

Developing Geopark tour packages in peripheral regions: a Shetland case study

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Geopark Shetland is working with Magma Geopark, Katla Geopark and Stonehammer Geopark on a tourism project funded by the Nordic Atlantic Cooperation Fund. The partners, linked by a 'Northern Georoutes' brand, are developing an online holiday booking system through which package tours to each of the Geoparks can be promoted and sold. The project aims to: (1) promote the Geoparks to a niche market by offering unique, high quality visitor experiences at affordable prices and (2) support local businesses through coordination of tourism activities.

This paper will highlight some challenges faced by peripheral regions in the development and sale of tourism packages, and outline potential solutions using the Geopark Shetland experience as a case study. There have been four key stages to the development process:

1. Engaging and maintaining stakeholder interest. In spring 2013, Northern Georoutes partners sent an online questionnaire to tourism businesses in each region to establish whether they would be interested in working in partnership to develop package tours. Following results analysis, some suggested package options were outlined for consideration.
2. Deciding who will sell packages. There are currently no Shetland-based tour operators offering a range of package deals. The Geopark worked with government development agency Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE) to explore the pros and cons of becoming a licensed tour operator, or working with an existing operator on the Scottish mainland.
3. Educating stakeholders about group business. In spring 2014 the Geopark hosted a 1-day seminar for stakeholders, led by experts in the tour package field in partnership with HIE and national tourism body Visit Scotland. It aimed to illustrate the mechanism of developing package tours, the risks and the benefits.
4. Addressing gaps in market provision. Analysis of market trends and product availability showed potential for business development in Shetland to cater for the adventure tourism market.

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