

Ecotourism and support of culture of ethnical minorities at Lake

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“To the Clean Peaks of Buryatia” – Ecotourism Development in the Baikal Region” – is a joint project implemented by the Baikal Information Centre “GRAN” and Global Nature Fund, supported by Merz-Stiftung. The uniqueness of the project is in the fact that we are trying to create an ecotourism model, capable to solve social-economic problems of ethnic minorites of the Baikal Region, environmentally friendly and protecting the unique culture of ethnic minorities and nature of one of the most remote and beautiful places of Buryatia – the Okinsky District. Ecotourism development and teaching the basics of tourism business will let to increase the employment level of the local people, revive folk crafts, and protect and preserve the traditional culture of soyots – one of the minorities of the North, assist their cultural and spiritual development.

The Okinsky district can boast of a unique natural and cultural-historic tourist potential: taking into account the number of its natural sites and cultural originality of aborigines, the Okinsky district doesn't have analogues in the republic. Density of population is 1 person per 5,000 sq.km. Soyots had luck in preserving their culture mostly due to a huge distance and, generally, isolation of their territory. The aborigines are busy mainly with private farmstead: cattle breeding (cows, horses, sarlyks, deer, sheep). Nowadays the Okinsky district may feel proud of its most northern population of yaks and the most southern population of deer.

The level of tourist potential mastery is extremely low, and of a spontaneous and uncontrolled type. Nevertheless, the territory has great tourist resources, including those for horse and water tourism development.

The first results reached during the project implementation:

- Experts from GRAN organized and hold 2 seminars for the Oka people. As a result of seminars and consultations, the first three families from Orlik Village decided o start receiving tourists in their houses.
- As a result of joint efforts of Baikal Information Centre “GRAN” and Global Nature Fund 2 tours were worked out: “Geser’s Area” and “Soyots of the Mountainous Oka”.
- 2 Tourist Information Centres in Orlik and Sorok Villages were equipped: with furniture and office equipment;
- Within the frames of the conference an international seminar was organized with about 60 participants, and a group of German experts visited the district to evaluate the presented tours.

The first conclusions we made during the project:

- It's necessary to organise a painstaking work with the local population, involved in the tourist business (guest houses, service provided at comfortable tourist spots, tour guides, excursions, catering, souvenirs production);
- Coordinated activity with the local administration is needed, for solving many problems appearing during the project;
- It's necessary to prepare professional staff: first of all, tour guides, preferably among the locals;
- Positioning on the external markets is needed, and strengthening of the advertisement-informational supply of the district's tourist potential, which is actively being done today with the help of GNF.

In our opinion, this is a universal algorithm of solving the top-priority tasks, and it can be used while implementing the projects alike in the Chepala Lake Region, where it's possible to develop ecotourism and preserve the *самобытной* culture of aboriginal peoples.

In the near future we'll solve the following project tasks:

- Work out a complex tourism development programme in the district taking into account modern tendencies of ecotourism development;
- Make an accent in ecotourism development on the complex product, including environmental, ethnographic and religious directions;
- Scientific tourism may become independent product – study and observation rare animals, birds, plant species and unique ecosystems;
- Oka Eco-product positioning must take place in the segment of expensive and VIP-tourism (for achieving the maximum economic effect while leaving the minimal recreational capacity on the environment).

We hope, implementation of the project “To the Clean Peaks of Buryatia” will bring tangible results, and on the example of one area, an effective model of introduction the ecotourism technologies into the traditional type of living of the population, will be created.