



Active2Public Transport Needs of hiking tourists in the Danube Region

Danube Office Ulm/ Neu-Ulm (DOU)

<https://interreg-danube.eu/projects/active2public-transport>

Active2Public Transport | Better combining cycling, walking and public transport in the Danube region

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More information about Active2Public Transport
and the project activities & results are available on:

<https://interreg-danube.eu/projects/active2public-transport>

Table of contents

1	Introduction	4
2	Procedure.....	5
3	Online Questionnaire	7
4	Interviews with hiking experts.....	11
5	Selection of good-practice examples	16
5.1	Collection of Good-Practice Examples in the Danube Region	16
5.2	Good-Practice Example: European Premium Hiking Trails (Germany).....	19
5.3	Good-Practice Example: To the hills by public transport (Slovenia).....	20
6	Summary & Recommendations	23
7	Appendix	26
7.1	Appendix 1: Online Questionnaire	26
7.2	Appendix 2: Guideline for the hiking expert interviews	30

1 Introduction

The "Active2Public Transport" project aims to reduce CO2 emissions in the transport sector in the Danube region by promoting active and emission-free forms of mobility such as cycling and walking in combination with public transport such as buses and trains.

Various target groups including cyclists, hikers and pedestrians as well as tourists and commuters are to be considered to achieve the project objective holistically.

As part of activity 1.4. needs assessment, the needs of hikers with regard to the use of active and sustainable forms of mobility are therefore analysed: *"Besides the analysis of cycle tourism in the Danube Region, DOU will (supported by the PPs) examine the needs of hiking tourists in the Danube Region. This will be done by interviewing hiking experts, hiking associations and analysing existing data/studies. From the results of the survey and the analysis, DOU aims to elaborate recommendations to improve the situation in the Danube Region which will become an integral part of the Danube A2PT Action Plan."*¹

The following report is based on the results of an online survey, informative interviews with experts, online research on the topic and further contributions from the project partners.

The results of the non-representative online survey and interviews are used to give an overview of the current conditions regarding hiking tourism in the Danube Region and to elaborate recommendations to improve the situation, especially in combining hiking with public transport. These recommendations are meant to become an integral part of the Danube A2PT Action Plan.

¹ Application Form Active2 Public Transport, p. 91

2 Procedure

In the beginning, the project partners were asked to insert the national hiking associations of their home country with contact details and a good practice example from each country into a created template. Differences between the countries in the Danube region were already evident: while some countries have national hiking associations or federations, in others, hiking is generally part of the national tourism concept. Depending on the country, the respective organizations are sometimes affiliated with ministries and sometimes independent.

The collected contacts were verified and supplemented through online research to create the distribution list for the surveys.

In the next step, the online questionnaire was created for the target group of hiking experts and hiking organisations. In this context, individual persons were not asked about their personal experiences while hiking. Before finalizing, there was an additional exchange with the project partners from "Győr-Sopron-Ebenfurti Railways Private Company Limited by Shares" as they are implementing a pilot action in Hungary with their associated strategic partner, the Hungarian Hikers Association. In this pilot action, additional train connections for hikers are to be tested, and information boards and signposts are to be implemented at and from train stations to hiking routes. During the exchange, the questions and answer options of the online questionnaire were partially updated or supplemented to gather interesting aspects for the pilot action of the project partners.

The online questionnaire was then sent with a request for completion and forwarding to the created distribution list.

In parallel, the interview guide for an in-depth expert round was created and participation was requested.

However, this approach proved to be very time-consuming and laborious. This is partly because most organizations consider the topic of active and sustainable travel for hikers, but usually as a marginal or cross-cutting issue. Moreover, relevant data and knowledge are often distributed among different organizations and stakeholders. For example, national organizations usually have an overview of the general development of the target group of hikers, while specific offers and implementations are more likely to be found with regional (tourism) associations, and hiking guides can most likely

provide information on the behaviour of hikers. As a result, the general feedback was often that no one perceived themselves as an expert on the topic, and the response to the inquiries was rather slow.

To still receive feedback, the relevant contacts were contacted multiple times and in various ways, and ultimately two supplementary individual interviews were conducted.

Additionally, extensive online research on the topic and good practice examples was conducted.

With this approach, the current status and the need to promote active and sustainable mobility for the target group of hikers could be determined. The results of this survey are incorporated as part of Activity 1.4 "needs assessment" into the online toolbox and made accessible and communicated to the public and relevant stakeholders.

3 Online Questionnaire

In total, representatives from eleven hiking organisations took part in the online questionnaire (see appendix 7.1). The gender distribution was balanced, with six women and five men participating.

Despite the relatively small group of respondents, experts from seven different countries in the Danube region participated: Germany, Austria, Croatia, Slovenia, Hungary, Czech Republic, and Romania. Of the eleven represented organizations, six operate at the regional level and five at the national level.

Country	Organisation	Geographical scope of action
Austria	WGD Donau Oberösterreich Tourismus GmbH	regional
Austria	Donau Niederösterreich Tourismus GmbH	regional
Austria	Donau Niederösterreich Tourismus GmbH	regional
Austria	Weitwanderwege	national
Croatia	DANUBEPARKS - Danube River Network of Protected Areas	Regional, for Germany, Austria, Slovakia, Hungary, Croatia, Serbia, Bulgaria, Moldova, Romania
Czech Republic	Czech Tourist Club	national
Germany	Deutscher Wanderverband Service GmbH	national
Germany	Deutscher Alpenverein Sektion Neu-Ulm	national

Hungary	Hungarian Hikers Association	national
Romania	Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve Authority	regional
Slovenia	Turizem Bohinj	regional

Table 1 Overview of participating organisations

According to the survey overall, the number of hikers in the regions has increased (9 out of 11). This has various causes, such as an increase in active hikers in the age group of 60 to 75 years, a growing interest among young people in hiking and the effects of the Covid pandemic. During this time, long-distance travel was not possible and there were no group leisure activities. Thus, the need for nature and recreation was reflected in a rising number of hikers, which remained almost unchanged even after the Covid pandemic.

The experts estimate that on average, people tend to hike in their own country rather than travel abroad for it (approximately 70-89%). In Upper Austria and Hungary, according to the experts surveyed, even 90-100% of hikers come from their own country, and only 0-9% of hikers come from abroad.

When choosing hiking routes, the distribution of circular and linear hikes varies by region, but it is evident that circular hiking trails are generally more popular (7 respondents indicated a percentage between 50-89%).

Since the start and end points of circular hiking trails are the same, this could facilitate active and sustainable travel. Nevertheless, it is evident that the majority of hikers still travel by car. However, there is also a promising trend towards using train connections and public transportation. In question number 7 (see Appendix 1), the experts were asked to indicate which means of transport the hikers use for their arrival and departure. In this case, 10 of the 11 organisations surveyed indicated the car as their main means of transport, but as several answer options could be selected here, 7 of the 11 organisations also indicated public transport as the second most frequently used means of travel.

Awareness of the topic is raising in the fact that all organizations provide information on sustainable travel and inform about the sustainable travel options in combination for hiking tours. All eleven organizations communicate this through their websites.

Other communication channels used include social media (7 out of 11), brochures/leaflets (6 out of 11), via email or phone upon request (5 out of 11), and through information boards along hiking trails (3 out of 11).

Awareness of the issue has increased not only among organizations but also among hikers. Even though more information is being communicated, some experts still indicate that active inquiries from hikers have also increased over the past five years (5 out of 11).

Most organizations provide information on active and sustainable travel options in specific hiking regions and include direct links to the websites of public transport associations (8 out of 11). For foreign hiking tourists, 5 out of 11 organizations also provide information on sustainable travel to and from the country at the national level. When describing individual hiking trails, information on travel to and from the start and, if applicable, endpoints is also more frequently included (6 out of 11). This is due to the expansion of the information provided, as 8 of the 11 organizations surveyed have already incorporated the topic of "active and sustainable mobility in hiking tourism" into their internal strategy, and two more are currently planning to do so. This is also reflected in the fact that 7 of the 11 participating organizations are already implementing special campaigns and creating separate informational materials to raise awareness of sustainable travel and inform the target group about alternative mobility options. The other four organizations are also planning campaigns and information materials.

The good practice example "European Premium Hiking Trails" (see Chapter 6: Selection of good practice examples) clearly shows that uniform certification of hiking trails positively influences promotion, leading more hiking tourists to choose the corresponding trails/regions. This certification also considers the possibilities for sustainable travel. However, this form of uniform certification hardly exists in the Danube region. Five of the experts surveyed stated that there is no certification at either the national or regional level, and four said they were not aware of any.

At the conclusion of the online questionnaire, participants were asked to identify the three areas where they see the most urgent need to effectively promote sustainable and active travel for hiking tourists. The aspect "Expansion or reopening of local transport stops" topped the list (7 out of 11). On one hand, it is understandable that the expansion of public transport is fundamental, as without a connection to public transport, hikers cannot be convinced to give up their cars. On the other hand, the

measures are very resource-intensive, lengthy, and complex, and therefore can be kept in mind continuously but cannot be implemented in the short term. In second place is higher frequency during the peak season and/or additional sustainable shuttle options to the hiking trails (6 out of 11). In third place are two aspects: "Providing separate & additional information specifically for the target group" and "Digital options/tools for planning hiking trips (e.g., apps)" (4 out of 11 each). Accordingly, the most urgent need perceived by experts is in the provision of public transport, which they communicate but cannot implement. The described need to provide further informational materials for the target group and to consider digital options and communication channels are aspects that the (hiking) organizations can implement independently. The fact that a strong development in this regard can be observed and that most organizations have integrated the aspect of travel into their internal strategy makes it optimistic to expect that this need can be addressed and met in the near future.

4 Interviews with hiking experts

To supplement the online questionnaire, two in-depth expert interviews were organised and implemented.

First, a detailed interview guide was created. The questions were chosen to ensure that the aspects and assessments from the online questionnaire could be deepened and discussed in personal conversations. An online search for scientific publications on the topic "Hikers and the use of active and sustainable mobility forms" was conducted to ensure that the formulated questions correspond to the current state of research. Some selected quotes also emphasized the importance of the corresponding questions and sometimes provided a good starting point for further exchange. The interview guide consists of seven main questions and two to six supplementary questions on each topic.

As described in Chapter 3, it took more time and effort to find interview partners, so the interviews were conducted chronologically only after the completion of the online survey. This allowed the results and feedback from the online questionnaire to be evaluated, and with this insight, the interview guide was revised and supplemented in some places. The complete interview guide can be found in Appendix 7.2

For organizational reasons, the interviews were ultimately conducted in a one-on-one setting rather than in a group exchange. Unfortunately, this did not allow for an exchange between the experts, but the individual interviews provided the opportunity for targeted follow-up questions.

The two expert interviews were conducted online via Microsoft Teams, transcribed, and subsequently evaluated. The expert of the first interview (hereinafter abbreviated as RF) is from Romania, female, and works at the public institution "Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve Authority." The expert of the second interview (hereinafter abbreviated as GM) is from Germany, male, active in FUSS e.V., Fachverband Fußverkehr Deutschland, with a focus on hiking, and additionally offers self-created hiking tours in Germany and abroad as a guide for tourists.

The developments in hiking tourism are perceived differently by the surveyed experts, which is mainly due to the various landscapes in each region. In the Danube Delta National Park, the number of hiking tourists has remained unchanged in recent years. However, there are significantly more offers for boat tours, and often a boat is needed

to reach the hiking trails. For example, last year, 24 new tours were approved and published as offers for tourists, but only 9 of them were hikes, while the remaining 15 were boat tours. In Germany and the DACH region, on the other hand, it is clearly noticeable that hiking tourism has been on the rise and growing over the past five years. This trend has various reasons: On the one hand, the seasons for hiking are changing. While there is still a peak season from spring to autumn, the summer months are often too hot for hiking, and the winter is so mild that hiking is possible without any problems. The expert GM stated on this topic: *"Therefore, tourism communities and organizations are increasingly offering and promoting hiking tourism as a year-round activity, and this has been working, especially thanks to the COVID-19 pandemic."* During the contact restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic, hiking was very popular as a way to exercise, get outside, and communicate with a lower risk of infection compared to indoors or more crowded areas e.g. within the city parks. As a result, many people have also discovered the beautiful landscapes in their own region and country. Another reason for the rise in hiking tourism is the increasing number of offers for children and families and the fact that younger people are increasingly planning hiking as a vacation activity. The demographic development also has a significant impact on this trend. The age group of 50 to 70-year-olds is physically fitter and represents a large group that continues to enjoy hiking, thus influencing the overall rise in hiking tourism and its target audience. This trend mainly relates to 1- to 4-day tours; for tours of 5 days or more, known as long-distance hiking, the numbers have remained largely constant for years.

Since the target group of hikers is very diverse, it cannot be assumed that all have an increased environmental awareness. RF notes that tourists from abroad tend to be more environmentally conscious than locals from Romania. However, there is a positive trend, and it is increasingly understood how important nature conservation is. In the national park, there are also strictly protected areas that must not be entered. This is generally accepted and adhered to by most tourists. GM also points out the diverse target group. In his opinion, the interests of the hikers are decisive: those who want to enjoy nature and tranquillity also protect it and are happy to use public transportation for arrival and departure. On the other hand, those who aim to experience as much as possible and take photos for social media often have different priorities. As an example, it is noted that traveling to the Allgäu by train is actually feasible without problems, but the highway is still full on the corresponding days, and most people continue to use their cars.

The experts consider the reasons for people choosing the car over public transport to be the lack of infrastructure and provided services, insufficient frequency and the challenges in planning and booking sustainable travels. According to RF, it is relatively difficult to travel publicly in Romania, as there are very few train connections. However, the national park has different entrances, and at least one allows for sustainable and active travel. For this, you need a train, a bus, and often a boat. Exact figures are not available, but it is obvious that most hikers arrive by car. GM reports that they have implemented various hiking offers only with public transportation. The first time, they left it up to the participants how they would travel to the starting point. The second time, the participants were asked to travel by public transportation, as the entire hiking week (note: various day tours in one week) was planned only with public transportation. For some tours, e.g., on the outskirts of the city, this was reportedly easy to implement, but it was much more difficult in rural areas, e.g., a hike in a nature reserve: *"There were hourly bus connections, but the last stop was in the next public transport network, and we had great difficulty obtaining a group ticket, which ultimately was only possible through personal contacts. Additionally, there were multiple transfers, and the bus and train connections were not coordinated. In the end, we also asked for feedback from the participants. Some said they would participate again, but despite us taking care of the planning and offering discounted tickets, there was a lot of critical feedback. Almost everyone wrote that using public transportation takes a lot of time and is cumbersome, and asked if we could change it back and form carpool groups."* GM added that it is challenging to plan offers like that, as the hikes are often weather-dependent, but the ticket purchase and route for public transportation need to be planned early. Other experiences like long waiting times on platform at unprotected, cold station without any service offerings made it even more difficult to convince the hikers to rely on public transport options. GM concludes: *"Considering the planning and the prices with public transportation in different transport networks, becomes so complicated and expensive that it is not an alternative to the car."*

RF is not aware of good-practice examples, which offers to travel sustainably to the hiking destination in the region. There were some projects planned but it remains uncertain how the status is. When tour guides create new offers, they are also analysed in terms of environmental protection and sustainability. However, according to RF, there is mostly no exchange with relevant stakeholders, such as municipalities and transport planning, in Romania. In comparison, GM is involved in the certification for the Premium Hiking Trails (see chapter 6.1.). As an example, GM mentioned the Albstadt region and the area around Tuttlingen in Baden-Württemberg, as there are many

beautiful circular hiking trails, most of which are certified as premium hiking trails (see good practice example 1). *"This means that, for example, nature conservation is a priority, and regional public transportation is integrated. Nowadays, there is also a lot of good information on the websites and really great promotion. As a result, tourists come repeatedly and complete one circular hiking trail after another. On our premium trail, if the stop is not directly on the trail, an access path is marked [...] and it also clearly indicates the distance."* The initiative to get the certification as a premium hiking trail usually comes from the municipalities themselves or tourism associations. Representatives from public transportation are also involved in the process and present at the expert meetings. GM added that there are even good examples, where it was carefully checked from which direction the wind and rain usually come and accordingly installed the weather protection at the bus stop.

Various measures are also being implemented in Romania to raise awareness among tourists, hikers, and the general population about environmental protection and its importance: *"We are doing a lot of awareness programmes and our institution has some information centres distributed within the territory of the biosphere reserve and tourist could get into the information centres to know more about the area, to know what is available to visit within the area to and to receive the excess permit. Because entering to the reserve, you need an excess permit and there are conducted rules to be followed within a protected area."* Additionally, they provide brochures, maps and information signs at the information centres and along some of the trails. There is also a big information board with available trails and natural sights installed in Giurgiu, which is the biggest city in the protected area. Another focus is on working with children: they are taught the importance of nature conservation and national parks from an early age to raise awareness among future generations.

In addition to information on and raising awareness of nature conservation in general, the institution also provides specific information on sustainable and active travel options. The institution's website includes links to providers of public transportation: bus connections, trains, boats, and information on arriving by bicycle, but apparently most people use google maps because it is easier. This information offering is intended to be continuously expanded. Next month, a new project will be launched to promote slow and sustainable tourism: *"Hopefully it will reach all the results proposed and I hope next year to have a new infrastructure more focused on slow tourism, because it is our intention to promote slow tourism with kayaks, mostly canoes or electrical boats which are less damaging for the environment."* RF currently sees the greatest need in expanding the range of sustainable mobility options. Better and more frequent train connections

are still lacking. Within the national park, they are taking active steps to switch to sustainable boats and thus adapt the mobility offerings.

GM concludes in the online interview: *“We really need to think big and aim for what our Baden-Württemberg Minister of Transport has set as a goal: a half-hourly service at every residential location, similar to Switzerland's hourly service, where even every farm is connected. The equipment of the bus stops is also very important: is there a shelter, wind and weather protection, can I get a coffee somewhere, or store my belongings in a locker? [...] Regional decision-makers need to be further convinced that promoting hiking tourism, including sustainable travel, is also economically beneficial. Hikers, especially those aged 50 to 70, enjoy hiking, but they also want a supporting program with a wine tasting or similar, a good meal in a restaurant, and at least 2-star hotels for overnight stays.”*

In summary, it can be stated:

- **Hiking tourism increased** overall since Covid (especially at one's home country)
- **Target group** 'hikers' is **very diverse** (age, environmental awareness, motive for hiking, etc.)
- Awareness on the topic is growing and tourism associations often consider active and sustainable travel options. However, there is still **too little exchange** with all relevant stakeholders and decision-makers, such as ministries, municipalities, or public transportation operators and train providers.
- Even in the case of offers from hiking guides for hikes with public transport arrival and departure, **insufficient frequency, many interchanges and the costs** can be perceived negatively.
- Additional offers during the high season are currently recommended. However, as hiking is increasingly becoming a **year-round activity** and hikes are generally **weather-dependent**, the long-term goal should be a public transportation connection with an appropriate frequency.

Since these are the results of two expert interviews, they cannot be considered universally valid or significant. However, many interesting aspects have been mentioned that also support the results of the online questionnaire. Additionally, it has become clear that there can be significant regional differences, but the general needs in the Danube region countries are quite similar.

5 Selection of good-practice examples

The collection of good practice examples was compiled through extensive internet research. Additionally, project partners and interviewed experts were asked for good examples via an online questionnaire and in-depth interviews. The collected examples were subsequently reviewed and, depending on the results, included in the overview.

The focus is on how comprehensively and intuitively the information is processed and presented for hikers. For instance, a purely textual reference to a public transport provider is not sufficient. It is essential to describe the specific sustainable and active travel options to the start and end points of a hiking route, including an integrated link that directly leads to a public transport provider to purchase a ticket.

5.1 COLLECTION OF GOOD-PRACTICE EXAMPLES IN THE DANUBE REGION

The selection of good practice examples includes 18 examples from 8 countries in the Danube region: Austria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Romania. The examples are sorted alphabetically by country in the overview, with a brief description of the contents and the corresponding web link to the example and further information.

Selection of good-practice Examples

to meet the needs of hiking tourist in order to use active and sustainable modes of transport

Country	Short Description	Link
Austria	"Bahn zum Berg" (Train to Mountain): Select your (nearest) city from the list to see all tours, including individual timetables, that you can reach by	www.bahn-zum-berg.at

	public transport in the next few days. "Bahn zum Berg" takes into account journey time, number of transfers, tour duration and daylight hours. This results in a suggestion for the optimum outward journey with as many return journey options as possible. You will then be shown those tours with timetables that are feasible from the city you have selected.	
Austria	33,472 mountain tours in the Alps - accessible by train & bus. The appropriate public transport connections are displayed for each hike. The 'Zuugle' website is available for Slovenia, Austria, Germany, Switzerland, Italy, Liechtenstein and France	www.zuugle.at
Austria	The Tourism Mobility Day has been held annually since 2014 and the 'Sustainable Mobility in Tourism' platform was established in 2016. As part of the platform, experts from tourism, transport and the environment meet twice a year at federal and state level to discuss important challenges and planned measures as well as ideas for developing appropriate joint mobility solutions.	https://www.bmaw.gv.at/Themen/Tourismus/tourismuspolitische-themen/tourismusmobilitaet/tourismus-mobilitaetstage/2023.html
Croatia	Register and interactive map of hiking trails, bypasses and markings in Croatia with accompanying Amenities and links to Public Transport Providers	https://www.hps.hr/vijesti/24565/projekt-sigurna-i-odrziva-planinarska-infrastruktura-2022-2023/
Croatia	Website for Tourism in Croatia: Description of hiking routes in Croatia and information on travelling to and from the destination, including by train and bus	https://croatia.hr/en-gb/outdoors-and-active-holidays/walking-and-hiking/via-dinarica-an-inherently-connecting-trail
Czech Republic	The Krkonose cyclobuses are tourist bus lines that help cyclists and hikers with transport in the Krkonose Mountains and Podkrkonoší. The buses operate annually from June to September. For each hiking route, information on travelling by train and the transfer options and times to the respective cyclobus	https://www.krkonose.eu/krkonosske-cyklobusy
Germany	European seal/certification as a premium hiking trail, one criterion for the successful certification is, e.g. the connection to public transport	https://www.wanderinstitut.de/premium-wege/en/
Germany	Since 2001, the 3 major German environmental organisations (BUND, NABU and VCD) and Deutsche	https://www.fahrtziel-natur.de/gebiet

	Bahn have been involved in the Fahrtziel Natur cooperation. The aim of the co-operation is to shift tourist traffic in sensitive natural areas in Germany, Austria and Switzerland from private cars to public transport.	
Germany	Detailed information on travelling to the Alpine region by public transport with overview maps of public transport connections, links, tips and recommendations for planning	Von A nach Berg – bequem, schnell, klimafreundlich - Alpenverein München & Oberland
Germany	Offer of the Ministry of Transport Baden-Württemberg: Selection of the best hiking routes in Baden-Württemberg that you can reach by public transport. The trails are recognisable throughout the state by the 'bwegt-Wanderweg' seal.	Baden-Württembergs schönste Wanderwege mit dem ÖPNV erreichen / bwegt.de
Germany	Among other things, selected travel routes in Europe by train, public transport, bicycle and on foot as well as hiking trails, which are even described with various entry and end points with public transport connections	Erfahre alles zu den schönsten Wanderungen in Europa Reisevergnügen
Germany	Reactivation of the Pfullendorf railway line by the town and its citizens; railway services are now used for tourist attractions and hiking tours	Wandern Räuberbahn
Germany	Information page on the Saxon-Bohemian Switzerland hiking region, including one ticket which is valid for all means of local transport (S-Bahn, train, bus or ferry) and from March to October, additional hiking bus lines to particularly attractive tourist destinations	Getting here & around (saechsische-schweiz.de) Hiking bus "WanderBus"
Hungary	MAV Train Operator Website: Not only information about the train connections, but also a selection of hiking trails, all of which can be realised with a maximum train journey of 30 minutes from Budapest	30-minute train ride from Budapest MÁV Group
Slovakia	Comprehensive information on travelling to the High Tatra Mountains hiking area by train, in addition to ticket service, also information on luggage storage, pet and bicycle transport, separate information for hikers from home and abroad, information on the services at the stops	https://www.zssk.sk/tatranska-elektricka-a-zubacka/

Slovenia	Detailed information on travelling without a car in the Triglav region, information on all active and sustainable forms of mobility supplemented by shuttles, hikes with interactive map and travel directions without a car	How to get around - Bohinj - uradna stran destinacije - TNP, Julijske Alpe, Bohinjsko jezero
Slovenia	To the hills by public transport: 40 low-carbon mountain trips in Slovenia. Raising awareness of the importance of the topic and web application for planning and carrying out hikes with step-by-step instructions	V hribe z javnim prevozom! (arcgis.com)
Romania	The Anii Drumetiei ("Years of Hiking") programme covers the whole of Sibiu County. The main aim is to improve the hiking infrastructure in the county and to promote specific ecotourism activities.	Years of Hiking (app for hiking & connectivity hubs)

5.2 GOOD-PRACTICE EXAMPLE: EUROPEAN PREMIUM HIKING TRAILS (GERMANY)

The German Hiking Institute is an association of hiking experts who continuously work on the development of quality standards for anything related to hiking. The basis for this work is scientific research.

At the suggestion of leading (hiking-) tourism professionals, a catalogue of criteria that allows to determine the strengths and weaknesses of a hiking trail as objectively and precisely as possible was created. The certification system for the '[Premium Hiking Trails](#)' seal was developed based on these criteria. Since 1999, this catalogue has been improved continuously and offers the possibility of comprehensively evaluating the quality of hiking trails. Independent specialists collect all experience-relevant data. For every kilometre of a trail, about 200 characteristics concerning the trail format, the landscape, cultural sights, civilizational barriers, the hiking guidance system and the macroenvironment are surveyed based on 34 criteria. These criteria are divided into 5 areas: trail format, nature and landscape, culture and civilisation, hiking guidance systems and overarching criteria. In the area of hiking guidance systems one of the important criteria for successful certification is the public accessibility, including bus stop, railway station, cable car station, boat landing stage in terms of sufficient frequency at regular hiking times, distance to the stops, continuous signposting with distance information

The characteristics are weighted differently depending on their importance and rated positively or negatively, a total score is calculated which expresses the experience density of the hiking tour. For some features, which, if too weak or too strong, would lead to an unavoidably serious impairment of the hiking experience, absolute limits are also set (e.g. max. 15% asphalt or concrete surface). Once all requirements have been met, a trail can advertise with the 'Premium Trail Hiking Seal'.

It is awarded for three years at a time and requires recertification. Since February 2011, the German Hiking Certificate for Premium Trails has been protected throughout Europe and is awarded in the respective national languages. Today there are 640 Premium Hiking Trails in Germany, Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands and Switzerland.

The 'Premium Hiking Trail' seal thus contributes at various levels to promoting the use of active and sustainable mobility among hikers.

Hikers can recognise from the seal that it is no problem to travel by public transport. In the regions of the premium hiking trails, an increase in the number of hiking tourists is documented almost everywhere after the certification and communication to the public. These results also show regional decision-makers and administrations that investments in these areas are indeed profitable. The principle of recertification after three years additionally ensures that the standard is at least maintained or that continuous efforts are made to implement the relevant requirements.

5.3 GOOD-PRACTICE EXAMPLE: TO THE HILLS BY PUBLIC TRANSPORT (SLOVENIA)

The information on the website ["To the hills by public transport"](#) is aimed directly at the target group of hikers and is a result of the [Life IP CARE4CLIMATE project](#) in cooperation with the Slovenian Alpine Association as part of the 'Hiking from the valleys to the heights' initiative.

The focus of this example is on raising awareness of the issue by describing and showing the negative effects of travelling by car. The situation in Slovenia is described as follows: *"There is a consensus in Slovenia that the public transport system is poor and uncompetitive with a passenger car due to the low frequency of journeys, long travel times, poor availability of information and other quality indicators."* In the following, however, it

is pointed out that there are nevertheless positive developments, and the existing challenges are discussed. Interested parties can also find links to scientific studies and position papers on the respective aspects directly in the text. The numerous positive aspects and effects of a sustainable journey on the environment and the hikers themselves are then explained. This approach means that potential hiking tourists are not simply given a hiking trail and information on how to get there and where to park when planning their trip but are first sensitized and motivated to avoid travelling by car.

This is followed by 40 hiking tours, all of which can be enjoyed without the use of a car. The tours are designed in such a way that the starting and ending points are different public transport stops. Every day, including weekends and holidays, there is at least one train or bus from a nearby regional centre in the morning and afternoon/evening. With a few exceptions, the trails run along marked mountain trails through experientially rich areas full of natural and cultural sights. All trips are one-day trips and mostly take place in the mid-highlands, but in the future the list of trips is expected to be longer, even with multi-day high-altitude tours.

These 40 excursions are presented in the form of an online application "[To the hills with public transport](#)". This has several functionalities that are intended for both planning trips and their implementation. When you click on each trip, a pop-up window opens with key information: the basic itinerary, approximate walking time, the difficulty of the route, reference to the map literature, the starting and final stop of public transport, additional information about the route in the maPZS application² and any notes. Links to stops in the state timetable search engine have also been added. In one of the tabs in the application there is also a filter that helps users choose a trip according to the desired characteristics.

In addition, users can find step-by-step instructions for planning a hike with sustainable and active forms of mobility and helpful tips on how to use the web application.

Finally, some websites are listed which are helpful, for example, when planning the route or purchasing special public transport tickets (e.g. group tickets).

² Routing app of the Alpine Association of Slovenia (Planinska zveza Slovenije, PZS)

This holistic approach and the clear compilation of all relevant information can help motivate even sceptical people to plan their next hike without their car.

6 Summary & Recommendations

The report on the needs of hiking tourists provides an overview of current developments and challenges in promoting sustainable and active mobility.

In general, it can be observed that there are significant differences between individual regions, but at the national level, the needs and challenges in the countries of the Danube region are very similar.

On a positive note, hiking tourism is on the rise which brings the topic more into focus and represents potential for economic growth in the area of hiking tourism for the Danube region. Furthermore, due to climate change the hiking tourism is becoming a year-round activity. Additionally, awareness of environmental protection and sustainable travel to and from hiking destinations has increased among both the target group of hikers and providers of hiking tours, such as tourism associations and hiking guides. It is becoming increasingly standard for described hiking trails to recommend sustainable travel options to the starting point, with additional links provided for planning.

On the other hand, most hiking tourists are still travelling to and from their destination by car. There are various reasons, as for example planning with public transportation, especially across different transport associations and state borders, remains very complicated. In some cases, public connections are completely lacking, the frequency is often inadequate and signage from the stop to the starting point of the hike is currently only found in good practice examples. In addition, the quality of the waiting experience at the stops themselves is also significant; it can vary greatly depending on whether one waits unprotected by a road or track or enjoys a high-quality waiting environment.

Gühnemann et al. emphasize: *"To reduce travel related GHG emissions significantly, tourism cannot only rely on technological solutions (electric vehicles) and trends (sharing) but must also initiate a shift from air and private road transport to rail and public transport. This requires measures that offer incentives (fast and direct train and bus connections, climate-friendly local transport, luggage services, attractive all-in packages, etc.), but also a*

focus on closer rather than long-distance home markets, promotion of longer stays and awareness-raising campaigns for local stakeholders and tourists.¹³

Based on the results of the non-representative online survey, the hiking expert interviews and the online research on the topic, we can give the following main recommendations on hiking tourism and its combination with public transport in the Danube Region:

1. Continuously expand information offerings on sustainable travel to and from hiking destinations and adapt them to the different types of hikers.

Although hiking organisations are providing more and more information, the request from hiking tourists is still increasing. In particular, digital services for planning hikes using public transport should be expanded. Consideration should be given to the diversity of hiking tourists, from families with small children to sports enthusiasts, when providing information and selecting communication channels.

2. Expansion of infrastructure and services provided

To motivate hiking tourists to travel actively and sustainably, it is necessary to expand the corresponding infrastructure and services. This includes, for example, the connection of hiking trails to stops, an appropriate frequency of public transport connections (especially on weekends, public holidays and during school holidays), as well as appropriate provided services at the stops to increase the quality of stay (e.g. weather protection, lighting, catering facilities, etc.).

3. Develop standardised certifications for hiking trails in the Danube region

Standardised certifications with a focus on sustainable mobility promote the advertising of hiking trails and give hiking tourists certainty when planning. The seal of the premium hiking trails, for example, shows that in the regions of the premium hiking trails, an increase in the number of hiking tourists is documented almost everywhere after the certification and communication to the public. These results also show regional decision-makers and administrations that investments in these areas are indeed profitable. The principle of recertification after three years additionally ensures

³ Astrid Gühnemann, Agnes Kurzweil, Markus Mailer: Tourism mobility and climate change - A review of the situation in Austria (2021)

that the standard is at least maintained or that continuous efforts are made to implement the relevant requirements.

4. Scientific surveys on the mobility behaviour of hiking tourists

The topic has gained in importance in recent years, yet it is often treated as a marginal or cross-cutting issue. Data needs to be collected at various levels and existing findings from the relevant stakeholders need to be collated and considered holistically in order to ensure sustainable promotion.

5. Sharing expertise and experience across regions

Hiking tourism is difficult to compare on a national level, as it depends more on the respective tourism region and its orientation. At regional level, however, hiking organisations and hiking experts are often confronted with similar conditions and challenges. It has therefore been shown that an exchange of expertise between individual regions can be beneficial and should be given more attention.

Finally: Travelling in a sustainable and active way needs to become more convenient, faster, cheaper and less effort in planning than travelling by car to achieve a change in behaviour.

7 Appendix

7.1 APPENDIX 1: ONLINE QUESTIONNAIRE

Questions

**for online questionnaire on the status and needs of hikers in the Danube region
regarding promoting the use of sustainable and active modes of mobility**

Headline:

Hikers and the use of active and sustainable transport modes

The 'Active2Public Transport' project aims to reduce CO2 emissions in the transport sector in the Danube region

Personal data and contact:

1. Surname
2. Name
3. Gender
4. E-Mail address
5. Country
6. Name of Organisation
7. Geographical scope of the organisation
8. If regional, which region of the country (If it was stated in question 7 that the organisation is regionally and not nationally responsible)

Current status:

9. How did the number of hikers in your region develop during the past 5 years?

Possible answers:

Same; More; Less; I don't know/ can't say

10. From your experience, how many hikers come from abroad versus from within your country?

Possible answers in each case in percentage terms from 0 - 9 %; 10 - 29 %, 30 - 49 %, 50 - 69 %, 70 - 89 % to 90 - 100 %.

11. From your experience, how many hikers do circular hiking trails (with the same start and end point, e.g. day trips) versus linear/ long-distance hiking trails (different start and end point)?

Possible answers in each case in percentage terms from 0 - 9 %; 10 - 29 %, 30 - 49 %, 50 - 69 %, 70 - 89 % to 90 - 100 %.

12. In your experience, how do most hikers arrive and depart in your country/region? (multiple answers possible)

Possible answers:

plane; car; long-distance bus; train; local public transport; bicycle; by foot/ long-distance hiking, I don't know/ can't say

13. In addition to hikes and trails, do you provide hikers with information and tips on sustainable travel options?

Possible answers:

yes; no; not yet, but it's in the process/planned

14. If you provide information, how do you communicate it? (multiple answers possible)

Possible answers:

organisation website; social media channels; link to public transport and such; e-mail or phone (on request); brochures/ leaflets; information signs (along the hiking routes); other

15. If "other" has been indicated, please specify (open question)

16. Which information do you provide? (multiple answers possible)

Possible answers:

on active and sustainable travel options to the country; on active and sustainable travel options to specific regions; detailed directions and transfer points including timetables; offers for day trips and multi-day hikes from A to B; on bicycle parking facilities (for tourists who want to go on bike and hiking tours); on luggage storage options (e.g. for day tours); links to public transport providers; information on ticketing and pricing; others; no information on active and sustainable transport modes provided

17. If you receive enquiries from hikers about sustainable arrival and departure options, how was the development in the last 5 years?

Possible answers:

fewer enquiries; same number of enquiries; more enquiries; I don't know/ can't say

18. Is the topic of active and sustainable mobility of hiking tourists part of your organisation's strategy (e.g. continuous consideration in new offers/hikes or part of the public relations strategy)?

Possible answers:

yes; no; not yet, but planned; I don't know/ can't say

19. Does your organisation have extra campaigns and/or information material to raise awareness of the issue of active and sustainable mobility of hiking tourists on arrival and departure?

Possible answers:

yes; no; not yet, but planned; I don't know/ can't say

20. Are there already good practice hiking regions where extra sustainable mobility options are available for hikers (e.g. bus stops at the start and end points of hikes)?

Possible answers:

yes; no; not yet, but planned; I don't know/ can't say

21. Are there national/regional certifications for hiking tours/hiking regions that take into account and promote the topic of sustainable arrival and departure?

Possible answers:

yes; no; not yet, but planned; I don't know/ can't say

Development potentials and needs

22. According to your expertise, in which three areas are changes most urgently needed to promote the active and sustainable arrival and departure of hikers? (three answers possible)

Possible answers:

expansion or reopening of local public transport stops; linking hiking trails to existing public transport stops; raising public awareness in general; service facilities at public transport stations, e.g. luggage lockers, bike parking facilities; lower prices for public transport tickets; extra offers, e.g. shuttles or higher frequency of public transport in the high season; providing separate & additional information specifically for the target group; digital options/tools for planning hiking trips (e.g. Apps); other

23. Further remarks/ assessments/ ideas on the topic (open question)

7.2 APPENDIX 2: GUIDELINE FOR THE HIKING EXPERT INTERVIEWS

Interview guide

for the exchange of experts on the needs of hikers in the Danube region regarding promoting the use of sustainable and active modes of mobility

- *We are pleased to welcome you to our expert panel on the needs of hikers in the countries of the Danube Region as part of the Active2Transport project.*

The '[Active2Public Transport](#)' project aims to reduce CO2 emissions in the transport sector in the Danube region by promoting active and sustainable forms of mobility such as cycling and walking in combination with public transport.

We are looking forward to exchange experiences and ideas with you and discuss this based on our expertise.

Please note the following organisational information before we start with the first question:

- *The online exchange will be recorded and transcribed, but only for internal analysis*
- *The exchange is scheduled for approx. 60 - 90 minutes*
- *You will receive the final paper*

- *We start with a short round of introductions: Please state your name, the country you come from and the organisation you work for and briefly explain how you are involved with the target group of hikers in your regular work.*

Questions No. 1:

How has hiking tourism developed/changed in your region/country in the last 5 years?

- Have there been any changes in the development of hiking tourism during or after Covid compared to before?

- Have there been any changes in the development of hiking tourism with regard to the composition of the target group?
- Has the total number of hikers increased/decreased in recent years?
- What is the ratio of hikers from within the country compared to hiking tourists from abroad?
- Do most hikers mainly choose well-known hiking trails, such as the European hiking trails or trails in special regions, e.g. national parks?

Question No. 2:

The target group of hikers is often described as having an environmental awareness. For example, it is stated in the case study: Hiking tourism – motives and behaviours (2021): *“This form of tourism is environment friendly, as the majority of hikers respect and protect the natural and cultural environment.”*

Does this correspond to your experience?

- Are litter and vandalism on hiking trails a challenge and are they reported by hikers?
/ How are the hiking trails maintained and what options do hikers have to report needs?

Also see: After the Hiking Tour: Walkers’ Behaviour (2024)

*“As for the reasons for not repeating the pedestrian route, participants who prefer to do local routes stop doing them due to the lack of maintenance. Those who prefer local routes give reasons such as **the lack of maintenance, degree of difficulty, lack of support infrastructure, slippery, muddy and/or rocky paths, and paths with poor vegetation.** The offer of pedestrian routes is fundamental to organize the use of forest spaces, especially reserve and nature protection spaces. For the sustainability of natural areas, it is essential to have communication strategies capable of receiving feedback from hikers in order to improve the experience of others.”*

- Does this also apply to (sustainable) travelling to and from the trail?

Question No. 3:

Following on from the previous question, the online questionnaire also showed that most hikers still use the car.

In your opinion, what are the most important factors and challenges for encouraging the target group of hikers to travel to and from the destination using active and sustainable mobility options?

- Are there differences between hikers from the region/country and hiking tourists from abroad?
- Are there differences between hikers who do circular trails and those who do long-distance trails with a different start and end point?
- Have there been any changes in hikers' chosen mode of transport in recent years?

Question No. 4:

To promote active and sustainable arrival and departure of hikers, support at national and regional level and a corresponding infrastructure are also needed. Even in a country as internationally renowned for hiking tourism as Austria, as the article "Tourism mobility and climate change – A review of the situation in Austria (2021)" points out:

*"In peripheral areas, however, there is often a lack of climate-friendly mobility services that offer similar travel times, comfort and flexibility as the car, particularly outside working hours. Compared to motorised private transport, public transport is significantly slower with regard to travel times, especially in sparsely populated areas ([ÖROK, 2019](#)), or there is sometimes no public transport available. As a result, there is **often no complete public transport connection for arrival and departure for the entire journey including the last mile, and within the destination area to tourist attractions and back to accommodation**. In the meantime, many tourism regions and locations are making efforts to offer demand responsive services such as hiker's taxis, ski buses, dial-a-bus systems, etc. to close gaps in the accessibility of peripheral locations and remote tourist hotspots ([BMNT & BMVIT, 2019](#))."*

What measures and promotion programmes are you aware of in your country/region?

- Are the hiking trails connected to public transport stops?
- Are there information boards and signposting from the stops to and along the trails?
- Convenience and comfort such as luggage transport, planning and booking effort, transfer frequency, reliability of connections and journey times; reliable and easy luggage delivery is particularly important. How are they provided?
- Are there additional public transport services during the peak season or additional shuttles for the last mile, for example?

- Are there tourist cards, including free or discounted use of public transport and possibly also cable cars and other offers in your country/ region?
- Are there certifications with defined measures, e.g. for *public transport hiking trails**, or organisations and tourism providers that promote sustainable travel to and from the destination?
- Do you know of good practice examples from your region, with offers to travel sustainably to your hiking destination?

for example Tirol Austria: "These "public transport hikes**" fulfil several criteria to ensure the quality and thus overall positive experience of a hike with public transport. Criteria include, for example, a maximum waiting time of 60 minutes at the start and end points, transport connections from morning to evening and a maximum 15 minutes walk from the bus stop to the start and end points of the hike. Tour suggestions are directly linked to the timetable and route planner, and tickets can be purchased quickly and easily in the online ticket shop."*

Question No. 5:

What measures are being implemented or planned within your organisation to promote the sustainable arrival and departure of hikers?

- Are there information on sustainable arrival and departure within the descriptions of individual hiking trails
- Do your organisation provides information on public transport timetables and prices / link to website
- Do your organisation provides information brochures on the topic
- Are there events and campaigns to raise public awareness of the issue (online & offline)
- Is your organisation in an exchange with stakeholders and/or / do you have the opportunity to provide feedback to relevant bodies, e.g. ministries, railway operators and public transport providers
- Are there different approaches/ strategies for different kind of hikers? (see Question No. 2, e.g. Hikers, who are environmental conscious in general, Hikers, who want to take nice pictures or family trips vs. long distance trails)

Question No. 6:

What need do you see for your country/region to convince hikers to use sustainable and active mobility?

- What are the biggest challenges or what should change most urgently/fastest?
- What are the hurdles/difficulties to implement sustainable mobility to hiking trails
- What do you need to achieve the goal?

Question No. 7

Finally, do you have any further comments, ideas, experiences or questions?

Thank you very much for your time and the valuable exchange.

Your expertise and experiences will be reflected in the report on the needs of hikers regarding the use of active and sustainable mobility, which we will be pleased to send you once it has been finalised