

FINLAND

Resilient futures

Location

Metsähallitus

Programming period

2014 – 2020

Priority

P6 – Social inclusion & local development

Measure

M07 – Basic services & village renewal

Funding (EUR)

Total budget 397 828.00

EAFRD 167 087.76

National/Region. 190 957.24

Other 39 783.00

Project duration

2019 – 2021

Project promoter

Lauhanvuori -
Hämeen kangas Geopark ry

Contact

terttu.hermansson@lhgeopark.fi

Website

<https://lhgeopark.fi/>

The project aim was for the Lauhanvuori-Hämeen kangas region to reach UNESCO Global Geopark status and this was achieved in summer 2020. Through project activities regional municipalities, Metsähallitus, Natural Resources Institute Finland, companies, associations, educational institutions and individual residents have worked together to develop the region and to construct a sustainable nature tourism destination.

Summary

With cooperation between several sparsely populated municipalities and other actors, the project holder, the Lauhanvuori-Hämeen kangas region aimed to become the second nature tourism destination to receive UNESCO Global Geopark status in Finland. Globally there are currently only 161 locations of this type.



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The region has been developed into a unified nature tourism location, which required long-term and future-oriented development work from a wide-range of actors in the region.

Nature tourism in the region has been developed with an emphasis on sustainable tourism and digitalisation and has been promoted both domestically and internationally. There has been a particular focus on well-being, health and food themes. With the help of higher education providers, new knowledge has been acquired on the region's geology, nature and cultural heritage. New activities and services have been created for Geopark customers, some of which are directed at international markets.

Results

As of January 2021, the Geopark's number of member companies had grown by 43.5% and member associations by 36%.

Visitor numbers to the region's nature locations have increased during the project by nearly 98%.

The annual visitor numbers to the Geopark websites (lauhanvuoriregion.fi and lhgeopark.fi) has increased during the project from around 4 000 visitors (2018) to 24 000 visitors (2020). The annual viewing rates of Geopark's YouTube channel have increased during the project from 700 views (2018) to around 19 000 views.

The project has provided work experience for five young people (two to four months per person).

One new company has been created in the region related to Geopark guidance services and several new services for Geopark customers have been developed. Study trips for international visitors are also being planned.

Context

In order to reach UNESCO Global Geopark status a region must have internationally significant geological heritage, whose maintenance is promoted and presented to the public in different ways. The region must also have valuable nature and cultural heritage that is cherished by and presented to the public. Geoparks must have a functional administrative structure, marketing strategy and a plan to promote sustainable tourism.

The Lauhanvuori-Hämeen kangas Geopark area is located in the border region of three provinces and ten (nine in 2021) small municipalities. Geopark preparation brought together three provinces with different identities but similar statuses and operational environments into a new, strong entity. The municipalities have joined their resources and strengthened their operational potential through close cooperation.

The vitality of the originally fragmented region needed strengthening and the potential for businesses and livelihoods improved. The Geopark accreditation process presented an opportunity for residents to participate in developing their living environment, to improve cooperation and strengthen networking. The process also represented an opportunity for higher education institutions and research institutes to get involved.

Tourism infrastructure and services in the Geopark area had already been developed in many ways, but the area needed further development as a tourism destination.

Objectives

The objective of the project was to develop the region to reach UNESCO Global Geopark status. This would ensure the region was a sustainable nature tourism destination with an international operational concept based on customer information and cooperation.

In addition, the project aimed to increase awareness of the Geopark concept, and specifically the Lauhanvuori-Hämeen kangas Geopark, amongst regional actors, residents, tourists and other stakeholders. The objective was to encourage actors to engage in more sustainable practices and to reduce their carbon footprint.

The project sought to strengthen and diversify the business activities of the region, utilise the knowledge of higher education institutions and to increase the local awareness and appreciation of the region and for local residents to participate in the development work.

Activities

The project combined local needs, EU rural development objectives and UNESCO criteria into concrete activities.

Through a visitor survey, the customer profile, expectations and demand needs of Geopark locations were ascertained. Based on the survey results, the local economic impact of achieving Geopark status was also assessed. A nature tourism plan and sustainable tourism indicators for the region were updated. The main cooperation partner of this section was Metsähallitus - a state-owned enterprise that produces environmental services for a diverse customer base, ranging from private individuals to major companies.

An operational plan for a nature tourism destination was built in wide cooperation with different actors and stakeholders. Regional tourism companies were particularly actively involved in this work. Activities were built on the UNESCO Global Geopark criteria and on the existing strengths of the area. The geological story of the region, which developed from an ancient mountain area into the current flat marshland, has been strongly emphasised, with wetlands an essential part of the nature tourism offer.

The project has developed a cooperation model for companies and associations, whose representatives meeting at least four times a year. These meetings enable networking and concrete cooperation plans to be developed. In particular, tourism digitalisation and sustainable tourism have been promoted with several workshops organised in cooperation with other actors, such as regional tourism organisations and projects.

Sales of tourism services have also been made available online, whereby the products offered by UNESCO Geopark member companies have been compiled together in a Geopark online shop. Covid-19 restrictions have meant that meetings, webinars and workshops have been held online.

Sustainable tourism has been promoted by communicating sustainability principles to individual tourists and companies. Company representatives have participated in workshops and acquired responsibility certification. This enables companies to show the Sustainable Travel Finland (STF) sign, obtainable when at least half of a company network has obtained STF certification.

Geopark aims to become a sustainable travel destination by guiding companies gradually towards more sustainable measures and ultimately to STF accreditation.

Through the project, the Geopark has joined the UNESCO Global Geoparks' GEOfood network. Geopark companies can use the GEOfood logo on their products as long as the food products and services fulfil certain criteria related to food locality, sustainability and traditions. Around GEOfood products, tourism routes related to local food can be constructed.

Quality Geopark communication material has been developed systematically in two languages (Finnish and English). Geopark has received new Lhgeopark.fi website and has produced an advertisement video that has received visibility in the global network of Geoparks. Thanks to the project, the park has been presented at fairs and events.

The environmental awareness of children and young people in the Geopark region has been improved through the organization of Geopark activity days and sessions. The awareness of municipalities and regional residents on themes related to sustainable development and the Geopark has been promoted through information disseminated at seminars and other events.

Higher education institutions have been involved in developing digital guidance material, which is presented based on location data and relayed to visitors alongside traditional guidance. Students employed in the project have also reviewed and contributed to knowledge related to the region's geology, nature and culture. The project has produced and piloted environmental education material, which will be utilised in school trips to the region.

Main results

The project enabled the Lauhanvuori-Hämeenkanngas region to reach UNESCO Global Geopark status in summer 2020. The project has increased and stabilised regional actors' cooperation over provincial, municipal and industry boundaries. Municipalities, Metsähallitus, Natural Resources Institute Finland, companies, associations, educational institutions and individual residents have worked together systematically to develop the region and to construct a sustainable nature tourism destination.

Sustainable development goals have been formulated for the project and a common plan of action agreed. Regional residents' local identity and pride as well as their relationship to nature have been strengthened and activities to protect the region increased. The project has generated further resources in regional development, for example, municipalities have further developed their hiking locations and travel services. Local people believe in the region and want to maintain its Geopark status.

As of January 2021, the Geopark's number of member companies had grown by 43.5% and member associations by 36%. Visitor numbers to the region's nature locations have increased during the project by nearly 98%. The annual visitor numbers to the Geopark websites

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Key lessons

The project is an exceptionally good example of close, purpose-oriented supra-provincial cooperation, combining several municipalities and numerous actors. Throughout the project, both the Geopark's stakeholder network and the number of people actively promoting the Geopark has constantly increased. A huge number of people have cooperated successfully, from regional administration at the municipal and provincial levels, Metsähallitus, Natural Resources Institute Finland, universities, different types of tourism organisations, funders and developers, schools and companies, associations and individuals in the region.

The project worked closely with other domestic projects, learned from foreign projects and shared information about its activities and best practices for other projects. The project serves as a good example of local actors using their own initiatives. The actors have a strong willingness and ability to cooperate to develop the region further.

The project has involved residents of different ages and backgrounds to develop their sparsely populated rural region. People from very different backgrounds have been employed and called to action, including young people still completing their education and older people with difficulties finding work.

Additional sources of information

www.facebook.com/lauhanvuoriiregion/
www.instagram.com/lauhanvuoriiregion/
<https://twitter.com/suogeopark/>
www.youtube.com/channel/UCuihxHxuoJzmsSUD6XAJ37g/videos



*This project has been categorised under 'Resilient futures' by the nominating National Rural Network