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WORKSHOP 2 – Water landscapes: international experiences

Water landscapes in Poland – Adaptation of the European Siekierki – Neurüdnitz Bridge for tourism purposes

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Today, with a view to discussions on water landscapes, I would like to present a project in which water in landscape became both inspiration and baseline for further activities. The project has been implemented by the Landscape Parks Complex of West Pomeranian Voivodeship, and the materials and photos in the presentation are courtesy of this institution.

Landscape parks in Poland have a long tradition. They were established primarily in the 1980s and '90s and constitute one of Poland's forms of nature and landscape protection. The key tasks of a landscape park include education, promotion and activities in the area of tourism and recreation, co-operation with different institutions and the people living within the park borders, as well as protection of these most valuable areas in the region.

The Landscape Parks Complex of West Pomeranian Voivodeship consists in six parks with a total area of 119,000 ha. Today I will focus on the Cedyński Landscape Park, where the “Adaptation of the European Siekierki – Neurüdnitz Bridge for tourism purposes” project is currently being developed.

The beginnings of a bridge connection between Siekierki and Neurüdnitz date back to the 1750s. Wooden bridges constructed in this place failed to survive the natural conditions and were destroyed by high water levels and ice drift. A bridge standing on brick and stone supports with steel spans was

constructed at the end of 19th century. In February and April 1945, the bridge was blown up by the retreating German army. After its rebuild in 1954, the bridge has never been exploited: not a single train has crossed it. It was maintained and renovated as a reserve crossing for defence and military purposes.

At present, the total bridge length is 660 m – two spans, each 330 m long, one on the German side and one on the Polish side. The spans connect to a mineral island of 110 m length.

The Siekierki-Neurüdnitz Bridge is the longest structure on the Odra River. The last scheduled trains crossed it in 1945. It is situated 77 km from Szczecin and 66 km from the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin and is of great symbolic value, both in terms of policy and history, as a witness of tragic events of World War I and II, and of the Cold War. The bridge spans the extremely valuable natural wetlands of the Odra River in the Cedyński Landscape Park. Today, it acts as a symbol of joint European history, nature and reconciliation between Poland and Germany, as well as an inspiration for Polish and German co-operation, for both current and future generations.

The unexploited Siekierki-Neurüdnitz Railway Bridge connects two banks of the Odra River. Its 660 m structure is surrounded by the old river bed of Odra, called the Kostrzynieckie Rozlewisko (Kostrzynieckie Wetlands). It forms a part of a larger, transborder natural complex situated along the Odra River bed and known among Poles and Germans as the Unique Lower Odra Valley (Unikalna Dolina Dolnej Odry). This area consists, along the course of the Odra River, of the Warta Estuary Landscape Park, Cedyński Landscape Park, German National Park of Odra Valley and Lower Odra Valley Landscape Park. In addition, all these areas are covered with bird habitat protection under the European Natura 2000 Network. With a view to natural values, this is the last such large area in Europe, where natural fluctuations of rivers are not artificially regulated and human activities are primarily of extensive nature, coexisting with the surrounding natural environment.

Providing tourists with access will transport them directly into wild nature, enabling them to enjoy nature “at their fingertips”, following the basic principles of sustainable development and not disturbing it in any way.

Since 2004, Poland and Germany have pursued the revitalisation of the Siekierki-Neurüdnitz Bridge in the form of the pedestrian and cycle connection of German and Polish tourist routes, rather than a railway connection. This project was addressed during a conference in 2015.

Material and conclusions collected during the conference formed the basis for further activities taken by the Landscape Parks Complex of West Pomeranian Voivodeship, in partnership with the German Barnim-Oderbruch Office. In 2016, an application to the INTERREG V-A Interreg V A Mecklemburg – Western Pomerania / Brandenburg / Poland was submitted. In July 2017, the Committee decided to co-finance the project. The total cost of the project amounts to EUR 3.6 million.

The following project tasks are planned:

- adaptation of the bridge as a pedestrian and cycle path with a viewing platform on the bridge;
- active protection of the eagle-owl (*Bubo bubo*) by the installation of artificial breeding platforms in a radius of 10 km from the bridge – bearing in mind that the eagle-owls nesting near the bridge may be disturbed during the renovation period;

- workshops for Polish and German local communities to demonstrate the opportunities of using the bridge as a tourist attraction;
- advertising film and media spots to promote the project and tourist products in the region;
- a closing conference.

From the bridge there are unique views of the Oder river and its wild, natural wetlands. The bridge itself is a form of a viewing terrace of a total length of 660 m. To attract more tourists, a two-storey viewing platform over the bridge span will be constructed providing views the whole bridge as a monument of technique. The bridge will be equipped in tourist and education infrastructure, while the embankment (state border) will act as a symbolic common leisure and recreation space. All this will increase interest and develop tourism in the region. The project will be a unique promotion of continuous and sustainable development of the border regions.

Providing the tourists with access to the bridge shall fill a gap in the communication system and enable more frequent crossing of the Odra River in both directions. Implementation of the project will enable multi-functional use of the bridge. The bridge will act as transborder pedestrian and cycle path, that forms part of currently created systemic cycle paths of the West Pomeranian Voivodeship. In addition it will combine the newly-developed Trasa Pojezierna (Lake Route) (Autumn 2018) between Trzcińsko Zdrój and Siekierki with the system of German and international cycle routes. It will enhance supra-regional and regional tourist flow on the long-distance W-E and N-S routes and will also encourage local tourism in the German and Polish communities surrounding the bridge.

In 2018, following the decision of the Regional Director for Environmental Protection in Szczecin, the pre-investment activities for the active protection of eagle-owls (*Bubo Bubo*) commenced. Tender documentation concerning adaptation of the bridge for tourism purposes is currently under preparation.

This presentation was prepared using materials and photos provided thanks to the Landscape Parks Complex of the West Pomeranian Voivodeship.