

## **International conference “Accessible Nature Tourism”**

**19<sup>th</sup> – 20<sup>th</sup> October 2017**

### ***Conference conclusions***

International conference “Accessible Nature Tourism” was held in Žemaitija National Park on 19<sup>th</sup> – 20 October as part of the INTERREG Latvia-Lithuania Cooperation Programme 2014-2020 project No.LLI-010 „Introducing nature tourism for all“ (**UniGreen**).

In total about 80 participants attended the conference (costs for 60 participants were covered by the UniGreen project budget (costs for lecturers, lunch, coffee breaks), other costs were covered by the national budget).

There were 4 presentations in the conference:

- “Accessibility can Enhance Tourism. Visitor-Friendly and Barrier Free Service Environment for Customers with Special Needs”. Lecturer – Leena Kuosmanen (Senior lecturer at the Laurea University of Applied Science, Finland);
- “Universal Design Principles, Latvia Case”. Lecturer - Māris Ceirulis (Chairman of the board of Liepaja Society of the Blind, Latvia);
- “Accessible Tourism for All – Are we ready?”. Lecturer – Gita Žemaitaitytė (Projects coordinator at the Lithuanian Association People with Disability, Lithuania);
- “Everyone Outdoors”. Lecturer – Riikka Mansikkaviita (Project manager at the Metsähallitus Parks&Wildlife, Finland).

### Key conclusions:

- Worldwide, there are 600-900 million people with disabilities. In addition, there are more and more people in senior age (e.g. in Latvia and Lithuania, there are more than 40% of all population in age 50 and older), people with temporary injuries as well as parents with children travelling with baby strollers. Therefore making tourism more accessible to all groups of people is crucial to ensure the equality of rights and sustainability of the tourism industry.
- There are 50-80 million people with disabilities in Europe. About 70% of them can and want to travel and get acquainted with other countries and nature objects all over the world. From a business perspective, it is a huge potential market for Europe as a whole, and for each region individually. There is a number of factors of why Europe is interesting to tourists, such as environmental, political and social security, good food, attractive sightseeing objects, social and cultural sustainability. Europe also has a growing business and public-sector expertise, creating new services and service packages for all people, including people with special needs.
- The European population is aging: by 2050 the number of people over 65 will be 3 times what it was in 2003, and the ones over 80s will be 5 times greater in number.

These figures represent a huge market potential which today remains vastly under-served.

- Making tourism more accessible is not only a social responsibility – it benefits not just the people with disabilities, seniors etc., but there is also a compelling business case for improving accessibility as it can boost the competitiveness of tourism in Europe. Making even just basic adjustments to the tourism facilities, providing accurate information, and understanding the needs of disabled people, can result in increased visitor numbers. Improving the accessibility of tourism services increases their quality and the enjoyment for all tourists. It also improves the quality of life in local communities.
- People with disabilities expect to use the same services and visit the same objects as non-disabled people.
- The adaptation of just a single object does not provide for a friendly environment to a certain area, as often only one customized object in the region is not sufficient to ensure its attraction to people with disabilities. A complete system of services and attractions must be developed, i.e. there should be a comprehensive offer of customized attractions in the area, including visitor centres, accessible accommodation, network of objects to visit which would be adapted for all, accessible transportation services, restrooms, food services etc.).
- There is often a lack of information. When planning the travelling routes, it is not always easy to find information on how accessible the facilities and nature objects are to everyone.
- Soft activities (incl. various projects) help to make marketing and promotion of the trails and visiting regions. Standards of Symbols around the world are extremely important.
- In order to adapt an area to everyone, it is essential to involve the non-governmental organizations of disabled people already in the initial stages of designing and planning of the infrastructure development activities as after all, the disabled people themselves are the best experts and can recommend the best ways on how to adapt the nature tourism infrastructure, products and services to their needs.
- Some people have invisible disabilities, such as various brain damage (learning problems, dislocation, disorientation etc.). This must be given a serious attention to as well. The improvement of accessibility in cities and natural environments should be carried out in a way to help people easily orient, easily access information and seek for assistance. These are the basic criteria that would allow people with such type of disability to travel independently and explore different areas.
- Accessible tourism implies a whole new approach to life, where all people (with permanent or temporary disabilities, seniors, obese, families with young children and those working in a safer and more socially sustainably designed environments) through their lifespan benefit from equal and accessible provision of infrastructure, products and services.
- Another essential aspect is the maintenance of the trails and other infrastructure. When constructing a trail adjusted to people with disabilities, the municipality or the park administration should keep in mind and foresee how to ensure the funding for the maintenance of such a trail, as it shall require additional resources (e.g. cutting the grass, removing the leaves, replacing the broken or outdated trail sections etc.), especially after several years of functioning.