

Conceptualisation of Forest Tourism: The Kočevsko Case Study

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This paper presents the definition of forest tourism and three varieties of forest tourism activities. An empirical study was conducted to examine the perception of forest tourism and forest activities in the case study of the Kočevsko forest in Slovenia. The triangulation approach consisted of a survey among Slovenian tourists, interviews with tourism stakeholders, and content analysis of promotional elements of the Kočevsko destination. The data showed that tourists find forest destinations interesting, safe, unspoilt, and suitable for young people and families. They describe forest tourism with the words 'bear', 'forest', and 'nature'. The respondents mostly prefer outdoor forest activities, wildlife observation slightly less, and lastly the relaxation options. The knowledge gained could help forest destinations to develop their products and adopt the appropriate customer approach.

Keywords: forest tourism, nature-based tourism, destination management, wildlife, outdoor recreation, forest relaxation



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Introduction

While urban tourism is forecasted to grow (Aall & Koens, 2019), nature is still an essential part of the tourism offer. And one of the most appealing features of nature is the forest and its wildlife (Kuvan, 2005). According to the recent Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations report, forests 'cover 31 per cent of the Earth's land surface (4.06 billion ha), but the area is shrinking, with 420 million ha of forest lost through deforestation between 1990 and 2020' (FAO, 2022). Forests are the most biologically diverse ecosystems on land, home to more than 80% of the terrestrial species of animals, plants, and insects. They significantly reduce the risk of natural disasters, including floods, droughts, landslides, and other extreme events. Around 1.6 billion people – including more than 2,000 indigenous cultures – depend on forests for their livelihood (United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, n.d.).

There are also many tourism benefits from being a nature destination. As a tourism attraction, forests receive approximately 8 billion nature-based tourism visits annually, generating income from direct expenditure, providing tourism jobs (especially for women, youth, and other vulnerable groups) and recreation opportunities, improving health, regulating air quality, and protecting biodiversity (Song et al., 2020; FAO, 2022).

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by all United Nations Member States in 2015, addresses an urgent call for action by all countries, with 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). SDG goal number 15, 'Life on land', aims to protect, restore, and promote sustainable use of ecosystems and sustainably manage forests, while SDG goal number 3, 'Good health and well-being', speaks about ensuring healthy lives and promoting well-being for all at all ages (United Nations, Department of Economic and

Social Affairs, n.d.). Therefore, we believe that forest tourism is a suitable response to these SDGs, since it aspires to protect nature and help people improve their health. Hence, the first aim of this research is to represent forest tourism as a sustainable and beneficial activity. Secondly, forest tourism, as such, is under-presented in the literature. While there is a growing interest in forest tourism research, the absolute number of scientific articles remains small (Santoso et al., 2024). Consequently, our second aim is to present the definition of forest tourism and three varieties of forest tourism activities.

We introduce forest tourism in the case of Kočevsko – a forestry region in Slovenia. Kočevsko offers various types of tourism, such as nature-based, sustainable, and boutique travel, and visitors associate it with relaxation, retreat, and self-connection, as demonstrated below by the results of this research. The Tourism Development Strategy for Kočevsko 2020–2025 defines the destination's DNA, which is based on the experience of the forest through a comprehensive, sustainable, and high-quality tourism offer (Uran Maravič, 2020). The Slovenian Tourism Strategy 2022–2028 highlights that forests cover 63% of the country's territory, and five Slovenian properties, including the primeval forests of Krokav and Snežnik (in the Kočevsko region), are listed as UNESCO World Heritage sites. The Slovenian Tourism Strategy (Ministrstvo za gospodarski razvoj in tehnologijo Republike Slovenije, 2022) identifies forests as a strength that needs to be preserved and strengthened. However, the term 'forest tourism' is not used throughout the strategy, which makes this paper particularly important.

The paper is organised as follows. The second section is the literature review and definition elaboration; the third section presents the case study area Kočevsko; the fourth section describes the methodology and data used in the paper; and the empirical results and analysis are reported in the fifth section. The final chapter provides conclusions.

Forest Tourism

The theory presents many different types of tourism that relate to nature. Nature-based tourism is a wide

category which includes tourism activities that use various natural areas (3S seaside activities, national parks visits, cruises) (Slocum et al., 2020). Other authors describe nature-based tourism as 'all forms of tourism that use natural resources and foster understanding and conservation of the natural environment' (Hughes et al., 2018, p. 449) or 'activities that people do while on holiday and which focus on engagement with nature and usually include an overnight stay' (Ahtikoski et al., 2011, p. 2). This is similar to ecotourism, which, on the other hand, is regarded as a more sustainable nature-based activity that has a low impact on nature or even contributes to the protection of the habitats and well-being of local communities (Wickramasinghe, 2012; Slocum et al., 2020, Farkic et al., 2025). Other types include wildlife tourism (where tourists interact with wildlife in nature) and adventure tourism (includes elements of risk and intense physical activities) (Hughes et al., 2018).

Nature-based tourism in forests appeared alongside the decline in forestry and has become a new source of income and a significant tourism offer in different destinations (Konu, 2015; Ahtikoski et al., 2011; Schweinsberg et al., 2012). If we focus more narrowly on forest tourism, it can be defined as a type of tourism that takes place in the forest and offers forest tourism activities such as wildlife watching, adrenalin sports and recreation, and relaxation. Its key resource and attraction are the forests used for recreation, which serve as a vital factor in a tourism destination's competitiveness (Kuvan, 2005). Forests can be classified into 6 levels (developed areas, parklands, forest plantations, semi-natural forests, natural forests, and wilderness) based on the level of human intervention and the forests' own biophysical characteristics (Aasre et al., 2016).

Nature-based tourism especially attracts families with children (Bostedt & Mattsson, 1995); however, healthy and active baby boomers also prefer to participate in moderate to strenuous outdoor activities (Wilson et al., 2017). One study focused on young adult immigrants, where five recreational types in non-urban outdoor recreation emerged: 'Nature lovers' mainly engaged in outdoor recreation, 'Social animals' focused on social activity, 'Activity lovers' highlighted

health and sport motives, 'Group-based quiet seekers' visited nature in groups, and 'Individual quiet seekers' came alone (Kloek et al., 2015). If people seek peace and quiet in the forest, they are more likely to avoid encountering other people and divert from their designated path; nonetheless, they do not dislike meeting timid wildlife like roe deer (Skov-Petersen et al., 2021). Consequently, an equilibrium between the accessibility of the forest for families and the concentration of tourists is appropriate (Bostedt & Mattsson, 1995).

Forest Tourism Activities

There are various forest tourism activities that tourists can engage in. One of the most valuable natural tourism assets is certainly wildlife – flora and fauna. Wildlife tourism can be characterised as tourism where visitors meet wild animals and are in a setting of wild flora (Folmer et al., 2016). Tourists can encounter emotional experiences, learn about nature, and become aware of nature protection. Thus, we recognise four central types of wildlife interpretation (encounter without interpretation, interpretation based on knowledge, on responsibility, and on emotional content), where any type of interpretation is better than none (Šumrada et al., 2022). The wildlife encounter can range from consumptive motivation (e.g. fishing, hunting), admiration and awe (e.g. whale watching, bear photography, bird feeding) to non-consumptive benefits of tamed animals (e.g. dog sledging) (Conti, 2019). The interest in visiting mega-fauna (especially bigger mammals), mega-flora (trees and forests), and smaller flora (orchids or wildflowers) is increasing (Folmer et al., 2016). In addition, wildlife-based community tourism in protected areas can contribute to biodiversity conservation and community livelihood improvement (Stone & Nyaupane, 2018). Money for forest preservation can be collected through payments for ecosystem services (ES), environmental mortgages, funding, licensing, fees, and donations (Whitelaw et al., 2014). The voluntary contributions of visitors are a consequence of the tourists' opportunity to see wildlife and the conservation efforts at first-hand, which can prompt visitors to donate money for wildlife protection because of their stronger identity with nature (Hehir et al., 2022).

Forests are also very suitable environments for outdoor recreation in all seasons (Ahtikoski et al., 2011) and are the most typical settings for outdoor recreation (Conti, 2019). Recreation can range from the highly active and adventurous (for example, mountain biking, cross-country skiing) through the intermediate level (for example, swimming in lakes and rivers or snowshoeing) to more relaxed and easier (for example, jogging or walking), depending on the visitors' motives. On one hand, the motives include risk-taking and physical fitness, while on the other hand, they can be enjoying nature, rest, or escapism (Tyrväinen et al., 2008). Outdoor recreation was especially important during the COVID-19 pandemic, when tourists used it for physical and mental relaxation and to avoid crowded places (Weng et al., 2023). Forest recreation and sport can take place in a setting designed for these purposes and which has adequate equipment and infrastructure; hence, it is monetised, which can also affect the demand (Fredman et al., 2012). However, some barriers restrict access to forests for recreational users, such as hunting or forest-management works (Janeczko et al., 2020).

The third section of forest activities is directed towards relaxation. The current trend is forest bathing, following the Japanese practice of *shinrin-yoku*, which represents a mindful, immersive tourist experience and contributes to well-being, happiness, fulfilment and better health (Farkic et al., 2021). Forest bathing is a structured, mediated slow forest walk that enables tourists to embrace nature and be aware of the environment (Kil et al., 2021). While spending time in the forest, visitors can breathe forest air, exercise, spend time with friends without electronic devices (digital detox) and activate all the senses. Other relaxing and leisure activities are forest selfness, reflexology, naturopathic elements, apitherapy, and picking forest fruits and herbs – all these are a positive contribution to clinical therapies, especially for respiratory diseases, mental illnesses, psychosomatic ailments, headaches and others (Cvikl & Pajk, 2015; Zhao & An, 2021; Cvikl, 2022). A greater understanding of the therapeutic potential of the profound use of nature can contribute to the reduction of all sorts of modern diseases and preventively strengthens human

physical and mental health (Schuh & Immich, 2019; Marselle et al., 2021). The forest is a source of energy, a place that restores and heals. Together with the trees, which represent its fundamental element, it allows for relaxation from noise and urbanisation. Sounds from the forest, such as rustling leaves, trees, and streams, have a therapeutic effect (Bouchardon, 2000; Mlakar Močilnik & Pirnat, 2010). There is also a tendency to intensify forest-based health tourism (wellness tourism in forests) due to the many positive effects of forests (Li & Wen, 2023). All in all, we can regard forest tourism as slow tourism that highlights freedom, self-reliance and independence, personal transformation, authenticity, the discovery of new dimensions of the self and new places, accomplishments, and stepping out of one's comfort zone (Conti, 2019).

Perception of a Forest Tourism Destination

Various studies (Tyrväinen et al., 2008; Hegetschweiler et al., 2022) have shown that people prefer managed forests without decayed wood, debris, or overgrown bushes, with moderate visibility and walkability and uneven-aged structure of trees; however, traces of human activity should not be extremely visible. This kind of outlook is more appealing to forest visitors, while they also perceive managed forests as a safer environment than wild forests (Tyrväinen et al., 2008). Forest visitors also prefer the presence of flowers, berry bushes and colourful leaves, which all contribute to the aesthetic value of the forest (Hegetschweiler et al., 2022).

In a study of forest perceptions, Karanikola et al. (2017) discovered that forest visitors used the environment mostly to meet friends and have leisure time with family, while only a few respondents visited the park for isolation and meditation. Another study showed that exercise and nature were the most important motivation elements, while relaxation and social motivations came last (Aasetre et al., 2016). These studies also asked about the satisfaction with different forest attributes like basic recreation infrastructure and its quality, forest park infrastructure and children's safety, in order to observe the perception of a forest destination (Karanikola et al., 2017; Aasetre et al., 2016).

To develop (forest) tourism, local support is also needed; hence, residents have to perceive the positive impacts of tourism development (Munanura & Kline, 2022). In one study, residents and tourism managers were asked about their perception of an emerging forest destination. While tourism managers supported the development of forest tourism, residents saw higher value in protecting the forest and not using it for tourism purposes (Kuvan & Akan, 2012). Meanwhile, Zhang et al. (2020) suggested that locals should be included in the management of protected areas and, therefore, even more environmentally aware, perceiving tourism's economic and environmental benefits.

Critical Perspective of Forest Tourism

While forest tourism has many positive effects and consequences on people, animals and nature overall, tourism in the forest could also be a threat. Tourism is prone to (over)consumption of natural resources (for example, deforestation for the purposes of land acquisition for accommodation or wood for building materials) and produces waste (for example, litter after picnic activities) (Kuvan, 2005). Tourism can also endanger wildlife and biodiversity, with tourists intruding on natural habitats (for example, ecosystem degradation, trodden cycling or hiking paths, scaring animals) and contributing to emissions of CO₂ (Gössling, 2018). And since forest tourism is gaining popularity, bigger masses of tourists can lead to over-tourism. In addition, as mentioned in the previous chapter, local residents do not always agree with tourism development, which can lead to conflicts with the community.

However, forest tourism is regarded as more environmentally, economically, and socially sustainable than traditional primary forest industries (Schweinsberg et al., 2012). Forest activities, which we described above, are especially regarded as sustainable and aim to encourage nature-friendly behaviour. Wildlife tourism can raise awareness about species and induce more conscious actions. It has great potential for engaging families with young children, who are perceptive of nature-protection messages and can act accordingly when they grow up. Recreation and relaxation are also non-invasive if destination managers



Figure 1 Study Area Kočevsko

Notes Left: Republic of Slovenia on the map of Europe, right: Kočevsko on the map of Slovenia. Adapted from Datawrapper (<https://www.datawrapper.de/>).

moderate the number of visitors and their influences. With the use of zoning, dedicated paths, guidelines, and similar measures, tourists could have a smaller impact on nature. Zhang et al. (2025) suggested that forest protection policies should prioritise protecting forest ecosystems and ensuring the sustainable use of forest resources. At the same time, they suggest that infrastructure and innovative tourism products should be improved to maintain the attractiveness and enhance the tourist experience of forest tourism. Moreover, local cultural features could be included in the tourism offer.

All in all, the forest as a natural resource is open to tourists and residents. Therefore, both groups cohabitate in the forest and enjoy its benefits. Local government and destination management should recognise this value and include different stakeholders in the forest planning process (Pavlakovič Farrell & Koščak, 2024). Collaboration, inclusion, and local participation are the keys to mutual understanding and the achievement of the goal of protecting and improving the forest.

This study aims to explore key aspects of forest tourism in the Kočevsko region, guided by research questions. First, we investigate *how forest tourism is conceptualised and experienced in the region*, examining both theoretical understanding and visitor perspectives. Second, we assess *how adrenalin-driven the*

tourism offer is in forest destinations, focusing on the variety and intensity of activities available. Third, we explore *how people regard nature as a relaxation option*, considering its perceived benefits for wellbeing. Throughout the paper, we seek to provide answers to these questions by linking theoretical frameworks with empirical observations, thereby offering a comprehensive understanding of the forest tourism experience and its multiple dimensions.

Study Area Kočevsko

The destination of Kočevsko combines the areas of the municipalities of Osilnica, Kostel, and Kočevje, which is the economic, cultural, touristic and educational centre of the region (Uran Maravič, 2020; Javni zavod za turizem in kulturo Kočevje, n.d.-b). Kočevje is also the largest municipality in the Republic of Slovenia. Among the most important economic branches of the municipality of Kočevje are forestry and the wood processing industry (Uran Maravič, 2020). The study area can be seen in Figure 1.

Among the most important tourism products of the municipality of Kočevje are hiking (13 mountain trails, 4 themed trails, 5 learning trails, 1 energy trail, the hiking event Walking in the Bear's Footsteps), cycling (maintained bike trails, MTB Trail Center Kočevje and events: Navkeber na Strmo Reber, Po-

furajmo Kočevsko, Enduro4fun, xc Kočevje and MTB cycling camps), tracking and observation of wild animals (brown bear, grey wolf, lynx), the 'Škrilj' bunker (a shelter built during the Cold War 80 metres below the surface, designed to allow stays of up to 100 days), survival in nature (under the supervision of experienced instructors) and riding (getting to know nature on horses) (Uran Maravič, 2020). Kočevsko also offers some products that can be classified in the category of selfness, for example, apitherapy.

Kočevsko focuses more on the domestic market and less on the foreign market. The primary tourists are those who love nature and like to spend their free time in it (Uran Maravič, 2020). Other stakeholders in Kočevsko are the Municipality of Kočevje, the Public Institute for Culture and Tourism Kočevje (Kočevsko Institute), the municipality of Kostel and the Municipality of Osilnica. The Public Institute for Culture and Tourism Kočevje has the most important role as the destination management organisation. The other stakeholders are tourism providers, the local population, and local companies (Uran Maravič, 2020).

There is no direct motorway connection to Kočevsko. However, it is accessible via regional road 106 from the direction of Ljubljana (Slovenia's capital), which is 60 km away. The distance from other Slovenian towns is 50 km on the road from Novo mesto and 70 km from Postojna. The municipality of Kočevje is also 30 km on the road from the state border with the Republic of Croatia, 90 km from the main Slovenian airport (Brnik), 136 km from the main Croatian airport (Zagreb), and 252 km from a major Italian airport (Venice, Marco Polo). Kočevje also has a daily public bus connection to Ljubljana and Novo mesto. A regular passenger train line between Ljubljana and Kočevje was renovated and reopened in January 2021 (Uran Maravič, 2020; Javni zavod za turizem in kulturo Kočevje, n.d.-a).

Methodology

The study aimed to understand the respondents' opinions, perceptions and attitudes towards the image of Kočevsko in Slovenia and, hence, form a background for future forest tourism theory. Triangulation was

used in this study to better understand the whole concept of forest tourism and the case study destination. Therefore, we conducted interviews with local stakeholders and a survey with (potential) forest tourists and concluded with a content analysis of promotional material from the destination. Consequently, three major research questions were formulated based on the literature review conducted earlier:

Research question 1: How is forest tourism conceptualised and experienced in the Kočevsko region?

Research question 2: How adrenalin-driven is the tourism offer in forest destinations?

Research question 3: How do people regard nature as a relaxation option?

The combination of all types of research is purposeful, as it provides insight into the same research problem from different perspectives. On one hand, through interviews with stakeholders in Kočevsko, we gained valuable quantitative data from the people who deal with tourists and tourism businesses on a daily basis. On the other hand, by questioning potential visitors, we explored their interests in the destination, their motivations for visiting, their activity preferences, and their current perception of the destination before or after they have visited it. The third method of content analysis showed how the destination perceives itself and presents itself through the promotion material. The survey results offer broad quantitative insights, while the interviews and content analysis add depth and contextual understanding.

The Survey

In the survey, we searched for an appropriate sample of respondents who would express their opinions about Kočevsko; therefore, a quantitative online survey was the first research method. To conduct a survey, a convenience sampling method was chosen for this research (a snowballing sample). The respondents were selected based on a non-probability sampling method. An online survey was sent out to the e-mail addresses of family and friends, and we asked them to send it to their friends. The survey was also published in several Facebook groups. The data was collected

Table 1 Content Analysis of Marketing Elements

	Destination Kočevsko
Brand logo	Wild. But Nice., Secret Forest of Slovenia, Green & Safe, Slovenia Green Destination Gold
Activities	Hiking, cycling, horse riding, fishing, water adventures, sailing, SUP, diving
Tourist products	Shinrin-Yoku Forest Baths, Western Riding, Wilderness School, Bear Watching, 2-Day Bear Watching, Western Horseback Riding, Guided Shinrin-Yoku Forest Baths, Castle Picnic, MATT Brewery Visit
Accommodations	Hostel Bearlog, Hotel Jasnica, Hotel Kovač, apartments and tourist farms
Social networks, website	Kočevsko – website, fb page, Instagram page

using an Internet survey form (in Ika Arnes tool) in May 2022, and the survey was conducted in Slovenian. Participants were at least 18 years old; among them were participants who had already visited Kočevsko and some who had not.

The survey questionnaire consisted of 13 questions and 28 variables and used open and closed questions. These questions referred to the opinion of the respondents about the destination, and the activities and tourism products at the destination. In the foreground were products that were related to outdoor activities and in connection with the forest and animals. Participants were also asked to indicate their degree of importance on a five-point Likert scale (1 = completely disagree, 5 = completely agree) and what characteristics they find important for certain phenomena. The questions were written according to the following criteria: relevant, clear, brief, inoffensive, unbiased and specific.

Before data collection procedures began, the questionnaire was pilot-tested with college research for one month before the survey took place to assess the content validity and clarity of the questions, with modifications made accordingly. At the end of the questionnaire, there were several demographic variables related to gender, age and country of origin.

A total of 110 fully answered questions and usable questionnaires were collected. However, more questionnaires were partially filled in, which is why some questions have a different final number. The final size sample of the study was $n = 110$, which resulted in a 29% response rate. The data gathered was analysed with the statistical tools of Microsoft Excel 2013.

Interviews

Four interviews with providers of various tourist services in Kočevsko were conducted. Interviews were conducted in person at the destination in May 2022. The interviewees selected were recognised as the most important in this area in the field of Tourism. Among the interviewees were the director of the Kočevsko Institute, the head person of the Tourism Sector at the Kočevsko Institute, a tourism guide at the Kočevsko Institute, an employee of the MTB trail centre Kočevje, and a local beekeeper. Each semi-structured interview lasted approximately one hour with 14 questions (with four core topics), where interviewees were asked about their work situation in forest tourism and possibilities for its development, their collaboration with different stakeholders and their perception of tourists' attitudes towards forest tourism activities. The questions asked were specific and related to their tourism activity. Interview transcripts were made and stored in a research database.

Qualitative analysis of interviews was conducted using a method of coding where we focused on three major categories of codes (perception of a forest destination, adventurous activities in a forest destination, and relaxation in a forest destination). In the interview transcripts, connections, recurring words, phrases, and shared opinions of the interviewees were identified, then interpreted and visually presented. In this specific case, we used the so-called framework of open coding (Babbie 2007; Easterby-Smith et al., 2005; Stirling 2001), which allows for the classification and labelling of concepts during the process of qualitative data analysis. As researchers, we have the opportunity to assign codes derived from the research (Roblek,

Table 2 Descriptive Characteristics of the Participants

Demographic Data	N	Percentage
Gender		
Male	16	15%
Female	92	84%
I do not want to answer	2	1%
Age	Average	Standard deviation
	29.2	11.86
Country		
Slovenia	96	87%
Croatia	6	5%
Bosna and Herzegovina	6	5%
Other	2	2%
Previous visit to Kočevje		
Yes	67	39 %
No	104	61 %

2007) and the questions based on which we gathered the obtained data. The interviews provided important data about local providers' actions and opinions on forest tourism. Additionally, the interviews aimed to check whether the employees and holders of these specific activities shared their opinions with the respondents in the survey.

Content Analysis of Marketing Elements

Content analysis of the website Kočevsko (<https://www.kocevsko.com/en/>) destination social media (Facebook, Instagram, YouTube) and promotional material (for example, leaflets) was made in May 2022. We grouped the important themes and examined the content that refers to each specific group. Following this, codes were assigned to understand the promotional material content better. We focused primarily on the tourism products advertised by the destination, and those offering animal tours and forest-related activities were highlighted. Brand logos, activities and products on the destination can be seen in Table 1.

Results

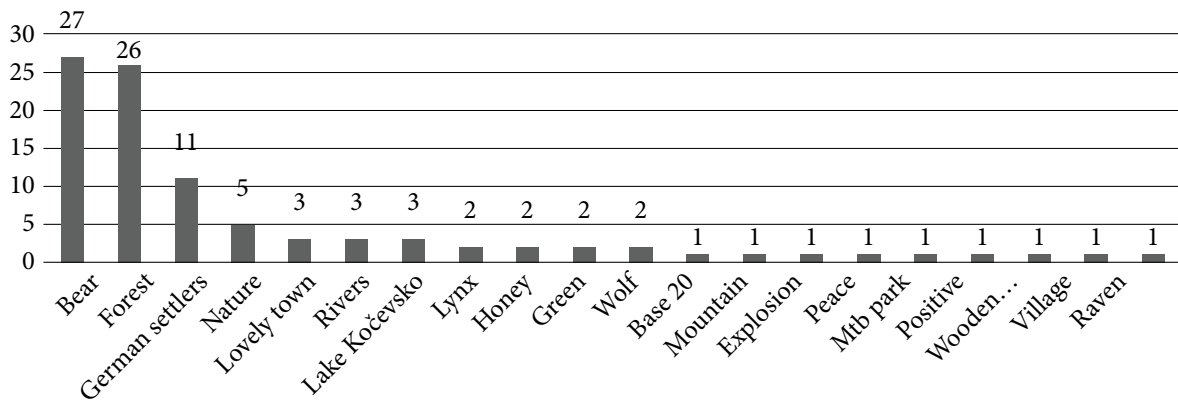
Table 2 shows the demographic profile of the respondents by gender, age and country of origin. The number of male respondents (15%) was lower than that of

female respondents (84%). Most of the respondents were from Slovenia (96; 87%), but there were also respondents from Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and other countries. The average age of the respondents was 29.2 years old.

Perception of a Forest Destination

We were interested in what participants think of when they hear the word 'Kočevsko'. It was an open question, and 115 participants answered. There were 95 words in total, which we were able to divide into 20 codes (graph 1). The codes were: Bear, Forest, Nature, German settlers, Lovely town, Rivers, Lynx, Lake Kočevsko, Honey, Green, Wolf, Base 20, Mountain, Explosion, Peace, MTB park, Positive, Wooden products, Village, and Raven. German settlers are known as Gottscheers of the Kočevje region (a.k.a. Gottschee) of Slovenia, formerly Gottschee County. Until the Second World War, their main language of communication was Gottscheerish, a Bavarian dialect of German (Moric, 2020).

With the program WordClouds, we drew a word cloud, where the words are written in order of size according to the number of times they were repeated in the answers. The bigger the word, the more it was repeated. Figure 2 shows a word cloud of all 20



Graph 1 Codes About Destination Kočevsko

codes that appeared in the responses. The largest are the words 'bear', which was found 27 times in the analysis, and 'forest', which the analysis found 26 times. The code 'nature' was found 11 times. Figure 3 shows 9 codes related to nature and wildlife. These are Bear, Forest, Nature, River, Lynx, Honey, Green, Wolf and Raven. It can be seen from the graph that the codes 'bear' and 'forest' stand out, which indicates that these are two words that represent destination when people hear the word 'Kočevsko'.

In the next question, we were interested in which word participants think of when they hear the word

'Kočevsko'. The nine words available were: Forest, Wolf, Secret war zone, Underdevelopment, Bear, Honey from Kočevje, Lynx, Largest fir tree, and Distance. Altogether, 154 participants answered. Most of the respondents believe that Kočevsko is best described by the word 'Forest' (73; 47%), followed by the word 'Bear' (43; 28%), while among the other offered words, they did not choose words such as 'Wolf', 'Lynx' and 'Largest fir tree' (0, 0%) at all (as can be seen from Graph 2).

We wanted to determine if the respondents consider Kočevsko as an interesting destination. Alto-



Figure 2 Word Cloud of all 20 Codes

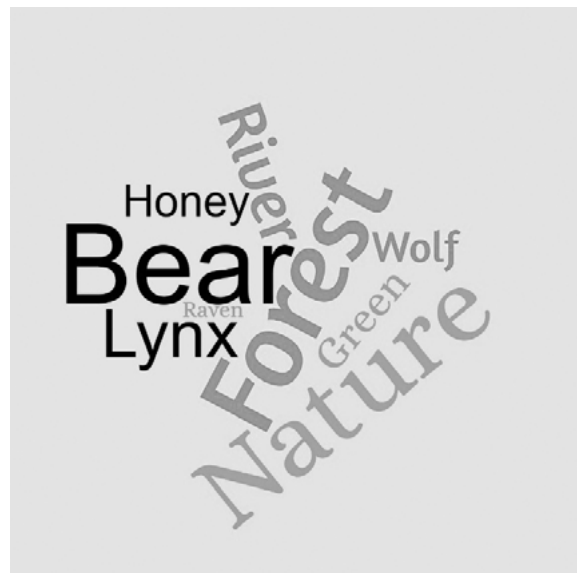
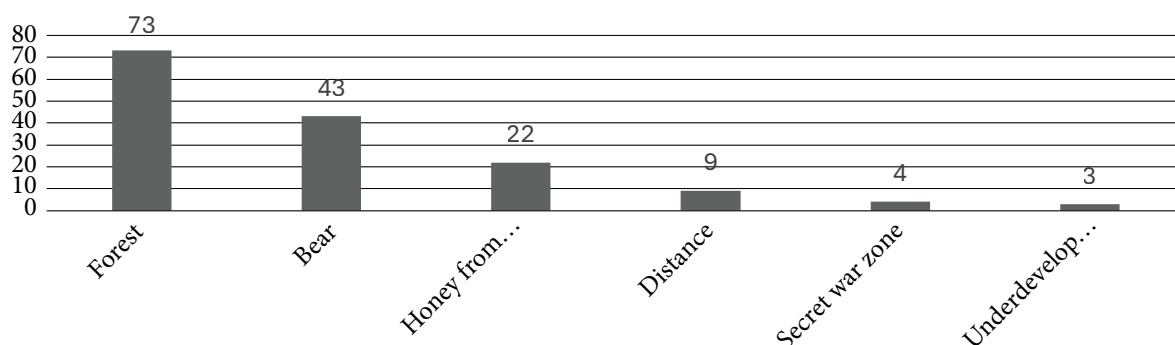
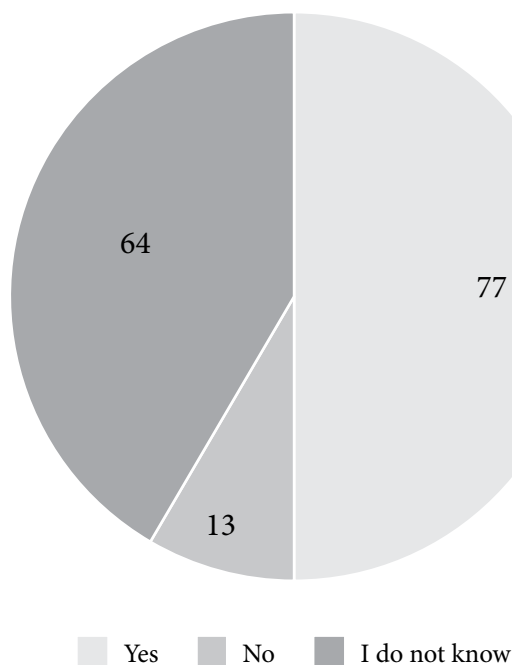


Figure 3 Codes Related to Nature and Wildlife



Graph Words About Kočevsko



Graph 3 Kočevsko as an Interesting Destination

gether, 154 participants answered. As can be seen from Graph 3, 77 respondents (50%) think that Kočevsko is an interesting destination, 13 (8%) think it is not, and 64 (42%) respondents do not know.

The respondents were asked to express their opinion about Kočevsko on a Likert scale from 1–5, where 1 means completely disagree and 5 means agree entirely. Altogether, 119 respondents answered this question. As can be seen from Table 3, the first claim was that Kočevsko is an economically and socially developed

destination. Most respondents, 44 (40%), neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement. The next claim was that Kočevsko is (in terms of transport) an accessible destination. The response here was similar; most of the respondents, 40 (34%), neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement. The next claim was that Kočevsko offers several different accommodation options. Most respondents, 45 (38%), neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement. The fifth claim was that Kočevsko is a suitable destination for a multi-day trip (1–3 days). Most respondents, 51 (43%), agreed with the statement. The next claim was that Kočevsko offers unspoilt nature. Most respondents, 57 (48%), completely agreed with the statement. The seventh claim was that Kočevsko is a suitable destination for young people. Most respondents, 53 (45%), agreed with the statement. The next claim was the same, only for families. Most respondents, 58 (49%), agreed with the statement. The ninth claim was that Kočevsko is a destination that offers an insight into the military history of Slovenia (World War II, independence). Most respondents, 59 (50%), agreed with the statement. The last claim was 'I would feel safe in Kočevsko'. Most respondents, 43 (36%), agreed with the statement.

With the promotional slogan 'WILD. BUT NICE', the destination of Kočevsko wants to present itself to the market and inform potential visitors that it can offer unspoilt nature that is suitable for carrying out various activities. They reach their target markets with the help of an umbrella promotion carried out by the Slovenian Tourist Board (STB). Based on the qualifications of the guides (knowledge of foreign languages),

Table 3 Opinions about the Destination Kočevsko

	1	2	3	4	5	Average
Kočevsko is an economically and socially developed destination (<i>N</i> = 119).	11 9%	22 18%	48 40%	34 29%	4 3%	3.0
Kočevsko is (in terms of transport) an accessible destination (<i>N</i> = 119).	8 7%	23 19%	40 34%	39 33%	9 8%	3.2
Kočevsko offers several different accommodation options (<i>N</i> = 119).	3 3%	17 14%	45 38%	43 36%	11 9%	3.4
Kočevsko is a suitable destination for a multi-day trip (1–3 days) (<i>N</i> = 119).	4 3%	15 13%	32 27%	51 43%	17 14%	3.5
Kočevsko offers unspoilt nature (<i>N</i> = 119).	3 3%	3 3%	11 9%	45 38%	57 48%	4.3
Kočevsko is a suitable destination for young people (<i>N</i> = 119).	4 3%	13 11%	30 25%	53 45%	19 16%	3.6
Kočevsko offers activities for families (<i>N</i> = 119).	3 3%	8 7%	29 24%	58 49%	21 18%	3.7
Kočevsko is a destination that offers an insight into the military history of Slovenia (World War II, independence) (<i>N</i> = 119).	2 2%	7 6%	31 26%	59 50%	20 17%	3.7
I would feel safe in Kočevsko (<i>N</i> = 119).	5 4%	14 12%	29 24%	43 36%	28 24%	3.6

they mainly target the German, Austrian and Croatian markets. The destination is developing boutique tourism for a smaller number of visitors, so the prices of tourism products are slightly higher. For the time being, the locals support the development of tourism. Still, they are against the development of mass tourism, as they fear that the mass arrival of tourists would devalue the importance of the destination. During the coronavirus epidemic, Kočevsko recorded a higher number of visitors, as most tourism products were carried out in nature for a smaller number of people. In recent years, more visits by domestic visitors have been recorded due to the pandemic closure of borders and restrictions on crossing them.

Wildlife Tourism

We wanted to get the opinion of the respondents about the tourism offer in nature in the destination of Kočevsko. They were asked to express their opinion on a Likert scale from 1–5, where 1 means completely disagree and 5 means agree entirely. Altogether, 115 respondents answered this question (as can be seen from Table 4). The first claim was ‘I am very inter-

ested in watching bears in their natural habitat’. Most respondents, 37 (32%), completely agreed with the statement. The next one was ‘Observing the primeval forest through VR glasses seems interesting to me’. Most respondents, 49 (43%), agreed with the statement. The last one was ‘Animal watching is an interesting tourism product that would make me visit the destination’. Most respondents, 48 (42%), agreed with the statement.

Watching bears in nature is one of the innovative tourism products that can be found in this area. We were interested in how many respondents had already observed a live bear. Most of the respondents, 122 (79%), have not yet observed a bear in its natural habitat, while 32 (21%) answered that they have.

The slogan of the Kočevsko destination is ‘WILD. BUT NICE.’ The logo is the word ‘Kočevsko’, which has a coniferous tree inside the letter O. Analysis showed that the website offers tourism products such as bear watching, wildlife photography and Night under the Stars. The Commission of the Slovenian Tourist Board recognised the experience of observing and getting to know a bear in its habitat as unique and included it in

Table 4 Tourist Offer in Nature at the Destination Kočevsko

	1	2	3	4	5	Average
I am very interested in bear watching in their natural habitat (N = 115).	7 6%	14 12%	21 18%	36 31%	37 32%	3.7
Observing the primeval forest through VR glasses seems interesting to me (N = 115).	4 3%	9 8%	18 16%	49 43%	35 30%	3.9
Animal watching is an interesting tourist product that would make me come to the destination (N = 115).	2 2%	12 10%	18 16%	48 42%	35 30%	3.9

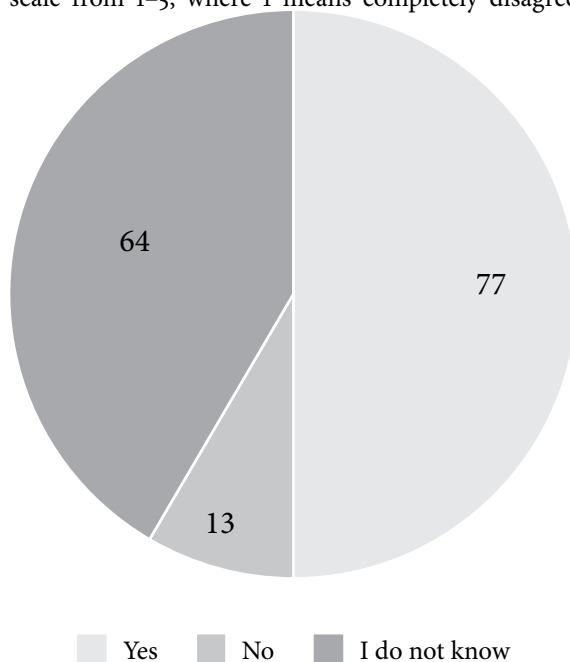
the family of 5-star experiences, Slovenia Unique Experiences (Javni zavod za turizem in kulturo Kočevje, n.d.-c.).

Adventure Tourism

We wanted to collect information on how many times per year the respondents go on a hike while travelling. Altogether, 111 respondents answered this question. Most of them, 41 (37%), answered that they hike 2–4 times every year. Next, we wanted to get the opinion of the respondents about the sports tourism offer. They were asked to express their opinion on a Likert scale from 1–5, where 1 means completely disagree

and 5 means agree entirely. Altogether, 111 respondents answered this question (as can be seen from Table 5). The first claim was: ‘Mountain biking is a very interesting outdoor activity’. Most respondents, 57 (51%), agreed with the statement. The second one was ‘I think Kočevsko Lake is suitable for practising water sports’. Most respondents, 47 (42%), agreed with the statement. The third claim was ‘The destination of Kočevsko offers opportunities for outdoor activities (cycling, hiking, etc.)’. Most respondents, 55 (46%), agreed with the statement.

Information about adventure tourism in the forest was also collected through interviews. The interviewee was the provider of the MTB bike park, which has been operating since 2016 and currently offers 11 routes, while a new route is introduced almost every year. They help cyclists up the hill with a van that takes them to the start of the track. The park’s profits are used to restore and buy new infrastructure. The space where the park is located was initially intended for sports activities. The interlocutor pointed out that other parks have a problem with obtaining consent from the owners. There is no such problem here, as 98% of the entire park is state or municipality-owned, which helps when obtaining permission for the construction of sports infrastructure. A critical component is cooperation with local providers who are involved in the entire product. The involvement of the local population is manifested in the fact that local residents are the builders and maintainers of the tracks, food and drink providers, transport providers and race organisers. Cooperation with cycling associations has also been established. As for forest conservation, they have a forest inspector several times a year. Together with the path maintainer, they check that everything



Graph 4 Observed a Live Bear

Table 5 Question about the Sport Tourist Offer

	1	2	3	4	5	Average
Mountain biking is a very interesting outdoor activity (<i>N</i> = 111).	5 5%	11 10%	20 18%	57 51%	18 16%	3.6
I think Kočevsko lake is suitable for practicing water sports (<i>N</i> = 111).	5 5%	6 5%	34 31%	47 42%	19 17%	3.6
The destination Kočevsko offers opportunities for outdoor activities (cycling, hiking...) (<i>N</i> = 119).	2 2%	5 4%	14 12%	55 46%	43 36%	4.1

Table 6 Opinion of Respondents About Relaxation at the Destination

	1	2	3	4	5	Average
Kočevsko offers quality honey (<i>N</i> = 110).	0 0%	3 3%	21 19%	52 47%	34 31%	4.1
I would participate in apitherapy (preserving health with the help of bee products) (<i>N</i> = 110).	4 4%	13 12%	17 15%	51 46%	25 23%	3.7
I can find my peace in the Kočevsko forests (<i>N</i> = 110).	4 4%	3 3%	25 23%	38 35%	40 36%	4.0
In Kočevsko there is sufficient offer for selfness (forest bath, yoga, meditation...) (<i>N</i> = 110).	2 2%	10 9%	31 28%	45 41%	22 20%	3.7

is in accordance with nature conservation and that the impact on the forest is as minimal as possible. They strive to have almost no impact on the forest ecosystem itself. They do not cut down new trees but make a new path where there can be no degradation. The analysis showed that the locals accept them and will continue striving for a common language.

Relaxation in Nature

We wanted to gather the opinion of the respondents about relaxation in nature. They were asked to express their opinion on a Likert scale from 1–5, where 1 means completely disagree and 5 means agree entirely. Altogether, 110 respondents answered this question (as can be seen from Table 6). The first claim was 'Kočevsko offers quality honey'. Most respondents, 52 (47%), agreed with the statement. The next one was 'I would participate in apitherapy (preserving health with the help of bee products)'. Most respondents, 51 (46%), agreed with the statement. The third one was 'I could find my peace in the Kočevsko forests'. Most respondents, 40 (36%), completely agreed with the statement. The last one was 'In Kočevsko, there is enough to offer for selfness (forest bath, yoga, medi-

tation)'. Most respondents, 45 (41%), agreed with the statement.

Regarding relaxation in nature, an interview was conducted with the director of the Kočevsko Institute and the head of the tourism sector at the Kočevsko Institute. In the destination of Kočevsko, they are aware of their potential for the development of selfness, but currently, they do not yet have many implemented products in this area. As part of tourism products that include activities in nature, they carry out some activities that can be classified under the umbrella of selfness. At the request of the group, the guides adapt the guided tour through the forest and include elements of mindfulness. While walking through the forest, the guides encourage visitors to feel the world around them, smell plants with different textures and identify them, hug trees, observe the crowns of trees and listen to different sounds – the sound of wind, leaves, animals, etc.

Kočevsko Institute and the local people know about successful practices from abroad and are aware of the potential. Years ago, there were ideas about the implementation of such products by a student of wellness who had a cabin in the forest at her disposal, but

the actual realisation of the idea did not happen. In co-operation with a local beekeeper, they plan to develop a tourism product in connection with apitherapy. Visitors would be able to overcome their fear of bees by staying directly next to the apiary and observing the bees in a safe way, thus getting closer to them and reducing the fear of bees over time. The interview with the honey grower also confirmed the positive effects of apitherapy, as well as the possibility offered by the provider to spend the night in this accommodation.

Discussion

During the research, we found answers to the research questions that were set at the beginning.

Research question 1: How is forest tourism conceptualised and experienced in the Kočevsko region?

The analysis showed that almost 40% of the respondents had already visited Kočevsko, and even more of them (50%) found the destination interesting and pleasant. They also stated that this destination offers unspoilt nature. The most recognisable words selected for this forest destination were 'bear' and 'forest'. In addition, other associations connected to nature were highlighted. As nature and forests are the main assets of the destination, this is also the reason why the local tourist board uses green colours, trees and forests in their promotional materials. And it is also why the bulk of tourism offers are based on nature and forests.

Research question 2: How adrenalin-driven is the tourism offer in forest destinations?

As seen from the survey and interviews, Kočevsko is and is regarded as a very active destination. There are many opportunities for outdoor activities (cycling, hiking, water sports, etc.), and visitors are recognising the destination as appropriate for these activities. Mountain biking is an especially developed tourism product, as was confirmed through the interviews. In addition, there are new and specialised adventure products, like animal watching. The respondents of the survey confirmed its attractiveness, yet only 21% of the respondents had already participated in the bear-watching adventure.

Research question 3: How do people regard nature as a relaxation option?

On the other hand, the opposite of adrenaline and sport is relaxation, which can also be an important factor when visiting a destination. The respondents of the survey regard forest destinations as peaceful and relaxing. Many also expressed high intention to hike while travelling; therefore, hiking in the forest can be a part of a healthy lifestyle. Almost half of the respondents (46%) would participate in apitherapy (preserving health with the help of bee products). Selfness such as forest baths, yoga and meditation can be part of Kočevje tourism products. As noticed from the interviews, the destination management organisation has already considered these options and regards them as a suitable investment in the future.

Conclusion

As we can see from the research, visitors of a forest destination highly value outdoor activities and wildlife observation, as well as relaxation in nature. Hence, in the long run, existing tourism products based on learning about nature and only including some elements of selfness will not satisfy tourists who want an authentic experience of nature and themselves. Destinations should consider the possibility of additional training of existing guides with the primary purpose of learning about selfness, the wildlife population and adventurous activities skills.

As shown in the research, visitors express demand for all activities. However, the case study of Kočevsko does not offer enough selfness tourism products. Due to the high proportion of forests, Kočevsko has excellent potential for developing forest selfness. Therefore, it is advisable to create new tourism products as part of selfness and use them to appeal to already existing target groups – individuals who live sustainably, appreciate nature and are ready to pay more for such experiences. We believe that the development of forest selfness would not threaten the carrying capacity of the destination because of the target group, which behaves responsibly towards the environment, and because products like these also emphasise the connection with nature and do not disturb it.

Forest destinations are regarded as interesting and appealing to young people and families. This shows the potential of tourism development in a natural en-

vironment, more precisely, a forest. In this article, we have conceptualised the phenomenon of forest tourism. It can be defined as a type of tourism that takes place in the forest and offers forest tourism activities such as wildlife observation, outdoor activities, and relaxation. In addition, forest tourism is also sustainable, since it teaches visitors to respect nature and inspires them to protect it. Moreover, it helps visitors to improve their health through outdoor activities and relaxation. The benefits of forest tourism can be used in many destinations and enrich the visitor's experience.

In the literature review, we also presented the drawbacks of forest tourism. Although it is regarded as sustainable, it can have damaging consequences for nature, animals, and even locals. These can come from the exceeded carrying capacity of the forest or from unintended actions of the tourists. One of the possible solutions is good destination management, which selects target segments of sustainable visitors who are aware of their impact on the forest. Second, destination management and local government could look after nature by implementing policies and introducing visitor management. Possible misunderstandings with local residents can be addressed by implementing practices of local participation in the decision-making process.

Recent research highlights the multiple benefits of forest tourism, emphasising its potential to support mental well-being, promote sustainable visitor behaviour, and require careful destination management. Visitors engaging in outdoor activities, wildlife observation, and relaxation in nature experience significant psychological benefits, including reduced stress and improved mood (Shin et al., 2009; Muro et al., 2023). Moreover, forest therapy programmes, whether self-guided or led by trained guides, enhance these benefits and provide opportunities for visitors to connect deeply with nature and themselves, supporting the concept of 'forest selfness' (Kim & Shin, 2021).

To meet the growing demand for authentic nature experiences, destinations such as Kočevsko could develop specialised forest tourism products that integrate elements of mindfulness, environmental education, and adventure skills. Implementing evi-

dence-based visitor management strategies, guided by carrying capacity analyses, is essential to ensure sustainability and prevent ecological degradation (Jamin & Rahmafitria, 2022). By combining these approaches, forest destinations can enhance visitor satisfaction, foster responsible environmental behaviour, and maximise the therapeutic and recreational potential of forest tourism.

There are some limitations to the study. The study presented forest tourism only at a destination in Slovenia; it would be interesting to examine other forest destinations worldwide. In addition, the survey sample used was limited to a few countries. However, in future research, bigger samples could be explored. Future research can also focus on activities of all three varieties of forest tourism activities and examine their potential to develop further.

Based on the results obtained, most people find forest destinations interesting and would be happy to see a bear in its natural habitat. Thus, we are convinced that forest tourism has great potential, especially in a digital world where individuals are looking for the opposite – peace, rest, and unspoilt and wild nature.

Suggestions for Further Research

Based on the results obtained, we are content that the majority of people find Kočevsko an interesting destination and would be happy to see a bear in its natural habitat. But when the family decides where to go on a trip on Saturday morning, they still prefer to go to the coast or mountains. For further research, we suggest that an analysis should be made of similar destinations that are already developing forest tourism – a survey on how forest tourism is practised elsewhere in Europe (good practice examples). We are convinced that forest tourism has great potential and, in a world of digitalisation, individuals are looking for peace, rest and nature.

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