

# Disabled people perceptions of Estonian nature trails

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The heightened social responsibility and growth of the tourism industry attempt to overcome many of the practical and cultural obstacles that people with disabilities face. In park management access of disabled people are more and more under concern and in tourism accessibility market considered as one of the rapidly emerging market segments. Accessibility market includes people suffering from some form of disability as well as the ageing population which often develops illnesses that lead to disability (Buhalis and Michopoulou 2010, Eichhorn et al 2008) Global competition, legislation and the increasingly ageing population demonstrate that competitive tourism destinations and organisations should undertake steps to improve their accessibility and to provide appropriate service and information conservatively estimated 500 million people with a disability (Pühretmair, 2004, Daruwalla and Darcy 2005).

In Estonia development of access for people with disabilities has been slower than in many other countries, because just some 25 years ago while being part of the Soviet Union Estonia did not officially have people with disabilities, because officially “the soviet nation was a perfect nation without any disabilities”. By today Estonia has implemented EU regulations connected to wheelchair accessibility and also nature trails in Estonia are designed to be accessible by wheelchairs.

The purpose of this study was to test four nature trails which were built or renovated in 2013 with disabled people in wheelchairs to find out their perceptions and satisfaction. Trails were selected from different biotopes and different parts from Estonia with logistical ability for one day visit. First two nature trails were located in Northern Estonia and other two trails were located in Soomaa National Park in South East Estonia.

- 1) Nature trail of the Viru bog in Lahemaa National park which introduces the Estonian typical raised bog habitat (wheelchair access for 1,4 km)
- 2) Sõõriksoo nature trail in Harju County which introduces spruce forests and formerly cultivated peat bog with old peat pits (1,4 km).
- 3) Riisa nature trail in Soomaa National Park which introduces the bog (wheelchair access for 1,2 km).
- 4) Beaver trail in Soomaa National Park (wheelchair access for 1,2 km) introduces floodplain forest, beaver population, flooded meadows.

## *Methods*

To get feedback from disabled people 7 persons from Estonian wheelchair floorball team did test all 4 nature trails in 13<sup>th</sup> of October 2013. Participants experienced nice Estonian autumn weather between 11 to 13 degrees Celsius with sunshine and with no rain. One female and 6 male participants between 20 and 39 years had interview questions beforehand and they did make some notes during the visits. Some days later all participants were performed in depth interviews. Tour lasted full day including also 5 hours bus ride in total

## *Results and discussions.*

Four respondents are visiting nature at least once in a week and free respondents just few times per year. It was dependent from a location of respondent homes, those who lived close to nature had chance to visit nature more often than those who had some distance to nature from their homes. Two respondents had visited nature trails before, but no one of the respondents had visited and haven't heard about the test trails in current study before.

About the expectations for the nature trails answered respondents that main aspects are good accessibility interesting and special environment which is not possible to see daily. Also good information and educational approach was mentioned by all the respondents.

All the respondents were very happy of the existence of the trails and possibility to visit nature in specially designed trails. Respondents were satisfied with the information provided on the information boards. All the boards were well readable technically and contextually. Width of the trails perceived to be good and there were enough wider places for wheelchairs to pass.

Highlights of the tour were for respondents viewing tower on Viru Nature trail and Beaver trail (Figure 1) which were in 1,5 height to make access also in flood times. *"It was very interesting, height of the trail made it like some real adventure course for wheelchair people"* (33 years old male respondent) Väga huvitav, kuna rada oli maast kõrgemal, siis ratastoolikatele justkui seiklusrada. Respondents did like a bog habitat in Viru and Riisa trails with bog pools, colours and smells. The least preferred trail was Sõõriksoo nature trail, because respondents said that it was *"too usual forest"*

Technically respondents found the main problem the accessibility and comfort for toilets. In Riisa and Beaver trail just moving one blank a little could improve the accessibility and comfort a lot. In Riisa and Beaver trails respondent mentioned also a metal net on the top of the wooden trail as disturbing and uncomfortable thing. Net is placed to avoid the slippery of trails then those are wet. Because weather was dry and sunny the respondents did not have chance to experience the efficiency of the nets.

## *Conclusions*

Current study demonstrated that disabled people are willing to explore more nature than they do have chance and they are very delighted of the existence of nature trails with wheelchair access. Respondents expected to experience something special and unusual in nature trails and they were not keen to learn about "too usual forest". Respondents admitted also that there could be more cooperation in trails planning and building process, because with a change of some small comfort of using the infrastructure could be raised a lot. Misunderstanding of the necessity of some details (like slippery avoiding net) and lack of the information about the existence of the nature trails shows that with more information sharing it is good chance to rise the visitation and satisfaction of the trails.

## *References*

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