

## HOW TO PLAN THE DEVELOPMENT OF CYCLE TOURISM? – EXAMPLE OF ISTRIA COUNTY

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### Abstract

*Cycle tourism is one of the most interesting tourism products because it can be developed in very different regions. Over the last few years within the framework of European projects, national and regional organisations, international routes like EuroVelo and other routes and trails from local to international level have been developed and promoted. The objective of this paper is to summarise the lessons from the creation of an operational plan for cycle tourism at regional level in the case of Istria County. Istria County, as the most developed tourist county in Croatia, began to develop cycle tourism in the middle of the nineties of the last century. Compared to other regions in Croatia, the County of Istria has many cycling trails and routes. Also, for a growing number of tourists, cycling is one of the important motives for their arrival in Istria. In the design of the cycle tourism development plan, a number of stakeholders were involved. The involvement of stakeholders was very important since the development of cycle tourism can have a significant impact on a large number of stakeholders in the region.*

*Key Words: cycle tourism, sustainable development, sustainable tourism, Istria County*

JEL classification: R58, Z32, L83, P48

### Introduction

Tourism is one of the most important industries in the world and, in 2017, 10% of the world GDP was generated from tourism. As UNWTO (2019) indicated, the contribution of tourism to economic well-being depends on

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the quality of the tourism offer. As a result of tourists' expectations, destinations try to develop and promote sustainable tourism taking account of the economic, social and environmental impact that tourism has on local communities and visitors. Cycling tourism is one of the forms of tourism that is promoted as sustainable tourism. As Gazzola et al. (2018) emphasise, the development of cycle tourism in areas not characterised by mass tourism have an economic, social and environmental benefit on the area. Cycle tourism can be developed in a rural or non-rural area that has preserved social and environmental values, which are an important part of cycle tourism (Gazzola et al., 2018).

Some authors indicated twenty years ago, but the same applies today, that renovation and rejuvenation of rural areas with a preserved tradition, environment and social dimension in cycle tourism destinations could solve the problem of their decay and cycle tourists would be able to enjoy diversified areas (Ritchie, 1998; Ritchie & Hall, 1999).

Cycling is a form of slow tourism that allows visitors to enjoy and, at the same time, to preserve the environment, which is the main attraction for cycle tourists (Pavione & Pezzeti, 2016b).

Therefore it can be said that cycle tourism is in line with the sustainable tourism task if it is developed in the direction of minimising the negative side of tourism and with the aim of a long-term positive effect (Liu, 2003).

Understanding the importance of cycle tourism in Istria as an important tourist product of the destination began in the middle of 1990s and today Istria region is the most developed tourist region in Croatia with the most developed offer of cycle tourism products. Since 2015, Croatia has developed the Action plan for the development of cycle tourism in Croatia (Ministry of Tourism, 2015) with the aim to further plan and promote cycle tourism as an important part of the Croatian tourism offer. The main activities of the plan are to stimulate the development of Operational plans for the development of cycle tourism at regional levels. First they stimulate inland counties to create Operational plans for their areas and then coastal counties, the most developed tourist areas of Croatia. In the paper, the process of development of the Operational plan is presented for development of cycle tourism in Istria County (Plan) which was finalised in January 2019 and plans activities until 2025.

## **Literature Review**

### **Cycle Tourism as a Part of Sustainable Tourism**

The development of a tourism destination must be created with regard to the environmental socio-cultural and economic effects which tourism activity has on a destination. If tourism activity is developed in an inadequate way, taking into account the primary features of the destination, the result will be diversified products that will provide tourists with new experiences (Abdelati & Bramwell, 2015; Pavione & Pezzeti, 2016a; Pavione et al., 2017). Cycle tourism is one way to diversify the tourism product of a destination.

The popularity and understanding of the importance of cycling tourism has been growing (Faulks et al., 2008; Downward et al. 2009; Lumsdon, 2009) and there are numerous destinations which want to join the trend of cycling tourism development due to many positive aspects that cycle tourism has on a destination development or as a motive for tourist arrival. In the last twenty years cycling tourism in Europe has increased and, as Deenihan & Caulfield (2014) mention, for example, between 2006 and 2011, cycling in Dublin increased by 45%. The development of cycle tourism has a positive influence on a destination, because destinations become more interesting to tourists, but it also has a positive impact on local residents (Rotar et al, 2012; Cope, 2003).

For the purpose of defining the term a cycling tourist, it is necessary to divide bicycle tourists with regard to the intensity of their cycling and the motives for their arrival at the destination (Kovačić, 2015). So, there are two extreme limits of cycle or bicycle tourists. On the one side, there are the hard-cycling tourists, who are cycling all the time, and their motive for choosing and arriving at a destination is cycling tourism, and, from the aspect of a holiday, the name of this type is cycling holiday (Simonsen et al., 1998, Keeling, 1999). On the other hand, there are cyclists who occasionally use bicycles for the purposes of transport or as an additional activity on the holiday in their leisure time and the name of this kind of holiday is cycling day visits. The largest number of cycle tourists is in the middle between these extremes; tourists for whom biking is an important part of the vacation, and who use a bicycle for the purposes of transport and those who are cycling while on holiday (Simonsen et al., 1998; Keeling, 1999).

Cycle tourism, as an important part of sustainable tourism, needs to be developed in the direction that will result in a complete cycle tourist offer and it is good that the local residents recognise the needs and wishes of cycle tourists (Rotar et al., 2012). A well-developed cycling infrastructure motivates and encourages cycle tourists to cycle for the purposes of leisure and recreation (Lamont, 2009), as a means of transportation (Pavione et al., 2017; Gazzola et al., 2018) or for competition (Simeoni & Crescenzo, 2018). Cycle tourism can be a driver for destination development (Gazzola et al., 2018) but it is very important that all stakeholders use the initiatives in cycle tourism to develop destinations in a sustainable and responsible way (Rotar et al., 2012; Simeoni & Crescenzo, 2018).

### **Strategic framework for Cycle Tourism in Croatia**

For the development of cycle tourism, it is necessary to have co-operation between different stakeholders in destinations. Also, national and regional institutions need to be involved and they are the basis for the development of cycle tourism (Pavione & Pezzetti, 2016a). The above mentioned is the basis for the development of cycle tourism in a destination (Malucelli et al., 2015) or in cross-border cooperation (Stoffelen, 2018) and in development of international cycle routes. Cooperation between different regions and countries is very important for cycle tourism. In previous years many different initiatives have tried to improve the infrastructure and other facilities specially designed for cycle tourism. One of the best known is EuroVelo, which is a bicycle network consisting of 15 long distance cycling routes connecting the European continent. The purpose and aim of the project, led by the European Cyclists' Federation, in cooperation with national and regional partners, is linking the whole European continent with cycling routes. In 2016 in Croatia, the Coordination for the development of cycling tourism was established, which carries out the activities of the EuroVelo project. Four EuroVelo routes: EV6 - Atlantic - Black Sea Route, EV8 - Mediterranean Route, EV9 - Baltic - Adriatic and EV13 - Iron Curtain Trail pass through Croatia. Two EuroVelo routes, Mediterranean route EV8 and Baltic – Adriatic EV9 pass through Istria County. The aim is to strengthen cycle tourism in Istria County and to connect the existing county and local cycle routes with the EuroVelo routes, as well as to develop and maintain them according to the EuroVelo criteria, which are: safety, comfort, coherence and attractiveness of cycling routes (EuroVelo – the European

cycle route network;<sup>3</sup> Coordination for the development of cycling tourism)<sup>4</sup>. Given the above mentioned, Croatia is a destination that has very good potential to be an important cycle destination.

The strategic framework of cycle tourism development in Croatia is planned under the umbrella of the Ministry of Tourism and the Croatian National Tourist Board. Croatian Tourism Development Strategy until 2020 and Action Plan for the Development of Cycle Tourism highlight the importance of cycle tourism as a part of sustainable tourism, whose development enriches the tourist offer of the destination and has an important positive multiplicative effect for the local population. The advantages of Croatia as a cycle tourism destination are the favourable climate, attractive and diverse natural environment, rich cultural and historical heritage, proximity to large markets, country security and many roads that are not traffic intensive. These are the values in the focus of cycle tourist interest. In many cases large capital investments in a destination are not important for cycle tourism. Most important for cycle tourists are the avoidance of traffic intensive roads that will, by their dense and intense traffic, endanger their safety (Ministry of Tourism, 2015; Malucelli et al., 2015; Deenihan & Caulfield, 2014; Boettge et al., 2017). In this sense, the main problem and obstacle to the development of cycle tourism in Croatia is the cycle tourism infrastructure (Ministry of Tourism, 2015, Ministry of Tourism, 2013). The planning of infrastructure projects for cycle tourism must be planned with regard to leisure or transport, considering different preferences of users (Malucelli et al., 2015).

The Tourism Development Strategy of the Republic of Croatia cites cycle tourism as a separate tourist product, mainly for tourists between 18-25 and 25-34 years of age as the primary segment for cycle tourism products. According to the Strategy, cycle tourism is also a primary tourism product in Istria County (Ministry of Tourism, 2013). Likewise, Croatia's Tourism Development Strategy in the portfolio matrix of Croatian tourist products states that cycle tourism is the most attractive tourist product after nautical tourism and the segment of sun and sea tourism, as the most competitive tourism product. In addition, Istria County is the most developed cycle tourism destination in the Republic of Croatia. With the aim of further development of cycle tourism in Istria County in 2019, the

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.eurovelo.com/en>

<sup>4</sup> <https://cikloturizam.hr/>

Operational plan for cycle tourism development in Istria County for the period 2019 – 2025 was created. The difference between the Istria Operational plan and other Operational plans in Croatia is that the former is made for seven-year period, whereas the latter are only two-year plans. Hence, Istria County has developed the Master plan for tourism development of Istria County (Istria Tourist Board, 2015), which also plans tourism activities until 2025 in which development of cycle tourism is also included.

## **Methodology**

### **Steps in Creation of Cycle Tourism Development Plan in Istria County**

Regardless of the fact that Istria County is the most developed tourism county in Croatia, it needs to face the new challenges and to further develop tourism products with the aim of being a recognisable cycle tourism destination, in line with other developed European destinations. Many stakeholders were included in the development of the Plan in Istria County. As the support of decision makers was considerable, it was very important to include them. The existing literature and strategic plans at national, regional and local levels were first analysed in the paper. Since the Croatian Ministry of Tourism supported the development of the Plan, a top-down approach at the beginning of the project was applied. In the next phase a bottom-up approach was used. At the beginning of the project, the first step was to inform the stakeholders about the initiative and the project, so the idea of the development of the Plan was presented in the media. After that, a questionnaire for different stakeholders was developed. The questionnaire was divided into seven parts. The first part was a short introduction providing the reasons of the Plan development, explaining the ways of the stakeholders' engagement in the project, stating the reasons of their involvement and defining who would develop the Plan. The next five parts were created according to the framework design by the Ministry of Tourism, which was obligatory for the development of the Plan, and consisted of: planned projects of investment in cycle infrastructure, projects that were related to legislation (obstacles and improvements needed), projects related to education, projects related to the enhancement of cycle tourism offer and projects related to information and marketing of cycle tourism in the planned period. In these five questions, the stakeholders were asked to indicate the topic, what was necessary for the realisation of the project idea, which activities

needed to be carried out, the necessary financial resources for the realisation of the projects, sources of financing, time frame for plan implementation of the project and priority (on three levels). The seventh part of the questionnaire asked for their opinions. They were asked to identify what the main advantages and disadvantages of cycle tourism development in Istria County were and if they had any additional plans for their area. Based on the information obtained, a SWOT analysis was created (Brščić et al., 2019).

The questionnaire was sent to 114 cycle tourism stakeholders and most of them participated in the project. The stakeholders were: officers in the cities, municipalities and tourist boards, bike clubs, hotel companies, Administrative Department for Tourism, Administrative Department for Sustainable Management, Department for Maritime Affairs Traffic and Communications, Department for Nature and Environmental protection, The County Roads Administration of Istria County, Istrian Tourism Development Agency (IRTA), Istrian Development Agency (IDA), Croatian Forests Ltd., Učka Nature Park, Public Institution of Kamenjak and Brijuni National Park. The next steps were divided into three phases. The first phase was to connect with stakeholders and include them in the creation of the Plan through the survey. After that, the collected data from stakeholders was analysed and presented in a workshop where additional comments and input were added. Next, all the ideas collected were analysed and vision, mission and measures were suggested. The third phase included the organisation of a second workshop where all this was presented to the stakeholders and discussed with them. After its completion, the plan is to be presented to the public, with the possibility of additional consultation with all interested parties over a period of 30 days.

## **Results**

### **Istria County as a Cycle Tourism Region**

The County of Istria has 2,820 square kilometres but Istria is geographically very diverse and climate-friendly for the development of cycle tourism. The number of inhabitants in Istria is 208,055 according to the Census from 2011, which is 4.85% of the total population of the Republic of Croatia (Istria County, 2019). The geographical position of Istria County can be seen in Figure 1.

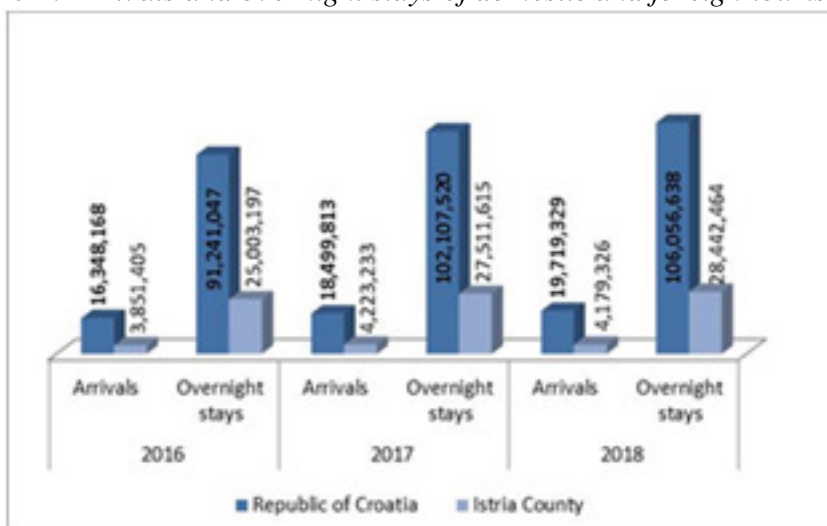
Figure 1: *Geographical position of Istria County*



Source: *Istria County*, <http://www.istra-istria.hr/index.php?id=263>

Istria County has long been the leading tourist region in Croatia. In 2018, the total number of overnight stays in Croatia was 106,056,638 with a total of 19,719,329 arrivals. On average, about 30% of tourist traffic is realised in Istria County and, in 2018, 26.64% of the total number of overnight stays in Croatia were realised in Istria County and most of the visitors were German, Austrian, Slovene and Italian tourists (CNTB, 2019).

Figure 2: *Arrivals and overnight stays of domestic and foreign tourists*

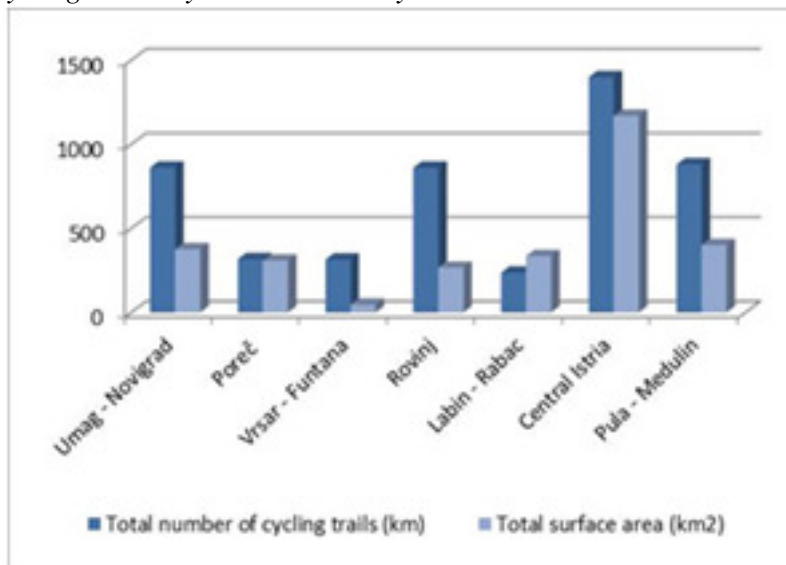


Source: *Croatian National Tourist Board*, <https://www.htz.hr/hr-HR/informacije-o-trzistima/informacije-o-tijeku-sezone>

The attraction of bicycle routes is reflected in the content of what the routes can offer and how attractions are, or can be, connected (Černá et al., 2014). Istria as a destination with many cultural sights, traditions, monuments and landscapes can easily link these destination contents which make cycling attractive.

On the destination web site of Istra Bike, the central point and destination management organisation for cycle tourism, all cycling routes have been listed and promoted, with their corresponding descriptions: their level of difficulty, surface type, type of trail, estimated cycling time and interesting things to see and the region is divided into seven sub-regions that offer different experiences. In 2018, Istria had a total of 147 cycle trails and routes (Figure 3) or more than 4,800 kilometers of cycling trails (Istra Bike, 2018).

Figure 3: Total number of kilometers of cycling trails and total km<sup>2</sup> per each cycling territory in Istria County

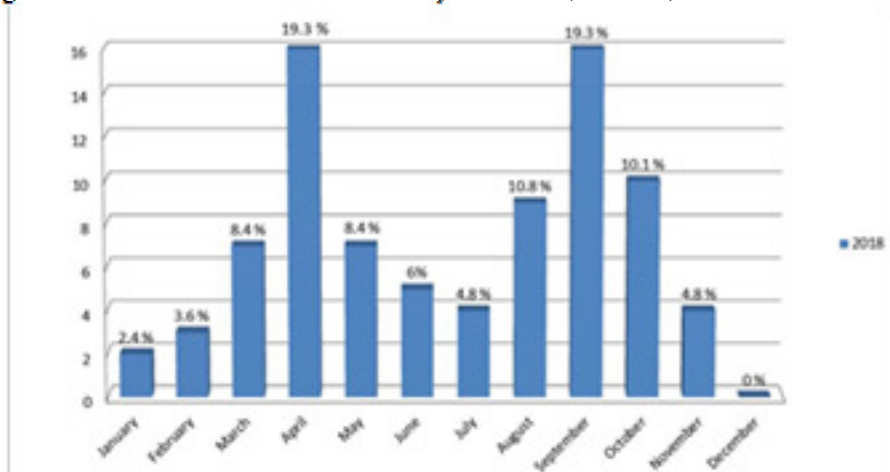


Source: *Istra Bike*, <http://www.istria-bike.com/hr/manifestacije>; and *Istria County*, <https://www.istria-istria.hr/index.php?id=425>

The Standards for Coordinated Cycle Tourism Development in Istria were made with the aim of developing cycle tourism in 2008. Its purpose was to provide standardised instructions for bicycle signalling, tables, maps and similar (IRTA, 2017). Due to the growing popularity of cycle tourism, changing lifestyles and types of holiday by an increasing number of people, Istra Bike & Outdoor DMC (Destination Management Company) department was founded in 2014. It was established with the aim of developing and promoting this segment of tourism in Istria region (Istra outdoor, 2018).

During 2018, 83 cycling events were organised in Istria County. Istria, as a summer tourist region, faces the problem of seasonality and overcapacity during the summer months. Most cycling events were organised in April and September, which is a good way of prolonging the season (Figure 4).

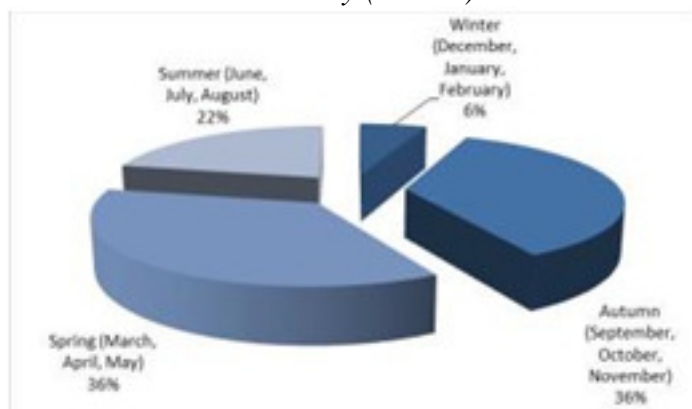
Figure 4: *Bike events in Istria County in 2018 (in total)*



Source: *Istra Bike*, <http://www.istria-bike.com/en/events>

At that time, the main roads are less crowded, and the temperatures are lower than during the main tourist season. All the above mentioned advantages influence and support the development of cycle tourism in the region.

Figure 5: *Bike events in Istria County (in total)*



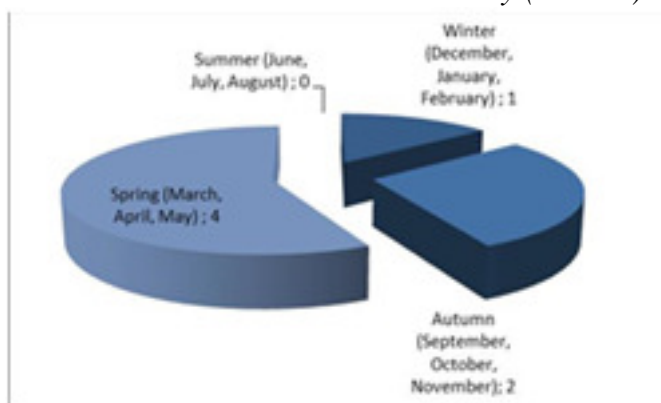
Source: *Istra Bike*, <http://www.istria-bike.com/en/events>

Further analysing the times of the events organised in 2018 (Figure 5), it can be concluded that the most interesting times for cycle events were

autumn and spring, so cycle tourism can be a good way to affect seasonality reduction.

Since Istria region is a recognisable and developed tourist region, some of the International bike events were organised in Istria County. In total 7 international events (races) were organised in Istria County in 2018 (Figure 6).

Figure 6: *International bike events in Istria County (in 2018)*



Source: *Istra Bike*, <http://www.istria-bike.com/en/events>

According to the TOMAS research carried out in 2017, 23.5% of Istrian tourists mentioned cycling as a holiday activity, which is the highest result in comparison to other coastal counties in Croatia. Tourists who stayed in Istria County in 2017 stated that in 25.4% of cases they used a bicycle as a means of transport. Average bicycle use, as a form of transport, in other coastal destinations in Croatia, was 15.3% (TOMAS, 2017).

### **Planned Measures for Future Development of Cycle Tourism**

The main goals of the future development of Istria County were summarised as the results of the project planned by stakeholders in the region. The main goal was to improve the quality of infrastructure. This is important for the quality of the existing roads as well as for the diversification of the cycle tourism product in the region. The second important goal is to position the region as an attractive cycle tourism destination. Other goals were to prolong the season, and the time which tourists spend in the area and to improve the safety of the roads for the satisfaction of tourists as well as local residents. Additionally, it affects

the repeated arrival of tourists, increases tourist spending and promotes cycling among local residents. With the aim to fulfil these goals, six measures were agreed on: investment in cycle infrastructure, development of bike share system of bicycles and electric bicycles, better cooperation between different stakeholders for the improvement of organisation, standards and management at the regional level, education of stakeholders and local residents about safety regulations, enhancement of cycle tourist offer and improvement of information and promotional activities (Brščić et al., 2019).

In relation to the above mentioned, the model which needs to be considered in development of cycle tourism in destinations can be summarised in the graphical model which can be seen in Figure 7. The model could be used for any destination which wants to develop cycle tourism.

Figure 7: *Model of cycle tourism development plan for tourism destinations*



Source: *Created by authors according to the Operational Plan for the Development of Cycle Tourism for the Istrian County for the period from 2019 to 2025*

## Conclusion

The lessons learnt from the research and the example of Istria County can be summarised in several concluding remarks. For the development of cycle tourism in some destinations it is necessary to use both a top-down and bottom-up approaches. The top-down approach needs to be implemented from the national and/or regional levels. They need to create the standards and to define the basic framework for cycle tourism development. The bottom-up approach is necessary to identify advantages and disadvantages and to create common goals of the stakeholders in the region. As many researchers point out, cycle tourism is a form of sustainable tourism and can be developed as special interest tourism. It can be developed in such a way as to create an additional offer in the region or just as one of the facilities in the destination. In this process, decision makers need to be involved and stimulate locals to implement their ideas so that cycle tourism can be developed in a way that will benefit and be used by local residents and communities. The development of cycle tourism can contribute to the destinations in many ways, bringing new opportunities for entrepreneurs. The new entrepreneurs need to be encouraged to implement new ideas in the development of cycle tourism in the region. In this way, cycle tourism can contribute to the destination in multiple ways, creating new jobs and life in areas which have not developed tourism activity. Istria County is a developed tourist region, but many improvements need to be carried out if it wishes to develop cycle tourism in a sustainable and responsible way. In Europe, there is a growing demand for cycle tourism, but little is known about the preferences and needs as well as the satisfaction of users of cycle tourism. Users' perception and satisfaction are important indicators in the development of tourism product and planning of tourism activity in the destination (Bršćić et al. 2016; Bršćić et al. 2018). These indicators are necessary for the future development of cycle tourism. It is also wise to consider the opinions of local residents about the development of cycle tourism in their region so that it can be developed in a sustainable and responsible way.

In the development of the Operational plan different stakeholders have had a different level of involvement and perception of cycle tourism development and that was a limitation in the undertaken research. This limitation was tried to be overcome by organising the workshops to clarify the ideas, so that the stakeholders are better understood by each

other. In the end, the stakeholders have accepted the development plan by signing the document.

For future research, it would be useful to carry out the research with the users of the cycle tourism product and develop the cycle tourism product according to their needs. Also, it would be wise to obtain the opinion of local residents about the cycle tourism product. All these elements, together with monitoring of realisation of the development plan, are necessary for the development of cycle tourism in a sustainable way.

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