

## THE 'GO-ALONG' INTERVIEWS FOR ASSESSMENT OF USERS' ATTITUDES TOWARD URBAN FOREST MANAGEMENT

\*Ieva Kraukle , Ilze Stokmane , Kristine Vugule 

Latvia University of Life Sciences and Technologies, Latvia

\*Corresponding author's e-mail: ieva.kraukle@hotmail.lv

### Abstract

Different stakeholders in urban forests have different interests, which are best captured through 'go-along' interviews. The aim of the research was to identify residents' views on the use of urban forests to ensure the delivery of social functions and to improve urban forest management practices. The 'go-along' interview method is a variation of qualitative interviewing used alone or in combination with other methods to explore and then improve understanding of people's experiences, in which people move when carrying out their activities or practices. The study looked at 4 urban forest areas in Latvia: the nature parks Ogres Zilie kalni, Bernāti, Ragakāpa and Langervalde forest. A total of 26 'go-along' interviews were conducted, where the principle of the researcher being guided by the interviewer was observed within the method used. The routes taken during the interviews were recorded in the *ArcGIS* application *QuickCapture*, in addition to taking photographs of places of interest and recording on a dictaphone the interviewee's perspective on the use of the particular urban forest in daily life, views on management and other insights. The planning and management process needs to consider and balance user preferences, national and local regulations, owner/manager commitments, opportunities and expert knowledge. Areas of varying levels of landscaping and maintenance should be created, so that visitors can choose the appropriate landscaping and intensity of visitation. People who choose to visit the forest have very positive feelings, which contribute not only to physical health, but also to a positive psycho-emotional state and relaxation.

**Keywords:** urban forest management, cultural ecosystem services, go-along, walk-along, landscape preference.

### Introduction

When studying urban forests in Latvia, the authors were already familiar with the different interests of different stakeholders involved in urban forest processes in the Ogre Zilie Kalni and Bernāti Nature Parks - regulatory, management and user stakeholders (Kraukle et al., 2024). Visitor/user interests, evaluations and perceptions of urban forest processes and amenities can be very diverse, as was already evident in the authors' surveys of Latvian urban forest experts in 2024. Participatory interviews were used to find out the views of users. The aim of the research was to analyse the habits and attitudes of the public on the use of urban forests to maintain cultural ecosystem services, assure the realization of social functions, develop and improve urban forest planning, management practices. The go-along method is a practical way for citizens and urban planners to exchange ideas on how to make urban forests more accessible for walking (Miaux et al., 2010), all types of recreation, sports and other socially relevant activities.

Research and practice should take an integrated human-natural systems approach; urban forest planning and design should take into account not only scientific research and local knowledge, but also the interests and priorities of local people (Beckley et al., 2006; Janse & Konijnendijk, 2007; Stokmane, 2022; Wolf & Kruger, 2010). Understanding the green identity of a particular place can help to design urban forests that better meet the needs of the local community (Carpiano, 2009). Local residents, long-term and regular visitors can provide insights into specific local knowledge, local aesthetic and cultural preferences, social systems and attitudes to inform researchers and planners about appropriate design solutions (Barron et al., 2021). In line with these needs,

go-along interviewing is a type of qualitative interviewing technique that is highly useful (alone or in combination with other methods) for exploring and subsequently improving understanding of people's experiences, relational perspectives on place and space, and the wider local area in which people move as part of their activities or practices (Carpiano, 2009; Cummins et al., 2007).

### Materials and Methods

The go-along interview method is a type of in-depth qualitative interview conducted by researchers who accompany individual informants in a familiar setting, such as their immediate neighbourhood or a larger local area. 'Go-along' can be conducted as a 'walk' (i.e. while walking with the participant), a 'drive' (i.e. while driving) or a 'mixed' form that combines the two previous types (Kusenbach, 2003). The way in which this commuting takes place can vary depending on the context and size of the neighbourhood, but essentially all commuting involves an interview with the participant while getting to know their neighbourhood or other local context. In this sense, the researcher 'walks through' people's lived experience of their neighbourhood. As a method, therefore, 'walking through' offers the researcher a unique opportunity not only to observe people's surroundings, but also to study their perception, processing and navigation of the environment (Carpiano, 2009).

The study covered 4 urban forest areas in Latvia: the nature parks 'Ogres Zilie kalni' (between Ogre and Ikšķile), 'Bernāti' (near Liepāja), 'Ragakāpa' (in Jūrmala) and Langervaldes forest (in Jelgava). A total of 26 go-along interviews were conducted between 3 March 2022 and 25 January 2025. The method used followed the principle of the researcher being guided by the interviewer (see Table 1).

**Table 1***Study areas and number of surveys*

<i>Urban forest study areas</i>	<i>Nature park Ogres Zilie kalni</i>	<i>Nature park Bernāti</i>	<i>Langervalde Forest</i>	<i>Nature park Raga kāpa</i>	<i>Total</i>
Number of go-along surveys	10	6	5	5	26
% Number of go-along surveys	39%	23%	19%	19%	100%

The routes followed during the interviews were recorded in *ArcGIS QuickCapture*. Additionally, photographs were taken at key locations and the conversations were recorded using a dictaphone. These conversations were later transcribed, and the themes that emerged were organized into tables for further analysis and the development of conclusions. In this study, the interviewer was asked to follow a routine route in the area to describe feelings, perspectives on the use and management of the urban forest in question. Photographs were taken in places that were highlighted in the interview.

In practice, different terms are used to describe walk/go-along interviews (Bartlett et al., 2023) in qualitative research. There are numerous 'go-alongs or go-along interview' (Bell & Bush, 2021; Duedahl & Stilling Blichfeldt, 2020; Garcia et al., 2012) 'walking interview' (Lynch & Mannion, 2016), even 'wheeling with a wheelchair' (Parent, 2016). The variety of terms used shows that the method is widely and diversely used to describe walking/interviewing and can be used by researchers in different fields. In our case, depending on the specific area and the interviewee's habits, 'going along', 'driving and going along' (6), 'walking with the family' (5), 'walk along with your dog' (6) were actually used. Several of the interviewees (3) cycle in the area on a daily basis, but in order to be able to conduct and record the interview, it was conducted on foot.

In areas where one does not know many personal acquaintances, it can be challenging to find people willing to participate in interviews. People must be willing to share their personal experience and devote a significant amount of time ranging from approximately 40 minutes to 2.5 hours in our case. Most of the people who responded to the invitation to participate in the interviews were socially active people whom we approached through a contact person they knew personally. When approached, they were asked to show and tell us about their habits and ways of using the particular area of the forest, things they liked and disliked about the area.

### Results and Discussion

A wide range of information was obtained in the interviews. In this study, the main focus is on the use of urban forests for recreation in order to improve their social function in planning and implementing urban forest management.

Based on the results of the study, we can agree with Kusenbach (Kusenbach, 2003) who identifies five themes that the 'go-along' method is well suited to

explore and illuminate: [1] perceptions (i.e., informants' knowledge and values that shape their experience of the everyday social and physical environment); [2] spatial practices (i.e., the spatial ways in which people engage with their environment); [3] the link between biography and place; [4] the social architecture of the natural environment (i.e., different types or forms of human relationships and how informants position themselves in this social environment); and [5] social domains (i.e., patterns of interaction and how place shapes the nature of interactions). The following text in [square brackets] links to the relevant topics. The analysis of the data emerged a certain structure and correspondence with the urban forest functions previously proposed by the authors (Kraukle, 2013; Kraukle et al., 2022), extracted on the basis of the most relevant urban cultural ecosystem services (see Table 2). Cultural or non-material ecological services (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, 2005) are important for people, providing socialisation and creativity, which in urban areas takes the form of various forms of recreation in natural environments to improve physical and psycho-emotional health, enjoying attractive landscapes and being inspired.

The psycho-emotional aspect of visitors - personal experiences [1], emotions [2], attitudes [4], aesthetic feelings - from the appreciation of landscapes, plants, landscaping [4] to vivid memories of visiting the forest in childhood and youth [3] - emerged as an important aspect in all the interviews. An important aspect of the stories is the emphasis on sensations [1] - beautiful sights in the landscape and small mosses or spider webs, the smell of May flowers (*Convallaria majalis*), the scent of chervil (*Ledum palustre*), blueberries, lingonberries (*Vaccinium myrtillus*, *Vaccinium vitis-idaea*), the taste of nuts (*Corylus avellana*), the special texture of sand on the beach or the cover of dead needles on the path, the taste of melting snow, the wind on the beach and the breeze in the forest. The different interests [4, 5] of the respondents in using the area, from quiet relaxation to intensive sport and competition, are also significant. Historical traces in the forest area are also of interest to people - hill forts, military heritage from the World War I and II, the Soviet era, cultural traces of resorts, entertainment facilities, sports infrastructure, industrial infrastructure heritage. Many mentioned the impact of Covid 19, with a huge influx of visitors to the nature parks, for which 'the municipality and the local population were not prepared [5]. People also draw attention to climate change, which they see in urban forests in the form of stronger storms, rainfall contributing to soil and

coastal erosion, trees uprooted by storms and damaged by insects and disease. Of particular note were the individual interviews conducted with people who typically lead tours in the areas, which tended to be longer and packed with information about the history

and natural values of the area [4, 5]. There were significant differences in the interviewees' understanding of natural processes, natural values, conservation methods and opportunities [1, 4, 5].

**Table 2**  
*Urban forest features in Go-along interviews [1, 2, 3, 4, 5]*

Urban forest functions	Survey responses	Study areas					Comments from respondents
		Zīle kalni	Bernāti	Langervalde	Raga kāpa	Total	
		Surveys mentioning the issue %					
Social	landscaping elements	35	23	15	12	85	different views on the need for landscaping
	trails, tracks	35	23	11	19	88	differing views on the need for amenities, with a strong aversion to boardwalks, which are very slippery and difficult to cross in wet weather
	history	32	19	19	15	85	historical facts are mentioned by the majority of respondents
Environmental	plants	19	19	19	16	73	specific plants are often mentioned
	invasive plants	8	0	11	4	23	an awareness of invasive plants, which are not very common in Bernāti, but very common in the Langervalde
Environmental education		4	8	0	0	12	environmental education not mentioned directly by any of the respondents, but 3 of them lead excursions in which they talk about environmental issues
Environmental protection	habitats	16	12	15	15	58	contradictory, sharply contrasting assessments
	positive attitude	11	11	8	8	38	positive attitudes among respondents involved in the environment or forest sector
	negative	7	4	8	8	27	lack of understanding of nature protection issues, considering dry trees to be 'a mess in the forest', not in favour of weeding invasive undergrowth species
Aesthetic	landscape attractiveness	19	12	15	12	58	attractive, changing landscapes, beautiful plants; mainly attractive landscapes are landscapes that are well-tended, transparent, in 2 cases wild landscapes are more beautiful
Economic	income generation	0	8	4	0	12	berry picking for sale, floristry materials for work, forest thinning
Psycho emotional	emotions	39	23	19	19	100	all participants express their emotions
	positive	39	23	19	19	100	like the forest, silence, peace, landscapes
	negative	9	15	7	7	38	unmaintained forest, undergrowth, toilet malfunctioning, cyclists damaging the forest

There is a clear need to further explain environmental processes to the public, as well as the importance of deliberate, planned management an issue examined from an expert perspective in the authors` study on the experience of urban forest management in Latvia.

Urban forests are most often visited by people who live nearby or can reach the area within 15-20 minutes (Jang et al., 2022; Mcgrath et al., 2024; Moreno et al., 2021), which is the case in our study [2]. Most visitors live close to the forest (38%) or travel up to 5 km (46%), with only 15% of respondents travelling around 30 km, i.e. less than 30 minutes. Several of the visitors note that they are willing to travel further to visit particularly scenic or interesting places. The surveys show that visitors from Riga and other nearby cities go to the Ogres Zilie kalni, from Liepāja, Grobiņa and Rucava to Bernāti, from Jelgava to Langervalde Forest and, if they have more time, to Ķemeru National Park. The respondents have been visiting urban forests for a long time [3]: interesting and emotional are the stories of people who have been visiting the area since childhood, or 'since birth' - in the case of our study - more than 40 years (35%), 30 years - 19%, 20 years -

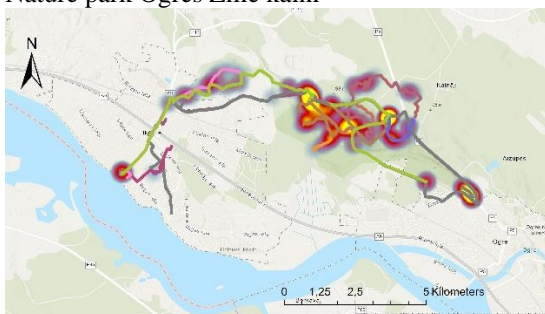
8%, 10 years - 35%, only one respondent became acquainted with the forest 1 year ago.

Several respondents stated that they visit the area several times a week - every day or even several times a day during the summer bathing season [1, 2]. They use different routes every day, depending on the weather conditions, the amount of time allocated for activities, their health status and mood [1, 2, 5]. The routes followed during the interview are summarised on maps, highlighting the visitors` favourite routes [2] (different colour for each respondent) and the landscapes, places, plants or facilities mentioned by the interviewees and photographed by the interviewer are shown in 'cloud form' (thickening of dots, more intense colour) in the places of most activity [1, 2, 3, 4, 5], see Figure 1. The interviewees expressed their attitudes to the different places by simply stating the facts, noting the positive (attractive landscape, walkable paths, psycho-emotional rest, few people, silence, positive memories) or negative aspects (too many people, too many or too few amenities, lack of benches, trail surfaces, too many/too few litter bins, toilets that malfunction, garbage) [1, 2, 3, 4, 5].

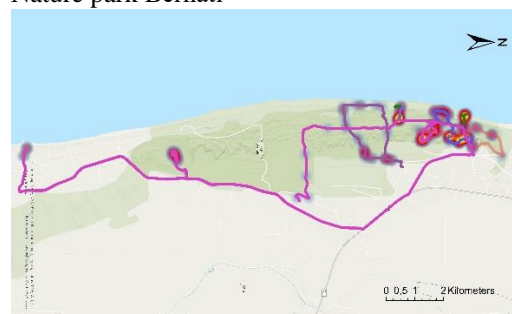
**Figure 1**

*Go along interview routes and photo locations [1,2]*

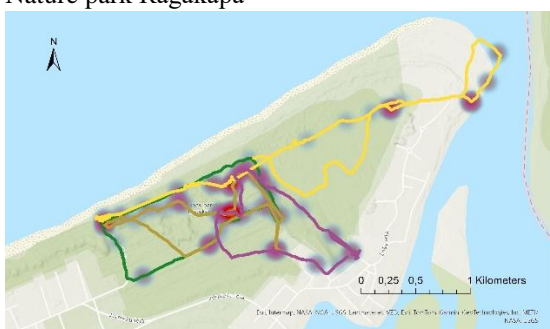
Nature park Ogres Zilie kalni



Nature park Bernāti



Nature park Ragakāpa



Langervalde Forest

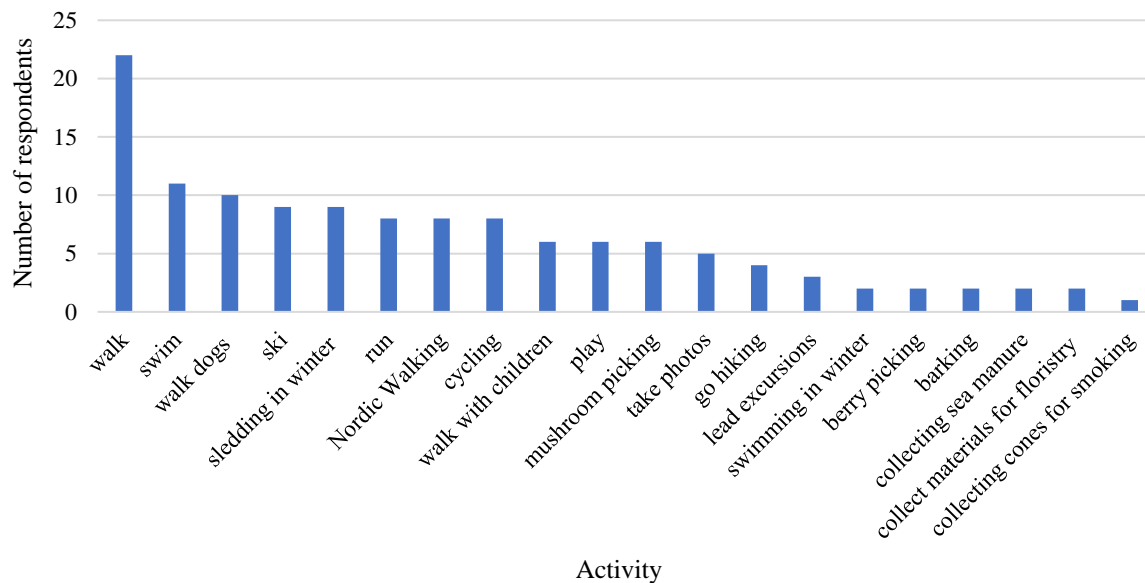


The list of activities performed is interesting [4], see Figure 2, with walking, swimming and walking the dog being the most popular. The most frequently mentioned activities are the traditional, even archaic ones that have survived from very ancient times: nut-cracking (picking *Corylus avellana* fruits), collecting sea dung (washed up sea plants) to fertilise and improve the sandy garden soil, and collecting pine cones (*Pinus sylvestris*) to smoke fish

caught in the sea.

In the urban forests, the green-blue structure with an articulated topography - a sufficiently transparent forest with hills bordering the water surfaces - is considered particularly attractive to visitors. In all three nature parks, the scenic, visually appealing extreme pine forests, fresh, dry air are particularly highlighted.

**Figure 2**  
*Respondents' activities in urban forests [1, 2, 4, 5]*



The flat landscape of the Langervalde Forest, with frequent undergrowth, is considered boring or 'nothing special'. Free access to the beach is essential, building is forbidden, 'a nature park is a place where you can relax if you don't have your own fields'. Visitors understand the situation [4, 5] - it is good that it is managed and maintained according to a plan. Fellow citizens appreciate the improvements in public attitudes 'people have become tidier' and 'clean up after themselves'. During the interviews a rating was given to the facilities [1, 2, 4, 5]. Table 3 and 4 show how many people mentioned and rated a particular type of amenity positively (+) or negatively (-) in the interviews.

Table 3 shows respondents' ratings for site-specific and linear landscaping, Table 4 - landscaping features and small architectural forms. Briefly describing the amenities in the Ogre Zilie kalni, the majority of respondents appreciate the existing amenities, but also expect them to be further improved and developed. In Ragakāpa (5-) and Bernāti (3-), the local people do not really use the existing amenities, in fact, they avoid them, except when showing the area to visitors, tourists. The Ogre Zilie kalni are dominated by gravelly hills, Bernāti and Ragakāpa by sand dunes, which are well drained and suitable for natural paths, avoiding the swamps and wet vigas in these areas. The Nature Park areas have an extensive network of paths that have been walked over time, with individual information signs; in Ragakāpa there are individual boardwalks, some of which were dismantled in 2024 and replaced with gravel paths. The Langervalde Forest is very different, with mostly waterlogged ground, which is only easily accessible via specially

created woodchip mulched paths and bridges over the many otherwise impassable gullies.

There are very different views on cycle and motorbike tracks. They are undoubtedly of interest to one group of users, but also a potential source of soil erosion, a source of noise in the case of motorcycles, and potentially dangerous to other visitors due to speed. If the people of Bernāti are happy that they have 'dealt with' motorcyclists by eliminating their activities in their territory, in the Ogres Zilie kalni there is a proposal from the people to find a place for them. The same goes for cyclists - in Bernāti and Ragakāpa there are no dedicated cycle paths, and their activities are restricted. Informal MTB trails have been established in the Ogres Zilie kalni for a long time and, according to the manager, they will be reviewed in 2024-2025, and a technical project will be developed to improve them, make them more interesting, safer and avoid impacts on the surrounding habitats. The gravel hills in the Ogres Zilie kalni are more resistant to soil erosion. In Bernāti and Ragakāpa, sand dunes are exposed to water and wind erosion due to loss of vegetation. In the Langervalde, the black soil is waterlogged and mobility is only possible on specially constructed paths with frequent mulching, which is not suitable for cycling.

Due to the high anthropogenic impact, the required campfire/grill sites have been created in 6 locations in the Ogre Zilie kalni and in 2 locations in Bernāti. In the Ogre Zilie kalni, Bernāti and Langervalde, wooden or stone sculptures and other artistic environmental elements have been created to attract visitors and serve as landmarks and signposts in the large forest areas.

**Table 3**

*Amenity ratings in Go-along interviews, spot and linear landscaping [1, 2, 4, 5]*

<i>Facilities</i>	<i>Casestudy areas (abbreviation)</i>				<i>Respondents' comments</i>
	<i>Zīlie kalni (ZK)</i>	<i>Bernāti (BE)</i>	<i>Langervalde (LA)</i>	<i>Raga kāpa (RK)</i>	
	<i>Rating in surveys (positive+; negative-)</i>				
<i>Spot/square landscaping</i>					
Swimming places	7+	4+	no	2+	Used extensively everywhere, swimming is often the main purpose of a visit.
Observation tower	4+	2-	no	no	BE - no sea view, height restricted due to Nature Park regulations.
Lighthouse	no	3+	no	3+	Lighthouse serves as a landmark and destination.
Viewing places	3+	1+	no	1+	ZK - lookout at Dubakalns water body, BE - lookout at Mount Poussin, view of the surrounding forest, sea not really visible, RK - lookouts with view of the surrounding forest.
Gazebo	1+	1+	no	no	None of the respondents use.
Activity places	4-	5+	no	2+	ZK -Nature concert hall site, Rope paths - undergrowth trampled at activity sites, BE - big stand as a cinema screen, LOC recreation base, Dzintariņš café, RK - Open-air Museum; 36-line restaurant kiosk.
Car parking	2+5-	3+	no	1+	Areas without asphalt pavement have dust in the air in dry weather or mud and potholes in wet weather.
<i>Linear landscaping</i>					
Ski track	5+5-	1+	no	1+	NK - 10km of specially constructed ski slopes with lighting, BE and RK skiers enter the slopes themselves.
Trails	7+2-	4+4-	4+4-	5-	In all areas, local visitors do not use the marked, signposted trails, nor do they use the boardwalks, which are slippery in wet weather, difficult to cross with pushchairs and bicycles. Marked trails are used by visitors in a strange place.
Cycling trails	3+	1-	no	3+	There are spontaneous cycle paths in the NC which are heavily used. BE cyclists are restricted as soil erosion is encouraged. RK - used to have stricter rules, now they are less strict.
Horse trails	2+	no	no	no	ZK - horse riding damages the trail surface and makes it difficult for pedestrians and cyclists to use.
Access roads	1+3-	2+	0+	0+	NK driveway mostly gravel, dust in the air in dry weather, elsewhere there are tarmac driveways which are appreciated.

In the territory of the nature parks, there is a desire (forbidden by Latvian law) to spend the night in tents or on branch poles, which are visible in places in the territory. In Bernāti, there is a strong negative attitude towards caravans (2-), as there has been a large influx

and this has caused inconvenience to the local population. The NC observes that there are only a few visitors with caravans who do not cause too much burden and inconvenience to other visitors.

**Table 4***Amenity ratings in Go-along interviews, landscaping features and small architectural forms [1, 2, 4, 5]*

Facilities	Casestudy areas (abbreviation)				Respondents' comments
	Zīle kalni (ZK)	Bernāti (BE)	Langervalde (LA)	Ruga kāpa (RK)	
	Rating in surveys (positive+; negative-)				
<i>Amenities</i>					
Benches	6+	6+	2+	2-	Benches are not used by sports visitors in all areas, but all agree that benches are needed for visitors who cannot walk long distances, in areas with attractive views.
Waste bins	2+3-	1-	1+	0+	ZK: 36 bins in activity areas, near benches, BE: 36 bins in a small area, which is disproportionate. LA - deliberately not placed RK - placed by benches. Sharply different opinions in all areas: more are needed, but mostly no bins at all. The principle of 'what you bring you take away' should be followed.
Information boards, signs	3+	3+	3+	3+	Many mention the need for them, even those who use them more often say that signs help orientation, especially if the place is less well known.
Fire and barbecue areas	5+	0+	no	no	As the number of visitors increases, the equipment needs to be renovated and the layout rethought. None of the interviewees use them.
Wooden, stone sculptures	4+	6+	2+	no	Positive attitudes of respondents, they are popular attractions, included in walking routes, for weddings and other celebrations.
Toilets	5+	3-	no	0+	Positive about well maintained WCs, especially with water and heat. BE - particularly negative assessment of defectively constructed toilets that do not actually work.
Bridges	0+	1+	5+	0+	LA, BE - positively appreciate, especially note larger, specially built bridges, where without their construction it would be difficult to use the territory, ZK, RK small bridges on dry ditches, uneven terrain are not even noticed by visitors, not mentioned.
Changing cabins	1+	0+	no	0+	Important changing facilities on all beaches.
Stairs	3+	no	no	2+1-	rated better than boardwalks, but noting that they can be slippery, cannot be used by cyclists, pushchairs, people with disabilities.
Exercise, sports equipment	3+2-	no	no	no	ZK - good appreciation, need to renew older ones, expand facilities for larger groups of athletes, also for smaller children.
Biathlon shooting wall	1+	no	no	no	ZK - appreciates new, modern activities.
Counters	2+	0+	0+	no	ZK - positive, respondents interested in total number of visitors, BE, LA, RK - respondents do not mention.
Coffee machines	2-	1+	no	0+	ZK - strongly negative attitude, BE - positive, included in the 'ritual' of the visit, RK - is located, not mentioned in the survey
Lighting on trails	2+	no	no	no	ZK - there is lighting on some paths, but should be more

Although the interviewed visitors do not specifically mention this, rangers regularly observe acts of vandalism and deliberate damage to facilities. However, such damage is either promptly repaired or the affected facilities are dismantled entirely, making them less visible to visitors.

Ragakāpa is known for its informal 'policemen', local residents who 'keep order', and in the Ogre Zilie kalni and Bernāti, there is also a high level of public involvement, with visitors reporting irregularities to the local police or managers [4,5].

Visitors make suggestions [4,5] for improving the landscape: Asphalted access roads and car parks, upgrading play and exercise equipment, creating paths parallel to the ski slope, creating a disc golf course, reinforcing the path surface to make it wheelchair accessible, improving route signage (information on the length of the path, approximate time and difficulty of the route (whether it is wheelchair accessible), creating audio guides, creating site signs, wooden sculptures, signposted 'entry gates', the possibility of creating pay-per-visit sites to identify specific sites if their maintenance and service is improved, etc.). These suggestions from visitors help to understand the needs and priorities of the population.

### Conclusions

The 'go along' interviews in urban and peri-urban forest areas, the case studies of Bernāti, Ragakāpa and Ogre Zilie kalni Nature Parks and the Langervalde Forest have led to a number of conclusions:

1. People who choose to visit the forest have very positive feelings, sentimental memories of childhood, youth, previous visits, which contribute not only to physical health through exercise and fresh air, calming, but also to a positive psycho-emotional state and relaxation. The results of the study show that the social, ecological, environmental education, environmental protection, aesthetic and economic functions of urban forests are important, but the

psycho-emotional function of urban forests, as identified by cultural ecosystem services, is particularly important and should be taken into account in the planning and management of areas.

2. The planning and management process should take into account user expectations, national and local regulations, the commitments of owners or managers, available opportunities, and expert advice. The planning process should involve specialists and experts from various fields, as well as users from different sectors, each bringing their own knowledge, experience and needs, which may often be diametrically opposed. The planning process should, as far as possible, reconcile different interests.

3. In order to minimise conflicts and disagreements between stakeholders, it is essential to explain the environmental requirements or management peculiarities to users, which may initially provoke a strong reaction from users.

4. In most cases, the managers and experts have taken the visitors' suggestions into account in the planning process, but financial constraints make it impossible to implement everything. Suggestions from visitors can help to prioritise work.

5. Taking into account different opinions, one solution is to create different areas with more and less intensive landscaping and maintenance, so that visitors can choose the level of landscaping and visitor intensity that suits them.

6. Given the amount of information gathered in the 26 Go-Along interviews, further detailed research and conclusions should be considered.

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