

Access to Nature in Lithuania: Limits, Perceptions and Design Issues

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Abstract—One of the factors in local tourism could be nature tourism promotion for disabled people in protected areas. This social group is more sensitive to long-distance travel; therefore, it is likely that local tourism is especially attractive. The disabled population may possibly have more free time, which also makes local travel particularly attractive. The main focus while developing disabled people's opportunities in nature should be imposed on three parallel tracks: 1) a consistent segment-oriented policy, 2) assurance of its feasible implementation, and 3) promotion of the motives to travel. One of them by itself wouldn't be enough.

Introduction

Less than 3 million people currently live in Lithuania. For a variety of reasons, but mostly due to emigration, population number fell by 500 thousand over the last 10 years. However, despite these indicators, opportunity to live a better and healthier life in Lithuania has increased greatly. About 15 percent (2,465,815 acres) of Lithuania's territory is covered by land of exclusive natural attractiveness—protected areas. More than half of these consists of national and regional parks—1,477,363 acres. (Kamicaityte-Virbasiene et al. 2009). Lithuania's national and regional parks position themselves as territories suitable for tourism, but can all of society's social groups reach and enjoy them?

The local tourist flow is exceptionally important for the development of tourism in the country. However, for the time being, mass tourism in Lithuania is a phenomenon of the summer, with all tourists seemingly lined all the way to the Baltic Sea coast. Meanwhile, longer weekends, outdoor rest and recreation with family still have not become a tradition. To promote local tourism in Lithuania the intention was to carry out a study to assess how protected areas are used by disabled people. This social group is more sensitive to long-distance travel; it is likely that local tourism is therefore especially attractive. They possibly have more

free time, which also makes local traveling more attractive. This article analyzes travel into the wild among this social group; together with a new range of adaptation possibilities and upcoming challenges.

Throughout this research, the term disabled is used to include individuals “who have long-term physical, mental, cognitive, or sensory impairments that, in interaction with various barriers, may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others” (United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2008). Thus, the term disabled includes those with hearing, visual, communication, mobility, agility, pain, learning, memory, developmental, or psychological/psychiatric difficulties to the extent that it could hinder their participation within society.

Disabled people comprise about 8 percent of Lithuania's population. A particularly important issue is that disabled children (0.5 percent of the population) must be granted good conditions for visiting tourism sites (Mactavish et al. 2004). It should be added that as children are the future of each country, influencing their travel habits could lead to positive changes in overall perception of domestic tourism as well.

While Lithuania's population is decreasing in its numbers and this is reflected in the overall statistics considering disabled people, in some areas, however, this trend is reversed, for example: in Vilnius, Lithuania's capital city, the number of people with disabilities is increasing. This trend has led to a decision to investigate the needs of disabled people living in Vilnius and opportunities to enrich their existence, relating the upcoming results to the state strategic planning process and to the approach of specialists, working in the field of planning protected areas. The results are presented below.

Accessible Tourism Planning

Almost 20 years ago Martinez-Alier (1995), evaluating priceless nature's benefits given to tourism, wrote: “The environment becomes a luxury good...” At the moment, tourism based on environmental advantages is conferred in many different forms—green tourism, outdoor tourism, sustainable tourism, alternative tourism, niche tourism, responsible tourism, etc. (Buckley 1994, Buckley 2000, Ceballos-Lascurain 1998, Page et al. 2002). Apparently discussion about the positive impact of nature on the tourist has been largely absent, while most concern is about the impact which humans and created services are bringing upon nature itself.

Many researchers are analyzing the needs of disabled people, including their traveling necessities, the motives of their conduct, their “behavior” as a market segment, includ-

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ing for tourism marketing (Hug et al 2007; Kaganek and Kruczek 2011). Obviously, providing infrastructure and facilities alone are not sufficient. Tourism for the physically handicapped is an increasingly popular form of tourism activity in Bavaria, and the tourism base is well adjusted to the needs of the disabled spending their holiday in this region (Sawicki 2011). Various types of tourism are rapidly gaining popularity in Poland, also, with the interconnection between tourism and opportunities for the disabled an important subject among Polish scientists (Goralewicz-Drozowska 2010, Sawicki 2011, Musiaka 2011).

While studying possible adaptation of natural resources to society's needs and promoting a new generation of responsible tourism consumers, it is time to remember the concept of accessible tourism (Sen et al. 2004). The accessible tourism planning approach is based on strategic territory and tourist product planning and design oriented to sustainable life, where all groups of society feel equal and comfortable. Accessible planning is the way of designing environmental spaces and elements so as to be usable by all people in all circumstances, avoiding the need of any special adaptation. One of the strategic goals of accessible planning is to promote equality and to ensure the equal participation of all members of society, including those with disabilities, in the public life, removing existing barriers and preventing any inappropriate changes.

The accessible planning concept presumes multiple planning approaches; it emphasizes equality more soundly than is expressed in the disabled people's freedom of movement concept. While the movement opportunities of people with disabilities can be strengthened applying specific engineering and architectural solutions, the accessible planning principle emphasizes preconceived primary solutions. In this context, planning is perceived as a congregated system of all factors involved—both planning and physical environment. The process involves the use of land, architectural and construction activities, product development and public hearings (Sen et al. 2004). Accessible planning is a principle which may become the starting point for all planning processes, which is especially important in nature. According to this principle the physical environment—buildings, natural areas, technical equipment, etc.—everything is designed and constructed in a way that all members of society have the opportunity to use it, regardless of mobility, vision, hearing and mental disabilities, or lower tolerance of environmental factors or allergies.

Assessment of needs of people with disabilities in the planning and development of public infrastructure often result in decisions that will be more functional for others, too. For example: cyclists and parents with children in strollers will appreciate infrastructure designed for wheelchairs. Specific measures for improved accessibility also upgrade the opportunities for people with mobility impairments. Anyone with limited hearing and vision, or even healthy, able-bodied people, will be satisfied with an easy to understand, specifically adapted environment (Israeli et al. 2002; Freeman et al. 2010). Clean air is an advantage for all of us, despite the fact that asthmatics and allergy sufferers are sometimes vulnerable.

Two main factors that determine the adequate adaptation of protected areas for the needs of disabled are being analyzed in this article: political decisions, implementation

and usage. To assess planning and implementation, the protected areas specialist's approach towards the universal planning and visitors with special needs was carefully analyzed. Consumer behavior analysis has been carried out on interviews of people with disabilities or their accompanying persons – those who are traveling or who intend to.

Methods

Methods used for the research – one interview with experts and two questionnaire surveys. Both interested segments, relevant to the protected areas and especially to the needs of the disabled people were interviewed: 1) tourism and recreation professionals, working in an area, that is national and regional parks; 2) visitors with special needs (people with affected motoric), with both physical and mental – information interpretation – disabilities (people with affected orientation).

The aim of the first survey was to assess the opinion of experts coming from the tourist information centers and regional parks on the infrastructure and meeting the needs of visitors. The aim of the second survey was to assess the needs of disabled people, their abilities and desires, finding out opportunities for developing the tourism infrastructure.

The first research was conducted by interviewing the target group associated with infrastructure planning in protected areas, consisting of professionals from tourist information centers and regional parks. Their daily activities directly related to tourists, they were proximate to the customers or those involved in visiting protected areas or other tourism objects. The inquiries method was a quantitative survey. The sample of 44 respondents (representative sampling; $(n = N / 1 + N(e)2; \pm 7\%)$, where N – number of specialists, n – number of respondents, e – margin level) for this study came from the number of specialists working in regional parks and related with tourism infrastructure. The timeframe for this survey was three months (August-October) in 2012.

Second survey used a quantitative survey method, directly distributing questionnaires among the respondents. However in the process a frequent respondent asked what the protected areas mean, who are those they are protected from, aren't they fenced? The sample of 121 respondents were interviewed during the query (representative sampling; $(n = N / 1 + N(e)2; \pm 7\%)$, where N – number of people with disabilities in Vilnius region, n – number of respondents, e – margin level). Timeframe for this survey was three months (August-October) in 2012.

Results

Infrastructure Assessed by Professionals From Nature Areas

While interviewing professionals representing protected areas, determining the advantages of those areas, and determining reasons for a visitor's choice to visit them were studied, along with problems appearing during or after their visit. It should be noted that the people working in the regional parks are best placed to see what kind of engineering infrastructure is best suited for incoming visitors or what is missing or in need of repair.

It is no surprise that nature and cultural heritage are very important reasons to visit protected areas (59% and 41% of respondents indicated that), as those areas are established in places where environmental features and facilities are the most numerous. However, various entertainments such as active recreation and cultural events accounted for only a small fraction (less than 20%) of tourist motives to visit a protected area. Sporting events are not a motive for visiting, because a big number of respondents have movement disability. However, lifestyle and traditions can be a great reason to visit thriving businesses and educational programs for the tourist in the protected areas, as an example – bread baking, candle making and so on. On the other hand, it is striking how a lack of information and activity, both from visitors and organizers, can undermine sports activities in nature or nurturing the local traditions.

It is essential to determine the level of infrastructure tailored to tourists while developing educational tourism in protected areas. The opinion of professionals, directly responsible for the development of such infrastructure, is one of the most important aspects evaluating infrastructure's capabilities in the protected areas.

According to the respondents, biking and walking trails are the most suitable for visitors, with 57 and 76 percent of respondents, respectively, evaluating these facilities as good and very good. Meanwhile, the least adapted infrastructure is considered to be:

Public WC, which 86% of respondents evaluated as bad and very bad, Catering services—77%,

Camping—78%, Public transport—80%. Other infrastructure installed in the protected areas—parking lots, beaches, bridges and so on—rated as average.

Tourism is a relatively new activity in Lithuania. It should be noted that the respondents had no doubts about the need for such infrastructure, as many as 84% agreed on that. More than half—64% of the respondents—considered the lack of infrastructure is due to lack of funds. But, the biggest issue is the lack of information on how to adapt the infrastructure so that it would be suitable for disabled people.

Expectations of Disabled People Already Travelling or Willing to Travel

Interviewing people with disabilities was crucial to understand where they intend to travel, the way they spend their weekends and what is their relationship to the protected areas and nature. Nature's impact on disabled people is a keystone in professional literature. Therefore it was important to understand the extent of opportunities, created by Nature itself and people, that disabled persons in Lithuania can use to her/his advantage.

Seventy percent of respondents answered affirmatively when asked how many of them participated in trips to national and regional parks over the past three years. Those with negative answers indicated the following main reasons affecting their behavior – lack of finances, missing information, no organization or invitation, absence of desire, no opportunity, complicated and not accommodating environment, due to deteriorated health, timing, work, family with small kids.

Which parks are favorite and most visited among the representatives of this social group? It is interesting to note the recognition of two parks as the most visited- Aukštaitija National Park and Trakai Historical National Park Reserve, more than 40% of respondents indicated visiting these parks. Not as often visited, but still popular are the Curonian Spit National Park, or Dzūkija National Park, 25 and 15% respectively. The least visited is Zemaitija national Park with 3%.

However the crucial aspect of the study analyzing the protected areas is travel time and frequency. Most often respondents visited protected areas as short-term visitors, as 47% of them indicated that their trip lasted a day; 32% reported only half a day. Concerning is the frequency of visits, as half (46%) of visitors pointed out a visit once a year, while 35% visited twice.

The study showed that visits to national and regional parks were mostly organized by disabled people's organizations (39% of respondents), or family members (28%). The car was mentioned as the main way of traveling (40%), but those traveling by public transport make a large number – 30%. Twenty-five percent of respondents traveled by rented vehicle (mostly bus or minibus).

For people with disabilities, 42% named protected areas as a major leisure attraction. The respondents valued infrastructure, which is already installed in the protected areas, more negatively than positively. Beaches were rated the worst (87%), trails suited for disabled (76%), recreational equipment (79%). Other infrastructure, suited for disabled—camping grounds, public toilets, bridges were rated negatively by the majority of respondents. Public transportation is the best valued infrastructure, while only 28% of respondents rated it very well.

Services in the protected areas have been analyzed in addition to the infrastructure assessment—catering, accommodation, information, etc. Attention to the needs of the disabled often enhance the motivation to travel, meaning well-being, comfort and independence. Catering services are treated as the best, as 44% of the respondents assessed them as good or very good. Only 30% of disabled people rated other services – entertainment, tourism information, accommodation, transport services positively. Meanwhile the remainder (around 20%) rated them as very bad.

Discussion

Main survey results from park specialists:

1. According to specialists from the regional parks and tourism information centers tourists, visitors partly like to spend their leisure time in protected areas for nature and cultural objects. Strikingly noticeable, however, is that the various entertainments, active recreation, cultural events accounted for a small fraction (less than 20%) of tourists' motives to visit a protected area.
2. According to specialists, biking and walking trails are best suited for visitors, and the worst suited are public WC, catering services, camping and public transport. Other infrastructure installed in the protected areas—parking lots, beaches, bridges, etc.—rated as average.

3. Most of the experts indicated visitor and tourist information centers are suitable for the needs of disabled people and are adequately adjusted, while facilities such as campgrounds, recreational facilities, public toilets, beaches, trails, bridges and public transport were perceived as poor for the needs of people with disabilities.
4. Lack of information on how to accommodate the protected areas for the needs of disabled people was identified by the professionals as the main obstacle adapting infrastructure, as well as lack of funds. Among the specialists there were no real doubts in the need for such infrastructure.

Main survey, conducted with disabled people, results:

1. Survey, conducted with disabled people, has shown that this group of respondents likes to travel, as 80% of respondents have had a leisure trip over the past 3 years. The most favorite sites are Palanga (35% of the respondents indicated this place as the most frequently visited), Nida (8%); 14% were traveling abroad.

2. Survey of disabled people visiting a protected area has shown the following results:

- Protected areas are mostly visited in summer (60%), but it should be noted that the spring (19%) and autumn (15%) attendance is also significant;
- Respondents most commonly visit the protected areas as short-term visitors, with 47% of respondents in the survey indicating that their trip lasted one day, 32% reported only half a day;
- Trips to the national and regional parks are usually organized by the organizations for disabled people, as 39% of respondents have indicated, or family members—28%.
- Car was the most convenient way of transportation (40%), but quite a big part of travelers consists of those travelling by public transport—30% of the respondents, or by preordered vehicle—25%.

3. Positive attitudes were shown by disabled people and their escorts to the protected areas as reflected in the figures: only 5% questioned consider them unimportant, and even 42% named the protected areas as a major leisure attraction.

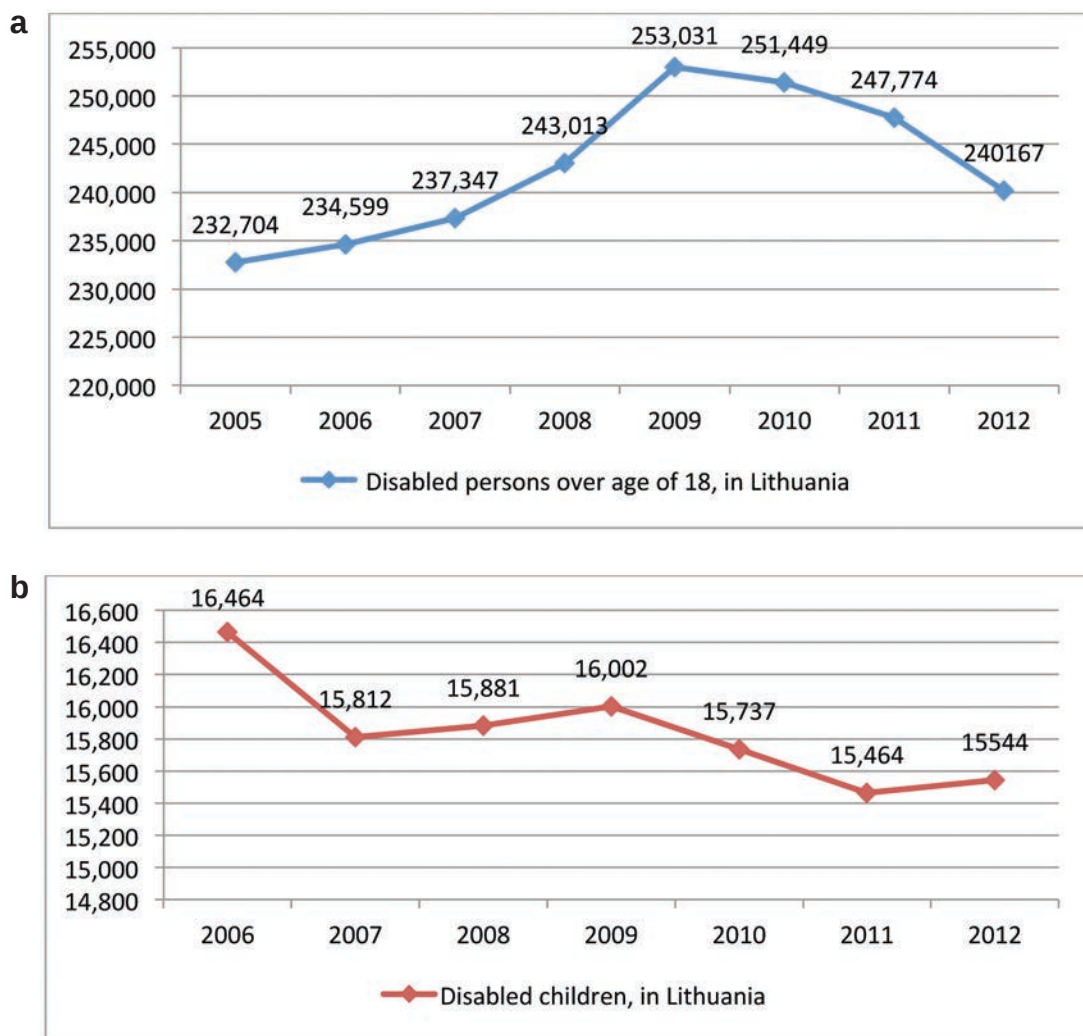


Figure 1—Number of dissable people (a—over age of 18, b—children younger than 18) in Lithuania. Source: www.stat.gov.lt

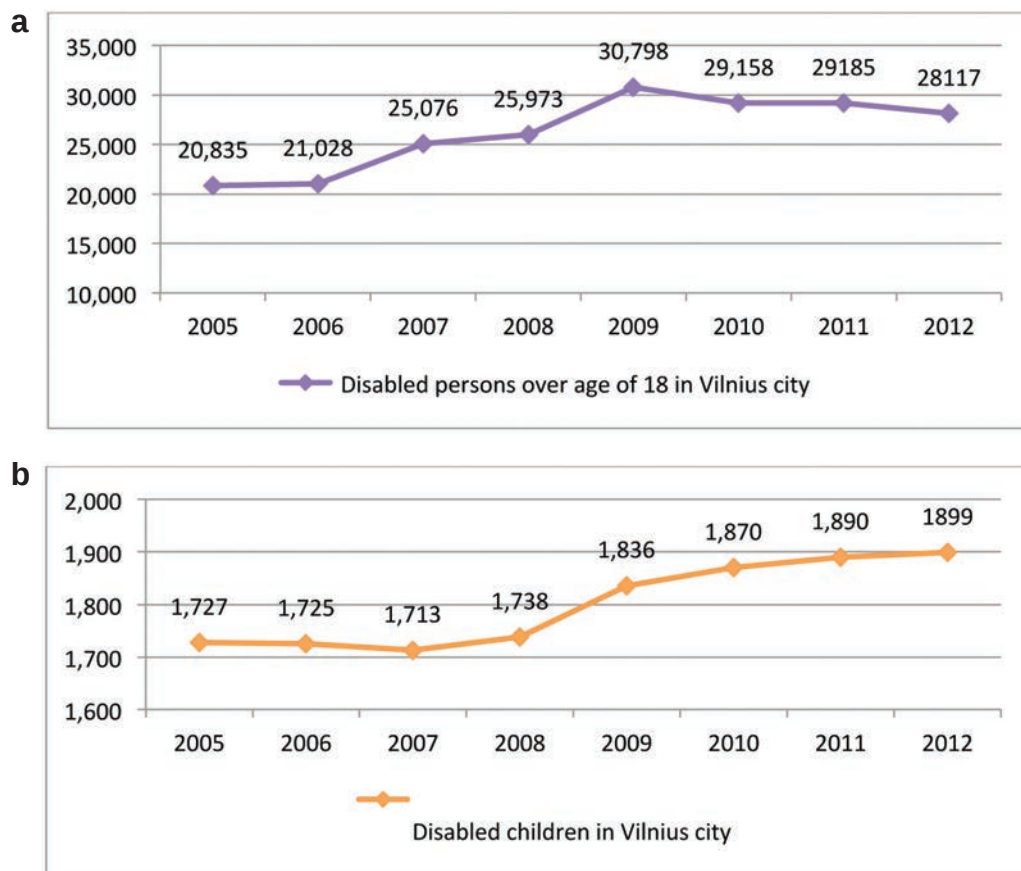


Figure 2—Number of dissable people (a—over age of 18, b—children younger then 18) in Vilnius.
Source: www.stat.gov.lt

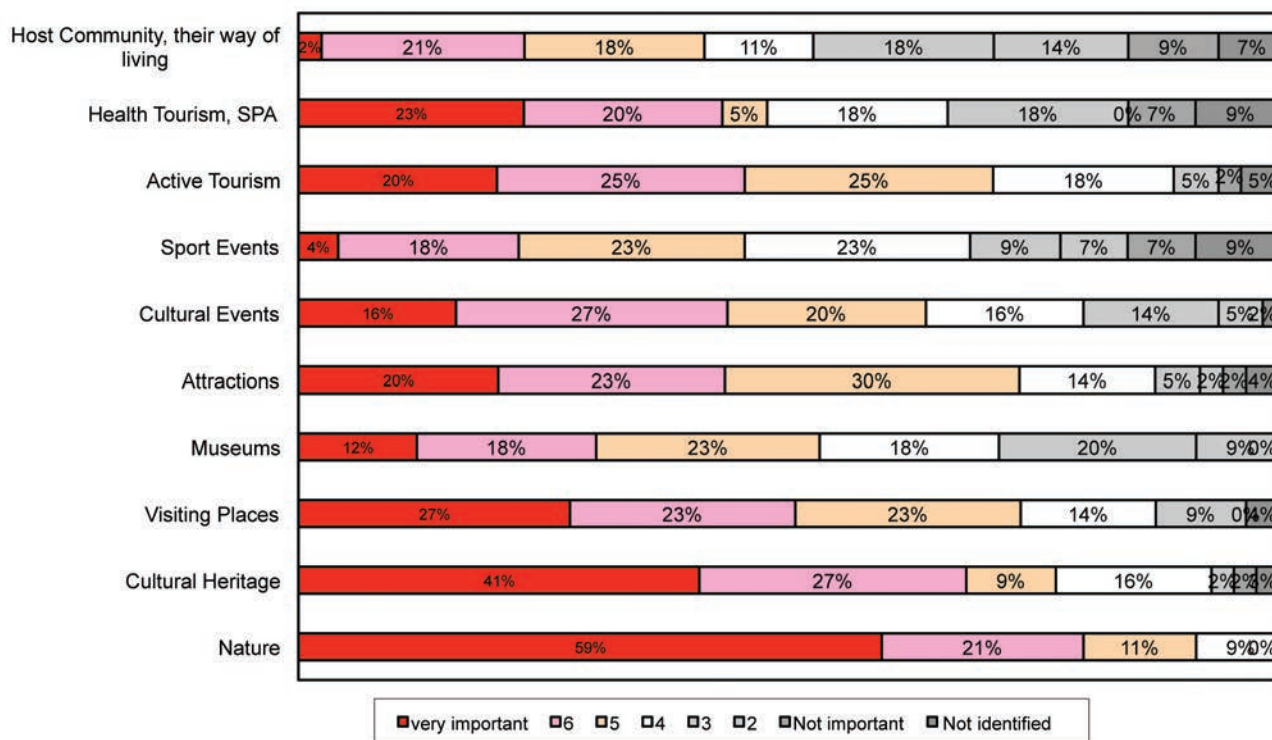


Figure 3—What are the main motives and interests of visitors/tourists coming to the protected areas? Rate in scale of 7 points, where 1 means “it does not matter at all” and 7 means “very important”, 99 – “I have no opinion”.

4. The respondents value infrastructure which is already installed in the protected areas more negatively than positively: beaches are rated worst (87%), then paths suitable for disabled people (76%), and recreational facilities (79%). Other infrastructure adapted for disabled, such as camping grounds, public toilets, bridges, by majority of the respondents are also rated negatively.
5. The evaluation of services provided to the disabled showed slightly better results: catering services are treated the best, as 44% of the respondents evaluated them as good or very good; other services – entertainment, tourism information, accommodation, transport services were rated positively only by 30% of those who responded.
6. The results showed that the visitors of the protected areas are very fond of traveling, but their options and habits are still strongly limited by the lack of the proper infrastructure and specially adapted services. Therefore the rest of the society must seek to implement all feasible measures that the protected areas be better adapted to the needs of the disabled people.

Proposals

1. Many investigators in different countries are using various techniques to determine and manage impacts on tourism and wild nature. The main focus when developing disabled people's opportunities in nature should be 1) a consistent, segment-oriented policy, 2) assurance of its feasible implementation, and 3) promotion of the motives to travel.
2. It can be determined, following analysis of the three studies that the largest gap and mismatch is between the policy makers and implementers. It is therefore necessary to link these chains for close cooperation in the future, ensuring this segment's opportunities to get acquainted with wild nature.
3. While neighboring countries have achieved a lot in opening up and adapting natural resources, some countries, such as Lithuania, suffer from the lack of attention on the issue – while holidaymakers have no doubts about nature's positive effects, their abilities to reach nature itself are very limited still. It is therefore necessary to encourage the development of the facilities, tailored to the needs of the tourists with special needs.

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