

## **Modernization of Touristic Routes at the Bolshaya Kokshaga Reserve in Mari El Republic, Russian Federation**

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The Bolshaya Kokshaga Reserve occupies the territory of 21,405 ha. It is located 40 km westward from Yoshkar-Ola, the capital city of Mari El Republic in the mid-Volga region of the Russian Federation. The reserve is mostly a mixed (broad-leaved/taiga) woodland that serves a habitat for 1732 species of flora and fauna, including about 40 endangered species (listed in the Red Book of Mari El Republic and Russia).

Due to its proximity to Yoshkar-Ola and the availability of a natural water route (Bolshaya Kokshaga river), the reserve has a strong potential for eco-tourism development. Field studies show that at least 5-7 hiking routes (or 'eco-paths') can function there, serving individual tourists and groups (primarily Natural Science students of Volga Tech and Mari State University). Since 2007, the reserve organizes training courses, educating people from local community to work as guides, tourism instructors, animators, etc. The public relations campaign, despite its limited funding, has led to decrease of the level of poaching, illegal trespassing and littering in the woods. However, the number of incoming tourists is still too low to become the additional source of revenue for the reserve. The reason is the lack or absence of modern infrastructure for eco-tourism: no visual navigation, no modern camping facilities, no roads or walking paths suitable for regular tourists. The author offers a set of measures to modernize the infrastructure of the Bolshaya Kokshaga reserve to make it an interesting tourist destination through additional investment from public funds and collaboration with local communities. These measures include arrangement of guarded parking at the entrance to the reserve, guidance by well-trained experts in both ecology and tourism, opening of new camping sites at the routes ('eco-paths'), including storage of additional tents, fuel, etc., rental of touristic equipment, sauna, and boat transportation service. These policies can be effective only along with public relations at local and regional level, and visualization of eco-tourism efforts through the reserve's logo, website, signs, and publications. Along with ongoing academic research and cooperation with universities, it is quite possible to make the reserve not only regional, but also national or even international eco-tourist attraction.