important part of the product** and an explanation of the “history behind each meal” should be shared with the guests (by the tour leader or better by the cook).

TIP Although local cuisine is a crucial part of the product, consider varying the meal offer. Customers don’t like to be eating the same dish for lunch and dinner for a whole week!

- ✓ **Meals and beverages should be locally sourced, sustainable, varied and authentic.**

TIP You need to find the right balance regarding quantities in order to avoid unsustainable food waste, without losing the local Mediterranean flavour.

- ✓ **Timing of meals must be appropriately organized around activities** and at the same time should respond to traveler’s expectations.

TIP Consider including some picnic or packed lunches also, in order not to spend too much time every day around a table



Variety of Mediterranean cuisine during Lebanon Tour.

- ✓ Good vegetarian options should be always available.

TIP When getting in contact with your customers, make sure you collect information about their dietary needs (vegetarian, allergic, Halal...) and adapt the meals accordingly.

- ✓ If packaging is required, it should be re-usable or at least recyclable.

TIP Buying recyclable packaging may be more expensive but can be incorporated into the price.

Safety

Natural areas and adventurous activities pose a certain risk to travelers. For the **MEET Network minimizing health and safety risks to travelers while participating in a MEET**

programme is essential. Tour operators, transportation providers and tour guides are requested to follow health and safety standards mandated by local and national authorities, but in addition they have to observe the following MEET criteria:

- ✓ MEET local Inbound Tour Operators must have a **release of liability policy**, and a relevant form to be signed by the traveler before starting the tour.
- ✓ An **emergency plan (what to do if)** needs to be developed by the tour operator with the participation of tour guides and drivers.
- ✓ Guides must follow designated trails.
- ✓ Guides leading excursions in natural environments or difficult mountainous terrain, must have a **solid knowledge and experience of the area, including orientation skills, and a good physical condition**, in order to deal with any kind of difficulty which may arise.
- ✓ Guides must be able to communicate with the driver/ tour operator in the event of an emergency.
- ✓ **The Tour Leader and guides shall be trained in first aid procedures.**
- ✓ **The Tour Leader must always carry a first aid kit.**
- ✓ 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).
- ✓ The driver of a passenger vehicle intended for professional tourism-related services must hold a **professional driving license** and must have sound experience and knowledge of the mechanical and driving characteristics of the vehicle in question, and be familiar with the area. Driving style should be extremely cautious and the driver should adapt to the customer's needs and expectations.

- ✓ **Life jackets must be used at all time by passengers on boats, kayaks, rafts and canyoning.**
- ✓ **Appropriate safety equipment (e.g. helmets) must be used for adventure activities, including biking.**

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

NOTE! Some of the MEET packages are located in countries with security-related issues (Terrorism, political instability, etc.).

The MEET initiative wants to contribute to a better relationship between people from different cultures, religions etc. through the MEET values (travel as exchange, respect of local culture, etc.). Nevertheless clients from MEET target markets can be worried 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 package-related destination is a safe area, and that any foreseen activity is organized in a way where the security is the first concern. If the tour has the need of having armed guards accompanying the group, consider that this can be delicate for people not used to it. Duly inform participants in advance.



MARKETING THROUGH THE MEET NETWORK

Mujib Reserve canyon, Jordan

ONE OF THE GREAT ADVANTAGES OF BEING PART OF THE MEET NETWORK is the capacity to place your product in international markets without incurring in costly campaigns.

The Destination Management Organization (DMO) “MEET Network” partners with a Destination Marketing Company (DMC) to manage the marketing and commercialization of the MEET catalogue.

The MEET Network, together with the DMC and Inbound Tour Operators, assures:

1. Strategic planning
2. Pricing and sales
3. Promotion and advertising 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.**



Jordan Mujib Reserve

Pricing

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

- Reflect the value provided in comparison with that of competitors
- Consider what the market will really 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 the Inbound Tour Operator (ITO) can sell the tour package for.

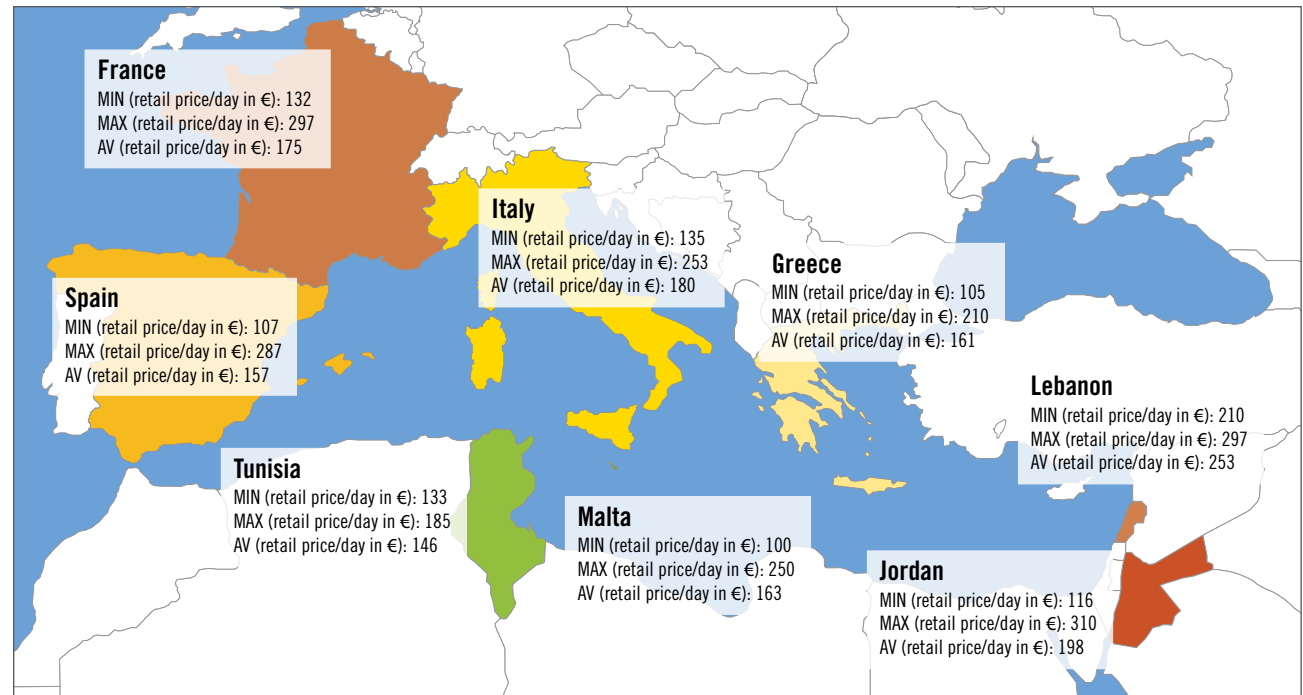
It is calculated by adding together all the fixed and variable costs of operating the tour and the profit margin that the ITO needs to make per sale to have a viable business (Net Rate = package cost plus ITO profit margin).

If your product will be included in the MEET Catalogue, this will be the price that you, as an Inbound Tour Operator, will have to negotiate with your service providers and the MEET DMC.

The MEET DMC 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 party distributors to help you reach your target markets and to sell the product on your behalf. In the case of the MEET catalogue, distribution costs will be endorsed by the DMC.

FIGURE 5: **Competitive Tour Pricing Ranges: Indicative Guideline** (red highest, green lowest)



This **Retail/Gross Rate** is the price that the consumer (or the Outbound Tour Operator) will pay for the package, 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 these guidelines should only be used as a general indication. Retail prices (careful, not net rates!)

of similar small group tours in MEET destinations are shown in the map above.

Due to the variation in the destination competitive pricing, tour package activities, accommodation quality, transport and meals it is not possible for MEET to have a common fixed price applicable to all products.

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

Calculating the cost and profitability of your product

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

Fixed costs

Fixed costs DO NOT vary, they stay 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 also falls within the concept of a fixed cost.

Variable costs

Variable costs change with the number of clients: they are dependent on how many tourists you carry. If you carry 10 guests the costs will be different to if you carry 20.

Examples of variable costs: meals, entrance fees to museums or national parks, bike or gear rentals.

Annual business costs

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

Contribution to the Protected Area

The main objective of MEET is to strengthen the conservation goals of a protected area. 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. The mechanism will need to be negotiated on an individual basis with each protected area as the legal framework for accepting donations differs across the region. For more information see, “How tourism supports protected areas” (Chapter 6).

Mark-up 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, factoring in mark-up.

There is no set figure for mark up; however, the mark up 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 that of your competitors — if it is too cheap people may question your professionalism, if it is too expensive and doesn't offer more value you may lose customers.

Commission

Commission is usually the major source of revenue for retail travel agents, wholesalers, inbound operators and DMOs. Tourism 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)

+

NET PRICE

+

THE COMMISSION for the MEET DMO 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 in 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 works with the purpose of creating a strong brand to differentiate itself from other offerings of the Mediterranean (and elsewhere).

This MEET branding is what needs to be incorporated into each MEET product, in order to be coherent with the other products that form part of the catalogue.

The MEET branding, that we previously introduced when talking about value propositions, 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 programmes: soft adventure and experiential traveling.



Brand promise

The brand promise defines the MEET Catalogue Unique Value Proposition:

"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 validated by the MEET partnership and by MEET inbound tour operators during the project implementation. All of the above stakeholders agreed that the brand assets are well aligned with MEET's overall positioning and product suite.

The MEET Network will work on Brand training with its partners (see an example about story telling in **Box 5**) to ensure that the voices of all those involved in MEET and in the inbound supply chain are aligned to create a singular, clear and compelling voice and unique offering.



BOX 5

Storytelling and MEET

Storytelling is an essential element of MEET strategy, helping breathe life into the MEET brand and its catalogue. 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 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 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 and the things 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 a chance 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.

For more information, check MEET Blog and Social Media!



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 at Port Cros' own organic and biodynamic winery. Learn all about his technique and exchange stories over a glass (or two) of excellent rosé.

Examples of MEET stories

The MEET catalogue

Why a Catalogue?

If you have followed all the previous steps and paid attention to MEET criteria, you will have in your hands a MEET product! Congratulations!

And now? Your product can perfectly work as stand-alone offer, so what is the point of being included in the MEET Catalogue?

Being part of the MEET Network (and therefore having the possibility to integrate your product into the MEET Catalogue) brings your area benefits such as:

- 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 using a recognized and respected international logo and brand;
- improved quality and sustainability of your product through adherence to a set of minimum standards,
- as well as reduced costs in marketing to target segments.

MEET is more than a product line. Together, as a collective of parks, 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.

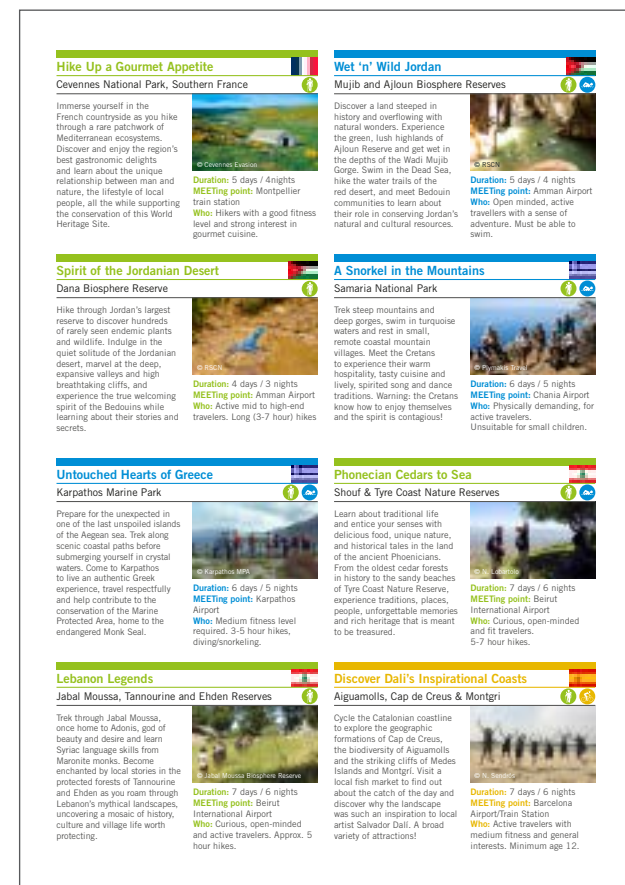
Having a single catalogue with the elements of the MEET brand facilitates the marketing of small, individual products located across a broad geographic region.

Your product will be assessed by the MEET Network and the DMC in order to verify the compliance with the MEET brand and principles; it will then be directly included in the catalogue for promotion and selling. If not compliant, a “MEET Product Improvement plan” will be prepared by the MEET DMO and agreed with you.

The fine-tuning of the packages during MEET project

You might wonder how we identified all the challenges, development needs and expected structure of our MEET packages. During MEET project, a big help with the fine-tuning of the products came thanks to the organization of 2 rounds of *test tours* (performed by protected area/ecotourism experts to evaluate the product) and 1 set of *fam trips* (to familiarize outbound tour operators with the products offered by MEET). To the right is an example of the Catalogue (Figure 7).

FIGURE 7: Example of The MEET Catalogue offering test tours



More information online (<http://catalog.meetnetwork.org>)

Thanks to the feedback and constructive criticism of more than **215 experts and tourism businesses** involved in the tours, we were able to improve and adapt our products to the demand.

Organizing *Test* or *Fam* Trips for a tourism product can be expensive. Usually invited participants are not requested to pay for the tours they take part free of charge, but if directed to the proper audience it can be a strong instrument.

If you decide to consider organizing a *Test* as part of your strategy, MEET Network will help you to identify the participants and manage the feedback.

You can see in the figure below (**Figure 8**) a collection of the most common words used by MEET packages testers during the assessment of their tours they participate to.

FIGURE 8: **Word Cloud of MEET packages participant's tour feedback forms**



MEET journey recap check-list

Establish a local cluster among protected areas managers, local ITO and service providers and civil society.

Formalize cooperation frameworks among park managers, TOs and service providers.

Inform MEET Network about the ongoing process and your intention of becoming a partner.

Establish a system for monitoring potential impacts of tourism in protected areas (with the support of MEET Network).

Provide the MEET Network with brand-aligned:

- Short product description
- Product programme and itinerary
- Price and impact on local community
- Option of conservation activities agreed with the park management

Work with the MEET DMC on product refinement and planning.

Be ready to receive your customers!



SECTION 2

Incorporating Elements of Sustainability



KEY ELEMENTS OF SUSTAINABILITY

Snorkeling in Sinis Marine Protected Area, Sardinia, Italy

NATURE-ORIENTED TOURISTS ARE ATTRACTED BY NATURAL LANDSCAPES WHICH HARBOUR SIGNIFICANT BIODIVERSITY. Tourists in coastal areas enjoy swimming and snorkeling in clean waters among the fish or watching seabirds. Others go on walks to enjoy views and wild flowers or to watch wildlife. All these activities require intact and healthy ecosystems. Protected areas rely on functioning ecosystems to provide visitors recreation, education, culture and fun. Well managed tourism can be a sustainable alternative to economic activities that would be damaging to biodiversity, while benefiting local populations.

But tourism can also have a variety of negative impacts on biodiversity, particularly when there is inadequate management. Irresponsible and unsustainable tourism can damage nature through habitat destruction, overexploitation of local resources, waste and pollution, invasive alien species and infrastructure development or negative impacts on local cultures.

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 cluster in order to protect biodiversity while respecting local communities.

We learned during **Section 1** how to create the product and how the MEET network will support its sales and promotion.

Section 2 will look at the most important and transversal components of sustainability each of the packages should refer to and which ones protected area management should make special efforts to address.

To whom is **Section 2** mostly directed?

- Park managers
- Conservation authorities
- Conservation NGOs

Interpretation

What is interpretation?

There are techniques for communicating ideas and concepts to a group of disparate people. Interpretation is the most important one. Most people think of 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 this 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 understand.*⁹

Many guides struggle to understand that their job is not to “teach” their audiences in the same way they were taught in school. 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, avoiding technical terms, lists of dates and numbers recounted by rote or in an overly academic fashion.



Local guide teaching organic wine production to the group, France.

In order to effectively deliver information to ecotourists, guides need to rely on the interpretive approach of communication, which has 4 essential qualities:

- It's **pleasurable**. Although entertainment isn't interpretation's main 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 really has 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**. Interpretation has to be presented in a way that is easy to follow or does not require a lot of effort from the audience.
- It has a **theme**. This is the most important quality of interpretation. **Theme is the principal message about the subject that you want to get across to your audience.** (See **Box 6** on the right)

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 (**Box 7** on the following page).

⁹ Ham, S (1992). Environmental interpretation: A practical guide for people with big ideas and small budgets.

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 water have dried out this lake, displacing animals and local people.

Ham, S (1992). *Environmental interpretation: A practical guide for people with big ideas and small budgets.*

Case study: Using interpretation in the Azraq Wetland Reserve, Jordan



Interpretation training, 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 Amman's booming population. In 1978, the Royal Society for the Conservation of Nature (RSCN) established Azraq as a wetland reserve. By 1992 however, the springs dried up, and the aquifers that had once gushed ceased to provide. Most water buffalos of Azraq died and most migrating birds went to the Sea of Galilee instead. The Azraq wetlands have been described in many text books 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 concepts of interpretation, the importance of delivering meaningful messages to the visitors, in terms of the importance of conserving an area, supporting local communities, supporting the conservation or particular programs, and encouraging the visitors to continue supporting the area after their visit.

By the end of the program, guides were able to provide information using interpretation tools, organized in topics and themes, delivering the right messages about conservation and ways to support the area after the visit, using examples from the Azraq Wetland Reserve and its challenging conservation. From this initiative a Manual was issued, and is available at <http://blog.meetnetwork.org/launching-meet-drops-of-knowledge-ecotourism-series/>



The role of guides in conservation

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

At the same time, guiding is an obvious economic opportunity for people from 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 count 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; for help preparing for a visit through formal briefings and informal talks; and generally to be a friendly, knowledgeable intermediary with unfamiliar places and people.

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

In addition to these roles, a guide should seek to inspire visitors to become supporters of conservation.



Shouf Biosphere Reserve team. Squirrels eating the cedar cone inside the cedar forest.

General criteria for tour guides working for a MEET product

The MEET tours are conducted by a **tour leader**, fluent in English, and able to conduct the group. The tour leader stays with the group the whole time, including arrival and departure. Tour leaders should ideally be from the local destination.

In the destination, local tour guides are in charge of providing specific information regarding a particular attraction (e.g. a tour guide in a museum) or in a protected area. Ideally local tour guides should be fluent in English, but if this is not the case, the tour leader should be able to act as an interpreter.

The MEET tour leader is aware of the MEET objectives and able to share the philosophy of the network, encouraging travelers to contribute to the conservation of the protected area.

The protected area must have effective control over local guides and the conditions under which guides operate. Most effective guide systems have a licensing mechanism. The protected area's administration or some higher authority acting at the administration's request, should be able to issue a license to guides, if they comply with relevant rules and regulations aimed to contribute with the conservation of the area. Licenses are usually extended to those individuals who pass a training course or a test.

Training naturalist guides

Naturalist guides need training in order to fulfill the many roles they are charged with. Training should not be a one-time event for guides. Good guides are those who continually refresh and update their knowledge, and the site's administration should consider carrying out periodic courses for this purpose. Courses should be developed in coordination with — and ideally co-financed by — the tourism sector.

The primary themes for a training course curriculum are:

- Natural history and cultural attractions.
- Conservation priorities and activities.
- Rules and regulations.
- Group management.

Using interpretation in visitor centers, signs and printed materials

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 planning and schematic phases of development, and work closely with designers, cluster stakeholders and protected area staff in fitting facilities or producing printed materials to the needs of visitors and resources.

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



Local guide presenting the bike route to tourists, Dune Costiere, Italy

Effective and sustainable interpretation centers generally include the following elements:

- They follow the elements of interpretation and follow a theme.
- Design a facility that evolves over time to keep the visitor center current, fresh and innovative.
- Understand the audience (e.g. tourists, children, elders) to ensure that visitor centers meet visitor, the protected area management and the local cluster needs.
- Clearly identify resources and 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 those who can provide the resources.
- Provide distinct and innovative designs to inspire the visitors.
- Use multi-media tools, in order to be consistent with the usual ways the visitor gains information.
- Create distinct and authentic experiences that are of the place or relate to the place.
- Be innovative because visitors seek new, distinct and interesting experiences.

Incorporating interpretation in printed materials (like brochures) or signs (e.g. in self-guided trails) follow the same guidelines for interpretation, using specific themes (no more than one theme for a brochure or trail).



It is sometimes hard for park management to ensure proper staffing in interpretation centers and museums; MEET suggests taking advantage of the local cluster to discuss and explore collaboration opportunities with local NGOs or inhabitants, that might take care of this aspect on behalf of the park.



Examples of the Wild Jordan Interpretation Center, Amman, Jordan

Visitor impact monitoring and management

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

Monitoring and managing visitor impacts are fundamental ecotourism management strategies; unfortunately, they are also ones most frequently left unattended. If the effects of ecotourism activities on the site's natural environment and on the surrounding communities are unclear or unknown, then there can be no certainty of success.

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 depend upon:

- ✓ 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 dedicated primarily for public use (such as ecotourism).



MEET team analyzing the zoning of Al Shouf Biosphere Reserve.

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 not sufficient. They demonstrated that what visitors did, when they did it and a number of other circumstances were frequently more important in determining visitor impacts than simply the number of visitors.

The simpler and straightforward concept of carrying capacity — i.e. limiting numbers of visitors — can sometimes be used as a solution for mitigating impacts in restricted, locations, but not usually on a protected area basis or large ecotourism site situation.

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

Establishing Limits of Acceptable Change

The LAC is a process that 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. When standards are not met, then management must adapt to mitigate negative impacts.

These are the basic steps in determining the LAC¹⁰:

- **Identification of area issues and concerns:** Involving all stakeholders, identify the ecotourism site's unique values, attractions, opportunities, threats and problems.
- **Define and describe the types of desirable activities:** This step should be done in the abstract, not thinking 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. They should be indicators directly related to the activities of visitors 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 way they are managing.
- **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.



Photo above: Mediterranean Diet, Ichkeul, Tunisia

Photo below: Sailing activity in Port Cros National Park, France



¹⁰ Drumm, A. and Moore, A., 2005.

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 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- for the trail.

The tables below outline the key indicators and the results of the analysis. (McKay, H. 2006)

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
Track/facilities impacts	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
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		

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 and the acceptability level for each impact, and indicates whether acceptability levels have been exceeded.

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 the MEET Network is to create a new model of tourism in the Mediterranean protected, generating economic benefits for conservation while creating incentives among local stakeholders to conserve their territories by linking protected areas to increased socio-economic 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 (see **Box 9**). Several protected areas in the Mediterranean have very high visitation rates.

However, the legislation — particularly in the EU countries — does not allow the charging of visitor entrance fees, 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 3**). 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.

During the development of the MEET project, various solutions were tested to ensure MEET Ecotourism packages 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 packages (from 2 to 5%) focusing on a conservation activity benefitting the park and linked with the package. The park has to identify such activity in agreement with the local cluster and report to MEET Network the advancements and monitoring of it.



Hiking inside the oldest cedar forest in the largest protected area in Lebanon.

TABLE 3: Types of Fees and Charges in 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.

Brown, C. 2001

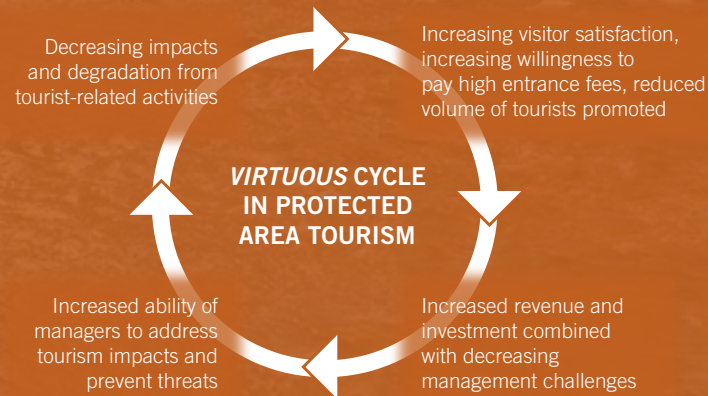
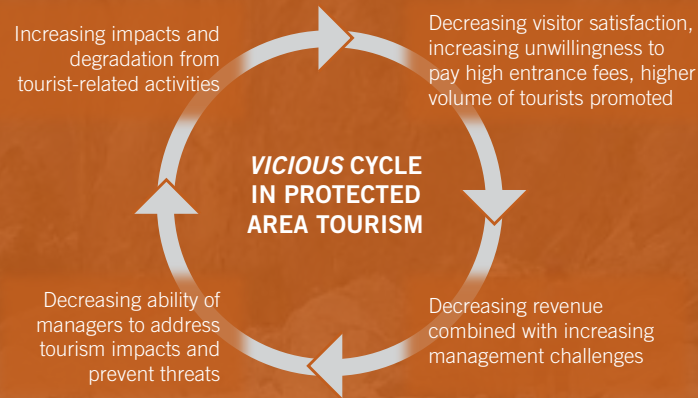
The Threshold of Sustainability

The point at which the management capacity of a protected area is sufficient to mitigate the most critical tourism-related threats, such 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.”

(Drumm, A., McCool, S. and Rieger, J. 2011)





CONCLUSIONS

Lebna beach, Korba, Tunisia

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.



© Shins Protected Area

Italy, Mpasinis

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.
- Applying to become a partner of the **MEET Network** and to have your product included in the MEET Catalogue.
- Understanding and taking advantage of the **MEET Destination Management Organization (DMO)** and its capacity — through its Destination Marketing Organization (DMC) — to reach international markets, reducing your marketing costs.

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.



Protected Area staff introducing rules for visitor's during MEET tour, Lebanon, Jabal Moussa forest.

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WORKING DOCUMENTS

Working document: *20140917_MEET CATALOGUE_SHORT.pdf*

Working document: *20141208_MEET test 2015_FLIGHT feasibility* (in Excel format)

Working document: Andy Drumm, Arnaldo Rodríguez. *Final MEET Product Definitions and Cluster Workshop Reports*. April, 2015.

Working document: Andy Drumm, Arnaldo Rodríguez. *Report and Outline Strategy for Tourism Management at Ickheul, Bokournine and Chikly Island Protected Areas, Tunisia*. April, 2015.

Working document: Andy Drumm, Arnaldo Rodríguez. *Report on the experts meeting in Rome*. January, 2015.

Working document: Carla Danelutti. *Draft of the Network Strategy-Internal Rules*.

Working document: Carla Danelutti. *Capacity Building strategy of MEET Network*.

Working document: Hany El Shaer, Carla Danelutti, Luca Santarossa. *External support in definition and assembly of the Catalogue*.

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Working document: Luca Santarossa, Paolo Pigliacelli. *Criteria for Pilot Actions Selection*.

Working document: *MEET Product Development Training Workshop*. May, 2014.

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Annex 1: Example of a Strategic Plan for Ecotourism¹¹

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

¹¹ Adapted from "Plan stratégique d'écotourisme du parc national Talassemtane" prepared by Atecma and Ecotono consulting for IUCN Med. The project adopted the European Charter for Sustainable Tourism approach in two protected areas of Tunisia and Morocco

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

Annex 2: Example of Cooperation Agreement between Park and Local Tour Operator

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 a basic 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 traveling 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 package/s in the territory, in collaboration with the Local community and following the principles as stated in MEET Manual.

The characteristics of the package, as detailed in the Manual, can be detailed here or presented in an annex. If already agreed, the characteristics of the package 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 package in the protected area;
- will cooperate closely with the Travel Agency for the definition of individual parameters (duration of the package, itinerary within the park, number of groups etc.);

- will notify the Travel Agency for any needed modification to the package 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 package;
- will coordinate with the Travel Agency and the rest of the cluster for disseminating and promoting the Ecotourism package

3.2 The Travel Agency (*name*):

- will cooperate closely with the management body for the for the definition of individual parameters (duration of the package, 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 Ecotourism package

ARTICLE 4

Funding

If the elaboration of the package 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.



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