

Best practice 39: Pays Cathare, France

Scale: Regional

Stage of tourism development: Growing

Main objective: Regional development

Categories of effects:

Effects on urban governance

- Cultural tourism strategy
- Sustainable partnerships
- Stakeholder participation
- Regional cooperation

Effects on quality of life

- Urban economies
- Environment
- Social life, local values and traditions

Located in the South of France, the Aude Departement is mostly known for its Mediterranean coastline and the World Heritage City of Carcassonne, both two important magnets for tourist attraction since the 1970s. The "hinterland" of Aude, however, has been lacking the attention in spite of a rich provision of Cathar and other historical sites. Decline of traditional economic activities and depopulation motivated the departmental authority ("General Council") to develop village cultural tourism as a way to diversify and revitalize the local economy. The "Pays Cathare" initiative began in the late 1980s, and illustrates a number of effective techniques of using cultural resources for economic and social development. After gathering representatives of towns and villages interested in heritage tourism, the General Council commissioned market research and feasibility studies for the Cathar heritage sites, which confirmed high tourist potential for the region. National agencies, the private sector, the Chamber of Commerce and local population were involved in the consultation process; The Cathares Studies Centre of Carcassonne was also involved in defining strategies in line with authenticity and sustainable development principles. This partnership approach was maintained throughout the programme. The initiative benefited from Leader I and II funding. This close identification between the Leader Initiative and the Cathar programme gave locals confidence that marketing, product development and training schemes could be effectively funded and generate massive support from project promoters. A cultural tourism strategy was devised, comprising three complementary aspects: the development of growth poles including one major Cathar site and side attraction; the development of a "Pays Cathare" quality label; territorial development whereby local initiatives are nurtured by local development agents. In the village of Cucugan, visitor numbers increased from 7000 in 1980 to 88000 in 2000. The initiative allowed many towns and villages to boost their declining economies and figures as a case study in the 2002 EC Tourism Unit report on natural and cultural heritage to develop sustainable tourism.

Source: EC, DG Enterprise, Tourism Unit, 2002. "Using natural and cultural heritage to develop sustainable tourism".

Links:

<http://europa.eu.int/comm/enterprise/services/tourism/studies/ecosystems/heritage.htm>

<http://www.audetourisme.com>