

**Czech-Polish MTB Trails:**  
**A General Assessment of The Existing Trails as They Currently Stand,**  
**Management Issues and Branding**

by Michelle Jones based on notes and observations from meetings during Dafydd Davis'  
assessment visit in Spring 2016  
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## **Introduction**

I have separated the findings in this report under the following headings:

- Tourism, Communities and Local Economy
- Branding and Marketing Strategies
- Further Trail Development
- Funding
- Partnerships
- Trail Management and Maintenance
- Land Management

These are summaries of observations on separate topics from meetings with stakeholders and/or partners of the project during the assessment visit in spring. Following these assessment topics, the findings from the observations and then the recommendations in relation to these findings are presented.

### **1. Tourism, Communities and Local Economy**

- The trails being free to use for anyone, and accessible to all people and communities is very important, and they allow users to be closer to nature, promoting the use of the forest
- The trails have been instrumental in developing tourism in the areas on both sides of the border and are of great commercial value, with increased numbers of biking tourists supporting local business
- On the Polish side of the border, they see that there are opportunities to further develop the municipality as an MTB destination, to bring economic benefit to the municipality and for the Forestry to use this model to develop trails elsewhere in Poland. Strategically speaking there is the potential for this area to become very important, and to further develop the mountain biking markets in Poland, if not Central Europe.
- On the Czech side of the border there was no tourism in the region before the trails. Now they have a thriving tourism product. Nove Mesto was recognized as having most potential for tourism development and it is believed that further trail development in Poland will further boost tourism in the area. It is not believed that it would create competition with the Czech trails and tourism facilities, as many users of the Polish trails already stay in Nove Mesto. Swieradow Zdroj has an already established tourism market and thus prices for facilities such as accommodation are more expensive than in Nove Mesto. Nove Mesto provides service to a different part of the tourism market than Swieradow Zdroj. The trails in both regions are viewed as one product by the stakeholders, however there are issues related to this, which will be discussed later.
- Following the use of trail counters and visitor surveys, the mayor of Nove Mesto wants to inform local businesses that the number of visitors increased by 7% over the last year; this should be treated as a signal for local businesses to develop and invest.

- The town of Nove Mesto has a municipality company called 'Sport and Relaxation Centre' which the town owns and supports financially. They manage half of the campsite and outdoor swimming area close to Singltrek Centrum.
- income increased 3.5 times since the opening of the trails. The centre is non-profit, people pay contributions towards the facilities, therefore the income from the camp now helps to contribute to the running of the swimming pool. Thus, income from the mountain biking tourists is helping to improve other local recreation facilities and the local municipality.

## **2. Branding and Marketing Strategies**

- There is a brand for the destination "Singltrek pod Smrkem". It was originally developed for both the Czech and Polish side, but the Polish partners decided to use their own branding. "Singltrek pod Smrkem" has a professionally developed philosophy and visual identity. It has established communication channels. It is established on the Czech Market and internationally. However, it is less recognized in Poland where Polish partners use their own branding and identity. The Polish brand identity is less defined and established – due to repeated rebranding. It does not reach beyond Poland. It does have communication channels developed.
- No common branding or product currently between the two sides of the border.
- Branding issues – rebranding is expensive and probably impossible. It may not be a bad thing that there are the three separate brands across the product – all together they create the whole product. The other partners consider branding to be a road block. Tomas Kvasnicka attempted to trademark the logo and word singltrek for the whole of the EU – the logo is copyrighted; the word is in dispute with Trek bikes, whose Czech distributor runs one of the trailheads together with current CEO of SpS, o.p.s.
- If any partner agrees to the license terms to use the logo/brand they can then use the logo on signs/marketing etc. The license is offered with a symbolic fee to partners and access points; however, the terms specify that they would have to use Tomas Kvasnicka's services for any expertise or supervision required in relation to any trails marked with the brand. The license was originally put in place by Tomas to protect the standard of quality associated with the brand
- The branding was originally wanted by all partners, who agreed for Tomas Kvasnicka to take ownership of it at the start; however, there was a disagreement about the extent of which to use the brand. The partners wanted the brand to make the destination unique and to set a quality standard. The use of the trademark by the partners was forbidden by Tomas except if they agreed to the license, as specified above. Tomas wanted to develop the brand to produce singltrek centres throughout the Czech Republic.

## **3. Further Trail Development**

- The Polish Partners they see a gap in the market which they feel they could fill – thereby increasing the status of the municipality as a destination.
- Forestry on the Polish side of the border sees potential to use the model elsewhere in the country; therefore, it is very important that the model succeeds at every level if it is to be replicated

- The Czech side would like to plan an iconic trail to go higher and include the mountain into the product, to attract more people, though they don't have agreement from all partners, like Nature Conservation currently
- Within CHKO's, as opposed to areas of State Forest without conservation status, there are higher designations for conservation. In the Jizera mountains there are some areas so strongly protected that it would be impossible to create trails. The State Forest must manage the forest within this designated area much more sensitively i.e. any cutting must be done sensitively. The designations and methods are stated in law. In areas where there are no designations, the State Forest still cares about how the forests and land are managed, they are custodians of the forest and want to look after it
- When discussing further trail development, some representatives of the Forest Authorities have stated there is adequate provision for this user group, and would like to consider other groups such as hunters and hikers, though they may not be taking into consideration the potential of the area to be of great regional significance because of the trail product
- Mayors, forest managers, a trails expert and a representative from Nature and Conservation would need to be present to discuss any new trail development within conservation areas, and agree to next steps
- It was observed that there is a desire to learn from the existing model when considering developing any further trails
- Due to the current situation, the State Forest has no desire to develop any further trails at present. First there needs to be clear agreement and they need to be sure the money they invested is not losing value; this is Mr Ricar's responsibility
- These trails were the first region in the Czech Republic where the State Forest invested money in a product such as this, and with that comes a high level of responsibility. Mr Ricar recognizes it is a similar situation to Coed Y Brenin in the UK, people are travelling to the region to use the trails and they are satisfied, however, they want to be sure that the governance is well done
- The trails were planned, designed and implemented very well but management is a key issue which needs to be resolved prior to any further development

#### **4. Funding**

- The trail maintenance budget is a very important issue
- The highest proportion of the budget is from the state Labour Office with contributions from the 3 founding municipalities (Libverda, Nove Mesto and Frydland) and one volunteer municipality. Three trailhead facilities pay contributions per the number of parking spaces at their facilities, this is a fixed annual contribution
- The contributions total 700,000 crowns p/a – 400,000 from the office of unemployment and approximately 120,000 crowns in total from the trailhead facility operators.
- Approximately 10% of funds for SpS o.p.s come from sponsors
- Expenses covered by the budget are salaries, tools, the running and maintenance of the quad and materials
- State Forests provides some materials where necessary e.g. SpS o.p.s. provides normal maintenance but 2 years ago a section of trail required resurfacing and this exceeded the usual cost of maintenance; this cost was covered by the State Forests, who provided the material and contractors to undertake the work

- The mayor of Nove Mesto monitors trends and figures in visitor numbers. As this is an EU project he feels there is an obligation to accountability to that project
- Trail branding, marketing and public relations are paid for by Tomas Kvasnicka without any contribution from public sources

## **5. Partnerships**

- Firstly, all partners worked together to meet and discuss the trails and their future. This shows a commitment and a willingness amongst the partners to work together
- The mayor of Nove Mesto sees that the transfer, or lack thereof, of information between the Czech and Polish side regarding forest operations is problematic
- The trail maintenance and management has been questioned by the media, which may have a negative influence on the number of visitors
- How will the development of the centrum in Poland affect the flow of information between the two sides? It is possible it could influence the trails by people starting from the Polish side, but it is also hoped that more information will be shared in addition to having an allocated person at the centrum to communicate with the Czech side. In terms of users it would be better to have the same information available at all access points.
- All partners are very valuable to the trail product, however, there are conflicts between parties and unless these are resolved to a certain level, or agreements are made which make it possible for these parties to work together, further development and the success of the existing project is in jeopardy
- On a local level, at present, the situation is not creating too many difficulties for the State Forest, however, it is a struggle to contain the conflicts between partners away from the media. The State Forest is a State organization, handling public money; this is Mr Ricar's responsibility. He does not want the coverage of the project's problems in media to create difficulties for the headquarters of the State Forests.
- Originally, the State Forest wanted the trails built and then passed on to the local mayors as their responsibility.
- However, current issues mean that Forestry must make a continuous effort to hold it all together; they have a responsibility to the public and would prefer if they were not in this position.
- State Forest feels that the flow of communication between themselves, OPS and the operators is effective. After forming OPS the communication improved. The OPS board consists of some of the mayors and this is seen by the State Forest as a good thing, as this links the communities to the management. The communities buy in and involvement is a fundamental part of the project. 3 Pillars – 1<sup>st</sup> pillar communities, 2<sup>nd</sup> pillar State Forest for land and investment, 3<sup>rd</sup> Pillar the expert - this arrangement applies only to the trails on the Czech side

## **6. Trail Management and Maintenance**

- There are currently no Trailhead Facilities on the Polish side and management and maintenance is an issue for them. They would choose to address this by looking for a private investor who would be willing to pay for and run a centrum and manage the trails.

Management and maintenance of the trails would be paid for by the town, however they do not feel that they have the relevant skills to do it themselves.

- Singltrek pod Smrkem o.p.s. are responsible for trail maintenance on the Czech side. They have a legal contract with the State Forest.
- Concerns have been expressed whether the trails are being maintained to the correct standard. As EU money and State Forestry funding paid to build the trail, they have a responsibility to ensure they are maintained to the required standards.
- The trail owner, in legal terms, is the State Forest and they have a responsibility and plays a role with regard to issues outside the day to day management and maintenance of the trails such as harvesting operations or naturally occurring events such as windblown trees or extreme weather
- It was stated by SpS o.p.s that if there is an issue caused by trail maintenance, insurance is in place to cover that – though the extent of this insurance coverage should be explored further in relation to the role played by SpS o.p.s and trail maintenance
- The objective of SpS o.p.s. with regards to maintenance of the trails is to maintain them at their original state, or reinstate them to this standard if required – this has proved to be problematic without a thorough understanding of some of the basic trail maintenance methods, as discussed with Dafydd during the trail review
- The State Forest has an obligation to provide larger repairs if there are natural disasters or naturally occurring issues such as windblown trees on the trail; this does not come out of the budget of SPS o.p.s.
- Contractors undertake harvesting and have a responsibility to reinstate the trail if they are damaged during forest operations, however this isn't usually completed to the correct standard and SPS o.p.s. end up reinstating the trail.
- The State Forest is obliged to inform SpS o.p.s. of any forest operations at least 3 days in advance so they can arrange for closures/diversions. SPS o.p.s. is obliged to inform all the users on the web site and at access points about any restrictions, however, their web site is largely unknown and the information channels of the destinations are run by the owner of the "Singltrek pod Smrkem" brand.
- State Forest has a harvesting plan which can be used to make future diversion plans and in addition, via the tendering process, OPS can be informed when the State Forest sign off a harvesting contractor to begin forest operations in areas crossing or adjacent to the trails
- There is no maintenance and management protocol but day to day issues are recorded and trailhead facility operators are obliged to report issues they learn about, as stated in the MOU they have with SpS o.p.s, other then Singltrek Centrum which has no obligation because it does not have an MOU with SpS o.p.s.
- Usually when State Forest calls OPS, within 30 minutes they send the information to the access points and if necessary set up diversions, however, this information is not sent to the trail on the Polish side, which can result in issues for trail users
- Forest operations do not take place during the main season
- Poland does not have the same agreements in place between the State forest and any management team. There is no communication between the two sides of the border regarding forest operations or issues on the trails and this creates problems for trail users, and seriously calls into question whether the trails could be considered one product.
- Every year, by the 30<sup>th</sup> April, an inspection of the trail should take place, after the winter season but before the new season begins

- Signage is an integral part of the trail
- The trails and signage are ridden and filmed prior to inspection. Following this an inspection only takes place in areas where issues have been identified, on foot and bike and following this the annual plan is created
- The same employee of SpS o.p.s who performs the inspection undertakes the repair work, with four other people available if required
- No specifications are provided for repair and maintenance work, though the original construction prescriptions for the trail are available to work with, they do not use them
- An inspection report is produced which describes what the issues are and the actions required/taken
- Problems identified by SpS o.p.s. include: boardwalk on turns becomes slippery when it's wet, blue trail for families has quite a lot of standing water on it, trail users skidding and the cause is unknown, water on the trails at some points
- Dafydd rode the trails and they are mostly in very good condition, with only small, easily solvable problems

## **7. Land Management**

- The trails as a land management tool – the existing trails fit in with the land management model, on two levels. Firstly, in making the forest more accessible to more people, secondly managing the impacts of those people on the forest; this is important in relation to the long-term sustainability of the product, as sometimes trails can have a negative impact and make it more difficult for land managers to do their work
- Czech State Forestry sees the trail as a tool for land management, managing recreation on their land, managing and reducing conflict between users and reducing impacts on sensitive areas such as the Jizera mountains.
- If forest operations are planned, local forest managers send the information to the OPS at least 3 days in advance, who then provide information to the users.
- The local forest managers have now learnt how to do their job around the trails and the managers, who live locally, have seen the benefits to the local communities.
- Hunters have complained that people are riding on the trails during night time – the data shows how many are riding during the daylight and after dark – 273 after dark for the whole year out of a total 80,000 passes (approximately 0.3% of the total) with highest numbers in October and November. Hunters would be in the forest from November to January. This is a safety issue.
- The trails are located within 2 local forest areas. Some competences related to trails lie with them and some lie with Regional Office at Frydlant. State Foresters try to plan forest operations with these local forest areas to take place during the winter season. However, some operations do occasionally take place during summer season.
- There is a problem with people not respecting the fact they cannot be in the forest areas during operations. All key partners and trailhead operators receive the information about closures beforehand, however the problem is sharing the information with the users as there is no officially acknowledged common information source.
- After long years of co-operation and working together, the State Forest have learned how to manage forests where trails are present and they are open to working with the partners,

they are not able to do their work per the need of the trails alone, but they are happy to find a solution to work together

## **8. Findings**

- It is agreed that the trails have had a positive impact on the regions on both sides of the border
- Cross border communication is not effective
- Communication between some Czech partners is problematic
- The product cannot truly be considered as one product, with such divides in communication, branding, future developments and vision, rather two neighboring products
- There doesn't seem to be a clear common purpose; all partners want to create and develop a high-level trail product, but there doesn't seem to be agreement about how proceed.
- Amongst the partners, it is obvious that the product is very highly valued for numerous reasons, though there are some negative issues having an influence over the product. There needs to be some structured thinking about how to take this forward.
- The trail system as it stands works up to a point, but to go further and achieve different things would require looking at developing the product further. However, there is no way to develop the trails further without having the right management framework in place to support that
- Branding continues to be a problematic issue
- Trail management and maintenance issues stem largely from inexperience or lack of knowledge, which can be relatively easily resolved
- The trouble with the current management and maintenance regime is that SpS o.p.s. can end up being reactive as opposed to using limited resources effectively, and the formalized trail maintenance and management process is very open to interpretation

## **9. Recommendations**

- It is important to first establish what we mean by sustainability, in terms of this product/trails, it works on several levels – in relation to land use/management, in relation to its impact on the landscape, ecology and environment, socially in relation to communities, in relation to management – how can it be sustainably managed in the long term – this is linked to all the other aspects of sustainability
- The key to ensuring the sustainability of this product going into the future is first to assess the trails and product as it stands – assess the trails as part of the whole product and assessment of the whole product, broadly speaking; looking at the trail model, physical state of the trails and how they are supported by the management framework now
- The signage and waymarking system should be reviewed as an integral part of the product; the management and maintenance of the signs need to form part of the management and maintenance framework for the product as a whole
- A positive way forward would be to develop a framework within which the product can be maintained and developed; this framework must be developed in cooperation with a clearly defined list of partners – this list could be based on the 3 pillars scenario referred to by the Czech State Forest earlier in the document i.e. 1<sup>st</sup> Pillar – communities, 2<sup>nd</sup> Pillar – State Forest for land and investment, 3<sup>rd</sup> Pillar -Expert



- In relation to further trail development, on both sides of the border, the governance of any product must be agreed; how will it be run and how will it be administered
- A clear frame of reference including aims and objectives must be developed at a high level e.g. if the aim is to create an international MTB destination, what does this mean for the scope and scale of the product developed, which parts of the market should be targeted, what trail model is required, underpinning all of that is the management model which needs to be informed by the governance structure.
- This should not only be about who will govern it, but under which framework it will be governed.
- The management model should refer to all the Frame of Reference points
- It is essential to address management and maintenance issues, relating to forest operations and user safety in a management framework
- Formal programs of inspections, protocols and standards need to be developed
- With regards to the maintenance schedule, protocols should be set up against standards. For example, at least once every year the whole trail should be inspected looking at aspects against set standards. The outcome of this would be the development of a prioritized program of works. Of course, it is important to be able to react to issues as they arise also, and the combination of the two types of work means you can work out how much material/labour etc. is required annually
- Processes and protocols need to be put in place to ensure management happens in the right way
- It seems there are possible disagreements between parties concerned with trail maintenance; it is difficult to manage large numbers of trails with limited funds, therefore it's especially important to have an effective plan to allow management to take place well.
- When trails are managed, and maintained well it's easier to develop further trails.
- Auditing the work of Singltrek pod Smrkem o.p.s. should ideally be done by external entity independent of SpS o.p.s.
- Fairness and equality should be built into any framework that is developed and each partner should be treated fairly.
- Clarity is required about what and who exactly a trailhead facility is and which roles all facilities play within the product
- Clarity is required in how the product or either of its national parts will be branded and promoted
- It appears that the State Forest is currently holding the product, including the other partners/operators together. Though this is working now at a basic level, it does not fit with the original plans of the State Forest and there needs to be considerations of the future development and how to improve this.
- There is consistency amongst the partners in the broad ideas for the trail product, but the details need to be discussed and more clearly articulated.
- In the Czech Republic, it seems that any frameworks, governance and standards developed would be most effective and powerful within the ownership of the State Forest, and in Poland within the ownership of the Municipality, though this is obviously an issue for the partners to discuss