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National selection for the Council of Europe Landscape Award in Latvia and the project “Kuldīga Town in Venta Valley – Preserving Unique Landscape for the Next Generations!”

Landscape management, planning and development issues are being increasingly emphasized since European landscape convention came into force in Latvia in the year 2007. Many municipalities recognize value of landscape and pay particular attention to their integration in the public space, but during the economic crisis that began in 2008, project development was limited due to lack of finance.

Therefore the “history” of the European Landscape Award in Latvia is short and a special National Landscape Award has not been established. But every 2 years a selection of applicants for the European Landscape Award is organized on a national scale.

In year 2008 and 2010 none of Latvian authorities or groupings considered their activities would qualify for this Award. In year 2012 two local municipalities participated in the national selection of tender for European Landscape Award. In year 2014 four local municipalities took part on national selection of Landscape Award.

Evaluation Commission of the project proposal was set up by the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Regional Development. This Commission included representatives from Nature protection department, Spatial planning and Environmental protection department, ministry of Culture, State Inspection for Heritage Protection and NGOs - Latvian Association of Local and Regional Governments and Latvian Association of Landscape Architecture as well. All applications were evaluated on the basis of rules governing the Landscape Award of the Council of Europe. Each criterion was evaluated from 1 to 3 points. In addition, each member of the Commission could give extra point for the particular importance of the project.

The highest number of points collected project by Kuldīga novads “Kuldīga Town in Venta Valley – Preserving Unique Landscape for the Next Generations!” which won the honor to represent Latvia on European level in the year 2014.

Why did this project win? The answer is simple, because this project had followed all the rules and met the criteria set by the Council of Europe: this is a unique project within natural and cultural values are systematically developed over many years, involving a wide range of target groups.

Kuldīga Town

Kuldīga is a historical town in the western part of Latvia, historical territory of Courland, with population of 11 200 according to Central Statistical Bureau (total population of Kuldīga Municipality including rural territories- 23 900)

Historically the central part of Kuldīga had started developing already in the 13th century and it has preserved the planning elements from the 13th –19th centuries. In the middle of the 13th century, Kuldīga became an important administrative, military and later a trade centre of Courland. The growth of Kuldīga was facilitated by its important waterways of the river Venta and old transit roads.

One of the most powerful expressions of charm of the old town of Kuldīga is the medieval historical centre near the river Alekšupīte that runs through the old town from the South, flowing between buildings, and reaching the river Venta with great accent - mill (an example of technology

development in the 19th-20th century) pond and a waterfall. It is the only such urban planning ensemble from the 17th-18th century that is preserved in the Baltic States.

The silhouette, panorama and urban landscape of the old town of Kuldīga cannot be perceived without direct context of the natural surrounding of the site – the primeval valley of the river Venta (depth 58 meters), rapid flow of the river and the widest waterfall (249 meters) in Europe, developed in dolomite riverbed of the river Venta. The impressive landscape of nature objects is harmonically improved with the massive brick bridge, built in 1874.

The unique value of the landscape in Kuldīga is signified by intersection of important natural and cultural highlights– the centre of Kuldīga town next to the river Venta is both NATURA 2000 and UNESCO Tentative list site.

Project

The presented project is the case how Kuldīga Town promotes and maintains synthesis of Cultural Heritage and Nature Values for future by a set of several complimentary activities implemented starting from 2004.

Central aim: Promote planning, protection and good management of Kuldīga Town landscapes within the river Venta valley to promote safeguarding of Cultural Heritage and Nature Values for future.

Aims:

- to improve river ecological condition and natural landscape;
- to restore and highlight Kuldīga town's culture and nature landscape on the banks of the river Venta;
- to raise public awareness and promote the image of Kuldīga town within the Venta valley as an important heritage site.

Outcomes

Ecological effects.

Improved water quality through implementing projects for new sewerage collection system and limiting the overgrowth of water plants.

Cleaned spawning sites, promoted growth of fish population have improved spawning success of lamprey and salmonid in upper stretches of the river.

Visual and culture historical effects.

Improved visibility of the river valley and landscape of the widest waterfall in Europe (249 meters) by limitation of overgrowth of water plants and clean and developed infrastructure along the river banks:

Renewed and highlighted culture historical landmarks – the old brick bridge, the town garden, restored museum building and renovated streets in the old town of Kuldīga.

Social and educational effects.

Well developed infrastructure for recreation and nature education activities including Blue Flag Beach on the river Venta and reconstructed town garden with open-air cinema.

The improvement of living conditions is achieved by connecting both sides of the river to centralised sewerage collected system and reconstruction of the old brick bridge and adjacent streets.

Activated and educated inhabitants and raised awareness – involvement of citizens in river clean-up activities, training of the teachers on how to use river as resource for outdoor environmental education, use of river and its landscape in artistic activities, organizing UNESCO city games/conferences.

Developed new entertainment events for the citizens - open-air cinema and tourism season opening event “Flying Fish in Kuldīga”.

Economic effect

Improved economic value of the landscape – due to well-maintained environmental and cultural values Kuldīga has become one of the “Top 10” visiting endpoints in Latvia. Additional economic gain is ensured also by enlarged fish spawning. Well arranged transport and engineering infrastructure helps in development of entrepreneurship The municipality supports various artistic initiatives and

culture historical projects e.g., international summer school of photography, artist residencies, exhibitions, financial contribution to restoration and renovation of the historical buildings in the town centre etc.

The project has increased public awareness and importance of landscape is recognised not only as a part of daily life, but also as a part of Cultural heritage inherited from the previous generations of different nations jointly living and developing Kuldīga Town. The project has also significant impact on local citizens who took active part from an early stage. From development of planning documents on different levels to practical involvement in the river clean-up activities, educational activities and other activities to maintain the landscape (including initiative to install video system to avoid illegal fishery and safeguard migratory fish resources) and awareness raising activities when the citizens restore and renovate their historical buildings.

The future challenges include management of the arranged riverside infrastructure, new projects for development of recreational facilities, the river Venta riverbed cleanup from the weeds as well as maintenance of landscape values and riverside infrastructure to ensure sustainable development both of natural and urban environment.