



SINCA NOUA

A WWF *One Europe,* *More Nature Pilot Project Site*

When a sustainable business moves into a rural area, all sorts of possibilities open up. Sinca Noua is a small Romanian village in southern Transylvania and the location for implementing a jointly-led community and business approach towards a green future for its people and landscapes. The ecologically-appropriate “Equus Sylvania” horse-riding and eco-tourist venture now employs more than eight full-time people, but its impact has been wider.

Facilitated by the local municipality and the Foundation for Sinca Noua, the village has embarked on a bold path towards transforming its economy into one based upon – and safeguarding – natural resources. As the first “ecological village” in Romania, OEMN has supported the initiative since 2004 because of the lessons – and the successes – which the village can offer.

About the Project Area

Location

Sinca Noua is located 50 km from the historic cultural and economic city of Brasov, in the southern Carpathians. It is possible to reach the village within three hours from Romania's principal international airport at Bucharest, some 180 km away.

Significant landscapes, habitats and species:

The village nestles in amongst the foothills of the southern Carpathian Mountains – the Fagaras and Tagla – which are host to a complete intact mega-fauna of bears, wolves and lynx. Almost completely surrounded by forests, Sinca Noua is blessed with abundant nature. Recent studies show a total of 23 different habitat types, 545 plant species, a very high number of insects (e.g. 545 species of large butterflies), 99 breeding birds as well as seven rodent species, 10 bats and 11 carnivore species present. The nearby (newly designated) Piatra Craiului National Park is noted for its rich biodiversity including species such as the edelweiss and chamois. The area is scenically picturesque and old traditions are intact.

Human presence:

Sinca Noua has approximately 1,800 inhabitants including a Roma minority of ca. 10% of the total population. The village has a long and distinguished history and in fact moved to this site during the political and religious upheavals of the 18th century, thus adding "Noua" ("new") to "Sinca", which comes from the neighbouring village "Sinca". Since farms in Sinca Noua, unlike in most other parts of Romania, were not collectivised during communism, the structure of small family enterprises has been preserved. The tradition that the younger generation takes over the farm from the elders has never been broken and the average age in Sinca Noua is still below 40 years, younger than in most other Romanian villages in the rural areas. The nearby county capital Brasov has a population of 280,000 and is a strong economic and cultural base for southern Transylvania.

Economic status:

Agriculture: Since the 1980s, agriculture, the mainstay of the region, has been in decline. Traditional, family farms of mixed crops (e.g. hay for livestock and domestic animals including sheep, cows, pigs and chickens) still function but people have found access to the market difficult if not impossible. A lack of subsidies for chemical fertilizers and pesticides has resulted in the absence of pollution into the landscape, as people were unable to afford to buy such inputs. This means that here, as elsewhere in Romania, much agriculture is in fact organic, from economic necessity rather than choice.

Other sectors: Apart from farming, forestry is important and the village has approximately 4,000 hectares of communally-owned woodlands. As a result of the efforts towards sustainability, tourism has become an economic force in the village, with seemingly well-based hopes for future growth in this area.

Problems



The main problems in Sinca Noua are economic, not environmental. With high employment in the traditional agricultural sector (which has little future), a lack of infrastructure, services and utilities, and out-migration in search of work, the problems facing the village are fairly typical of rural areas throughout post-transition, post-EU accession Central and Eastern Europe.

The hills, meadows and forests of the region are themselves relatively intact, forming a valuable resource which, if properly managed and marketed, could lead the village out of recession. The challenge has been how to earn income from these resources without squandering or damaging them.

Solutions and Results

Equus Sylvania opened for business in July 2004, around the same time as the Municipality (mayor's office) declared an official sustainable development path for the village which set out a twenty year vision:

A Vision for Sinca Noua – elaborated by the local council in November 2003

In 20 years, Sinca Noua will be an ecological village with a high social and economic standard. The local economy will be based on organic agriculture, eco-tourism and small processing industries. The village will be extended at its periphery. The community will contain a large surface of forests, natural pastures and hay-meadows, of which 10 percent are protected areas.

The population is becoming well-prepared in its professions, for example, knowing foreign languages, and will have easy access to medical and veterinary services.

The traditional folklore with its local particularity and the typical architectural style of the region will be vivid and transmitted. The use of natural resources in the community will be a model for sustainable development.

Joint and well-coordinated efforts of the municipality, Sinca Noua Foundation, and Equus Sylvania have subsequently led to a whole host of economic opportunities springing up. The strategy is based around three pillars of economic activity: organic agriculture; small-scale local product processing; and eco-tourism.

1. Traditional – Organic – Agriculture

Certification of the first organic agriculture began in 2006, and soon the entire territory will be designated in this way: a first for Romania. This traditional agriculture is important from both the conservation and the social point of view, since it works without large machinery, without chemicals and is also labour-intensive. Produce from organic agriculture also commands a higher price.

2. Small-Scale Local Product Processing

The meadows and forests around Sinca Noua house an abundant supply of forest fruits, mushrooms and medicinal plants. These, together with organic farming and animal husbandry, represent a rich potential source of income if processed, marketed and sold. To that end, the Foundation embarked on an ambitious plan to open up a Food Processing Centre, a purpose-built facility which will add value to the local produce and make a host of high quality organic food products including jams, brandies, cheeses and other dairy products. In December 2007, an empty farmhouse was purchased and converted into a small-scale cheese factory with training.



This facility, which employs two full-time staff, and which of course purchases all its raw milk from local farmers, has been producing cheese and other dairy products since April 2008. It is planned that the real Food Processing Centre will be constructed during 2009/10 and, eventually, the complex will expand to include an organic bakery and butchers.

Processing of forest fruits plays an important socio-economic function in that it provides income for the Roma population who – generally lacking in land – traditionally harvest them.

3. Eco-Tourism

The Equus Sylvania horse-riding facility and guesthouse is a small, high-quality, environmentally-appropriate business on the edge of the village. Employing eight full-time and up to six seasonal staff, it offers high-class equestrian and nature packages to tourists. Most of the food served by the kitchen is locally sourced, heating is provided by a wood-chip biomass burner, and wastewater treatment is performed by a small artificial reed-bed nearby.

Now that Sinca Noua is on the domestic and international map, more visitors are coming, Romanian and foreign alike. Already, two other small guesthouses/pensions have recently opened up in the village, as people start to exploit the opportunities initiated by the village's transition to a new economy.

The combination of organic agriculture, processing of high-quality local products and eco-tourism offers hope (and increasingly, results) to suggest that Sinca Noua can indeed achieve its bold vision set out by the mayor and council of the village back in 2003.

OEMN Mission

WWF's One Europe More Nature (OEMN) project uses an innovative approach to forge unusual partnerships so that business and nature can co-exist. Its mechanisms lead to win-win solutions for all, allowing Europe's rural workers to make incomes from the countryside while protecting nature. OEMN, tested at many pilot rural locations throughout Europe, is now mainstreaming conservation into everyday European business life.

Other WWF OEMN pilot project sites

Prespa (Albania, Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Greece), Vainameri (Estonia), Tisza Floodplains (Hungary), Merja Zerga (Morocco), Gelderse Poort (Netherlands), Maramures (Romania), Doñana (Spain)



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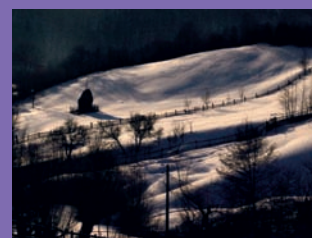
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