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ESTONIAN UNIVERSITY OF LIFE SCIENCES
Institute of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences

Report of the pilot testing of ForestTrail hiking route in Estonia

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Introduction – coherence to the task.

AIM: The Report of the pilot testing of Forest Trail (FT) hiking route in Estonia is compiled for the Estonian Rural Tourism Organisation (ERTO), aiming to evaluate the newly developed long-distance hiking route Forest Trail by analysing and giving recommendations for improvements of infrastructure, navigation, services and sightseeing objects, and social aspects by testing specific route areas in Estonia.

STRETCHES: Although we had to select 2 options from the following trail selection: day 17 (Haanja (Suur-Munamägi) - Tsiistre); day 20 (Kolodavitsa - Värskä); day 34 (Kuremäe - Vasavere) or day 41 (Eisma - Oandu), recommended by project partners, we managed to cover all these routes and additionally tested also day 46 (Tsitre – Kaberneeme). We also modified the testing and cut the day 20 Kolodovitsa - Värskä into shorter stretch: Säpina- Kolodovitsa and added a part from day 19 (Kolodovitsa - Obinitsa) to reach the specific services in Piusa and Obinitsa.

The reason for doing more stretches, than asked, was the COVID-19 situation. All students did not want to move in big groups and together and some wanted to fulfil the task in smaller groups or individually (day 46).

Fields of the testing:

INFRASTRUCTURE: We had to evaluate the existing and missing infrastructure of the trail (information boards, information signs, resting places etc.). The aim was to draw the conclusions and come up with specific and realistic recommendations. Infrastructure objects had to be evaluated following the scheme:

- Info stands: accessibility from the route & content (provides hiker with information on the surrounding area in understandable manner; languages available);
- WC - availability, quality;
- Resting places - availability, accessibility from the route, quality;
- Security aspects - dogs, other hazards noticed during inspection;
- Trail availability – any obstacles that disturb the hiking (overgrown trail, fallen trees across the trail, wet and swampy trail etc.)

NAVIGATION: We had to test GPX data and maps of the aforementioned sections (how to find them, how easy it is to download GPX on different systems – Android, Apple etc.). In the sections, where route marking already had been done, we had to evaluate the navigation following the marking and draw the conclusions and come up with specific and realistic recommendations.



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SERVICES AND SIGHTSEEING OBJECTS: We had to evaluate the location, visibility (including signposts to the objects from the route as well as visibility on the map) of service and sightseeing objects relevant to the hiking route and draw the conclusions (including how appropriate sightseeing objects and services are for hikers) and come up with specific and realistic recommendations.

SOCIAL AND CULTURAL ASPECTS: We had to evaluate the hiking route from the “foreigner view” to understand, if the pilot implementers as foreigners feel welcome, comfortable, informed. Are there any cultural or practical issues needed to be solved or addressed with extra information? We had to draw the conclusions and come up with specific and realistic recommendations.

MOTIVATION, NEEDS AND SATISFACTION LEVEL OF HIKERS

(optional): The task was to look for hikers hiking Forest Trail route and explore their motivation, needs and satisfaction level by using the questionnaire. We hiked in October and we did not meet any other hikers on the route.

TESTERS AND TESTING TIME: The pilot testing of FT was carried out by the students of Estonian University of Life Sciences. The students were second- or third-year students of Nature tourism curricula. They were accompanied with the university teachers Marika Kose and Tarmo Pilving, local guides in some stretches and Reeda Tuula – Fjodorov, the lecturer of recreation management in Tallinn University on three days of testing. The testing was carried out in October 2020.



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1. Results of the pilot testing.

1.1. Day 34. Kuremäe – Vasavere. 08.10. 2020

The trail was tested together with the local guide Anne-Ly Fersel. We had 15 students and 2 supervisors testing the stretch. The gathering was at 10.00 at Kuremäe Apteegi kohvik Café.

1.1.1 Evaluation of the infrastructure

This stretch was totally copying the RMK long distance hiking trail Penijõe - Aegviidu - Kauksi. Therefore the comments about infrastructure and other objects on the trail would also be relevant for RMK representatives. Most of the infrastructure on the stretch is maintained by RMK (Figure 1)



Figure 1. The overall idea of RMK infrastructure on FT stretch Kuremäe – Vasavere.

Info boards – The trail is following or cutting several RMK recreational objects and paths and most of them have relevant info boards (Figures 1, 2) in Estonian and Russian languages, equipped with QR code. In case of international visitors, not speaking any of these languages, the information would not be understandable. Only pictures and Latin names of species could be understood. When passing the lakes, all lakes had info.

WC- there was one DC at Nõmmjärve resting place (in the middle of the stretch) and another few km from Pannjärge sports centre. Both were clean and well usable, but very dark, as the windows were very small or missing.



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Figure 2. The info board of Kurtna Suurjärv, maintained by RMK.

Resting places – There were several public resting places on the trail with benches, tables and fireplaces (Figures 1, 3 and 4). Also, garbage bins were available and toilets. For such a long stretch there would be a need for more, especially when it is wet and you cannot sit on the ground.

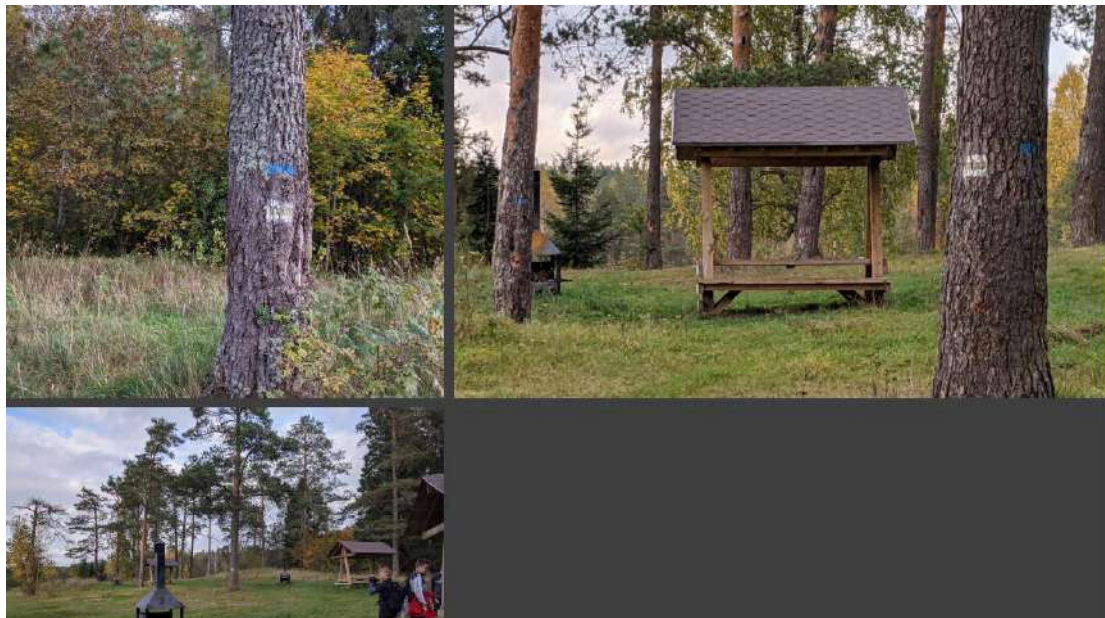


Figure 3. Nõmmjärve resting place. We had our lunch there. The confusing marking is visible. The down left picture shows the faraway direction around the place, leading to the trail, but marking was not easy to follow. We used GPX to find right way.



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Figure 4. Kurtna Beach at Nõmmjärve resting place.



Figure 5. The “swing” at Vasavere lake. Not most safe attraction.



Security aspects – The swing at Vasavere lake (Figure 5) is tempting but if unexperienced, the users may hurt themselves. All the dogs, we saw, were inside the yards. There were many aspects of security on the trail cover and materials safety, but we describe them in the trail availability chapter. It must be noted, that on the FT webpage the trail is advertised as easy. All hikers found, that the length of the trail was longer than advertised. Different devices counted different, but everybody got more than 16 km (Figure 6). The trail surface cover was very diverse and, in some places, rather difficult and demanding. For example, the drained peatland area with bare roots and hollows was extremely difficult, also some gravel patches were hard to walk.

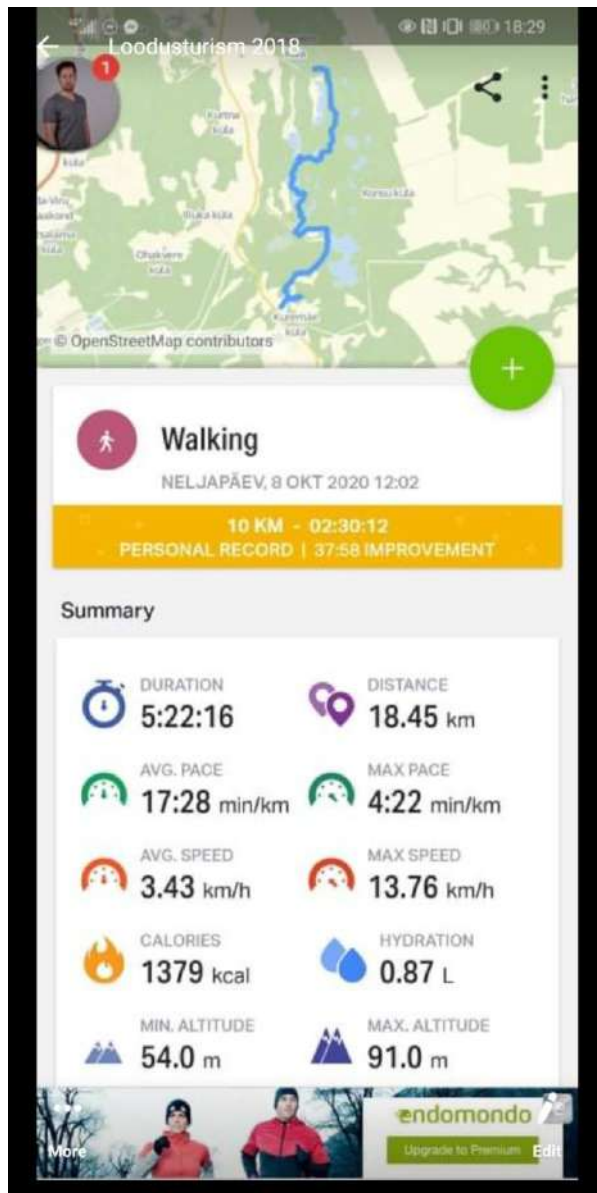


Figure 6. The Endomondo app calculated the distance 18,45 km. Other devices also got the distance between 18 – 19 km.



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We strongly recommend to add the information for hikers about the need for proper footwear and very demanding surface of some parts of this stretch. We also recommend to change the difficulty level on the web page from “easy” to “moderate”, as there are ups and downs, difficult surfaces that slow down the pace and the length is longer than marked.



Figure 7. The first aid for blisters. This FT stretch needs very proper hiking boots with hard soles and support for ankles.

Trail availability

This stretch of FT covers very diverse landscapes and trail types. It crosses many ditches of different sizes, but the crossings are a real problem. The bridges or paths over soft and wet surfaces were in very bad condition and really dangerous in autumn, with wet surface and fallen leaves (Figure 8a and 8). There was a real threat to fall and get seriously wet, muddy and injured. In some places the bare roots made the trail also difficult and slippery. One had to be very careful on these parts of the stretch.



Figure 8 a.



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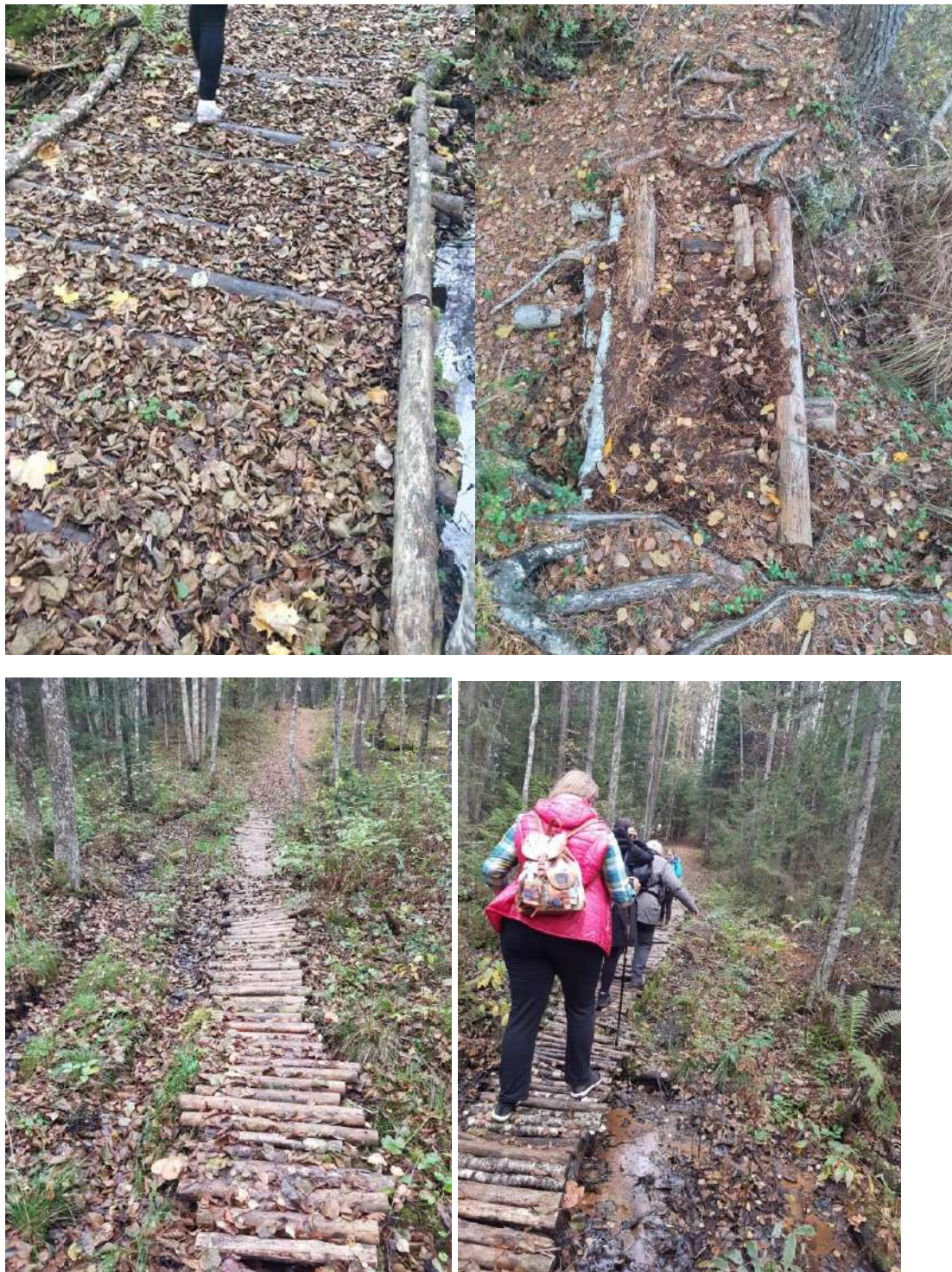


Figure 8. The “bridges” or crossings over the wet and soft surfaces. The materials, used, were rotten, the nails did not hold the material and were dangerously poking out, material was slippery, rotten or broken. It was really dangerous to cross the “bridge” below.



Figure 9. A proper and well-maintained bridge over the drained peatland ditch.

The part from Kurtna lakes to Pannjäärve had well maintained and proper bridges, paths and crossings, it was evident, that they had been renovated lately (Figure 9).

1.1.2 Evaluation of the navigation

The navigation was the most difficult part during the testing. As it was the first day of testing and most students were not familiar with the trails, apps and also long-distance hiking, it took a while for everybody to make the apps work in their phones. Most students had worked out at home the webpages, the trails and apps, but there were some, who hadn't and it took quite a lot of time. There were also participants, who tested the trail without mobile phone and apps, just following the signs and markings.

First notice is that if people are not familiar with either FT or RMk trail, their marking system or logic, it would be very confusing to start in just an arbitrary spot. And we could say, that Kuremäe is just a kind of spot. There were no markings or signs of either trail in the Kuremäe village, nothing also near the Apteegi Café (Figure 10). All students started to run around, find GPS and phone apps, looking for the signs or marks in directions. It took another while to decide, which way to go, as finding location was not so easy, when doing it first time. We really recommend to put a sign there (Near Apteegi Café), to show both directions of the FT, even if it is on RMK trail. It is really confusing there, as there are roads, taking to different directions. Even the stickers would be helpful.

When we finally had decided, which way to go, then everybody was trying to follow the GPX and we reached a big crossroad (Figure 11). There was no pedestrian walk,



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nor signs or indicators about the direction. The traffic was busy and the speed limit 70km/h, which all made the crossing very unsafe.

Some students got the idea at home, that the GPX trail with waypoints (Figure 12), visible in computer, did not work or open the points when downloaded. We could not solve the issue also when starting the trail.



Figure 10. “Big panic” in Kuremäe, trying to start the hike...

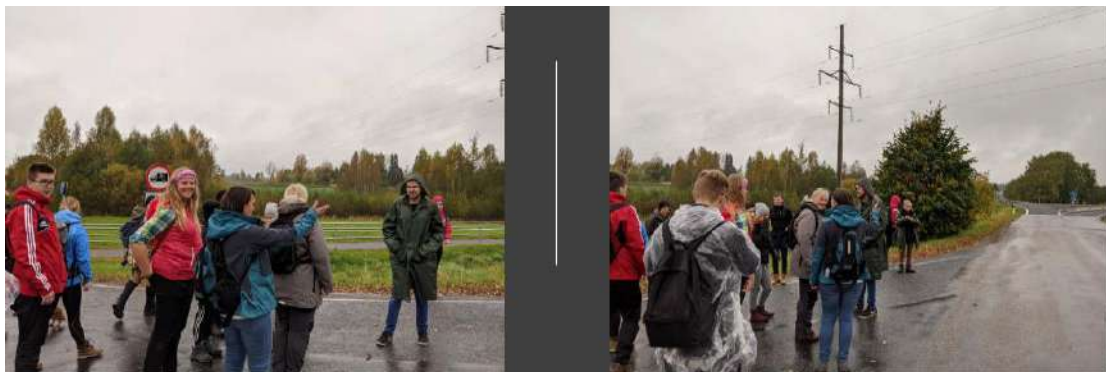


Figure 11. The crossing of the highway, speed limit 70km/h. A) there was no pedestrian road leading to the crossing or helping to cross. B) there were no signs, showing the right turn, as there were several options.

Overall assessment for GPX trail is good. It was in accordance with the physical trail, but the trail marking was not accurate and there were several “handwritings” for marking. The RMK markings were of different size, colour and freshness. The “yellow” was quite varying in tones (Figures 13 and 14), from neon to greenish. It was evident, that some parts had been recently marked and some were really worn and faded with weather. There were minor problems with the track.



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Figure 12. The GPX track with waypoints. In early October 2020 it was impossible to use this in phones. It downloaded as simple track without waypoints.

First serious problem occurred 500 m after the crossing of highway, when we missed the turn (Figure 14). This place definitely needs a signpost with arrows! The markings in that part of FT were old, faded and hidden behind branches. There were no leaves in October, but in summer it must be even worse. Some markings were on smaller trees, while growing, they may be not visible.



Figure 13. Different markings and colours. In some parts of the trail there were several trail markings, in blue and red, in addition to white-yellow-white.



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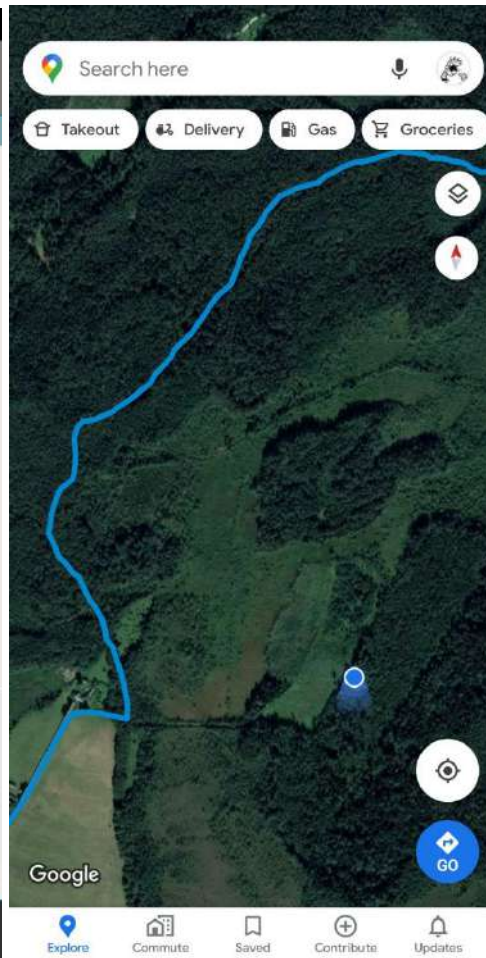
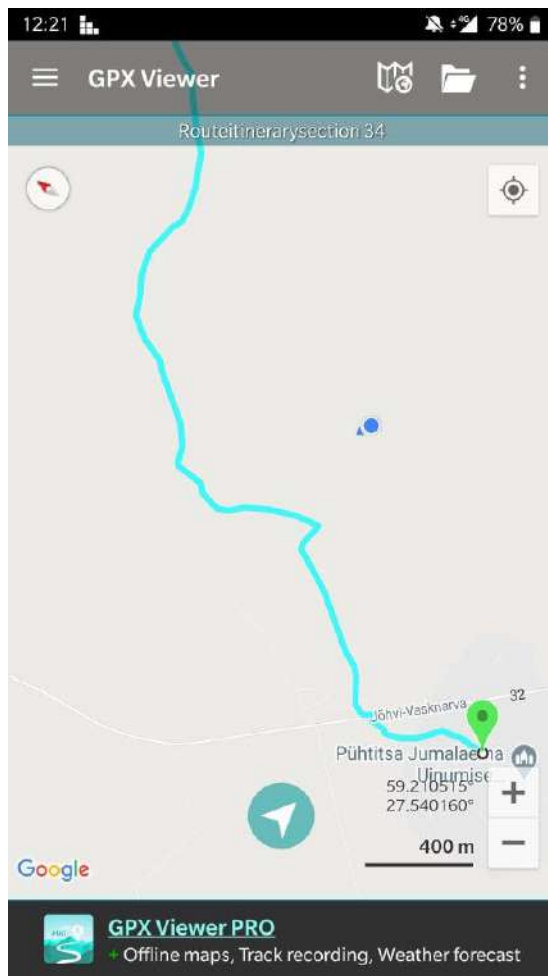


Figure 14. We missed the turn and got lost. The screenshots of missed turn (above screenshots). The marked tree, that we missed (below). The tree (marking?) was badly visible (17 people missed it).

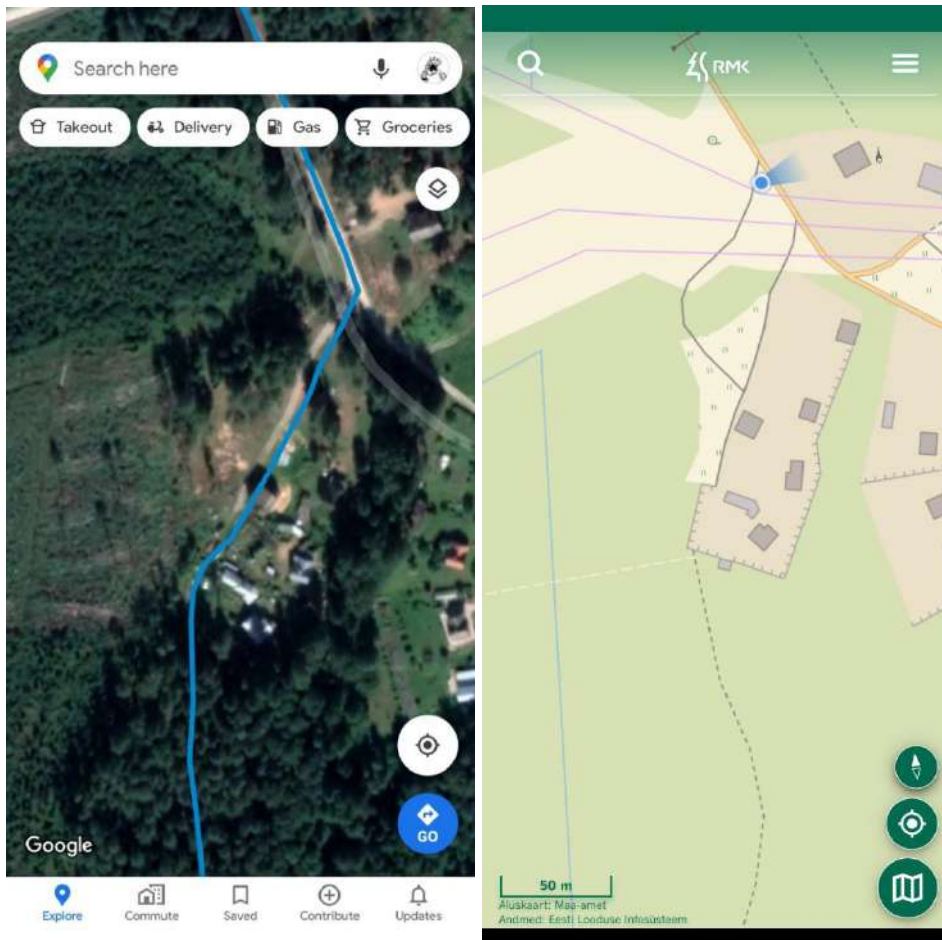


Figure 15. Which way?

There was a small misunderstanding with the FT and RMK trail, passing one household (Figure 15). The FT GPX showed straight passing from the yard but RMK trail was marked left to it. The marked trail was blocked with cut tree piles and was not accessible. We got in conversation with the owner (see in social/cultural aspects).

Shortly after that we got to a turning point that was not marked and was hard to recognise, as there was a turn to a smaller surface road (Figure 16). It may have been marked, but there had been a clearcut recently and probably the trees with marks had been cut. It was a really confusing moment and without GPX we would have missed the turn.

1.1.3. Evaluation of the services and sightseeing objects

We used several services during the 2-day hike. On this stretch we started from Apteegi Café in Kuremäe and it was a very good choice (Figures 17 and 18). We got 3 sorts of soups, cakes and drinks. All food preferences and allergies were considered with most care and attention. It was a really warm and hearty welcome. We recommend!



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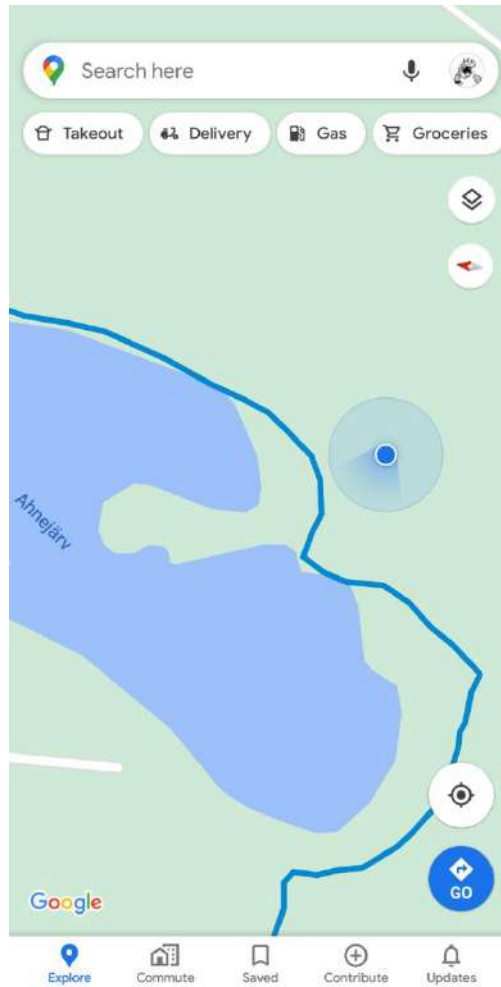
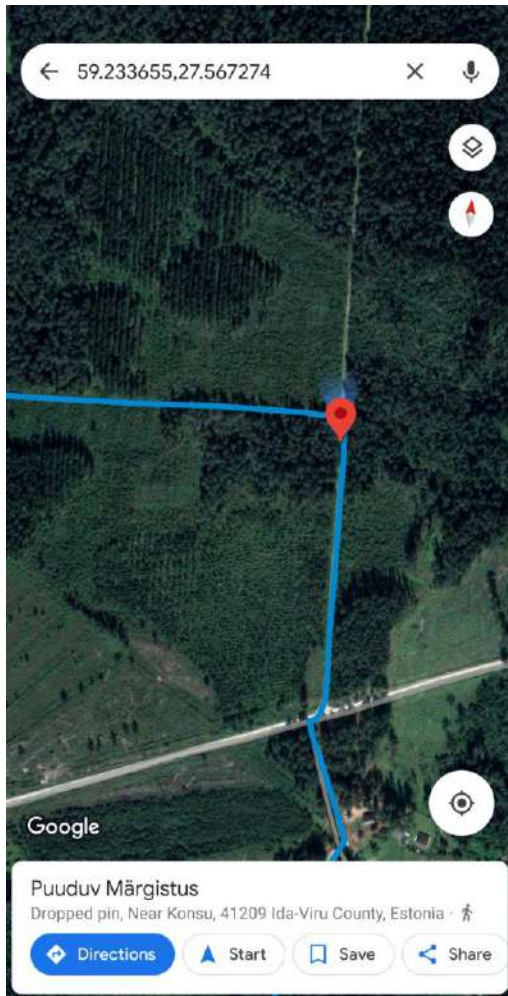


Figure 16. The turn (right) was in open treeless place (recent clearcut) and led to a smaller path. The trail around Ähijärv lake (right) overlapped with several other trails and there were many markings, it was really difficult to sort out, which was the FT. We had to follow the GPX, not to get lost.



Figure 17. The Apteegi Café and our welcoming meal. We felt really warmly welcome.



Figure 18. The Apteegei Café and parking lot. Outside.

The most significant sight was the Kuremäe Nunnery. As we used the local guide, she told us about the Nunnery, religious and practical aspects of the place. It is important to mention, that the students had very little idea about the religious issues, Orthodox church and what is a nunnery. We strongly recommend to find and add some guides or contacts in FT itinerary or links for information and education on these issues.

We stayed overnight in Eisma Holiday centre, near Lahemaa on northern coast. The accommodation was very suitable for hikers, as there were rooms with different comfort rate and size and prices. The staff was really friendly and helpful even late in the evening, pampering us with food, tea, drinks and sauna. We recommend this place for all hikers. The food was simple and excellent, all dietary special needs were well considered.

The trail itself was also really beautiful and diverse. The nature was magnificent – quiet forests of different types, lakeside views (Figure 18), wetlands. There was quite a bit of information to interpret the landscape, but we really enjoyed our guide and her explanations.



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Figure 18. 3rd year students at Vasavere lake. The beautiful forest landscape.

1.1.4. Evaluation of the social/cultural aspects

The FT stretch is in Ida-Virumaa, which has a big Russian-speaking population. We had an encounter in the trail part (Figure 15) with a local man, who appeared from his



Figure 19. Encounter with local. Friendly or not friendly?



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Property and started talking in Russian. As he was in a military outfit and speaking loud and persistently, it was quite threatening for the students, who did not understand Russian. One supervisor and the guide understood and we realised, he was just wanting to talk to people. He had been a military officer and wanted to talk about his career in Soviet Army and also about his family. He did not want to leave us and we had to use all I kind of tricks to say, that we can manage alone. We were not aware of his psychological state, but it seemed unstable to us. Although with good intentions, he might give a fright to hikers. We recommend to mark the path rather on the left path from his house.



Figure 20. The villages were small and calm, the villagers were friendly and greeting us



Figure 21. The garbage on the signpost and the boards, nailed on trees.



Altogether the villages were small and calm (Figure 20) and we noticed some odd activities (Figure 21). We picked all garbage, we saw on the trail.

1.2. Day 41. Eisma – Oandu. 09.10.2020

We started the trail from Eisma Harbour (Figure 24) with 13 students, 2 lecturers and with Reeda Tuula -Fjodorov from Tallinn University. Because the previous day path was more difficult than expected, one student's old leg injury didn't allow her to continue.

1.2.1. Evaluation of the infrastructure

Info boards – There were no specific info boards of FT installed yet, but where the trail was following RMK trails, there were info boards, in good shape (Figures 22 and 23). The information was in English and Estonian. The boards were new.



Figure 22. The RMK information board from Altja.

WC – There were no DC possibilities in the beginning of the trail, near Eisma harbour. There was a DC in an RMK resting place in the middle of the trail. The DC was across the road, which made it difficult to find. Signs would be helpful. It was clean. There was no public toilet in Altja, we could use one in Toomarahva. But there were many in Oandu, in the parking place of RMK Oandu Nature Centre.

Resting places – There were several resting places around the trail (as waypoints) but as our GPX with waypoints did not work and it was difficult and internet-consuming to find them, we did not try. We only used the place on the road. It was really great, with several fireplaces and benches.



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Figure 23. The small info board on Altja Trail.

Security aspects – there were no specific issues with security. The first part of the stretch was on the asphalt road, with lots of curves and quite narrow. It was not busy in October, but in summer it may be very busy. There should be warnings on FT website for people to be careful.



Figure 24. Eisma harbour

Trail availability – there were no specific hazards on this stretch. The paths were even, smooth, without difficult grounds. The only hazard could be the fallen trees on the first part of the stretch, that turns from asphalt to the woods. There are fallen spruces, it is difficult to climb over them and not too easy to go around. We understood, that they have left there in purpose, to make the trail more “natural” but it was not an easy obstacle.



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1.2.2. Evaluation of the navigation

There was a small sign at Eisma Harbour, where the stretch should officially start (and end), directing to the trail. This stretch was better and more generously marked, than previous day. The markings were FT markings, not RMK in the first part of the trail. The FT markings were on metal posts, trees and fences.

The first part on asphalt was well marked and good to walk. Then there was a sudden turn to the right, into the forest, which was not at all marked and we almost missed it, if we hadn't GPX files at hand. Following the trail in the woods, there were several fresh markings, but some were really badly placed on rotten and cut wood, overgrown already destroyed by decomposing fungi. All the markings on fallen and dead trees will disappear soon, it is not good idea to mark only these trees.

There were other problems with markings on the trees as well. In some cases, the markings were abundant when coming from one side but not noticeable when arriving from the other. Figures 26-29 show the bottlenecks with the marking. The person, marking the trees, had been rather creative, hiding the marks on young spruces, but it would not be very functional for hikers. The stickers on the wooden and metal posts in the second part of the stretch did not stick properly.

The trail was very easy to follow without GPX in most parts, except while crossing with RMK Altja trail (Figure 28). There is the RMK marking with green (Figure 30) and that is confusing, although the marking is well done. The Altja trail has a lot of good info boards, marking the trail and confirming you are on right path.

1.2.3. Evaluation of the services and sightseeing objects

The landscape, especially the coastline is very beautiful and enjoyable (Figures 31 and 32). The Altja trail is picturesque and very informative. We had a pre-ordered lunch at Toomarahva in Altja and that was excellent! All allergies were considered and there was plenty of food (Figure 33).



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Figure 25. A well marked tree (above) where the marked tree is visible from long distance (although not at the very side of the path). There were many places, where markings were hidden and made on small trees (below). The mark is on the right side, on a small spruce, hidden between the branches. When trees grow, it will not be seen.



Figure 26. Stickers on the wooden board posts. The arrows were really useful.



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Figure 27 Stickers on the wooden electric posts so not stick.



Figure 28. The FT crosses with RMK Altja trail. An info board is needed.



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Figure 29. The sticker on the road sign post is not sticking.



Figure 30. The boulder and the RMK Altja trail marking.



Figure 31. Altja bridge.



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Figure 32, Beautiful seaside.



Figure 33. Toomarahva Tourism Farm.



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1.2.4. Evaluation of the social/cultural aspects



Figure 34. Altja boar shelters.

This stretch, especially Altja, gives the scent of Lahemaa NP and the traditional culture of coastal fishing villages (Figure 34).

1.3. Day 46. Tsitre – Kaberneeme 17-18.10.2020

The Tsitre – Kaberneeme stretch was tested by one student and her family members. As the stretch was quite long (24 km) and the student was not capable to walk the stretch within one day, she spread it on the whole weekend and walked two days.

1.3.1. Evaluation of the infrastructure

Info stands – The information stands were in the beginning of the stretch, information was available in three languages. There was enough space for parking in front of stands. The information was interesting and well understood. The info stands and maps did not have the marking “You are here” and it took us very long to find our location on the map.

WC – There was a very decent DC in the beginning of the stretch by RMK and two other DC-s on the first 5 km of the stretch. All the rest 18 km did not have any public toilets, but there was an RMK DC in the end of the stretch.



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Resting places – There were only 3-4 places, suitable for sitting, resting and having a meal. These were the RMK resting place in the beginning of the stretch, the bus -stop, where 2-3 people would have place (Figure 36), a fireplace on the beach and a bench by the main road where it would not be very safe or comfortable to sit for a longer time.

Security aspects – there was a huge unleashed dog (Figure 35) running free on the stretch. It would not go far from home, but it frightened us and tried to jump up on us. It walked almost 0,5 km with us.



Figure 35. Angry dog.

A very long part of the trail is on the big motorway, especially in the beginning. There were lots of cars during our walk. There is no space for walkers, the road margins are quite narrow and we felt really in danger while walking there.

Trail availability – the trail was in good order, only one fallen tree.

1.3.2. Evaluation of the navigation

The trail stretch is called Tsitre-Kaberneeme, which means Tsitre to be the beginning and Kaberneeme to be the end. While hiking, we found the markings unlogical, in some places pointing to Tsitre and in other places to Kaberneeme. Seldom there were markings, pointing to both ways at the same time. On one bus stop there was an arrow, pointing to wrong direction, so we walked half a kilometre in wrong direction.

It was really sorry, that the GPX track with the waypoints did not work. We could not see the interest points on the map in our phone. It is really very uncomfortable to search for them in the system while walking in nature. We did not visit any of the waypoints, as they were not signed in the nature and the GPX did not work and we had not printed these points out beforehand.

One of the waypoints of the stretch was Salmistu Harbour (Figure 37). It is closed for construction, but the trail goes through the harbour and building zone. We had to struggle to find the way round. As the construction period is stated to last 1 year and 1 month, but usually longer, then the FT management should follow these kind of changes and report about them on the FT webpage.



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Figure 36. The bus stop with the resting place and misleading arrows.



Figure 37. The construction works at Salmistu Harbour.

1.3.3. Evaluation of the services and sightseeing objects

We did not visit most of the sights, as they were too far from the trail, like Tülivere Scred Oak. Its location was unclear to us, as the GPS did not show it but the road sign directed somewhere in the woods. We also saw Muuksi Hill, but we did not visit it, as we did not see any proper access to it. Maybe in summer, with warmer weather we would have visited it. We went to Haapse coastal pine woods and Augu Boulder (Figure 38). It was a very beautiful place, which stayed in memories and made us to take picture. Also, the coastline was memorable. There were cool forest cabins near Augu Boulder. In Valkla, near the beach there was “Rannaresto”, but we did not go there, as we thought our hiking outfit was not proper for the place.

1.3.4. Evaluation of the social/cultural aspects



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There was a really beautiful house on the trail between Kaberneeme/Valkla on the coast. We do not know, if it is rented out or someone lives there, but the lady, present there went swimming naked. It is just along the FT.

1.3.5. Motivation, needs and satisfaction level for hikers (optional).

When you are not visiting the waypoints, the first part of the stretch is boring. It is all along the quite busy motorway with fields on both sides. The interesting part of the first half of the stretch was, that there were lots of horses, owned by locals. Not considering the motorway part, the stretch is really easy and comfortable for walking and would be suitable for families with kids.



Figure 38. The Augu Boulder and beautiful seaside.

1.4. Day 20/19. Säpina – Kolodovitsa / Kolodovitsa-Obinitisa. 29.10.2020

The Southern Estonia stretch was visited by 5 students and two lecturers, Marika Kose and Reeda Tuula-Fjodorov. The group was accompanied by local guide of Setomaa Helen Külvik and FT staff Raili Mengel and Kadri Moppel.

1.4.1. Evaluation of the infrastructure

Info stands – There were no specific FT info stands on the stretch. The stands in Piusa were informative about local nature and in good shape.



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WC-On this stretch the open public DC was in Piusa. It was not very clean, although there was even some toilet paper. The doors did not close properly. But the DC was usable. On working hours everybody could use Piusa Cave centre WC-s.

Resting places – There were no public resting places on the stretch(es), except in Piusa. There you could use the railway station benches, the resting area of Piusa Cave Centre. There were garbage bins.

Security – There were no loose dogs or any other direct hazards on the road, but if one will cross the railroad, there will always be a risk of train, especially when people would use earphones and do not hear properly.

Trail availability –

When you travel Sāpina - Kolodavitsa stretch, coming from Sāpina, then before the railway tunnel there is a ditch, full of water- It was quite tricky to jump over it. When we were testing the trail, there had been no bigger rains and floods, but when there will be more water, it would be a challenge to cross that ditch (Figure 39)!



Figure 39. The ditch, full of water near railway tunnel.

As the ditch runs through the tunnel (Figure 40), under the railway, then when it is full of water, it would be difficult and unsafe to go through it. It would tempt people to climb up on the railway embankment and cross the railway above. The embankment has very steep slopes and lots of vegetation on it, which makes it not a very easy task. We consider there should be an information or warning about the water in the tunnel, its depth and alternatives of crossing.



Figure 40. The railway tunnel.

1.4.2. Evaluation of the navigation

The FT part from Säpina to Kolodovitsa was marked and we could follow the marks. From Kolodovitsa to Obinitsa the trail was not yet marked and we used GPX. We had some problems with noticing the markings. In general, the markings were well visible and appeared often enough, but there were none, when the roads split (Figure2).



Figure 41. Where to put the sign(post)?



Figure 42. A well-marked bus stop.

On the second half of the stretch after Piusa, when the trail turned in the midst of the sand its and dunes, the old forest had been freshly cut, (Figure 41) The road will split and there is no trees or posts to mark. Hopefully the FT team will be aware of such cuttings on the FT and update the markings or find the posts if trees are gone.

With existing marking, we had the first problem in the beginning: we walked from Sāpina 1 km and GPX viewer told us to turn on the gravel road, but there was no sign (Figure 43). Then we noticed far away one very thin tree with FT marking (Figure 44). When approaching the tree, we saw it was going to break soon.



Figure 43. Where to turn?



Figure 44. The tree will fall down soon. The summer green will cover the marking.



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The problem with the marking would be, that it had been probably done in autumn, when undergrowth and leaves are gone. It is easy to mark, but when in spring the leaves and plants will appear, it would be very difficult to notice the markings. We see this as a big threat and recommend to check the trail markings in the middle of the vegetation period for hikers safety.

We also noticed, that 3,5 km before Kolodovitsa the marking was misleading and too far from crossroads. We understand, that there will be signposts and info boards on certain parts of the FT and hopefully these problems will be solved.

Although GPX worked well, we had some technical problems with apps. We used the NaviCup, which did not work properly in some Android phones. It worked Ok in Apple iOS phone. We also noticed, that in the woods (from Piusa to Obinita especially) when there are lots of side roads and the forest is remote, the GPX viewer apps and maps do not show these side-roads (surface roads) and turnings (Figure 45). We recommend to mark these places especially carefully. If locals do the marking, they may be knowing the proper trail by some local knowledge, but strangers would get lost easily.

The group also had problems on landscape, as they did not know how to use the app (that they had to enter “your position”). If not properly used, this can lead to getting lost. We recommend to make it possible for hikers to leave the notes and tips about using different phones and apps in the FT web page, then everybody could use them.



Figure 45. The surface roads, not visible on GPX app.

1.4.3. Evaluation of the services and sightseeing objects

As we visited the region during the low season, we could not get in the Piusa Cave Center (Figure 47). But we could visit the Piusa Pottery (Figure 48), where the hosts were friendly and welcoming, sharing their information and company with enthusiasm.



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It is a great place to pop in and have a chat and buy local souvenirs any time of the year. A great attraction is Piusa nature trail and visiting the huge sandpit (Figure 46).



Figure 46. Piusa sand quarry.



Figure 47. Piusa Caves visitor centre.

Obinitsa Cemetery was also interesting to visit, but without guiding it would not talk much to strangers. Maybe an info-board with burial habits would be useful in future.



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Also information about the ancient burial mounds next to the cemetery could be of interest of the visitors.



Figure 48, Piusa Pottery.

Taarka Tarõ was an excellent place for a good meal (Figures 49 and 50). We pre ordered the food and it was a good Seto food. The hostess introduced it well and there was plenty of food and drinks after the long day of walking. We really recommend it for hikers, as in summer season it will be open regularly not only on the pre order.



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Figure 49. Local food at Taarka Tarõ, Obinitsa.



Figure 50. Cake and tea at Taarka Tarõ, Obinitsa.

1.4.4. Evaluation of the social/cultural aspects

The stretch runs mostly in the woods and to some extent on roads. There are some populated places like Piusa and Obinitsa where one could meet people. In Obinitsa you will see the flags of Finno-Ugric nations and there are some other items, pointing to Seto culture, but for an individual hiker it would not tell much. Of course, the FT materials will provide this information and people could find information before hiking and visit the Seto museum in Obinitsa.

When leaving Piusa and turning to obinitsa, then turning to the woods, where the forest was cut on the dunes, we found a lot of garbage near the FT on trail sides. There were



also a lot of old plastic ribbons from some sports events, hanging along the FT. We removed them. We took a photo of all garbage, we found (Figure 51).



Figure 51. Garbage from Piusa to Obinita.

We had a local guide with us, and it was really great opportunity to do this stretch with her, hearing the stories and legends of the region. We also enjoyed the diverse and beautiful landscapes on this stretch.

1.5. Day 17. Tsiistre – Haanja. 30.10.2020

The Southern Estonia stretch was visited by 5 students and two lecturers, Marika Kose and Reeda Tuula-Fjodorov.

1.5.1. Evaluation of the infrastructure

Info- boards – there were no specific FT info boards. There was information in Tsiistre near the village house and at Haanja, Suur Munamägi.

WC- there were no public toilets on the stretch, but You can visit the toilets in Haanja, Suur Muna Café or in Tsiistre café, if they are open.

Resting places – all the stretch was on local gravel roads. There were no places along the trail to sit or rest. Only in Tsiistre and in Haanja, near Suur Munamähi and Suur Muna Café. As the trail is only on local gravel roads, it would be useful to (or recommend local communities) create some benches or resting places.

Security aspects – there were lots of dogs in the households near the road. The dogs were noisy and threatening, it took some effort to find out from the distance, if they are



in the yards or loose. Fortunately, the dogs were not loose on that day, but they were really big and angry and looked threatening.

But the real threat on this stretch is the traffic on local roads. The roads are curvy and visibility is not good for cars and hikers. The road margins have (deep) steep slopes quite often and there is not much space for walkers to step aside. The problem is, that local truck drivers (or any other vehicle drivers) are not used to hikers (or anybody walking) on that road, but they are used to high speeds as they know the roads well. We strongly recommend FT team to write in local newspaper or promote on some local events the FT and that there may be people walking on certain roads. The FT website says, that hikers should be careful in smaller roads. For this stretch we recommend to add a warning, that hikers should watch out the whole stretch, as the drivers will not speed down and the traffic is busy.

Trail availability – as trail is running along local gravel roads, it is well available and only if there would be road construction works, there would be problems of accessing.

1.5.2. Evaluation of the navigation

On that stretch a big problem in our opinion was, that a lot of markings were done on birches (figure 52). These marks were really difficult to notice, as it melted with the trees and grey weather. We consider also a problem to notice these markings during the vegetation period, when trees will have leaves and all the shrubs and tall vegetation are growing, as the marks will certainly not be visible then. It was clearly understood, that the marking had been done in autumn, when the green was gone. On this stretch we saw a cross-mark on the road sign post – wrong direction. We welcomed this sign and discussed that these signs would be welcome everywhere (more often) where you may take the wrong turn.



Figure 52. The marking on the birch bark. Figure 53. Wrong direction sign!

1.5.3. Evaluation of the services and sightseeing objects

We highly recommend the Suur Muna Café as the menu is great, made of local components and all is very good and tasty. The service is friendly and excellent! We



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did not visit the Suur Munamägi lookout tower during our hike, but we have done it before and we recommend to plan the arrival or departure from Haanja so, that one can visit the tower.

1.5.4. Evaluation of the social/cultural aspects

This stretch does not offer any cultural or social aspects on the trail itself. For walkers it is quite monotone and “boring” (Figure 54). The beginning in Tsiistre and ending in Haanja (or vice versa) offers local services and possibilities to meet locals. In Haanja there is also possibility to visit Mooska Smoke Sauna and Vällamägi hill and trail.



Figure 54. Typical Haanja gravel road.



Conclusions

The pilot testing of selected stretches of the Forest Trail brought up following issues and recommendations:

- The changes from RMK trail to FT must be carefully marked in nature and must be addressed in the descriptions on website clearly.
- The instructions for downloading and using the apps for different devices must be highlighted on the website and made available easily for hikers. Users tips would be good idea.
- The website should contain basic information about technical issues of the stretches – difficult paths, slippery parts, steep slopes, dangerous crossings and special needs for footwear and / or clothing. The beginners are not aware of these issues and are not prepared.
- The younger generation is expecting DCs to be available on such trails for hygiene and ecological reasons. If there will be none, this should be addressed in the descriptions delicately.
- On long stretches in remote and wild areas the benches or logs to sit on and rest would be welcome, especially with wet and cold weather, when you wouldn't sit on ground to rest.
- The markings, done in autumn or winter could be useless, as they are made not considering the green parts of the trees, bushes and tall vegetation. They will be invisible during vegetation period. These markings should be checked in early summer!
- The markings on birches are badly visible because of the white colour of birch bark.
- Markings on small, dead, branchy trees should be avoided in strategic places, as their marking may not be visible or can disappear.
- The trails, running on public roads (especially narrow and curvy ones) will be a real threat to hikers, as local drivers are driving with high speed, are not slowing down and are not expecting hikers. These stretches should have special warnings on the website!
- While FT owners will keep their parts controlled and inspected regularly, the same should be expected from RMK. Their markings and trail safety may vary a lot.
- FT owners should inspect the trail regularly, as there may be clearcuts and other forestry or land use interventions, removing the marked trees or markings unexpectedly.