

**AN ACTION PLAN  
FOR THE QUALITY  
DEVELOPMENT  
AND SUSTAINABLE  
TOURISM OF SAIMAA  
GEOPARK**

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Elinkeino-, liikenne- ja  
ympäristökeskus



Euroopan maaseudun  
kehittämisen maatalousrahasto:  
Eurooppa investoi maaseutualueisiin



RAIJA JA OSSIN  
TUULIAISEN SÄÄTIÖ

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FCG SUUNNITTELU JA TEKNIikka OY

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# AN ACTION PLAN FOR THE QUALITY DEVELOPMENT AND SUSTAINABLE TOURISM OF SAIMAA GEOPARK

## 1. SUSTAINABLE TOURISM AND QUALITY

Traveling should increase well-being in economic, employment, environmental and socio-cultural sectors for years to come. Also travelers should feel that they are welcomed, they get their money's worth and that their experiences meet their expectations. Taking sustainability into account is the basis of geology-based traveling, since it is implemented in areas that are environmentally sensitive and where traveling groups expect services to be provided responsibly. Circular economy's principles of using pre-existing resources more proficiently fits into the spirit of Geopark.

Saimaa Geopark is a coherent area with particular geological value. It includes nationally and internationally significant geological landscapes and attractions, as well as cultural destinations. 65 geosites create an interesting and attractive destination to the southern Saimaa area that enables a new and diverse productization for different travel and leisure target groups.

The tourism of the Geopark area consists mainly of nature travelers. The amount of nature travelers has increased in national parks in particular, in which the rise of visitor counts have been detected in growth curves year after year. The only Geopark in Finland to acquire the UNESCO Global Geopark status as for now, the Rokua Geopark, has reported growth in visitor counts during the last few years.

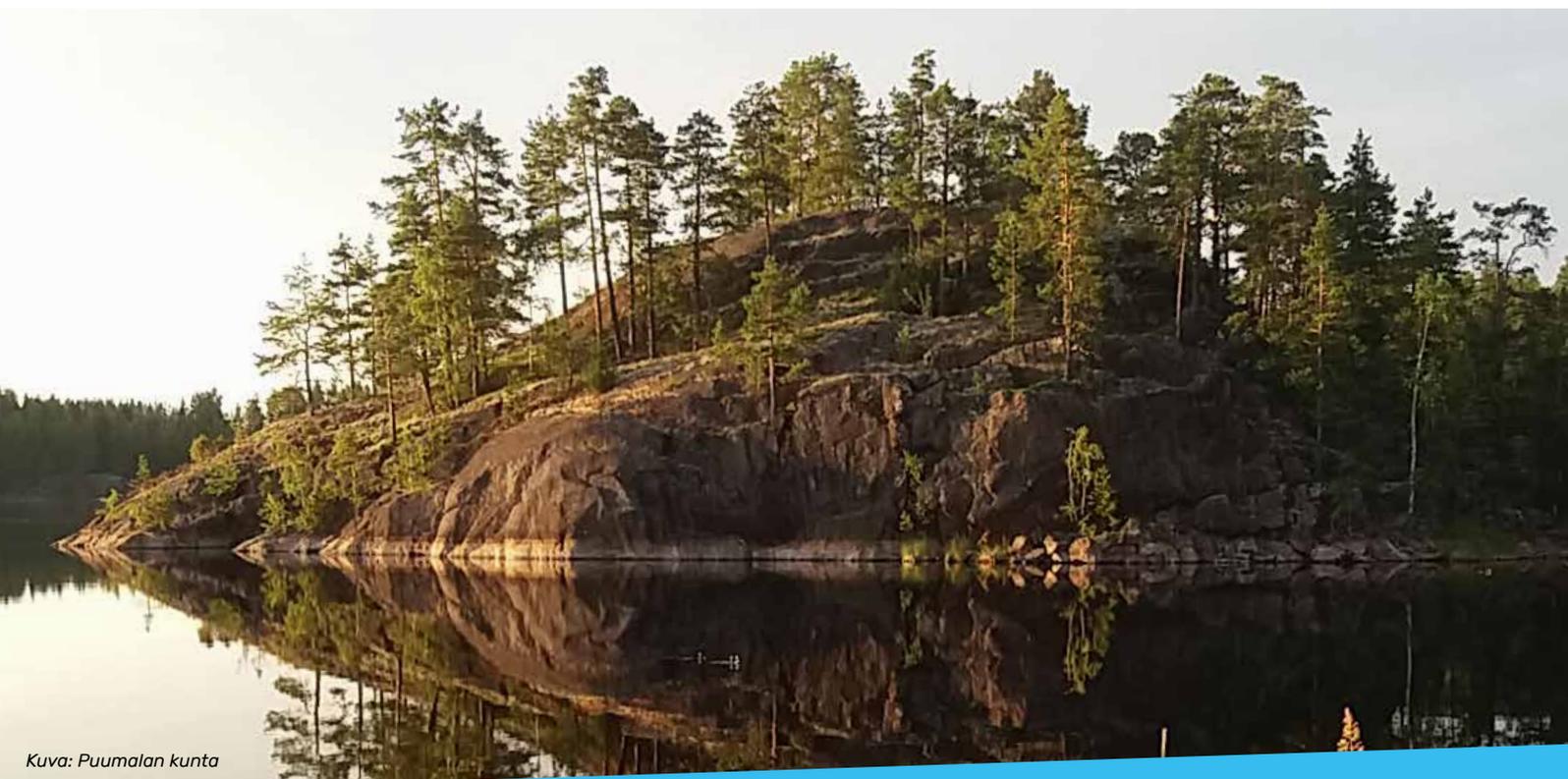
There are also several actors and stakeholders in the Saimaa Geopark

area, such as companies, associations and actors of the public sector such as municipalities. All of these actors have their own role in the quality, safety and sustainability of the area. Many geosites are located in areas that do not have daily supervision and care. These aspects create their own challenges in the strategic development of the area.

In order to acquire the UNESCO status, Saimaa Geopark must demonstrate that it fulfills the requirements set for the network's geoparks and their operations. According to the principles of UNESCO, a geopark must provide new operational prerequisites for the region's companies and enhance the travel sector and its employment. Also, it must increase the citizens' knowledge and appreciation towards their home region, and thereby strengthen their identities.

### 1.1. Composition of the Action Plan

The action plan has been composed based on five interviews with actors of the region, a sustainable tourism workshop held 12.2.2019 (20 participants), quality workshop held 7.5.2019, UNESCO criteria, master's theses, pre-existing research material, and FCG Suunnittelu ja tekniikka Oy's leading expert Niina Vesterinen's expertise, during the Spring of 2019. The action plan works as a tool for Saimaa Geopark Oy.



Kuva: Puumalan kunta

## 2. THE ACTION PLAN

### 2.1. Goal

The action plan responds to the UNESCO Geopark –status requirements, and the principles of sustainable tourism, quality and safety of Saimaa Geopark.

### 2.2. The Principles of Sustainable Travel

1. Sustaining the values of Saimaa Geopark –sites and advancing their protection.
2. Minimizing the litter and strain on a sensitive environment, and preserving geological legacy, nature and diversity of culture.
3. Reducing climate change and enhancing climate change adaptation with concrete actions.
4. Strengthening the vitality and well-being of the area:
  - a. locality and expertise as a part of Saimaa Geopark –products and services
  - b. the creation of new jobs and companies
  - c. understanding the meaning of the values, identity, tradition and culture of the region.
5. Producing and offering services sustainably and responsibly, as well as authentically and openly by utilizing the strengths of the area, while taking into consideration their quality and safety.
6. Informing target groups of the sustainable values and services of Saimaa Geopark through influential multichannel marketing.
7. Persistent and systematical development.

### 2.3. Quality Guarantee

The quality demands of travelers in the entire service chain have increased, and in order to succeed in international competition, service processes and customer service must be improved. The constant development of quality is the basis of profitable and sustainable activity. Quality offers success and actual benefits for stakeholders.

1. Saimaa Geopark –network develops its services and sites persistently and systematically.
2. Actors appreciate the feedback of customers and utilize it in the development of their own activity.
3. The attractiveness and services of the area are based on its supply of unique geological, archeological, cultural and historical attractions and landscapes.
4. Saimaa Geopark –knowledge offered to visitors is up-to-date, comprehensive and interesting, and it is implemented in multichannel marketing while taking into consideration different target groups.
5. Services and products utilize local expertise and raw materials, for example some companies offer tasty local food made from clean raw materials.
6. Many of the region’s small family businesses offer personal services.

### 2.4. Actions

Actions are based on six main themes:

1. Enhancing the vitality and well-being of the local community and surrounding environment
2. Ensuring a sustainable natural environment
3. Sustainable tourism in the Saimaa Geopark area
4. The development and production of services
5. Enhancing the security of the area
6. Quality development.

Kuva: Puumalan kunta



The Vitality and Well-Being of the Local Community and the Surrounding Environment	Content	Responsibility	Funding	Schedule
A report on the current situation and challenges of sustainable tourism among the Saimaa Geopark collaborators and constant sustainment of expertise	In order for the association to acquire up-to-date knowledge of the area's sustainable tourism, a report is conducted with an electric inquiry. The inquiry also maps out matters concerning quality, safety and marketing. The acquired knowledge eases the planning of future actions. Bulletins of the good practices and benefits of sustainable tourism are a part of all organized events.	Saimaa Geopark ry	Part of the association's basic activity	2019
The development and execution of meters and statistics	The basic meters that will be followed are defined. These can be for instance visitor counts, the movement of travelers by season and the effects of traveling on local economy. Inquiries are conducted for travelers, the local population and the business sector so the starting level can be identified. Inquiries are repeated in every 4 years for example.	Saimaa Geopark ry, XAMK and Saimaa University of Applied Sciences	Part of a development project, as these	2020, 2024
Further development of collaborations with schools	<p>New interesting content is composed for the use of camp schools and student groups in different ways. These can be for example an adventure game, developing the content of guideposts and producing them in a mobile form, assignments for different subjects and classes, material about Saimaa Geopark specialties, in which additional knowledge about every site is offered, a story bank, "Pokemon Saimaa Geopark Go" –game. Exemplary camp school programs are conducted in collaboration with travel companies of the area: "Saimaa Geopark – Camp School".</p> <p>Collaborations with universities and universities of applied sciences are continued through development projects, theses and Saimaa Geopark –study modules.</p> <p>Bulletins of Saimaa Geopark and the geology of the area are arranged to teachers of the municipalities.</p>	Saimaa Geopark ry, schools of the area, other educational institutions, travel companies	ESF, Finnish National Agency for Education's government aid for development projects, Business Finland's innovation funding (games), Centre for Economic Development, Transport and the Environment's aid for environmental growth and education projects, association funding	2020-
Encouraging the companies and actors of Saimaa Geopark to enhance sustainable tourism in their actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To make a decision that sustainable travel is important.</li> <li>• To participate in the education and development projects of sustainable tourism.</li> <li>• To take into consideration the different aspects of sustainable tourism in their own activity, i.e. economic, environmental and socio-cultural impacts.</li> <li>• To make a self-evaluation, annex, in order to gain perspective on the level in which the company currently operates on concerning sustainable tourism, and recognize the most challenging aspects that need to be developed first.</li> <li>• To compose a development plan for sustainable tourism by utilizing for example Visit Finland's travel agency manual. The plan helps actors implement actions systematically.</li> <li>• To inform target groups about the work and actions done for sustainable tourism and its values for example with websites that include knowledge on responsible actions at least in the target group's language or in English.</li> <li>• To start the process of applying for a sustainability certificate.</li> <li>• To take into account climate change mitigation in their actions, as well as introduce adaptation strategies, for example by producing new weatherproof services.</li> </ul>	Saimaa Geopark ry and its activity	Part of actors' own activity/ Different business subsidies for actions	Continuous
The planning and execution of Geopark Rangers –education	<p>The planning and execution of Geopark Ranger geological travel guide –training. The education is aimed primarily to guides, entrepreneurs and associations of the area, in order to increase and expand their own expertise.</p> <p>The education material can be utilized diversely, for example in information stands and communications.</p>	Saimaa Geopark ry together with guide associations and educational institutions	Finnish National Agency of Education aid and project finance	2020
Engaging the local population	Continuous, interesting multichannel marketing (media, bulletins and visibility in different events) of the actions and benefits of Saimaa Geopark for the local community.	Saimaa Geopark ry	basic activity	Continuous

Ensuring a Sustainable Environment	Content	Responsibility	Funding	Schedule
Conducting a treatment and operation plan for sites	An operation plan is conducted for the most delicate sites of the region in order to ensure its carrying capacity: the current situation of the sites, accessibility, services of the region, as well as companies and visitor counts. Goals are defined and how management and treatment is organized, who takes care of the maintenance of service structures and how, and who is responsible for supervision, resources and schedule among others. Relevant meters are set so goals can be reached, and data is collected if necessary.	Saimaa Geopark ry	Internships, thesis and project finance, rural development funding	2019-2021
A "Happy Seal" to guide in environmental aspects	A coherent and multilingual "Happy Seal" –guide with plain language and pictures is conducted, that guides travelers and others to act responsibly in the Saimaa Geopark area and its sites. It consists of guidance considering for example waste management, water protection, fishing and mobility in nature. They can be found on geopark -sites, sorting stations, companies, rental boats, cottages, information stands and websites. Based on the "Happy Seal" –guidance data, an electric information kit is distributed to tour operators of the region.	Saimaa Geopark ry, Pidä saaristo siistinä ry, South Karelian Foundation for Recreation Areas	project finance	2020-continuous

Sustainable Tourism in the Saimaa Geopark Area	Content	Responsibility	Funding	Schedule
Encouraging municipalities to collaborate in the development of public transportation	Municipalities are encouraged to develop route applications and ensure that data is available in pre-existing chosen applications, so that travelers can easily access public transportation routes, schedules, tickets and prices in the Saimaa Geopark area. TripGo as an example - a new route planning application that offers alternative routes by combining public transportation, bicycles and taxis, showing calorie and CO2 consumption simultaneously. It is ensured that links to chosen route planning applications are available for travelers on their used sources of information.	Saimaa Geopark ry, municipalities, provinces, chosen route planning applications	Part of the basic activities and funding of municipalities, innovation funding of companies	2019
Enhancing cycling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Development work of bicycle routes is utilized, for example South Karelian theme routes.</li> <li>Data/link of pre-existing routes and materials as well as bicycle rental and maintenance spots are gathered to the Saimaa Geopark website.</li> <li>Travel companies are encouraged to offer bicycle rentals and inform customers about the cycling possibilities of the area.</li> <li>It is ensured that pre-existing routes, map materials, guides and services answer to demands and are easily accessible and up-to-date.</li> <li>Criteria set by Visit Finland is utilized in the development of cycling.</li> <li><a href="https://www.businessfinland.fi/globalassets/finnish-customers/02-build-your-network/visit-finland/julkaisut/tuotesuosituksset-of-pyoraily.pdf">https://www.businessfinland.fi/globalassets/finnish-customers/02-build-your-network/visit-finland/julkaisut/tuotesuosituksset-of-pyoraily.pdf</a></li> </ul>	Saimaa Geopark ry, municipalities and Centre for Economic Development, Transport and the Environment	Rural development program and Finland's structural funds program's funding	2019-2021
Bus transportation from Lappeenranta Airport to sites	<p>An experiment with demand responsive transport. A traveler informs the need for transportation for example at least 24 hours before a flight either via email or an application.</p> <p>Data can be acquired for instance from the airport websites, airlines or the Saimaa Geopark –website. The price is defined in advance according to zones.</p>	Saimaa Geopark ry together with Lappeenranta Airport and a taxi entrepreneur	The province, municipalities, risk sharing among travel companies and taxi entrepreneurs	2020

Service Development and Production	Content	Responsibility	Funding	Schedule
	Actors are encouraged to utilize the geological legacy of the region. Different target groups (e.g. senior citizens, children, youth, special groups, international travelers, local citizens, cottage guests) are taken into consideration, and sustainable services that support muscle power and public transportation are developed and produced.			<b>continuous</b>
Storifying the Lake Saimaa route from the ancient sea to Saimaa	A lake route based on storified fact and fiction is developed for the support of actors, travelers and the local community in order for them to get familiar with the area. The route can be cycled, paddled, rowed, hiked or skied. A map brochure and a mobile guide is conducted of the route.	Saimaa Geopark ry together with entrepreneurs	Independent work of companies, project finance, company finance project of rural development funding	2022
Connecting food experience to the services of Saimaa Geopark more tightly	Food travel includes encounters with local and story-based, food-related experiences, such as eating at a restaurant, and visiting markets and cheese factories. Connecting food prominently to local producers, stories and culture makes, in its own way, the site interesting and strengthens its profiling. Enhancing the visibility of the D.O. Saimaa – label. Food experiences as a part of Saimaa Geopark’s communications. Implementing a food travel workshop, for example Hungry for Finland, for the actors of the area.	Saimaa Geopark ry together with companies and other actors of the area	Part of own activity, project finance (Rural development program)	continuous

Safety	Content	Responsibility	Funding	Schedule
	<p>Travel safety means ensuring a smooth traveling process. Traveling process consists of the traveler, the travel company and its staff, the destination, private and public operational environments as well as the entire service chain from the beginning of the journey to the destination and back.</p> <p>Travel safety is often associated with avoiding accidents and problems in independent sites or companies. From the point of view of the traveler however, safety includes the entire service chain: all stages of traveling beginning with the consideration of destination and booking a trip including transportation, to lodging and food services as well as activities of the entire trip.</p> <p>International travel operators demand even stricter safety operations before verifying a contract than our legislation does.</p>			
The development of safety and security expertise	<p>It is ensured that all companies and actors acquire a legislative and up-to-date safety document (that includes dangers related to the service as well as risk management and emergency operations), that all company employees know and abide by. Additional information:  <a href="https://tukes.fi/en/products-and-services/services-for-consumers/obligations-of-service-providers/safety-document">https://tukes.fi/en/products-and-services/services-for-consumers/obligations-of-service-providers/safety-document</a></p> <p>A safety pass of the travel industry MaTuPa –education is arranged for Saimaa Geopark actors. MaTuPa is a sort of safety introduction that lasts for a day, providing basic knowledge on safe traveling and encourages to develop own safety skills.</p> <p>Actors are informed of the meaning of travel safety and safety tools  <a href="https://blogi.eoppimispalvelut.fi/safetytools/">https://blogi.eoppimispalvelut.fi/safetytools/</a></p>	Saimaa Geopark ry, entrepreneurs, educational institutions	Part of basic activity. Project finance: Rural development program and Finland’s structural funds program’s funding	continuous, education, 2020
The composition of Saimaa Geopark safety plan	<p>A large group of actors and the location of geosites in unsupervised and remote areas create challenges for safety.</p> <p>A network-like safety plan of the area is implemented, cf. Lapland’s Model (Lapin malli). A risk assessment is conducted as the basis of the plan. A collaborative model is practical and profitable. Companies, officials, associations and educational institutions form an open network and plan and solve local safety challenges together.</p>	Saimaa Geopark ry with rescue authorities, Regional State Administrative Agencies, unions of the province, municipalities, companies, associations among others	Launching with project finance: Rural development program and Finland’s structural funds program’s funding	2021
Informing citizens about safety	Citizens are informed about safe mobility in the area (on ground, water or ice). Shared instructions are conducted utilizing pre-existing instructions of officials e.g. <a href="https://www.turvakanava.fi/en">https://www.turvakanava.fi/en</a>	Saimaa Geopark announcements, companies and geosite correspondents	part of own basic activity comprising a guide through a project: rural development funding	2021-

Quality	Content	Responsibility	Funding	Schedule
Utilizing pre-existing quality development tools in order to increase quality expertise	A quality development program that is tailored for the travel industry and based on international quality criteria Laatutonna Q1000 <a href="https://perhopro.fi/laatutonna/">https://perhopro.fi/laatutonna/</a> Quality tester for culture travel <a href="http://www.kulmat.fi/images/tiedostot/Artikkelit/cf_laautesteteri2013.pdf">http://www.kulmat.fi/images/tiedostot/Artikkelit/cf_laautesteteri2013.pdf</a>	Saimaa Geopark ry communications and launching of education, development of the company's own activity	Project finance, companies	2020-
Utilizing pre-existing channels for customer feedback	Saimaa Geopark Tripadvisor -site and other social media channels are followed and commented on, and acquired knowledge is utilized in the development of the area.  The use of the #saimaageopark hashtag is still encouraged among Saimaa Geopark collaborators. This way knowledge of the visitors' opinions about the area and its services are gained as comprehensively as possible.  Companies are encouraged to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• collect customer feedback regularly by utilizing different methods, e.g. interviews, web inquiries, customer target group research, mystery shopping, direct feedback.</li> <li>• utilize the monitoring of social media's recommendation and review services directed towards C2C, customer to customer, as well as further processing of feedback, evaluations and questions.</li> <li>• basis for these are found on e.g. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» <a href="https://www.tripadvisor.fi/TripAdvisorInsights/w653">https://www.tripadvisor.fi/TripAdvisorInsights/w653</a></li> <li>» <a href="https://docs.google.com/forms/">docs.google.com/forms/</a></li> <li>» <a href="https://www.surveymonkey.com/mp/travel-survey/">https://www.surveymonkey.com/mp/travel-survey/</a></li> </ul> </li> </ul> Companies are asked to add questions about Saimaa Geopark to their own customer feedback inquiries, for example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Was the visit to the Saimaa Geopark area the main motive of your trip? If so, how would you evaluate the experience and its success as a whole? (on a scale of 1-5).</li> <li>• Did you visit any Geopark sites? Name the sites. If so, how would you evaluate the sites? (on a scale of 1-5). <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» accessibility and findability</li> <li>» interestingness of the site</li> <li>» usefulness of the knowledge acquired from the site</li> <li>» cleanliness of the site</li> <li>» safety of the site</li> <li>» services of the site</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	Saimaa Geopark ry, companies	basic activity	2019-
A customer feedback inquiry for the entire Saimaa Geopark area	A customer feedback inquiry is implemented in all collaborative companies and organizations of Saimaa Geopark in order to figure out the starting level. The data should be acquired from both peak seasons and off seasons.  The results are implemented in the development of the area. The inquiry can be repeated every three years for example. The questions should be based on the following aspects for instance: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the physical operational environment and its functionality (cleanliness, access to information, infrastructure, other services)</li> <li>• accessibility and the use of transportation</li> <li>• safety</li> <li>• different aspects of sustainability</li> <li>• service skills</li> <li>• how expectations of travel services and products are met</li> <li>• quality-price ratio</li> <li>• communications and sales (availability)</li> </ul>	Saimaa Geopark ry	Project finance, a thesis	2020, 2023

# WHAT IS SUSTAINABLE AND RESPONSIBLE TOURISM AND CIRCULAR ECONOMY?

- Sustainable tourism
  - Sustainable tourism is traveling that takes into account the previous and current economic, social and environmental aspects, in a way that the needs of travelers, travel companies, destinations, the environment and the local population are taken into consideration. (UNTWO)
  - The measures of sustainable tourism help minimize or eliminate possible negative effects entirely while simultaneously developing and promoting traveling that appreciates and utilizes the strengths of the area.
  - Environmental effects can be decreased for example by reducing the use of water, utilizing renewable energy sources in heating, acquiring environmentally friendly products, following the planned routes of program services and favoring local, organic and plant-based food.
  - Positive socio-cultural effects can be increased by utilizing local culture and geo attractions and taking into consideration the opinions of the local community when developing activity, for instance.
  - Local economy benefits from traveling the most when companies employ as many locals as possible and when products and services are purchased from other local companies.
- Environmental, sociocultural, economic
  - Responsible tourism
  - Responsible travel business is sustainable and profitable, and it takes into consideration the company's direct and indirect impact on the surrounding society. Sustainable development can be viewed as a goal that corporate responsibility strives for.
- Circular economy is a part of sustainable tourism.
  - In circular economy, production and consumption produce as little loss and waste as possible.
  - Instead of pushing products for earning, circular economy emphasizes:
    - services: sharing, renting and recycling instead of owning
    - circulation of materials and raw materials
      - a sustainably produced and consumed food conserves and recycles valuable natural resources, for example
      - intelligence based on digital solutions.
  - Circular economy is represented by for example boarding houses, food rescue, and souvenirs produced from recyclable materials.



## WHY IS THE PROMOTION OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND TOURISM IMPORTANT IN THE SAIMAA GEOPARK AREA?

### Finland has committed to

- UN's framework convention on climate change.
- UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its 17 main goals and 169 sub-goals, some of which are related to traveling.
- EU's decision of reducing CO<sub>2</sub> -emissions significantly during the next few decades.

### Saimaa Geopark area

- The Geopark status of UNESCO requires measures that are related to sustainable development and limiting climate change.
- Lake Saimaa has unique geological, archeological, cultural and historical attractions. The negative effects of the visitors of these attractions have to be minimized and the positive effects maximized.
- Parts of the lake landscape is preserved through several protection programs, such as the Shore Conservation Program, the Esker Conservation Program and Natura 2000. The most important individual object in need of protection is the extremely endangered Saimaa ringed seal. Sites and actors must perform in a way the protection goals are reached.
- Extending the measures of sustainable development to the everyday use of all stakeholders, such as the municipalities, travel operatives, associations, sites and local population in the future, will enable:
  - utilization of the Saimaa Geopark's cultural environment and nature/geology as an operational environment
  - equal development of the region's livelihoods and profitable business
  - sustainable coexistence of industries without harming nature or the cultural environment
  - the local population's approval of traveling, as well as regional well-being and appreciation

## Responsible members

- Increase well-being and industry development in the future, and offer prerequisites for the success strategy of the municipality.
- Create a competitive advantage for the companies of the region as well as new jobs.
- Gain a competitive advantage and a great image in advance while adjusting to new, stricter environmental norms.
- Create an asset through a good and healthy living environment, clean nature and natural resources that attracts companies and citizens to the area, as well as secures the vitality of the municipality.
- Enhance an economic and community structure and other municipality-based operations that secure biodiversity and profitability, and thus create a sustainable operational environment for the vitality of traveling.

## Travel operators

- Wish to increase responsibly produced travel experiences.
- Climate change raises demand for products with a low carbon footprint.
- Distinguished certificates in particular help convince international travel companies to follow the principles of sustainable and responsible tourism.
- It is easier for responsibly operating companies to sign cooperation agreements.

## Responsibly operating travel companies

- Customer satisfaction and experienced quality is higher than in non-responsibly operating companies.
- Create a positive company image and signify the values of the company.
- Actions add credibility.
- Get significant reductions in costs through energy savings for example.
- Understand the significance of responsible actions in the future of traveling and operational environments.
- Feel that it is crucial that sustainable choices are visible for customers in order to ensure profitable, competitive and persistent activity.
- It is easier to sell services and sign cooperation agreements (especially with a certificate).
- Are forerunners.
- Indicate interest with their own actions in the changes of their operational environment.
- Create a positive company image and its current and future employees as well.
- Aim to guide, with their own example, consumers to sustainable and responsible choices.

## Responsible travelers

- The recognition of the values of sustainable tourism affects the purchase decision of customers.
- Want, according to several researches and trends, more sustainable services. For example:
  - 65% of overnight travelers want to book environmentally friendly lodging on their next trip (Booking.com's 2017 Sustainable Travel Report)
  - travelers who appreciate responsibility travel more often, stay in their destinations longer, consume more per trip and 1/3 of them would be ready to pay more for responsible services (Reiseanalyse 2014)
  - nearly third of consumers (29%) would most likely choose a company that has higher environmental consciousness compared to others (ABTA 2015)
  - Seek destinations with clean air, a sense of place, and the opportunity to meet local people (Reiseanalyse 2018).
- Y- and Z-generations are more ethical consumers than ever, who choose destinations according to their values.
- Some of the visitors of Geopark choose it as their destination due to responsible motives (according to research from other geoparks).