



TRAILS

TRAILS: Trails Maintenance and Exploration with Passions

TRAILS Report

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1. Introduction

Hiking is one of the most popular outdoor activities in Europe, providing people with opportunities to connect with nature, stay physically active, and explore diverse landscapes. However, the sustainability of hiking infrastructure, including trail marking and maintenance, relies heavily on the efforts of dedicated volunteers. Recognizing this need, the TRAILS project was launched to inspire a new generation of young people to actively participate in trail marking and maintenance while fostering their passion for outdoor exploration.

1.1 About the TRAILS Project

Natural trails and paths provide countless opportunities for outdoor enthusiasts to connect with nature, engage in physical activity, and explore the environment. However, the maintenance and marking of these trails are crucial to ensure the safety and accessibility of hikers, bikers, and other users. Traditionally, these tasks have been carried out by NGOs and volunteers, yet in recent years, there has been a significant decline in the number of active trail markers and volunteers across Europe. This decrease is due to waning interest among younger generations and insufficient funding or support from recreational organizations.

Recognizing this growing challenge, the TRAILS project was developed to inspire a new generation to engage in trail marking and maintenance while creating a deeper connection to nature and a sense of environmental stewardship. Through trail marking, young people not only gain valuable technical knowledge and learn about safety but also develop a sense of responsibility and community engagement, all within the context of a physically active lifestyle.

The idea for the TRAILS project originated from the experience of OTI Slovakia, a Slovak based hiking club, which is involved in promoting trail marking in Slovakia. OTI observed the declining interest in trail marking in the Nitra region and responded by organizing informational seminars and promoting this activity locally. Realizing that this issue extends beyond Slovakia and affects countries across Europe, OTI proposed elevating these efforts to an international level, partnering with organizations in Austria and Serbia to tackle the shared challenge.

The TRAILS project aims to develop innovative strategies to promote trail marking and maintenance among young people, ensuring the sustainability of hiking trails for future generations. Its specific objectives include:

- Encouraging young people to be more physically active by spending time outdoors practising hiking,
- Developing good practices for promoting volunteering in sport,

- Creating a network of active hikers and trail markers dedicated to the maintenance of hiking infrastructure, and
- Contributing to the upkeep of hiking trails in the European Union.

By addressing the urgent need for trail maintenance and involving young people in meaningful outdoor activities, the TRAILS project seeks to preserve Europe's hiking heritage while promoting healthy lifestyles, environmental stewardship, and community connection.

1.2 Project partners

The TRAILS project is a collaborative effort involving partners from Austria, Slovakia, and Serbia, each bringing unique expertise and perspectives to the initiative. Together, these organizations are committed to promoting outdoor activity, volunteering, and sustainable trail maintenance across Europe.

1.2.1 Naturefriend International

NFI is the Austrian umbrella organisation with more than 350,000 members and with media channels reaching more than 200,000 persons yearly. IT is part of Green 10 - a platform of 10 largest environmental NGOs in Europe. NFI contributes with extensive outreach in Austria and internationally as well, which will support the dissemination process in the TRAILS project. NFI involves practitioners (coaches, sport trainers, educators and volunteers) in the project activities as they are all highly interested in how to motivate other inactive members to do outdoor sports and outdoor activities in nature. Additionally, NFI has a member organisation International Young Naturefriends promoting active participation of young people and therefore, it provides NFI with direct access to youngsters of all backgrounds who are invited to join the TRAILS project.

1.2.2 Mountaineering Association of Serbia

The Mountaineering Association of Serbia (MAS) is the national sports federation in which basic sports mountaineering, mountaineering-skiing organizations—clubs, societies, and other sports organizations—are united as members. In 2017, the association consisted of 166 basic organizations with 15,487 members.

It is an independent, non-political, and non-profit organization that regulates the conduct of sports activities and endeavors in mountaineering through sports rules. It achieves its goals through the work of basic organizations united within the Association and mountaineering associations, which serve as forms of territorial or interest-based organization of members within the Association. The Mountaineering Association of Serbia is a member of the International Climbing and Mountaineering Federation (UIAA), the European Ramblers'

Association (ERA), the Balkan Mountaineering Union (BMU), and the European Union of Mountaineering Associations (EUMA).

The Mountaineering Association of Serbia (MAS) organizes and supervises the maintenance, marking, and improvement of existing hiking and walking trails, as well as the planning, design, and construction of new trails and paths within the territory of the Republic of Serbia. These activities are carried out through the Commission for Mountaineering Terrain and its member mountaineering sports organizations/clubs, which act as direct executors and are the only entities qualified and authorized to perform these tasks in their respective areas. Such work can only be performed by individuals who hold a valid certificate of completed training—a trail marking course.

1.2.3 OTI Slovakia

OTI Slovakia, established in 2017 in Nitra, is a sports organization dedicated to promoting physical activity, non-formal education, and community engagement. The organization hosts a wide range of activities, including hiking events, workshops, sports competitions, nature clean-ups, and cultural events.

As a registered hiking club under the Slovak Tourist Club (KST)—the national organization responsible for hiking trail marking in Slovakia—OTI Slovakia works closely with certified markers to maintain and promote hiking paths in the Nitra region. The organization also organizes seminars and hikes to attract new trail markers, ensuring the sustainability of trail maintenance efforts. In the past, OTI implemented a project under the European Solidarity Corps to increase the popularity of trail marking in Slovakia, further contributing to the goals of the TRAILS project. Leveraging its experienced members, volunteer base, and social media outreach, OTI plays a key role in inspiring young people to become trail markers and promoting hiking infrastructure at both local and international levels.

1.3 The Erasmus+ Sport Programme

The Erasmus+ Sport programme is a vital initiative of the European Union aimed at fostering the development of sport and physical activity across Europe. It supports projects that address societal challenges through sport, promote inclusion and equal opportunities, and encourage cooperation between organizations in the field of sport. As part of the broader Erasmus+ programme, it prioritizes innovative actions that use sport to create positive social, educational, and cultural impacts.

Two of the main priorities of the Erasmus+ Sport programme are highly aligned with the goals of the TRAILS project: **promoting education in and through sport** and **encouraging healthy lifestyles for all**. By supporting initiatives that combine physical activity with informal education, Erasmus+ Sport empowers young people to adopt active lifestyles while gaining valuable skills and experiences.

The TRAILS project embodies these priorities by promoting hiking and trail marking as a means to encourage outdoor activity, environmental stewardship, and community involvement. Through its focus on education, volunteering, and sustainable trail maintenance, TRAILS contributes to the broader mission of Erasmus+ Sport to make sport and physical activity accessible, inclusive, and beneficial for all members of society. As a co-funded initiative, TRAILS leverages the support of Erasmus+ Sport to inspire a new generation of trail markers and ensure the preservation of hiking infrastructure for future generations.

2. Country analysis of Trail Marking Across Austria, Serbia, and Slovakia

Trail marking across Austria, Serbia, and Slovakia presents a fascinating spectrum of organizational approaches, challenges, and opportunities. Each country's framework is shaped by its governance structure, cultural practices, and available resources, making a comparative analysis particularly insightful.

To understand the current state of trail marking and maintenance in Austria, Serbia, and Slovakia, comprehensive desk research and surveys were conducted in each partner country. These efforts aimed to gather insights into the management systems, organizational structures, recruitment practices, and challenges faced by trail markers. The research also explored funding mechanisms, maintenance practices, and the use of technology in trail marking, providing a holistic view of the similarities and differences between the countries. This detailed comparison highlights the unique approaches and shared challenges, laying the groundwork for identifying best practices and opportunities to revitalize trail marking by engaging younger generations.

The overview of the trail marking management in each country as well as findings and observations can be found in the detailed comparative analysis below.

2.1 Management and Governance

Austria's trail marking system is divided between alpine associations and local entities such as municipalities and tourism agencies. While this decentralized system allows for regional flexibility, it also leads to variations in standards, even though there are overarching concepts to guide practices. Serbia, on the other hand, benefits from a centralized approach through the Mountaineering Terrain Commission, which provides education, certification, and standardized trail management. Similarly, Slovakia's system is governed by the Slovak Tourist Club (KST), a single organization with a national standard (STN 01 8025), ensuring uniformity in marking practices. This centralized model gives Slovakia an edge in maintaining consistent quality.

2.2 Organizational Structure and Data Management

Austria employs approximately 250 trail workers and relies on a robust digital database for recording trail characteristics and signposts. This structured approach is mirrored in Slovakia, where comprehensive data on 15,600 km of trails is maintained and 400 active markers are currently working on the Slovak trails out of which 61 are certified instructors and 218 are qualified with the rest being assistant markers. In Serbia, data is partially available online, covering 3,470 km of officially registered trails, with estimates suggesting a much larger network. Serbia also has the highest number of trained markers (425), highlighting its strong organizational backbone.

2.3 Recruitment and Training

Recruitment is a significant challenge in all three countries, with aging volunteer bases and limited youth involvement. In Austria, trail markers are elected and require no formal certification, although training is available. This open system contrasts with Serbia and Slovakia, where certification is mandatory. Serbia offers a basic two-day training with the option for advanced certification, but its field remains male-dominated, with an average age of markers at 57 years. Slovakia also mandates certification through a detailed process involving practical experience, national exams, and supervision by certified markers. Despite its thorough training system, Slovakia struggles with recruitment, seeing only 0-2 new trainees per year in some regions.

2.4 Trail Maintenance Practices

Austria and Serbia adopt a region-specific maintenance approach, with Austria conducting annual inspections and Serbia scheduling maintenance every 3-5 years. Slovakia adheres to a strict three-year cycle, unless emergencies demand immediate attention. While Austria and Serbia rely heavily on volunteer efforts, Slovakia integrates a double-check system to ensure quality, with trail markers submitting photos of updated marks for review.

2.5 Techniques and Materials

Austria and Slovakia both utilize painted markings alongside modern tools like GPS apps for trail management. Serbia's approach retains a historical touch with the 102-year-old Knafelc marking system, emphasizing tradition. Slovakia's focus on quality control through a photographic double-check system adds an innovative layer to its practices.

2.6 Funding and Financial Support

Funding is a common constraint, with all three countries experiencing financial deficits. Austria relies on state subsidies and association funds, while Serbia's funding sources are diverse, including EU projects and local budgets. Slovakia previously relied on the Ministry of Education and now transitions to funding from the Ministry of Tourism. Slovakia stands out by providing modest financial support to markers, such as €80 per year in specific regions, though it remains insufficient to attract newcomers.

2.7 Collaborations and Partnerships

Collaborative efforts vary significantly. Slovakia demonstrates robust partnerships with police, rescue services, and environmental agencies, leveraging trail markers' expertise in broader contexts. Serbia and Austria show limited collaboration, focusing primarily on local club and municipal efforts.

2.8 Incentives and Perks for Markers

Slovakia offers the most comprehensive incentives, including financial rewards, recognition through a badge system, and access to restricted areas. These perks, although modest, contribute to greater marker engagement. In contrast, Austria provides no direct incentives, relying instead on the dedication of its volunteers. Serbia also lacks significant perks, with personal satisfaction being the primary motivator for its markers.

2.9 Key Observations and Insights

The analysis of trail marking across Austria, Serbia, and Slovakia revealed a range of practices, challenges, and opportunities unique to each country. While each system reflects the cultural and organizational context of its region, several shared themes emerged, such as the need to engage younger generations, address funding shortages, and modernize practices. The following key observations and insights summarize these findings, offering a concise overview of the strengths, weaknesses, and potential areas for improvement in trail marking and maintenance across the three partner countries.

Governance Models	
Observation	Insights
Austria follows a decentralized approach, while Serbia and Slovakia use centralized governance systems.	Centralized models (e.g., Slovakia) ensure consistency and efficiency, whereas decentralized systems offer flexibility.
Standardization	
Observation	Insights
Slovakia employs a national marking standard (STN 01 8025), while Serbia uses the historic "Knafelc" system.	Standardized systems enhance quality control but may lack the adaptability of region-specific approaches like Austria's.
Recruitment Challenges	

Observation	Insights
Across all countries, the average age of trail markers is 50+, with low youth participation.	Addressing the aging volunteer base requires targeted youth outreach and incentives to attract younger participants.
Certification Requirements	
Observation	Insights
Austria does not mandate certification; Serbia and Slovakia require it.	Mandatory certification can ensure quality but might deter potential volunteers unless adequately supported.
Maintenance Practices	
Observation	Insights
Maintenance frequency varies: annually in Austria, every 3-5 years in Serbia, and every 3 years in Slovakia.	Regular maintenance schedules, as in Austria, can reduce risks, but Serbia and Slovakia balance resources with periodicity.
Financial Constraints	
Observation	Insights
Funding is a universal challenge, with markers often working as unpaid volunteers.	Innovative funding models (e.g., public-private partnerships or EU grants) are vital to sustain and grow trail systems.
Use of Technology	
Observation	Insights
Austria and Slovakia utilize GPS and apps for trail management; Serbia focuses on traditional techniques.	Incorporating technology like GPS mapping can modernize trail management and attract tech-savvy youth.
Gender Disparities	
Observation	Insights
All countries report male-dominated trail marking, especially in Serbia (100% male trainers).	Promoting gender inclusivity can diversify the volunteer base and address current demographic imbalances.
Incentives and Recognition	

Observation	Insights
Slovakia offers badges, financial rewards, and restricted area access; Austria and Serbia lack such incentives.	Tangible benefits (e.g., recognition systems) can motivate volunteers and enhance retention rates.
Collaborations	
Observation	Insights
Slovakia excels in partnerships (e.g., with police, rescue services); Austria and Serbia have limited cooperation.	Broad collaborations can enhance resource sharing and promote trail marking's societal importance.

3. Risks and Future Potential of Trail Marking

Trail marking plays a vital role in ensuring the safety, accessibility, and enjoyment of hiking trails while supporting sustainable tourism and local economies. However, several challenges threaten the continuity and effectiveness of trail marking systems across Austria, Serbia, and Slovakia. Simultaneously, evolving technologies, shifting demographics, and growing environmental awareness present opportunities to transform and revitalize this critical activity. This chapter examines the key risks facing trail marking and explores its future potential to adapt and thrive.

3.1 Risks to Trail Marking

➤ Aging Volunteer Base

One of the most pressing challenges is the aging demographic of trail markers. Across all three countries, the average age of active markers is over 50 years. This trend risks a significant knowledge gap as older markers retire, with insufficient recruitment of younger volunteers to take their place. Without deliberate interventions to attract younger participants, the sustainability of trail marking activities is at stake.

➤ Funding Shortages

Trail marking depends heavily on limited and inconsistent funding. In Austria and Serbia, a lack of substantial financial support places a heavy reliance on volunteers, with minimal incentives to compensate for their time and effort. Slovakia's shift in funding responsibility from the Ministry of Education to the Ministry of Tourism adds transitional uncertainty. The ongoing funding gaps hinder the ability to maintain existing trails and invest in innovations.

➤ Environmental Challenges

Climate change and environmental degradation exacerbate the risks to trail marking. Extreme weather events such as storms, floods, and landslides can damage trails and markers, increasing the frequency and cost of maintenance. Additionally, trails in remote or fragile ecosystems face greater challenges in upkeep without causing ecological harm.

➤ **Lack of Awareness and Engagement**

Trail marking is often perceived as a niche, technical, and time-consuming activity. Among younger generations, there is a general lack of awareness about its importance and the opportunities it offers for personal growth, skill-building, and community contribution. This disconnect makes it challenging to position trail marking as a compelling volunteer activity.

➤ **Collaboration Deficiencies**

Strong partnerships are essential for maximizing resources and promoting trail marking. While Slovakia demonstrates successful collaborations with rescue services and environmental agencies, Austria and Serbia exhibit limited cooperative efforts. This lack of synergy restricts opportunities for knowledge sharing, resource pooling, and joint initiatives that could strengthen trail marking systems.

➤ **Limited Technological Integration**

While Austria and Slovakia have embraced digital tools like GPS mapping and trail management apps, Serbia lags in adopting similar innovations. This uneven integration of technology hinders efficient trail monitoring and data collection, limiting the ability to modernize trail marking systems and attract tech-savvy volunteers.

3.2 Future Potential of Trail Marking

Trail marking holds immense potential to evolve and thrive by embracing innovation, inclusivity, and collaboration. To engage younger generations, it is essential to reframe trail marking as a dynamic and rewarding activity. Integrating it into outdoor education programs or organizing events specifically targeting youth could boost early interest. Gamification, such as using digital platforms to create competitive or interactive experiences, can transform trail marking into a modern and appealing pursuit for a tech-savvy audience. Programs that empower young people to take leadership roles, such as becoming trail ambassadors, can further inspire and motivate their peers.

The adoption of technology offers another avenue for growth. Tools such as GPS mapping, mobile applications, and interactive platforms for trail management can revolutionize the way trails are maintained and monitored. These technologies not only streamline processes but also provide an entry point for younger volunteers who are adept at using digital tools. For instance, hikers could use apps to report trail conditions or sign up for trail maintenance tasks, creating a direct connection between volunteers and the system.

Financial sustainability remains a critical area for development. Diversifying funding streams through partnerships with private companies, sponsorships from outdoor brands, and access to grants from EU programs could alleviate the financial burden currently carried by volunteers. Additionally, embedding trail marking into eco-tourism initiatives could open up new revenue opportunities while promoting sustainable tourism practices.

Inclusivity is another key to unlocking the potential of trail marking. By actively reaching out to women and underrepresented groups, trail marking organizations can build a more diverse volunteer base. Sharing success stories and role models from varied backgrounds can help challenge stereotypes and broaden appeal. Inclusivity is not only a moral imperative but also a practical solution to expand the pool of participants.

Environmental sustainability can align closely with the future of trail marking. As climate change poses increasing challenges, training markers in eco-friendly practices and utilizing durable, low-impact materials will be vital. By promoting environmentally conscious trail management, trail marking can contribute to broader conservation efforts and attract individuals who are passionate about protecting nature.

Finally, collaboration and public recognition will be instrumental in revitalizing trail marking. Building strong partnerships with government bodies, NGOs, and local communities can amplify the impact of trail maintenance efforts. Collaborative projects with organizations like mountain rescue teams or conservation groups can elevate the importance of trail marking in ensuring outdoor safety and environmental protection. Simultaneously, public campaigns and recognition programs that celebrate the contributions of trail markers can enhance the visibility of the activity, inspiring new generations to participate.

By embracing these strategies, trail marking can transform into a forward-looking and sustainable activity, ensuring its relevance and impact for years to come.

4. Young People's Perspective on Trail Marking

From June to September 2024, surveys were conducted in Austria, Serbia, and Slovakia to explore young people's perspectives on trail marking. The surveys targeted individuals up to 30 years of age, aiming to gather insights into their hiking habits, awareness of trail marking, barriers preventing participation, and suggestions for making trail marking more attractive. The findings provide valuable information on the attitudes and preferences of young people in each country, offering a foundation for developing strategies to engage them in this essential outdoor activity. The following sections detail the results, starting with an analysis of responses from Serbia.

4.1 Analysis of survey findings

4.1.1 Austria

Demographics of Respondents

- **Gender:** Respondents were predominantly female (**59%**), followed by males (**37%**) and a small percentage identifying as diverse (**4%**).
- **Age:** Most participants were in their mid-20s, with **78%** aged between 23 and 30. A smaller group (22%) included individuals as young as 15 to 18.
- **Education:** The majority had a university degree or equivalent (**68%**), with some respondents holding high school diplomas (**25%**) or primary education (**7%**).

Hiking Habits

1. **Frequency:**
 - **19%** hiked weekly.
 - **28%** hiked every few weeks.
 - **25%** hiked once a month.
 - **22%** hiked a few times a year.
 - **6%** hiked less frequently.
2. **Preference:**
 - A significant majority (**97%**) preferred group hikes (e.g., with family or friends).
 - Only **3%** preferred hiking alone.
3. **Trail Types:**
 - **44%** preferred moderate trails.
 - **31%** engaged in both easy and moderate trails.
 - **25%** hiked challenging trails or a mix of moderate and difficult trails.
4. **Other Outdoor Activities:**
 - Respondents frequently participated in complementary outdoor activities such as cycling, climbing, jogging, and swimming.

Awareness of Trail Marking

1. **Encountering Trail Maintenance Personnel:**
 - Only **34%** reported having encountered individuals responsible for trail maintenance.
 - **38%** had never encountered such personnel, and **28%** were unsure.
2. **Familiarity:**
 - Familiarity with trail markings was moderate:
 - Scores of 3 out of 5 accounted for **44%** of responses.
 - Scores of 4 or higher accounted for **38%**.
 - Low familiarity (1-2) was reported by **18%**.

3. Reliance on Trail Markings:

- A strong majority (**91%**) relied on trail markings for navigation.

Interest in Trail Marking

1. Desire to Learn:

- **38%** rated their interest in learning about trail marking as 4 or 5 out of 5.
- **34%** showed moderate interest (score of 3).
- **28%** expressed low interest (scores of 1 or 2).

2. Participation:

- **41%** were open to volunteering for trail marking.
- **47%** were unsure, citing “maybe” as their response.
- **12%** were not interested.

Perceived Importance of Trail Marking

- Many respondents emphasized that trail markings enhance safety, navigation, and enjoyment.
- Specific benefits mentioned included:
 - Preventing accidents and ensuring hikers stay on the correct path.
 - Reducing reliance on digital tools like GPS.
 - Contributing to the preservation of nature by guiding hikers away from sensitive areas.

Barriers to Participation

The key obstacles identified were:

- **Lack of awareness:** **56%** stated they were unaware of opportunities to participate.
- **Time constraints:** **50%** cited a lack of time.
- **Logistical challenges:** Some respondents noted that trails were difficult to access from their location.
- **Low motivation:** **20%** expressed disinterest or found the topic unengaging.
- **Commitment concerns:** **15%** felt the required training or responsibilities were too demanding.

Suggestions for Improvement

Respondents proposed the following to make trail marking more appealing:

1. Enhanced Promotion:

- Increased advertising on social media (**20%**).
- Awareness campaigns in schools, universities, and local communities (**15%**).

- Highlighting benefits, such as free memberships in alpine clubs or discounts on outdoor gear (**10%**).
- 2. Incorporation of Social Elements:**
 - Organizing group activities and community events around trail marking (**25%**).
 - Combining trail marking with other outdoor activities to make it more engaging (**15%**).
- 3. Incentives:**
 - Suggestions included compensation, such as small financial rewards (**12%**) or free accommodation at alpine huts (**10%**).

Preferred Engagement Strategies

Respondents recommended strategies to involve young people:

- **Social Media Outreach:** Targeted campaigns on Instagram, Facebook, and other platforms to attract interest.
- **Community-based Programs:** Organizing trail marking projects through schools, youth groups, or clubs.
- **Educational Workshops:** Offering practical demonstrations and interactive training sessions.
- **Team-Building Activities:** Promoting trail marking as a fun and collaborative experience.

Time Willingness for Participation

- **30%** were willing to commit a full day per month.
- **25%** preferred shorter commitments of 4-6 hours.
- **20%** expressed interest in dedicating an entire weekend once or twice a year.
- **25%** were unsure or hesitant, citing variable availability.

4.1.2 Serbia

Demographics of Respondents

- **Gender:** The survey had a slightly higher male participation (**57%**) compared to females (**43%**).
- **Age:** Most respondents were young, with **93%** aged between 15 and 23. A smaller portion, **7%**, were in their late 20s or early 30s.
- **Education:** The majority of respondents (**67%**) were high school students, with **30%** pursuing university-level education and **3%** from primary schools.

Hiking Habits

1. **Frequency:**
 - 23% hiked once a month.
 - 20% hiked every few weeks.
 - 37% hiked a few times a year.
 - 13% hiked once a year.
 - A small group (7%) hiked more frequently or less than the above.
2. **Preference:**
 - 90% preferred hiking in groups (e.g., with family or friends).
 - Only 10% indicated a preference for hiking alone.
3. **Trail Types:**
 - 70% preferred easy trails.
 - 23% preferred moderate trails.
 - Only 7% hiked on difficult trails.
4. **Other Outdoor Activities:**
 - Many respondents engaged in activities like jogging, camping, and walking. However, detailed percentages varied due to responses in open-ended formats.

Awareness of Trail Marking

1. **Noticing Trail Markers:**
 - 73% had noticed trail markers during their hikes.
 - 17% were unsure or didn't recall noticing them.
 - 10% explicitly stated they hadn't noticed them.
2. **Familiarity:**
 - When asked to rate familiarity with trail marking on a scale of 1 to 5, most responses clustered around 2 (17%), 3 (40%), and 4 (30%). A minority rated their familiarity as 5 (13%).
3. **Reliance on Trail Markings:**
 - 67% relied on trail markings and signs for navigation.
 - The remaining 33% either did not use markings or relied on other methods.

Interest in Trail Marking

1. **Interest in Learning:**
 - When rating their interest in learning about trail marking on a scale of 1 to 5, a majority leaned toward higher interest:
 - 1: 7%
 - 2: 7%
 - 3: 13%
 - 4: 40%
 - 5: 33%
2. **Participation:**

- **50%** expressed interest in participating in trail marking activities (e.g., on a voluntary basis or as trail markers).
- **33%** were unsure, answering “maybe.”
- **17%** said they were not interested.

Perceived Importance of Trail Marking

- The majority acknowledged that trail markers significantly enhance the hiking experience by ensuring safety and navigation.
- Many highlighted its role in providing confidence during hikes and avoiding getting lost.

Barriers to Participation in Trail Marking

The primary barriers included:

- **Lack of time:** Cited by **57%** of respondents.
- **Lack of awareness:** **47%** were unaware of trail marking activities.
- **Lack of skills:** **17%** felt they lacked the physical or technical skills required.
- **Social barriers:** **13%** said their friends’ disinterest discouraged them from participating.
- **Commitment concerns:** **10%** felt they couldn’t commit to the required training.

Suggestions for Making Trail Marking More Appealing

Respondents suggested the following improvements:

- **Integration with other activities:** Many respondents (30%) proposed combining trail marking with other outdoor activities, such as hiking, swimming, or community events.
- **More education and visibility:** **27%** emphasized better promotion of trail marking through workshops, school programs, or social media.
- **Social engagement:** Several participants mentioned including young people in team-building exercises or community-driven events.

Preferred Engagement Strategies

- Community-based events and school programs: Mentioned by **40%** of respondents.
- Fun and engaging formats: Many respondents suggested combining trail marking with enjoyable activities like parties or team-building exercises.
- Awareness campaigns: **23%** recommended using social media influencers, posters, and school-based outreach to inform young people.

Time Commitment

- Most respondents were willing to dedicate a few hours to a full weekend per month for trail marking.

4.1.3 Slovakia

Demographics of Respondents

- **Gender:** The survey showed a majority of **69%** female respondents and **31%** male participants.
- **Age:** Respondents were predominantly in their 20s and 30s, with **70%** between 19 and 30 years old. A smaller proportion, **30%**, were aged 15-18.
- **Education:** The respondents were relatively well-educated:
 - **53%** had completed university-level education (either bachelor's or master's degree).
 - **41%** had completed secondary school, and a small number (**6%**) had engineering or higher education.

Hiking Habits

1. **Frequency:**
 - **47%** of respondents hike on a weekly basis.
 - **33%** hike every few weeks.
 - **16%** hike once a month.
 - **4%** hike a few times a year.
2. **Preference:**
 - **83%** preferred hiking in groups (family, friends, etc.).
 - **17%** preferred hiking alone.
3. **Trail Types:**
 - **57%** hiked moderate trails.
 - **39%** hiked a mix of easy, moderate, and difficult trails.
 - **4%** hiked on easy trails only.
4. **Other Outdoor Activities:**
 - Many respondents also engage in activities such as cycling, running, skiing, and climbing. These activities are often done alongside hiking, highlighting a general interest in outdoor recreation.

Awareness of Trail Marking

1. **Noticing Trail Markers:**
 - **100%** of respondents had noticed trail markers during their hikes.
2. **Familiarity:**
 - On a scale of 1 to 5, most respondents rated their familiarity with trail markings as follows:
 - **5 (very familiar): 27%**

- 4: 38%
- 3: 26%
- 2: 6%
- 1 (not familiar): 3%

3. Reliance on Trail Markings:

- A significant majority (**94%**) rely on trail markings for navigation during their hikes. Only **6%** do not depend on them.

Interest in Trail Marking

1. Desire to Learn More:

- **56%** of respondents expressed a high interest in learning more about trail marking (rating 4 or 5).
- **28%** had moderate interest (rating 3).
- **16%** expressed low interest (rating 1 or 2).

2. Interest in Participation:

- **61%** expressed interest in participating in trail marking activities, with a mix of voluntary interest and a desire to become certified trail markers.
- **16%** were unsure and answered "maybe."
- **23%** were not interested.

Perceived Importance of Trail Marking

- The majority of respondents agreed that trail marking significantly enhances the hiking experience. Key benefits highlighted included:
 - **Increased safety:** Trail markings help hikers feel more secure by guiding them on the correct path.
 - **Better navigation:** Trail markers make it easier to explore new places without the constant need for a GPS or map.
 - **Enjoyment of nature:** With clear markings, hikers can focus on enjoying the scenery without worrying about getting lost.
 - **Enhanced accessibility:** Markings ensure that hiking trails are more accessible to beginners and people less familiar with the area.

Barriers to Participation in Trail Marking

1. **Lack of Awareness:** Many respondents (**39%**) were unaware of opportunities to get involved in trail marking activities.
2. **Time Constraints:** **56%** cited a lack of time as the primary barrier.
3. **Long-term Commitment:** **20%** felt that the long-term commitment required was a barrier to participation.
4. **Lack of Motivation:** **16%** felt unmotivated to get involved, with some also finding the activity dull or uninspiring.

5. **Physical Challenges:** 10% mentioned that they lacked the physical skills needed for trail marking.

Suggestions for Improvement

Respondents proposed several ways to make trail marking more appealing:

- **Increased Awareness:** A stronger focus on advertising and communication, especially via social media and local events, would help engage young people.
- **Incentives:** Financial rewards, transportation support, or benefits like free memberships or discounts at hiking clubs could attract more participants.
- **Community Engagement:** Organizing group activities or social events, such as picnics or hikes, alongside trail marking tasks would make the activity more enjoyable.
- **Improved Trail Maintenance:** Better maintenance of the trails and clearer markers could make the task of trail marking more rewarding and increase participation.

Preferred Engagement Strategies

To better involve young people in trail marking, respondents suggested:

- **Social Media Campaigns:** Promoting activities through platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and collaborating with influencers to attract attention.
- **Community and School Programs:** Engaging schools, universities, and local youth groups to get involved through organized events or volunteer programs.
- **Group Activities:** Creating team-based events where young people can collaborate and socialize while contributing to trail marking.
- **Educational Campaigns:** Providing more information about trail marking and its importance, possibly through workshops, training sessions, or local outreach.

Time Willingness for Participation

- 38% of respondents were willing to commit a full day per month to trail marking.
- 22% would be able to commit 4-6 hours.
- 16% expressed willingness to dedicate an entire weekend occasionally.
- 24% were unsure about their exact availability, often depending on other commitments like work or family.

4.2 Observations and Conclusions: Comparative Analysis of Survey Findings from Austria, Slovakia, and Serbia

4.2.1 Hiking Frequency and Preferences

- **Austria:** 47% of respondents hike weekly, and 33% hike every few weeks. The majority prefer moderate trails (57%).
- **Slovakia:** 47% hike weekly, and 33% hike every few weeks. Most prefer moderate trails (57%) or a mix of easy and moderate trails (39%).
- **Serbia:** 23% hike weekly, while 37% hike a few times a year. A higher percentage of respondents prefer easy trails (70%) compared to Austria and Slovakia.

Observation:

- **Serbia** stands out with a significantly lower weekly hiking frequency (23% compared to 47% in Austria and Slovakia) and a greater preference for easy trails (70%). This suggests a more casual approach to hiking in Serbia, potentially due to less challenging trail infrastructure or lower engagement in regular outdoor activities.

4.2.2 Awareness of Trail Marking and Navigation

- **Austria:** 91% rely on trail markings, with 38% rating their familiarity with them as 4 or 5.
- **Slovakia:** 94% rely on trail markings, with 65% rating their familiarity as 3 or higher.
- **Serbia:** 73% have noticed trail markings, with 40% rating their familiarity at 4 or 5.

Observation:

- **Serbia** shows the lowest familiarity with trail marking (40% rating 4 or 5), suggesting a need for improved education and awareness of trail markings compared to Austria and Slovakia, where familiarity is higher (Austria: 38%, Slovakia: 65%).

4.2.3 Interest in Learning About and Participating in Trail Marking

- **Austria:** 41% expressed interest in volunteering for trail marking, with 56% interested in learning more.
- **Slovakia:** 61% expressed interest in volunteering, with 56% interested in learning more.
- **Serbia:** 50% expressed interest in volunteering, with 66% interested in learning more.

Observation:

- **Slovakia** shows the highest interest in volunteering for trail marking (61%), indicating that young people in Slovakia may have better access to or awareness of relevant programs and initiatives. Serbia follows closely with a strong interest in learning (66%), but volunteering interest is lower compared to Austria and Slovakia.

4.2.4 Barriers to Participation in Trail Marking

- **Austria:** 50% cited time constraints, with 56% unaware of opportunities to participate.
- **Slovakia:** 56% cited time constraints, and 39% were unaware of opportunities.
- **Serbia:** 57% cited time constraints, with 39% unaware of trail marking activities. Additional barriers included safety concerns and lack of physical skills.

Observation:

- **Serbia** stands out with unique barriers such as safety concerns and lack of physical skills, mentioned by **10%** of respondents. These concerns were not as prominent in Austria and Slovakia, where time constraints and lack of awareness were the primary barriers. This suggests that safety-related concerns in nature may need more attention in Serbia.

4.2.5 Suggestions for Improvement and Engagement Strategies

- **Austria:** Respondents suggested better promotion via social media, community engagement, and offering incentives like free memberships or transportation support.
- **Slovakia:** Similar suggestions for improved promotion, social media campaigns, and incentives such as discounts and rewards.
- **Serbia:** Respondents emphasized the need for better publicity, influencer involvement, and educational outreach.

Observation:

- **Austria and Slovakia** focus on practical incentives (e.g., free memberships, discounts) and better outreach through social media. **Serbia**, on the other hand, places a stronger emphasis on influencer involvement and building awareness through education and community events. This suggests that, while Austria and Slovakia are focused on making the activity more accessible, Serbia may benefit more from campaigns that emphasize the value and importance of trail marking.

The survey results from Austria, Slovakia, and Serbia reveal both shared characteristics and unique challenges when it comes to young people's engagement with trail marking and hiking. Across all three countries, trail marking is widely recognized as an essential tool for ensuring safety and improving the hiking experience. The majority of respondents from all countries expressed a strong interest in participating in trail marking activities, with notable enthusiasm for learning more about the topic. However, the level of engagement and the factors influencing participation differ between the countries, highlighting the need for tailored strategies.

A common barrier across all three countries is the lack of time and awareness of trail marking opportunities, which suggests that outreach efforts should focus on making participation more accessible and visible. Offering flexible scheduling and better promotion through social

media and community engagement could significantly boost participation. However, Serbia faces additional unique barriers, such as concerns about safety and physical limitations, which are less prevalent in Austria and Slovakia. Addressing these concerns through reassurance and education, while emphasizing the importance of safety in outdoor activities, could help overcome these challenges.

In terms of hiking habits, Serbia shows a more casual approach to hiking, with a greater preference for easy trails and lower frequency of hiking compared to Austria and Slovakia. This may reflect differences in infrastructure, culture, or access to trails, and suggests that trail marking initiatives in Serbia should focus on making it more accessible and appealing to those who engage in hiking less frequently. Austria and Slovakia, on the other hand, exhibit higher engagement in weekly hiking and a preference for moderate trails, which points to a more experienced hiking culture and greater readiness to engage in trail marking activities.

In conclusion, while young people across Austria, Slovakia, and Serbia show a shared interest in hiking and trail marking, engagement strategies need to be tailored to the unique contexts of each country. By addressing the specific barriers in each region—such as safety concerns in Serbia or the need for greater awareness in Austria and Slovakia—trail marking initiatives can become more inclusive and appealing to young people, ensuring the sustainability and growth of outdoor recreation in the future.

5 Recommendations for Making Trail Marking Appealing to Young People

Trail marking plays a crucial role in ensuring the safety and accessibility of hiking trails, fostering outdoor recreation, and contributing to environmental conservation. However, engaging the younger generation in trail marking activities remains a challenge. Based on the survey results from Austria, Slovakia, and Serbia, it is clear that young people are interested in participating, but face barriers such as lack of awareness, time constraints, and concerns about physical demands. This chapter provides recommendations to make trail marking more appealing to young people by addressing these challenges and offering practical strategies that align with the preferences and needs of the youth in these countries. By making trail marking more accessible, enjoyable, and rewarding, it is possible to inspire a new generation of volunteers who will help maintain and protect our hiking paths for future generations.

5.1 Promote Awareness and Visibility of Trail Marking Opportunities

One of the key barriers to engaging young people in trail marking activities across Austria, Slovakia, and Serbia is the lack of awareness about these opportunities. Many youngsters indicate that they are unaware of how to get involved or don't know that trail marking activities are even available. To address this challenge, it is essential to implement comprehensive strategies to raise awareness and ensure that young people are well-informed about the benefits and ways to participate in trail marking.

Recommendation 1: Utilize Digital Media and Social Media Campaigns

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Given that young people are highly active on social media, it is an effective platform for reaching and engaging them. Trail marking organizations should leverage social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok to raise awareness and share information about trail marking opportunities.

- **Campaigns and Posts:** Regular posts highlighting upcoming trail marking events, volunteer opportunities, and the benefits of participating can increase visibility. Sharing photos and videos of young people actively involved in trail marking can help inspire others to join.
- **Influencer and Ambassador Programs:** Partnering with outdoor influencers, local celebrities, or even young trail marking advocates can amplify the message. These influencers can reach a wider audience and create relatable, engaging content that resonates with their followers, making trail marking more appealing.
- **Hashtags and Challenges:** Creating engaging hashtags (e.g., #MarkYourTrail) or challenges, such as "trail marking weekends" or "trail improvement days," can generate interest and build a sense of community. Encouraging young people to share their experiences online will help to spread the word and encourage others to participate.

Recommendation 2: Educational Campaigns in Schools, Universities, and Youth Organizations

Educating young people about the importance of trail marking and how to get involved is another effective way to increase awareness. By directly engaging with schools, universities, and youth organizations, trail marking programs can reach a large, untapped audience.

- **Workshops and Information Sessions:** Organizing workshops or guest lectures in schools, universities, and youth clubs can provide information about the practical aspects of trail marking. These workshops could cover topics such as the environmental benefits of trail maintenance, the skills involved in trail marking, and the personal satisfaction gained from volunteering.
- **Collaborations with Environmental and Outdoor Groups:** Collaborating with existing environmental groups, hiking clubs, or local community centers to host informational sessions can help bridge the gap between young people and the opportunities to get involved in trail marking. These partnerships can also provide a network of support for new volunteers.

Recommendation 3: Create Informative Platforms and Resources

Providing young people with easy access to information about trail marking activities is essential. This can be achieved by creating dedicated online platforms and resources where they can find detailed information on volunteering opportunities, upcoming events, and training programs.

- **Websites and Apps:** Developing a user-friendly website or mobile app that consolidates information on trail marking activities in each country is a powerful way to inform young people. The platform can provide event calendars, registration forms, maps of trail marking sites, and tips for beginners.
- **Regular Updates:** Use the platform to send regular updates, newsletters, or reminders about upcoming events, highlighting the positive impact of trail marking and the experiences of past volunteers. This will help to keep young people engaged and motivated to participate.
- **Interactive Maps and Guides:** An interactive map that shows the locations of trail marking events or the status of trails that need maintenance can encourage young people to get involved by showing them where their efforts can make the most impact.

Recommendation 4: Public Awareness and Community Engagement

Beyond digital platforms, physical presence and community-based engagement are important for raising awareness. Traditional methods such as posters, flyers, and information stands at community events, festivals, or in local hiking shops can help spread the word to those not as active online.

- **Local Community Events:** Organizing community outreach events like information booths at local fairs, hiking expos, or environmental festivals can allow young people to learn about trail marking opportunities in a fun, informal setting. These events could include live demonstrations, interactive activities, and even small group hikes to show participants the importance of trail marking.
- **Partnerships with Local Businesses and Clubs:** Collaborating with local outdoor shops, hiking clubs, and tourism organizations can help raise awareness. Businesses that cater to outdoor enthusiasts could promote trail marking activities in their stores, offer discounts for volunteers, or host events related to trail maintenance.

5.2 Address Time Constraints and Increase Flexibility

One of the most significant barriers to young people participating in trail marking activities, as identified in the surveys conducted in Austria, Slovakia, and Serbia, is the lack of time. Many young individuals, especially students and young professionals, face busy schedules that leave little room for regular volunteering or long-term commitments. To overcome this obstacle, it is essential to offer flexible and accessible volunteering opportunities that fit into the dynamic lifestyles of young people. By designing trail marking programs that accommodate their time constraints, we can significantly increase participation and engagement.

Recommendation 1: Offer Flexible Volunteering Opportunities

Flexibility is key when engaging young people in volunteer activities like trail marking. Many young individuals may not have the ability to commit to long-term or rigid schedules, so providing a range of flexible volunteering options can make trail marking more appealing.

- **Short-Term Commitments:** Organize trail marking events that last a few hours or a half-day, allowing participants to contribute without committing a full day or weekend. For example, organizing "afternoon trail marking sessions" or "weekend cleanup events" can be more manageable for people with busy schedules.
- **Drop-In Opportunities:** Create "drop-in" volunteer events where participants can come and go as they please during designated time frames. This could be as simple as allowing people to register for a shift on a specific day and encouraging them to help when their schedule permits. This approach can lower the barriers for those unsure of their availability but still want to contribute.

Recommendation 2: Organize Seasonal or One-Time Events

Another way to address time constraints is by organizing seasonal or one-time events that allow participants to dedicate a specific block of time to trail marking, without the expectation of a recurring commitment. These events can be promoted as special occasions, which may make them more appealing.

- **Seasonal Campaigns:** Organize "Trail Marking Seasons," where events are held during specific periods of the year. For example, during the spring or fall, trail maintenance could be scheduled to prepare trails for the upcoming hiking season. These campaigns can focus on a collective goal, such as marking a certain number of trails or sections of trails within a set time frame, creating a sense of urgency and community involvement.
- **Special "Trail Marking Days":** Host national or local "Trail Marking Days," where volunteers can come together to mark trails across different regions on the same day. This approach makes the activity feel more like a celebration and can increase visibility and engagement. One-time events can also attract those who may be interested in trying it out without the pressure of long-term commitments.

Recommendation 3: Create "Micro-Volunteering" Opportunities

"Micro-volunteering" refers to small, manageable tasks that can be completed in short periods of time, which is an excellent solution for young people with limited availability. These opportunities are less intimidating than larger projects, allowing individuals to contribute in ways that fit within their busy lives.

- **Small, Task-Based Volunteering:** Design trail marking projects where young volunteers can complete small tasks, such as marking a section of trail or helping with signage placement, that can be finished in an afternoon or a couple of hours. These

micro-tasks could be tied to larger goals, allowing participants to feel that their contributions are meaningful while avoiding long-term commitments.

- **Flexible Task Management:** Volunteers could sign up for specific tasks, such as maintaining signage, clearing overgrown trails, or updating trail maps, allowing them to pick what works best with their schedules. The flexibility in task selection can help ensure that volunteers feel in control of their involvement, reducing the likelihood of feeling overwhelmed.

Recommendation 4: Offer Virtual Volunteering Opportunities

With the rise of digital platforms, virtual volunteering presents an opportunity for young people to contribute to trail marking activities even if they cannot physically attend events. While physical trail marking requires hands-on involvement, there are many related tasks that can be done online, such as planning, mapping, or promoting trail marking initiatives.

- **Mapping and Virtual Coordination:** Encourage volunteers to participate in virtual mapping projects where they can help identify and update trail locations and signage through digital tools. This approach can attract those who want to contribute to trail marking but cannot physically be present for the on-the-ground activities.
- **Promotion and Advocacy:** Young people can be involved in promoting trail marking activities by using social media, creating promotional content, or reaching out to their peers to spread the word. Offering virtual roles as social media ambassadors, event coordinators, or content creators can help broaden the scope of volunteer involvement.

Recommendation 5: Simplify the Registration Process

A simplified registration process that allows young people to sign up easily for trail marking events can encourage participation, especially for those who are busy or do not have much experience volunteering. Removing barriers to entry is essential for ensuring that time constraints do not deter young people from getting involved.

- **Online Registration:** Make the registration process straightforward and accessible through an online platform where young people can sign up for events, choose their preferred dates and times, and receive reminders. This will help reduce friction and make it easier for volunteers to commit, even if they have busy schedules.
- **Group Registration Options:** Offer group registration for friends or teams who want to volunteer together. This can help attract young people who prefer to participate with others and provides a more social way to engage.

5.3 Offer Incentives and Recognition

Incentives and recognition play a crucial role in motivating young people to participate in volunteer activities, including trail marking. While many young people are motivated by a

sense of purpose and the desire to contribute to environmental sustainability, offering tangible rewards can enhance the appeal of trail marking and encourage more consistent participation.

Recommendation 1: Provide Tangible Rewards and Perks

To attract and retain young people in trail marking activities, offering tangible rewards such as discounts, vouchers, or exclusive benefits can be highly effective. These incentives can create a sense of value and reward for the time and effort that volunteers put into trail maintenance.

- **Discounts on Outdoor Gear:** Partner with outdoor gear retailers or hiking clubs to offer discounts to volunteers who participate in trail marking activities. This incentive appeals to young people who are already interested in outdoor recreation and may find discounts on hiking boots, backpacks, or clothing particularly motivating.
- **Free Memberships or Entry:** Offer free memberships to hiking or environmental organizations (e.g., alpine clubs or nature conservation groups) as a reward for consistent participation. Additionally, volunteers could receive free access to national parks, hiking trails, or outdoor events, which would add extra value to their volunteer efforts.
- **Transportation Support:** For young volunteers who live in urban areas and have difficulty accessing hiking trails, providing transportation support such as travel reimbursements or organizing group travel can help reduce barriers to participation and make it easier for them to attend trail marking events.
- **Perks at Outdoor Events:** Volunteers could receive perks at outdoor festivals or events, such as free entry, VIP access, or discounted tickets to hiking-related activities, camping events, or outdoor concerts. This creates a sense of community and an additional incentive for those interested in outdoor recreation.

Recommendation 2: Implement a Recognition System

Public recognition and appreciation can motivate young volunteers by acknowledging their contributions and showing that their efforts are valued. A formal recognition system can increase volunteer engagement and build a sense of accomplishment and pride.

- **Certificates and Awards:** Provide certificates of participation or special awards for volunteers who complete specific milestones, such as marking a certain number of trails or volunteering for multiple events. These certificates can be shared on social media, displayed on personal profiles, or even included in resumes, showcasing the volunteer's commitment to the community.
- **Volunteer of the Month or Year:** Introduce a "Volunteer of the Month" or "Volunteer of the Year" program to recognize outstanding volunteers. This could be based on the number of hours volunteered, dedication to trail marking, or innovative contributions (such as leading a group). Recognizing top volunteers with special awards, such as a

trophy, public recognition on social media, or a feature on the organization's website, will motivate others to participate.

- **Public Acknowledgment:** Give volunteers public recognition during trail marking events by mentioning their names in event announcements or newsletters. Acknowledging volunteers during local community events or on social media platforms (such as Instagram stories or Facebook posts) can further increase their sense of pride in their contributions.
- **Leaderboards and Gamification:** Implement a system where volunteers can track their contributions and progress through a leaderboard, gamifying the experience. This can make trail marking feel like a more competitive and engaging activity, encouraging young people to earn points or badges for completing tasks, attending events, or recruiting new volunteers.

Recommendation 3: Organize Social and Networking Opportunities

For many young people, volunteering is not just about the activity itself, but also about meeting like-minded individuals, building friendships, and being part of a community. Offering social events and networking opportunities can make the volunteer experience more enjoyable and appealing, which can increase overall participation in trail marking activities.

- **Post-Event Socials:** Organize social events after trail marking activities, such as group dinners, BBQs, or picnics, where volunteers can relax and connect with each other. These events help create a sense of community and make trail marking more enjoyable by offering a social aspect.
- **Volunteering Meetups:** Encourage volunteers to stay in touch and continue their engagement by hosting regular volunteer meetups. These could involve hiking together, discussing future projects, or simply socializing and sharing experiences.
- **Online Communities:** Create a dedicated online space (such as a Facebook group, Discord channel, or WhatsApp group) for trail marking volunteers to connect, share photos, discuss their experiences, and plan future activities. This fosters a sense of belonging and encourages volunteers to stay involved.

5.4 Make Trail Marking Activities More Fun and Engaging

One of the key factors in motivating young people to participate in volunteer activities is making the experience enjoyable and engaging. While trail marking is an important and impactful activity, it can sometimes be perceived as tedious or repetitive. To ensure young people are enthusiastic about getting involved and staying involved, trail marking events must be made fun, dynamic, and interactive.

Recommendation 1: Gamify the Trail Marking Experience

Gamification is a powerful tool for making activities more engaging and motivating. By introducing game-like elements to trail marking events, young volunteers can have fun while contributing to trail maintenance.

- **Challenges and Competitions:** Organize trail marking events as friendly competitions, where volunteers can compete to mark the most trails, complete the most tasks, or even design the most creative trail signage. Offering small prizes or recognition for top performers (e.g., “Trail Marking Champion”) adds an element of excitement and a sense of accomplishment.
- **Tracking Progress and Earning Rewards:** Create a system where volunteers can track their contributions and earn badges, points, or rewards as they complete tasks. These rewards can range from digital badges on a volunteer profile to real-world perks such as discounts on outdoor gear, free event entry, or special recognition. This adds a layer of motivation and encourages young people to engage regularly.

Recommendation 2: Combine Trail Marking with Other Outdoor Activities

Many young people are motivated by the opportunity to explore nature, engage in outdoor adventure, and participate in multiple activities at once. By combining trail marking with other outdoor pursuits, the experience becomes more dynamic and enjoyable.

- **Themed Trail Marking Events:** Organize themed trail marking days that incorporate fun outdoor activities. For example, a "Hiking and Marking Day" could include a short hike to mark a section of a trail, followed by a picnic or outdoor games. This offers young volunteers the chance to socialize, relax, and enjoy the day after completing their trail marking tasks.
- **Integrate Educational Elements:** Combining trail marking with educational activities can also increase engagement. For example, offer nature talks, environmental education, or survival skills workshops as part of the event. These additional elements provide a well-rounded experience that appeals to young people interested in learning while contributing to trail maintenance.

Recommendation 3: Organize Adventure Camps or Weekend Retreats

An immersive experience can provide a unique and memorable way to engage young volunteers. Organizing trail marking events as part of adventure camps or weekend retreats can make the activity more enjoyable while fostering a sense of community and teamwork.

- **Weekend Trail Marking Camps:** Host weekend camps where participants can hike, camp, and mark trails together. These events can be held in scenic areas where volunteers can contribute to trail marking while enjoying outdoor activities such as cooking over a campfire, team-building exercises, and storytelling around the fire. The idea of a “trail marking adventure” adds excitement to the activity and encourages participants to spend the weekend connecting with nature and their peers.

- **Themed Outdoor Retreats:** Incorporate specific themes into weekend events, such as "Eco-Friendly Trail Marking" or "Trail Clean-Up and Sustainability Retreat." These retreats can focus on environmental conservation while providing opportunities for outdoor fun and relaxation. Offering workshops on wilderness survival, orienteering, and photography can provide additional learning opportunities that make the experience more rewarding.

Recommendation 4: Integrate Technology and Interactive Elements

Young people are increasingly drawn to activities that integrate technology in creative and interactive ways. By incorporating tech-based tools into trail marking activities, you can make the experience more engaging and relevant to a tech-savvy generation.

- **Mobile Apps and Trail Mapping:** Develop or utilize mobile apps that allow volunteers to track their trail marking progress, report issues with trails, or even map unmarked areas. These apps could include features such as trail gamification, where participants can check in or collect points for visiting specific locations or marking sections of the trail. This adds a fun, interactive element to the work.
- **Interactive Challenges and QR Codes:** Use QR codes placed along the trails that link to digital challenges or fun facts about the area. Volunteers could scan the codes to learn more about the environment, flora, and fauna, or participate in mini-games related to the trail. This would not only make the trail marking activity more interactive but also educational.
- **Social Media Engagement:** Encourage participants to share their trail marking experiences on social media, using specific hashtags or tagging the event's account. Organizing contests or challenges on platforms like Instagram or TikTok, where volunteers post photos of the marked trails or their volunteer experiences, can further engage young people and make the activity more fun and shareable.

5.5. Ensure Accessibility and Inclusivity

For trail marking initiatives to successfully engage a diverse group of young people, it is essential to ensure that the activities are accessible and inclusive. Many young people face barriers related to physical ability, geographic location, or social factors. By making trail marking more accessible to people of all backgrounds and abilities, we can broaden participation and create a more inclusive volunteering environment. Here are three key recommendations to promote accessibility and inclusivity in trail marking activities:

Recommendation 1: Adapt Trail Marking Activities for Different Physical Abilities

Young people have varying levels of physical ability, and it's important to ensure that trail marking is an inclusive activity for all. Some may have mobility limitations, while others may be new to outdoor activities and may not feel comfortable with physically demanding tasks.

- **Provide Different Levels of Involvement:** Design activities that can be tailored to different physical abilities. For example, some volunteers could focus on light tasks like painting or maintaining signage, while others may take on more physically demanding tasks such as clearing overgrown trails or building markers. Allowing participants to choose the level of involvement based on their ability can make the activity more inclusive.
- **Provide Support for Less Physically Able Volunteers:** Ensure that volunteers who have mobility impairments or other physical challenges have access to support, such as designated routes that are easier to navigate or assistance from experienced volunteers. Offering tools like accessible transportation or ensuring accessible trailheads can also help participants with mobility challenges engage in trail marking.
- **Inclusive Training:** Provide inclusive training sessions that offer practical advice on how to mark trails effectively while considering various abilities. This could include adaptive techniques for individuals with physical challenges or older volunteers.

Recommendation 2: Improve Accessibility to Trails and Events

Geographic barriers can prevent many young people from participating in trail marking activities, particularly those who live in urban areas far from hiking trails or in regions where trail networks are underdeveloped. Making these activities more geographically accessible is key to increasing participation.

- **Provide Transportation Support:** One effective way to improve accessibility is by providing transportation support, such as organizing group transportation to and from trailheads or offering reimbursement for travel costs. This would remove the financial or logistical barriers for young people who may be interested in volunteering but cannot afford or access transportation.
- **Host Events in Various Locations:** Organize trail marking events in different locations, including urban parks, nature reserves, and areas closer to communities. By hosting events in a variety of locations, more young people, especially those without easy access to remote areas, can participate. Additionally, hosting local events or “micro-events” in the city or nearby nature areas could help increase participation.
- **Promote Local Trails:** Focus on promoting local or urban trails for marking, where young people are more likely to be familiar with the area. By increasing awareness of nearby trails, volunteers are more likely to engage with projects that feel relevant and accessible to them.

Recommendation 3: Foster Inclusivity for Underrepresented Groups

Ensuring that trail marking activities are inclusive of all social and cultural groups is critical to creating a diverse and welcoming volunteer community. Young people from underrepresented backgrounds, such as women, ethnic minorities, and marginalized

communities, may feel excluded from outdoor activities or volunteering opportunities if these activities are not designed with inclusivity in mind.

- **Create Targeted Outreach Programs:** Develop outreach programs that specifically target underrepresented groups. This can include partnering with organizations that serve women, ethnic minorities, or LGBTQ+ youth, and promoting trail marking opportunities through those channels. Ensuring that volunteers from diverse backgrounds feel welcomed and supported is vital to creating a truly inclusive volunteer community.
- **Encourage Gender Diversity:** Make efforts to actively engage women in trail marking activities by promoting the benefits of outdoor volunteering and showcasing female role models in trail maintenance. Offering women-specific events or creating a women-friendly atmosphere can help make these opportunities more attractive.
- **Support Cultural and Social Diversity:** Emphasize the value of diverse perspectives in volunteering efforts. This can include creating spaces for young people from different cultural backgrounds to connect, share experiences, and learn from one another. Engaging community organizations that support ethnic minorities and migrant groups can help bridge the gap and encourage participation from diverse communities.

6 Conclusion

Trail marking is a vital activity that ensures the safety, accessibility, and enjoyment of hiking trails, while also contributing to environmental sustainability and community well-being. The TRAILS project has highlighted the importance of engaging young people in trail marking and maintenance to ensure the long-term preservation of these outdoor resources. Through comprehensive surveys and analyses conducted in Austria, Slovakia, and Serbia, this report has identified both shared challenges and unique barriers faced by young people in participating in trail marking activities. It has also provided targeted recommendations to overcome these obstacles and make trail marking more appealing to the younger generation.

Key findings revealed that lack of awareness, time constraints, and accessibility are significant barriers to participation, while factors such as flexibility, social engagement, and incentives play a crucial role in motivating young people to get involved. Tailored approaches for each country—such as increasing promotional efforts, offering flexible and short-term opportunities, and integrating trail marking with other engaging outdoor activities—are essential to address these challenges effectively.

Additionally, this report emphasizes the need for inclusivity, ensuring that young people from diverse backgrounds, abilities, and regions feel welcomed and empowered to participate. By creating a sense of community, offering meaningful rewards, and providing opportunities for growth and leadership, trail marking can become not just an act of volunteering, but a rewarding and enjoyable experience for young people.

Ultimately, the success of trail marking initiatives depends on collaborative efforts between organizations, local communities, and volunteers. By implementing the recommendations outlined in this report, we can inspire a new generation of young people to contribute to the maintenance and preservation of hiking trails, ensuring they remain accessible and safe for years to come. Investing in this shared effort will not only strengthen trail networks but also promote a culture of environmental stewardship, active living, and community connection among young people.

7. Annexes

1. Results of surveys in Austria, Serbia and Slovakia
2. Country analysis of trail marking in Austria, Serbia and Slovakia