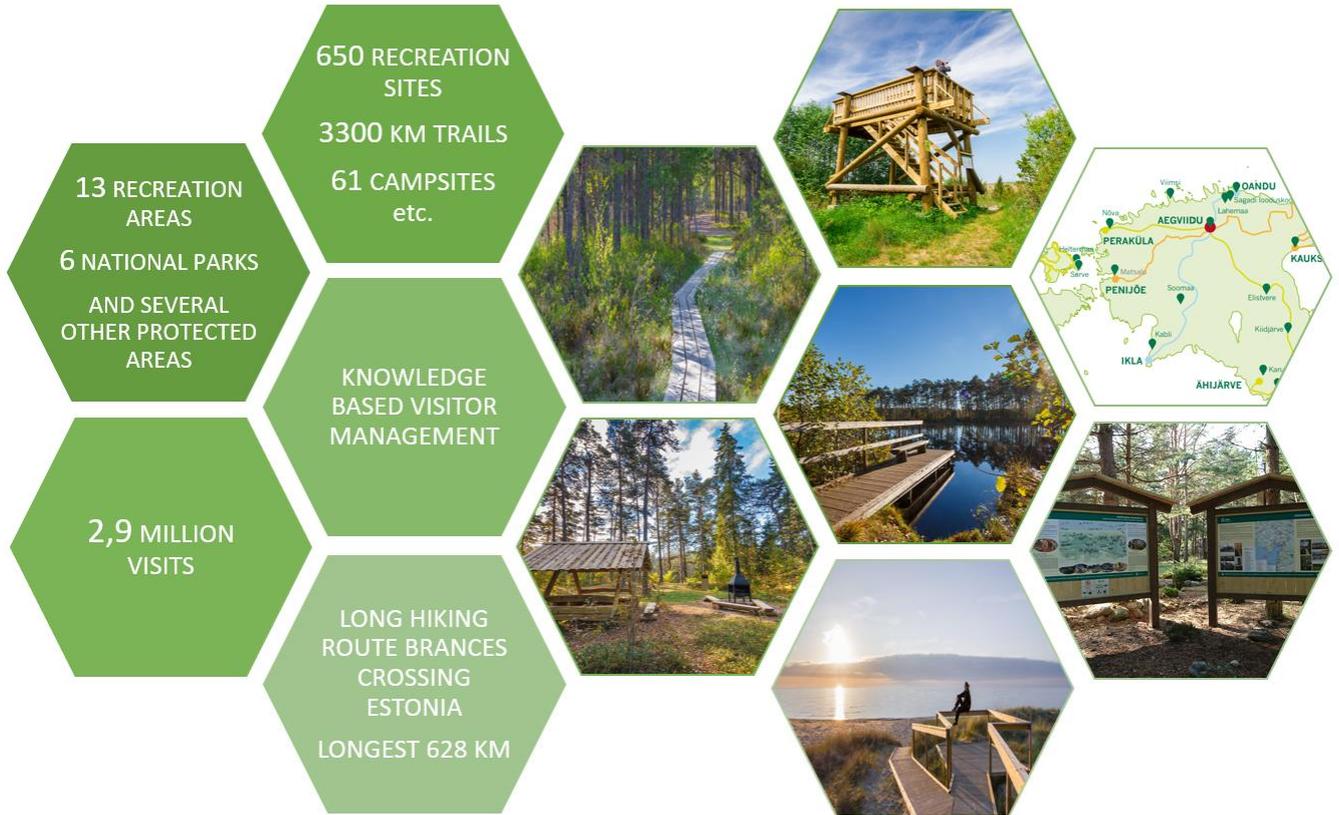


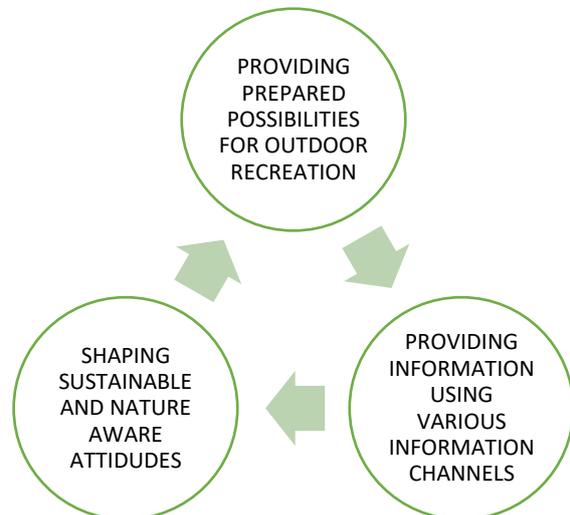
# FINDING BALANCE-

## KNOWLEDGE BASED VISITOR MANAGEMENT IN RMK



Visiting recreation and protected areas has become more popular. In 2020, visiting areas managed by the State Forest Management Center (RMK), reached a record high level of 2.9 million visits. According to the visitor survey, the motives why visitors come to nature, are beautiful landscapes, feeling of nature, staying away from noise and pollution, peace of mind, stress relief.

Outdoor recreation can inevitably have an impact on the natural environment. The impact depends to a large extent on many factors, such as the use, the natural conditions and the preparation of the site for visitors. The main task of RMK's visitor management department is finding balance. This is done by creating diverse recreational opportunities in protected and recreation areas, directing visits to them and raising nature awareness.



Information obtained through a consistent and mutually supportive monitoring and survey system, is crucial for the planning and management of the sites. Monitoring and research provide a basis on which to develop development strategies and plan the construction and management of the infrastructure of recreation sites, to monitor the functioning of the applied management techniques etc.

Planning based on a comprehensive monitoring and research system can prevent and reduce the potential negative effects of a visit. Despite the increase in the volume of visits, planning based on monitoring and conscious guidance of visitors has ensured that the condition of the areas prepared by RMK for outdoor recreation is maintained.

Information on the nature and volume of visits collected during visitor monitoring helps to understand visitors' preferences and needs and to monitor trends in change. Monitoring trends provides an opportunity to react as a preventive measure and to make changes in planning, both to improve the visitor experience and to prevent possible negative effects of the visit.



Landscape monitoring and research helps to understand the environmental impacts and monitor the condition of the visitor sites. The experience so far has also given a good picture of which management techniques can be used to prevent possible negative effects or mitigate the losses that have already occurred.

### Visitor monitoring

Monitoring the number of visits to the outdoor recreation sites managed by RMK is carried out regularly and on a uniform basis. There are electronic counters placed to a selection of outdoor recreation sites.

Visitor counting has provided useful information on long term trends but also on rapid changes. For instance there is knowledge that visiting season is getting longer- in addition to summer visiting, more and more people are also visiting during spring, autumn and winter. Also visiting hiking trails has become increasingly popular. In addition to following long trends, visitor counting information was essential in spring 2020 in order to deal effectively with sharply increased visitor volumes.

Visitor surveys are conducted on a uniform basis in all recreation and protected areas. Visitor surveys information is collected about the profile of visitors, activities, geographical distribution of visits, duration and frequency of visits, as well as money spent during visit, visitor satisfaction, motives, etc. For instance from visitor survey there is knowledge that visitors are happy with the services provided- satisfaction rate on the scale of 1 to 5 is 4,5.

#### POPULATION SURVEY RESULTS

In 2012 **85%** of respondents found outdoor recreations possibilities provided by RMK are necessary  
2020, first covid year, was the result **97%**

In addition, RMK has also ordered various studies explaining the necessity and general background of the possibilities of moving around in nature. Such studies have dealt with the population awareness and use of the opportunities for recreation in nature, berry and mushroom picking, social tolerance in areas with high visitation etc.

### Environmental impact evaluation

The study of the environmental impacts of RMK's recreational sites began in 2002, when RMK commissioned a study to assess the recreational carrying capacity and environmental impacts.

The aim of the study was to find out and assess the impacts of recreational use on the natural landscapes based on the selected visiting sites, which would ensure better planning and protection of recreational and protected areas, the organization of visits and the implementation of landscape protection measures.

The study was conducted in the years 2002-2012 and it involved nearly 100 high priority and problematic sites, due to their condition, all over Estonia.





The study resulted as an overview of the condition and problem areas of the landscapes of the visitor sites, the extent and recreational causes of the environmental impacts and management recommendations for applying protection measures. A method to assess the condition of soil and undergrowth vegetation was worked out. With the second study round, came the overview and knowledge of the effectiveness of the applied landscape protection measures.



The results of the study showed the need to develop a monitoring process protocol, which would describe the condition, management and development needs of the visiting sites and the changes taking place on a uniform basis throughout Estonia.





In 2008, RMK's Visitor management department started monitoring the condition of visitor sites, such as camping areas, campfire sites, forest huts and other so-called surface objects. The monitoring method was developed as one of the planning tools for visitor management and is a multi-criteria condition class assessment that includes both, the characteristics of the landscape and infrastructure of the site.



The condition of the soil and undergrowth vegetation is assessed on permanent monitoring transects, using six condition levels.



The implementation of landscape protection measures changes the appearance of the natural landscapes, but in the condition of high recreational load, it often gives the landscape the needed protection from the impacts of recreational use and the opportunity to recover. Here are the changes in the condition after the wood walk was built in Kaberneeme.



2009



2013



2018



2022



Measures to improve the situation have therefore also been implemented in fragile areas, which are important for Estonia and have a long traditional background. These pictures show the changes that have taken place in the landscape on the Taevaskoda hiking trail, which was the first object of the mentioned study in 2002. Landscape protection work was carried out in 2012 after a repeat survey.

