Title of the Story: REGULATING SAFE AND SUSTAINABLE VISITOR MANAGEMENT IN LAHEMAA

Destination Name: LAHEMAA

Country: ESTONIA

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Nomination Category: (Please check the boxes that indicate the focus of your story)

☐ Localizing the destination supply chain
☐ Decarbonizing the destination supply chain
☐ Culture & Communities
☐ Environment & Climate
☐ Nature & Ecotourism
☒ Tourism Reset & Recovery
☐ Other

Find detailed instructions for submitting good practices in the Top 100 training module “Good Practice Story”.

Should you have any questions on your submission please refer to our FAQ page or contact top100@greendestinations.org.
DESCRIBE YOUR GOOD PRACTICE STORY

Address each aspect of your good practice story in the different sections being specific including relevant quantitative and qualitative information.

**Issues faced**

Click or tap to enter text

In Lahemaa there are several organisations that are concerned with sustainable visitor management in the area. One of the state agencies – RMK, State Forest Management Centre – takes care of the visitor management and infrastructure on state land. The duty of RMK’s Visitor Management Department is to organise sustainable recreational use of the natural environment in state forests, considering the tolerance limits of the natural environment and sparing biodiversity. It goes without saying that this activity is effective only if it promotes the users’ environmental awareness. RMK is responsible of approx. 30% of all the land in Estonia.

Lahemaa has the best nature recreation infrastructure in the country and is immensely popular. RMK operates approx. 200 km of hiking trails, 20 shorter study or hiking trails, 10 camping sites and 2 visitor centres in the area.

People started going to nature frantically from the very beginning of the Corona pandemic. They didn’t have enough information where to go and more popular hiking trails became really overloaded. So instead of avoiding the crowds, people got unsafely close to each other in nature. There were incidents when the police had to interfere and guard at popular nature objects. Besides that, the crowds disturbed local community, making them feel unsafe, cramming the parking spots and blocking roads with cars. Nature also suffered on heavy visitation because of all the tramping and more trash. Photo: *Visitors’ cars blocking roads in Lahemaa at the beginning of the pandemic.*

(https://virumaateataja.postimees.ee/6923724/politsei-ei-pidanud-inimeste-tunglemist-viru-rabas-rahvakogunemiseks)
Methods, steps and tools applied
RMK’s Visitor Management Department realized very quickly that the situation at their nature recreation objects near towns (incl. Lahemaa) is getting unsafe and they have to take action. They updated their webpage (https://loodusegakoos.ee/en) and app (https://www.rmk.ee/organisation/rmk-mobile-app) and information boards in nature with up-to-date information to disperse and redirect visitors. Their aim was to inform people how to behave in nature, which places to avoid and where to go to be safe. So every family could take a look at the webpage or app before going to nature and find the latest information of the places that are already crowded and go elsewhere. RMK also used Loquiz interactive and educative games at less populated places to attract people to go there.

They used marketing all over Estonia to let people know of the modifications, e.g: https://rohe.geenius.ee/rubriik/looduses-liikumine/kuidas-valtida-sattumist-rahvast-pungil-matkarajale/

Key success factors

*What helped you tackle the issues? Click to add your text*

- It was not difficult to reach many people because RMK nature recreation objects are widely used and RMK webpage and app are very popular.
- When RMK people were able to act quickly and efficiently, it really helped to manage the visitation.
- It worked well because both digital and on spot information was distributed widely.
- The message sent was clear and simple. Easily understandable signs and labels and short study videos were used.

*An information board in Käsmu, Lahemaa, with a poster of Covid regulations on the left.*
Poster of Covid regulations used at RMK objects in nature.

Lessons learned
While implementing the Good Practice what challenges were faced, and how were they overcome? Click to add your text

- The biggest challenge was how to reach people so that it would sound positive and would not scare anyone off. Spending time in nature is healthy. It just has to be done wisely.
- As so many specialists in different fields have noted, Covid also had positive effects. It gave stimulus to pay more attention to dispersion of visitors and visitor behavior in nature, also in the future.
- RMK people realized how important digital solutions are and have now created several smart games to increase going to nature especially with children. These also help to redirect visitors because the places of the games are carefully chosen.

Results, achievements and recognitions

What were the qualitative and quantitative results of the good practice? Has it received any rewards? Click to add your text

Generally in Estonia the visitation of RMK nature objects increased from 2,6 million in 2019 to 2,9 million in 2020. But thanks to dispersion, unknown places were discovered and in Lahemaa the number of visitors decreased from 228 200 people in 2019 to 169 100 in 2020.

As a result of RMK good work, more people were able to enjoy nature, but didn´t get too close to each other. Estonians like spending time in nature and during the pandemic there were so few other places to go. So good visitor management helped to relieve the pressures of the pandemic.

Consequently, locals and nature are now less disturbed because there are not so many accumulations anymore. For example, Viru bog in Lahemaa that has been one of the top nature attractions in Estonia, has much less visitors now. It had 48 200 visitors in 2019 and 31 800 in 2020, so the decrease is 34%. More places have been discovered and rural economy has gained all over the country.

People got used to created material, use them continuously even without Covid restrictions and the visitation of nature objects has spread more widely and evenly over Estonia and stayed like that, so the situation is much better.

The example can easily be used in any other destination to manage visitation.

Additional references

Provide links to further information. Pictures and videos should be available for download either from Youtube, Vimeo or other Cloud-based (Google/ One Drive) download URL.

Examples of RMK created materials that are constantly updated:
- How to behave in nature: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mBXGx9lEXwM
- List of overcrowded objects: https://loodusegakoos.ee/juhised-looduskulastuseks/ulerahvastatud-objektid
- Possible routes: https://loodusegakoos.ee/juhised-looduskulastuseks/valjaisoit-loodusesse
- Rules of conduct: https://loodusegakoos.ee/rules-of-conduct
- Interactive games: https://loodusegakoos.ee/juhised-looduskulastuseks/nutimangud-looduses-ja-kodus

Articles and photos of the police checking people at the beginning of the pandemic in Viru bog, Lahemaa:
https://virumaateataja.postimees.ee/6923724/politsei-ei-pidanud-inimeste-tunglemist-vиру-rabas-rahvakogunemiseks

https://www.delfi.ee/artikkel/89387093/fotod-politseinikud-kontrollisid-vиру-rabas-liikumispiirangutest-kinnipidamist