

Visitor Surveys and Visitor Impact Monitoring in Recreational Areas in State Forests of Estonia

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About a half of the 4.5m-hectare area of Estonia is covered with forest and about a half of that area – 1.08m hectares – is Estonian state forest, which is managed by the State Forest Management Centre (Riigimetsa Majandamise Keskus, RMK). RMK is a profit-making state agency, the purpose of which as provided in the Forest Act of Estonia and in the Estonian Forestry Development Plan is to reforest, to tend, use and protect the forest and to guarantee the Estonian people as diverse as possible ways of using the forest without damaging the forest and forest species. RMK employs about 1200 people and its annual turnover is slightly less than a billion Estonian kroons.

Forest has been traditionally important for Estonian people. For centuries people used the forest to get wood, to pick mushrooms, berries and nuts, and to collect pine resin and birch juice. As the society developed, the recreational use of forest has gradually acquired a more significant role. The great changes that Estonia has undergone in the last decade have substantially increased the recreational load of state forests.

The increase in the visitation load of state forest and the rising trend of outdoor activities, as well as the development of nature tourism and the forthcoming accession to the European Union present a challenge to the manager of state forest: to guarantee diverse opportunities for outdoor activities for people and at the same time to guarantee the sustainable, but efficient management of resources. In order to complete this task, RMK has planned a number of measures:

- Directing the movers in the nature and planning-construction-management of the infrastructure for outdoor activities or “creation of the site”;
- Informing the public of nature holiday and recreational possibilities in the state forest, using different media (information centres, publications, home page, events, TV etc) or “publicity”;
- Promoting the environmental awareness of users of possibilities provided by RMK and shaping their attitudes of nature use by using different means or “shaping of attitude”;
- Identifying the adequacy and efficiency of the planned measures or “monitoring and surveys”

The poster of RMK concentrates on the visitor surveys conducted in nine RMK recreation areas in 2003 and on two supporting researches conducted in the same year: the research of environmental awareness and of outdoor activities. The purpose of the visitor survey in RMK recreation areas was to identify visitor groups, the expectations, needs and satisfaction of visitors. The aim of the survey on outdoor activities was to find out whether people know about the opportunities provided in the state forest, whether they use them and whether they regard the provision of such possibilities as important. The environmental awareness research focused on the relationship between man and the forest and on identifying the significance of the natural environment.