

FOREST, HEALTH AND TOURISM: DEVELOPING SUSTAINABLE HEALTH TOURISM OFFERS IN LOCAL FORESTS

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Abstract

Purpose – Forests are a “polyvalent space” of very broad significance and use. Especially given the ongoing shift towards being a “health space” and their increasing interpretation by society as a location for leisure activities, recreation and experiencing nature, forest-based health tourism activities and offers are springing. It is therefore crucial to take not only the demand side into account, but also those offering these forests: the forest owners.

Methodology – Within the framework of a cross-border "INTERREG-V-A Austria-Bavaria 2014-2020" research project on the socially important topic of "Forest, Health and Tourism", an online survey of forest owners (n = 150) in the projects pilot regions of Lower Bavaria and Upper Austria was conducted and evaluated.

Findings – Forest has an enormous emotional value for their owners. Indeed, they see the importance of their forests for the population and society, but primarily as a deliverer of “ecosystem services” and not as activity space. There is a basic willingness to make their forests available for health tourism use, but this requires compensation or added value.

Contribution – While a forest-related, health tourism product development deals in particular with the demand side, addressing specific target groups with concrete offers, the supply side is often neglected. The survey makes clear that forest owners, despite the common right of free access to forests, must always be seriously and actively involved in product development and implementation of forest-based health tourism offers as key stakeholders in a participatory and transparent manner.

Keywords: forest, health, tourism offers, natural resources, product development, stakeholder participation.

INTRODUCTION

Forest-based health tourism activities and offers are emerging in many places - from educational forest walks to stress-reducing, preventive forest programmes to therapeutic forest stays (Marušáková and Sallmannshofer 2019) - because forests are now being seen as a "health space" (Claßen 2016) and people are increasingly interpreting forests as a place for leisure activities, recreation and experiencing nature. Their use as a health space once again changes the character, the "essence" of forests (Kühne 2019): from a backdrop for sporting activity, they become a health-promoting "remedy" due to their demonstrable psychological and physical effects and mutually reinforcing benefits (Schuh and Immich 2019; White et al. 2019) - now health becomes the actual motive (Steckenbauer 2017). Owing to these qualities, forests are now facing a present in which

health is more important than ever before (Zukunftsinstitut 2022) - this experienced an additional "boost" due to the Covid-19 pandemic (Palm et al. 2020).

As early as in its 1975 version, the German Federal Forests Act (BWaldG) stipulates that "...forests must be conserved and, wherever possible, expanded because of their economic benefit (utility function) and because of their importance to the environment, in particular for permanently maintaining the natural balance, for the climate, the water balance, for maintaining air purity, soil fertility, the landscape, the agriculture and infrastructure and the recreation of the population (protective and recreational functions), and that forests must be properly managed on a sustainable basis, forestry must be promoted and a balance must be established between the interests of the general public and those of forest owners" (Section 1 BWaldG).

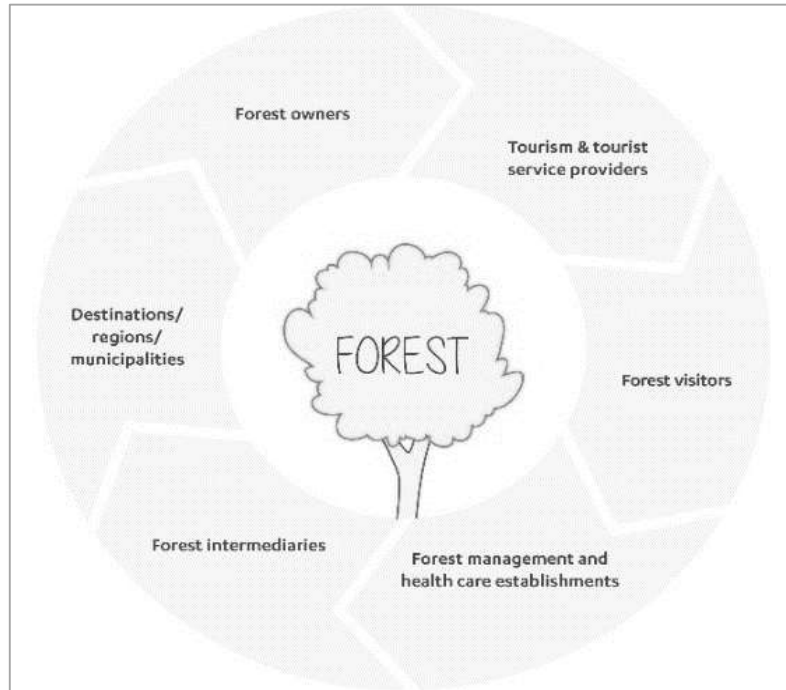
This excerpt clarifies that "forests", by law, already have various functions and purposes. The examples of Germany and Austria show that the forest area is also distributed among many owners. Of the approximately 11.4 million hectares of forest area in Germany, 48% is private forest (with around 1.8 million private forest owners) and 19% is owned by municipalities - the remaining forests are divided between the states (29%) and the federal government (4%) (BMEL 2021). In Austria, the majority of the approx. 4.0 million hectares of forest area is privately owned (82%) by around 145,000 forest owners. The remaining 18% is predominantly owned by "Österreichische Bundesforste" and to a small extent by municipalities and the state (BWF 2016).

Considering the numerous functions and the existing ownership structure, it is no surprise that there are a multitude of different stakeholders and their clashing individual interests. Forests are thus a "polyvalent space" with a very broad spectrum of significance: from a place of raw material extraction to a place that provides essential ecosystem services to being a scenic backdrop or to providing local recreation (Berr and Jenal 2022).

In addition to forest visitors and forest owners, who are usually the focus of attention, another group of people active in the forests - "forest mediators" - is gaining in importance in the course of this health-oriented change. As qualified forest health trainers, forest educators, forest therapists etc., they function as "intermediaries" who professionally support corresponding activities in the forest and, at the same time, serve as a link of sorts between forest spaces and forest effects on one side and forest visitors and forest owners on the other. In many cases, they are freelancers or even work privately in the forest as "facilitators", but they also increasingly support and provide health tourism offers on behalf of or in close cooperation with local institutions and facilities, e.g. state forest enterprises, regional tourism associations, local health facilities as well as destinations and municipalities (Suda et al. 2022).

The changed perception of forests as a health space and the associated provision of corresponding forest-related activities and offers ultimately results in numerous groups of people with different motives and interests, being out and about in the forest and identifying the opportunities and possibilities of capitalising on and using forests in the context of health and (wanting to) participate in these (Fig. 1).

Figure 1: Stakeholder groups involved in forest use for health tourism



Source: Markov et al. 2022.

Quite often, such clashes of different interests also result in potential differences and conflicts (Jenal 2019). Three "types" of conflicts of goals can often be identified in forests: conflicts between different forest visitors, between forest visitors and the goals and interests of forest owners, and between the interests of forest visitors and the goals of protecting and conserving the forest (habitat) as an ecosystem for animals, plants and climate (BAFU 2013; BAFU 2018). Conflicts can also arise "outside" the forest itself - e.g. at a destination or municipality level, when new forest-related offers or even strategies are linked to (infra-)structural or commercial measures that are pushed without the participation of the population or, in particular, of local forest owners, so that important stakeholders may feel ignored and not consulted.

Ambiguities and resulting conflicts often also arise from legal requirements and regulations. Forest visits for private recreational purposes are legally guaranteed to all persons. This is regulated by the so-called "right of free access" (see Art. 27 BayNatSchG (Bavarian Nature Conservation Act); Section 33 Para. 1 Forest Law). However, it is not a "free ride" for forest visitors - they too have duties and regulations for their stay in the forest. With the increasing perception of forests as a health space, the type and background of forest use is now often changing; new health tourism activities complement the classic walk or hike. This in turn results in duties and regulations for forest visitors, but in particular for forest owners and forest mediators with regard to liability, maintenance of safety and possible obligations in the case of commercial forest

use or access for economic purposes, i.e., also the provision of corresponding offers where the right of free access no longer applies. The implementation of such offers therefore requires the notification and approval of forest owners (and possibly the authorities) in advance, as well as, in principle, a legal or contractual safeguard.

The use of forests for health tourism thus involves a wide range of different groups of people and stakeholders. In order to better understand the foundations as well as the challenges of such forest use, it is therefore important to focus on the three groups of people who are closest to the forest and who are out and about in forests or "active" there: forest owners, forest mediators and forest visitors.

However, in research as well as in the development of products and services, the focus is often on the demand side, i.e., on forest visitors - but not on those who actually make their forest area available as this health space, as a place of activity - namely the forest owners.

It is therefore important to find out and investigate more closely what forest owners actually think about the forest as a new health space and about its additional use for health tourism besides the actual management. Would they even be willing to make their forest area available for this purpose – and if so, do they impose specific conditions?

1. METHODS

In the course of a cross-border "INTERREG V-A Austria-Bavaria 2014-2020" research project in Bavaria and Austria on the topic of "forest, health and tourism" - which specifically explores the question of how local forest areas can be used sustainably for health tourism - a survey of forest owners was carried out, the results and findings of which serve as the basis for this article.

Forests are one of the most characteristic landscape factors in the northern foothills of the Alps; after all, 52% of the province of Salzburg, 41% of Upper Austria and 35% of Bavaria are covered by forests. Primarily small-scale ownership structures have established in these regions - over half of the forest owners owning up to three hectares of forest area. Such farm sizes do not allow for full-time core commercial use - these forests can only be managed as a part-time activity in connection with a farm or as a hobby. But often, apart from a lack of interest and training, there is a lack of available resources to work in the "inherited" forest - in the worst-case scenario, the forest is left to its own devices. When drafting forest laws, it was assumed that all functions of the forest (utility, protective and recreational) could be covered by the proceeds of the timber sold. However, this has not been the case for some years now. The conservation of biodiversity and ecosystem services is as much the responsibility of forest owners as the elimination of "atypical hazards" for forest visitors. Every now and then, this recreational function in particular increases significantly due to the increasing interpretation and importance of forests as a health space for the population - management and care of forests now includes, among others, hikers and walkers who seek natural forests, peace and relaxation (Markov et al. 2023). Against this backdrop of the additional use of forests for health tourism, it remains to be seen to what extent forest owners want this at all. In

order to investigate this question, this present survey of 150 forest owners from Lower Bavaria and Upper Austria was conducted online as part of the project (Markov et al. 2022).

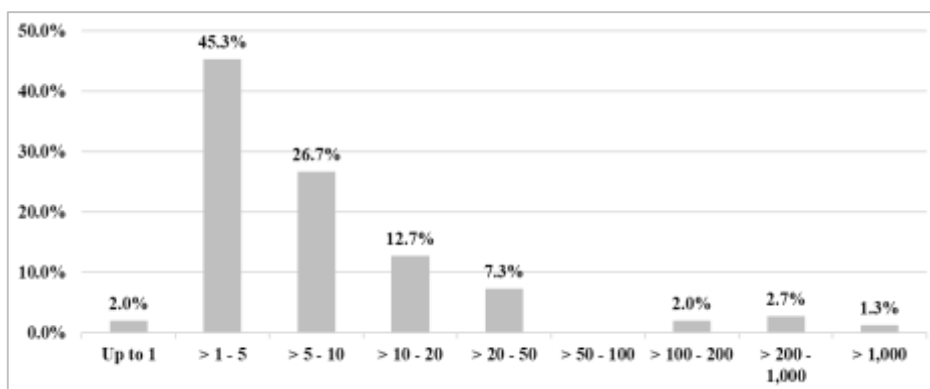
The survey was conducted online from July to December 2021, and it targeted private forest owners in the two project pilot regions of "Lower Bavaria" and "Upper Austria", with a sample of n = 150 participants. The basis was an online questionnaire developed together with experts from tourism and forestry containing a total of 12 multiple-choice and evaluation questions, depending on the combination of answers, as well as open questions.

The aim was to shed more light on how forest owners, as key stakeholders, view this complex of topics related to "forest, health and tourism" using quantitative surveys on individual circumstances, ideas and perceptions about "forests", forest visits and the use of forests for health tourism. The specific questions to be investigated were: what is the importance of their own (private) forest for the respondents, what are their views on free access to forests and to what extent would they be willing - possibly under specific conditions - to make their forest area available for health tourism. The quantitative survey of closed questions was analysed and interpreted using the statistical and analysis software SPSS (Kromrey 2009).

2. RESULTS

85% of the 150 forest owners surveyed are male which is the clear majority. The scenario is different when it comes to the age structure; there is a wide range of forest owners between 25 and 76 years of age. The 50-59 age group dominates with a share of almost one third. Almost every second respondent (45.3%) owns between one and five hectares of forest area, followed by five to ten hectares (26.7%) - 6% of respondents even own more than 100 hectares of forest area (Fig. 2).

Figure 2: **Total forest area privately owned by the respondents in hectares (ha).**
(n=150)

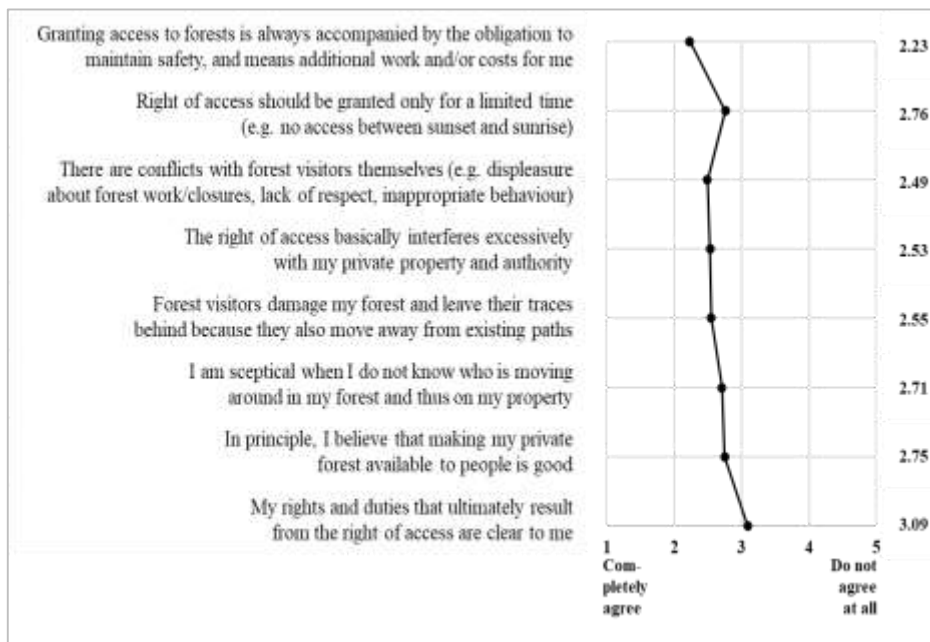


Source: Markov et al. 2022.

On being asked about the importance of their forests, forest owners specifically state that the forest has an "emotional value" for them that must be preserved – 72.7% agree completely. Furthermore, the respondents consider their forest to make an important contribution to the "ecosystem service" (e.g. protection against erosion or floods, contribution to climate protection, habitat for animals and plants, water storage) and as a source for their "own needs". Respondents see their forest area significantly less as a "social contribution" in the sense of a place of recreation for locals or the population or as a space for sporting or health-related activities.

In Austria and Bavaria, the surveyed forest owners are more sceptical about the right of free access to the forest. For almost two-thirds of the respondents, this "always goes hand in hand with obligations to maintain safety and means additional work and/or costs" (63.4%). Moreover, from their point of view, there are "conflicts with forest visitors themselves" (58.0%), e.g. displeasure about forest work/closures, lack of respect for forest ownership or inappropriate behaviour such as making noise or littering. Likewise, respondents feel that "the right of access basically interferes excessively with their private property and authority" (48.6%). Where there are fundamental considerations and discussions on the free right of access, the fact that every second forest owner "cannot clearly understand what rights and obligations result from this" (Fig. 3) seems particularly astonishing.

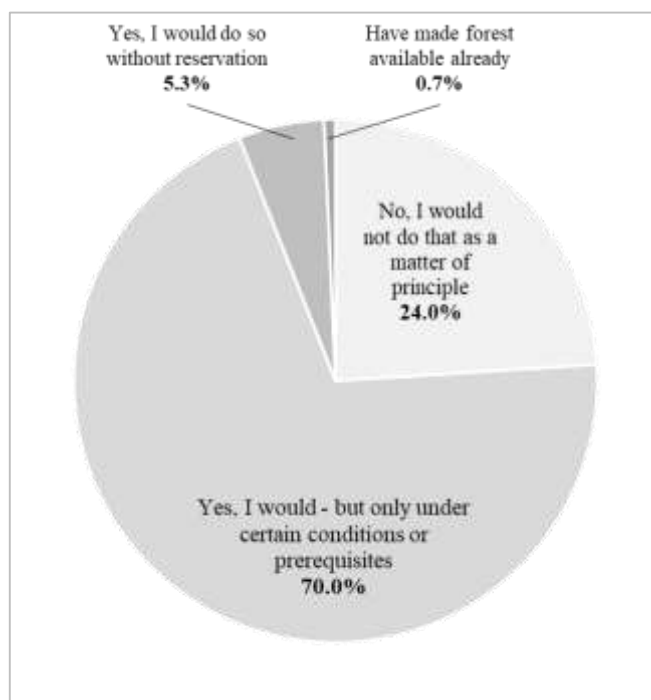
Figure 3: Views of the surveyed forest owners on the "right of free access" to the forest. (n=150)



Source: Markov et al. 2022.

Although the responses about forests and the right of free access are somewhat sceptical in general, it is surprising positively that 75.3% of the forest owners would be willing to make their private forest property available for health tourism - e.g. for guided hikes, forest education (for children, schools, guest groups, etc.), recreation offers (meditation, yoga, Qi Gong, etc.), therapy measures (for burn-out, depression, addiction, etc.). 5.3% of the respondents would do so without restriction and 70.0% would do so under specific conditions and prerequisites (Fig. 4).

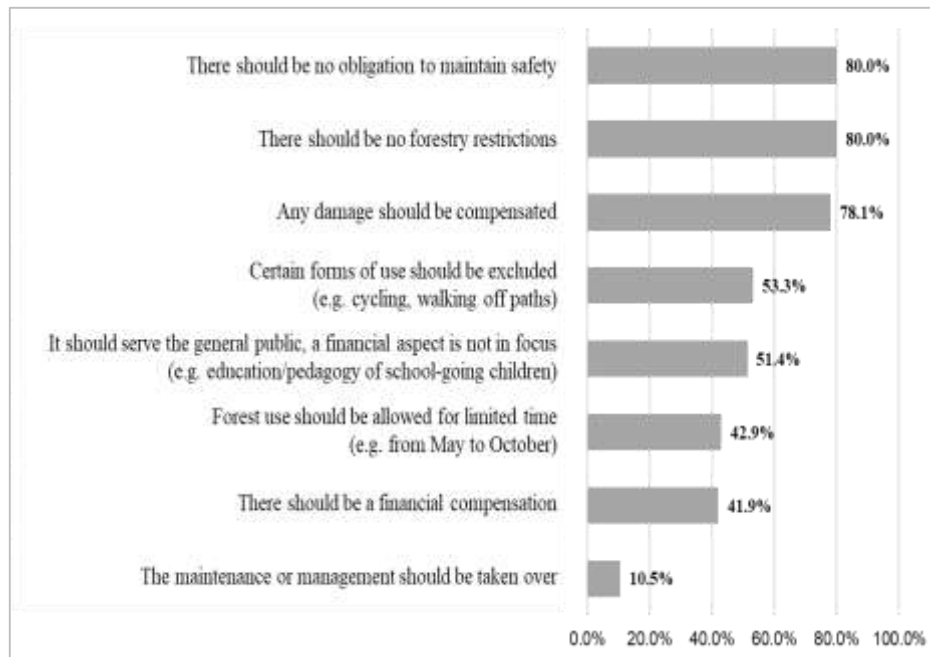
Figure 4: **Willingness of forest owners to make their forest available for health tourism.** (n=150)



Source: Markov et al. 2022.

These primarily include that the use of their forest area for health tourism must not result in "any obligation to maintain safety or any forestry restrictions" and that "any damage due to such use should be compensated". "Financial compensation", on the other hand, plays a rather subordinate role - less than half the respondents would see this as a condition (Fig. 5).

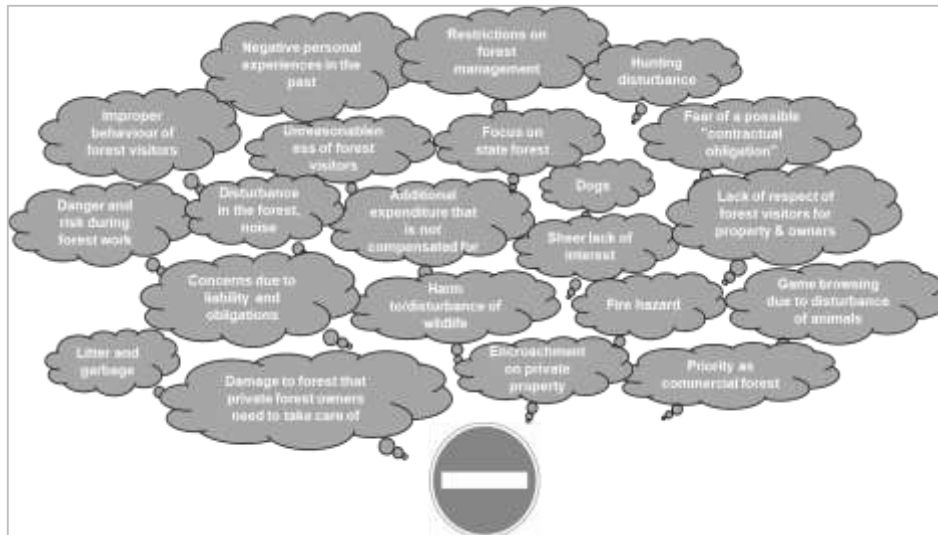
Figure 5: **Conditions and requirements of forest owners for making their forest area available for health tourism.** (n=105, multiple answers possible; follow-up question)



Source: Markov et al. 2022.

The results of the survey show a wide range of views and opinions on private forest ownership and its importance and use, possibly for health tourism. It should be noted that "not all forests are the same" - in all considerations concerning forest use, it is essential to bear in mind that there are regional differences in the perceptions of forest owners and in the framework conditions (legal foundations, location in a more tourist-oriented area, economic importance of the local forest, etc.). Forests have an enormous "emotional value" for forest owners. At the same time, they also see the importance of their forest for the general public, but primarily as an important provider of "ecosystem services" - not as a playground and activity space for the population. As a result, they are often sceptical about the right of free access to forests and the associated use of forests by the population. Especially disruptions, restrictions, damage within the forest as well as the often-cited lack of appreciation and respect towards the property of forest owners provide negative experiences with regard to access, right of access as well as ultimate use (Fig. 6).

Figure 6: **Reasons for refusal of the surveyed forest owners for making their forest area available for health tourism.** (n=36, multiple-answers possible; follow-up question)



Source: Markov et al. 2022.

CONCLUSION

Despite the increasing importance of health and recreation as well as of health tourism offers in forests, there is almost no exchange or cooperation between the surveyed forest owners and the corresponding local stakeholders. Nevertheless, forest owners would be willing to make their forest area available for health tourism. Primarily the less transparent and comprehensible regulations surrounding the right of access (including the obligation to maintain safety and ensure liability) result in hesitation and concerns, and so the respondents often attach certain conditions and prerequisites to making their forest area available - which are anything but unrealistic. They also often feel left out and presented with a *fait accompli* when it comes to developing and codetermining future ideas, offers and forms of forest use. In the development and successful implementation of health tourism offers, it is therefore essential to take forest owners seriously as key stakeholders - to include their opinions and views in all considerations concerning forest use from the very beginning. This is because they are essentially willing to provide their forest area for health tourism. Private forest owners also need to be transparently and openly informed or sensitized about what the background is and what processes and activities are involved, especially in their part of the forest. Here, it would be desirable that in future, forest mediators increasingly act as a link and interface between forest owners and other stakeholders - typically this is also the task of local destination management organisations or tourism associations.

Generally, the willingness of forest owners to make their forest areas available entitles them to compensation or "added value" - not necessarily only in the form of financial compensation, but also, for instance, in the form of support services, compensation for any damage or relief from risks and additional expenditure. Often, however, this added value is also simply brought in by "immaterial benefits", e.g. by the (renewed) increase of appreciation for forest owners and forest use.

In addition, there is a need for simple, understandable guidelines and mechanisms by authorities and institutions that help forest owners make their forest areas available without the fear of additional burdens, restrictions or risks - the laws concerning the "right of access" and the rights and duties arising from it must become more transparent, understandable and comprehensible. The issue of liability in particular proves to be a critical factor here. As with the designation of cycle paths and hiking trails by municipalities, contractual regulations could provide safety, for example, through an agreement with a forest owner to take over the latter's obligations to maintain safety in view of the contractual use for health tourism purposes of his land, and in this respect, exempt him from legal liability claims.

Finally, yet importantly, forests are also a very "emotional topic" for forest owners as they are mostly their private property. Raising awareness, communicating respect and appreciation as well as rules of conduct for forest use by the population or those who avail health tourism offers must therefore be a mandatory basis. The same applies to the regional promotion of cooperation between all stakeholders involved in forest use and the establishment of local mechanisms to ensure participation and codetermination.

This article strives to make a significant contribution to taking different perspectives into account in the course of health-oriented use of local forests, as well as to understanding different backgrounds and interests that come together in the forest - in order to ultimately be able to draw conclusions and make recommendations on how forest use for health tourism can become a win-win situation for all stakeholders. This is because sustainable added value for all stakeholders is only possible when they understand and respect each other - and ultimately act in the common interest.

The research conducted so far has some limitations, as it has only focused on Austria and Germany. It is important to extend the study to other European countries to have a more comprehensive and holistic understanding of the topic. Although the sample was representative, in the next step, it is important to shed light on the target audience that was analysed, and then to dive deeper into their characteristics by surveying them. Further research will continue to explore the results obtained from this study. Based on these results, managerial implications of this study suggest developing successful products for health and forest industries that cater to the specific needs of the target audience. In the future, it would be beneficial to consider the lifestyles of the target audience and to align the products developed to suit the target groups' lifestyles, thus making them more appealing and customer centric. At the same time further research is necessary concerning the inclusion of the forest owners' perspective in health tourism product development.

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