YouthTRAILS

Methodology for youth workers as ecotourism agents

Co-funded by the European Union

Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor EACEA can be held responsible for them.

Project No: 2024-1-IS01-KA220-YOU-000246411

YouthTRAILS

YouthTRAILS

1. The Case for Strengthening Youth Work in Remote Areas Through Ecotourism Education

Tourism has the potential to transcend borders in EU and foster cross-cultural understanding, especially **it is key for many remote areas to halt depopulation, restore places through regenerative practices**, and it has the potential to create job opportunities and new nonprofits in remote areas (mountains, offsite geothermal sites, rural areas, etc).

As part of EU efforts to enhance sustainability, **tourism is currently undergoing major transformation** when it comes to its impact in local communities. For example, many governments and regions are taking actions on aspects such as **'overtourism'** and **'gentrification'**.

Tourism is, without a doubt, influenced by popular or mass culture, and that means that many people are inspired to visit a specific place due to social media, or pop culture, while many other places are left empty. **The rise of low-cost trips and cruise ships have literally invaded different major European Union cities making them objects of consumerism and leading to a lodging crisis for locals**, as it is more convenient to rent places for shorter periods of time than for stable living.

What about remote areas?

According to the European Commission's Long-term Vision for the EU's Rural Areas (2021), rural regions account for almost 30% of the EU population and 80% of its territory, yet many suffer from "development gaps" compared to urban areas.

Ecotourism offers a compelling response to these challenges by promoting sustainable economic activity that leverages local natural and cultural assets without overexploiting them.

A 2020 report by the European Parliament emphasises that nature-based tourism is the fastest-growing segment of the European tourism industry, with an annual growth rate of 10–20%, and is increasingly relevant in rural and protected areas.

The transition pathway for the tourism agenda also stems from the issue of **supporting younger generations to participate in the green transition through ecological tourism encouraging youth work as a cornerstone**.

Through youth-led initiatives, educational programmes, and ecotourism projects, young people can directly contribute to conserving local ecosystems, revitalising traditional practices, and creating sustainable business models rooted in place-based identity. For example, youth involvement in agroecology, nature guiding, circular economy models, or cultural heritage tourism creates local impact while fostering environmental stewardship.

Moreover, **youth workers can help translate the language of policy into grassroots action**. They act as facilitators, educators, and connectors — enabling young people to acquire the skills needed for green jobs, take ownership of their communities, and participate in shaping climate-resilient futures. This active participation not only boosts self-confidence and belonging but also leads to more cost-effective and targeted development strategies for municipalities.

According to YouthTrails' perspective, ecotourism as an educational practice by youth can be implemented if opinions, ideas, and processes are jointly sought by local authorities, tourism entities, youth workers and youth. As our scope resides in the remote areas of the European Union, we want to reflect on the current opportunities and develop a valuable workable reasoning tool for youth workers.

References

European Commission. (2021, June 30). *A long-term vision for the EU's rural areas: For stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous rural areas by 2040* [Press release]. European Commission. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_21_3162

European Parliament. (2020). *The future of EU tourism – Striking a balance between competitiveness and sustainability*. Directorate-General for Internal Policies.

https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/652215/IPOL_STU(2020)652215_EN.pdf

Council of the European Union. (2024, November 25). *'Glocal' opportunities for young people in rural and remote areas: Council approves conclusions*. https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2024/11/25/glocal-opportunities-for-young-people-in-rural-and-remote-areas-council-approves-conclusions

2. YouthTrails

YouthTrails is a community dedicated to empowering young people through ecotourism, and creating a vibrant network of organisations in ecotourism to favour youth mobility and education around environment, culture and community engagement.

YouthTrails is a **European project designed to connect youth with sustainable travel experiences that promote environmental conservation, cultural exchange, and community engagement.**

We believe that travel should be more than just sightseeing—it should be a journey of learning, responsibility, and impact, of interaction with locals, in this way **places are not just consumption goods and not only stuff for social media.**

YouthTrails wants to support young people and youth organisations to actively participate in the creation of ecotourism offers and educational experiences for their peers.

Not only **- we want to raise awareness among the stakeholders about the necessity of shared and joint work in sustainable development as a process of youth participation.**

YouthTrails creates opportunities for young people to:

- Engage with nature and local communities through ethical, low-impact tourism.
- Develop skills in sustainability, leadership, and responsible travel.
- Support conservation and eco-entrepreneurship initiatives in remote and rural areas.

YouthTRAILS

2.1 Main results

1. A YouthTrails Certification Label

How's youth with ecotourism? Are young people into ecotourism? Are ecotourism venues ready to engage young people? These are the big questions we'd like to answer with YouthTrails!

In this sense, we have come up with a **YouthTrails Label**, a youth-friendly eco-certification for hostels, eco-lodges, tour operators, and ecotourism projects that meet our **youth-friendly and sustainable tourism criteria**. This ensures that certified destinations:
✅ Offer meaningful learning experiences in conservation, cultural heritage, and sustainable tourism.
✅ Provide affordable, youth-friendly accommodations, education and travel opportunities.
✅ Engage local communities, ensuring tourism benefits residents and supports local economies.
✅ Minimise environmental impact through eco-friendly operations, waste reduction, and conservation efforts.

We have the ambitious goal to gather a **network of hostels, ecotourism venues, outdoor sites, youth organisations, eco-friendly cultural centres and youth clubs** to promote sustainable travels among youth.

2. A Training Programme for Youth Workers & Ecotourism Professionals

We equip **youth workers** and tourism professionals with the **skills and tools** to develop, promote, and facilitate **youth-centered ecotourism**. This includes:
🎓 **Workshops & Training Modules** on sustainable tourism, entrepreneurship, and environmental conservation.
🌍 **Hands-on Ecotourism Initiatives** that connect youth with local sustainability projects, especially with the creation of participated maps.
📖 **Guides & Toolkits** to help organisations implement youth-friendly ecotourism programs.

3. A Platform for Youth-Led Ecotourism Experiences

YouthTRAILS

YouthTrails acts as a bridge between young travellers and responsible tourism initiatives by:

🌱 **Connecting youth with certified eco-destinations** through an interactive online platform.

🚀 **Showcasing youth-led ecotourism projects** to inspire and support emerging sustainable tourism leaders.

📢 **Providing a voice for young ecotourists** to share their experiences and advocate for better tourism policies.

3. Ecotourism education

Ecotourism is a form of responsible travel that emphasises environmental conservation, cultural respect, and community engagement. For young people, it offers a unique avenue to explore the world while making a positive impact.

Ecotourism education, therefore, is about building a generation of travellers who see the world not as a product to consume, but as a means for empathy, personal growth and shared creation of development projects.

Ecotourism is defined as "**responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and supports local communities, incorporating interpretation and education**" (What Is Ecotourism, 2022).

Youth travellers increasingly:

✅ **Choose shorter but more frequent trips (2-4 days) focused on outdoor, wellness, and cultural experiences.**

✅ **Show a strong interest in ecotourism accommodations and sustainable leisure activities.**

✅ **Utilise digital platforms to access information, book sustainable travel options, and share their experiences online.**

✅ **Seek safe and hospitable destinations in remote, eco-friendly areas, away from crowded urban environments.**

3.1 Criteria for ecotourism

We've already explored what ecotourism is and what makes it different from other types of travel. But to truly call something "ecotourism", it needs

to follow certain principles. That's why businesses and projects must meet specific criteria to ensure they are genuinely sustainable and responsible.

Understanding these criteria will give you a clear picture of what running an ecotourism business actually involves. And when you're ready to start your own project, you can use them as a practical guide to make sure your initiative stays true to ecotourism values.

One of the biggest challenges in ecotourism is greenwashing—when businesses pretend to be eco-friendly but don't actually follow sustainable practices. It's a marketing trick designed to mislead customers into thinking they're making an ethical choice, even when the reality is very different.

What is greenwashing?

It's when companies use false or misleading claims to make their business seem more environmentally responsible than it actually is. This can be through vague language, exaggerated claims, or certifications that don't mean much.

Why is it a problem?

It damages local communities and ecosystems – even if tourists and businesses have good intentions, greenwashing can lead to environmental harm, economic exploitation, and cultural disruption.

It undermines real ecotourism efforts – genuine businesses that follow sustainable practices may struggle because greenwashing creates distrust and confusion.

Ecotourism must not be confused with sustainable tourism!

Back in 2000, a group of tourism experts, business leaders, and conservationists met in Mohonk, USA, to try and create a clear definition of ecotourism. This became known as the Mohonk Agreement, one of the first serious efforts to distinguish ecotourism from broader sustainable tourism.

What did they decide? T**hey agreed that ecotourism is a very specific type of tourism—it's all about travelling to natural areas with a focus on conservation, cultural respect, and education**. This means that **not all sustainable tourism qualifies as ecotourism.**

Sustainable Tourism = A broad concept that applies to all types of tourism (beach holidays, city breaks, adventure travel, etc.). The goal is to minimise negative impacts on the environment, economy, and local communities while still allowing tourism to grow.

YouthTRAILS

Ecotourism = A more focused version of sustainable tourism. It only takes place in natural areas and is designed to actively protect the environment, support local communities, and educate travellers about conservation.

Just to make a concrete example:

A sustainable hostel in a small town that reduces water waste and sources food locally = ✅ Sustainable tourism, but ❌ not ecotourism.

A sustainable hostel in a small town that funds reforestation in its local natural area and offers guided nature tours by local guides = ✅ Both sustainable tourism & ecotourism.

As you can see, it is fundamental to have the three aspects: 1. **direct environmental relation with a local asset** (not just generically), as in the second case the sustainable hostel actively works to restore environment 2. **educational aspects** (offering a concrete learning experience) 3. **clear relation with the local community** (tours/local guides).

Any **ecotourism experience** should meet these key criteria:

✅ **Nature-based experiences** – The main focus should be on connecting travellers with **natural environments** to foster appreciation and respect.

✅ **Education & Awareness** – Ecotourism should actively **teach** visitors about nature, local cultures, and sustainable practices.

✅ **Conservation Efforts** – Activities should directly contribute to the **protection of natural areas and biodiversity**, either through funding, volunteering, or sustainable management.

✅ **Local Community Benefits** – Ecotourism must **support local economies** by creating jobs and business opportunities while respecting social and cultural values.

✅ **Community Involvement** – Whenever possible, **local communities should be part of the decision-making process** and have a voice in how tourism develops in their area.

✅ **Sustainable Design & Scale** – Lodging, tours, and attractions must be built in a way that **respects the environment** and does not overwhelm local resources.

✅ **Minimal Cultural Impact** – Tourism should not disrupt or exploit **local traditions and lifestyles**, but instead help **preserve and showcase** them in an authentic way.

References

European Commission. (n.d.). *Tourist accommodation - EU Ecolabel criteria*. European Commission - Environment. Retrieved February 6, 2025, from https://environment.ec.europa.eu/topics/circular-economy/eu-ecolabel/product-groups-and-criteria/tourist-accommodation_en

Good Travel. (n.d.). *What is ecotourism?* Good Travel Blog. Retrieved February 6, 2025, from https://www.good-travel.org/blog/ecotourism

Ecotourism Greece. (n.d.). *EETLS - European ecotourism labelling standard*. Ecotourism Greece. Retrieved February 6, 2025, from https://ecotourism-greece.com/providers/eetls-european-ecotourism-labelling-standard/

International Ecotourism Society. (n.d.). *What is ecotourism?* Retrieved February 6, 2025, from https://ecotourism.org/what-is-ecotourism/

Standards Map. (n.d.). *European ecotourism labelling standard (EETLS) overview*. Retrieved February 6, 2025, from https://standardsmap.org/en/factsheet/174/overview

4. General trends about ecotourism and young travellers

Young travellers in the EU, especially Gen Z, are increasingly choosing eco-friendly travel options. They prefer sustainable accommodations and transport, showing a strong interest in nature-based and community-driven experiences. A large portion of Gen Z is open to staying in green-certified lodgings, marking a shift toward environmentally conscious tourism.

European ecotourists tend to be well-educated and fall into two main groups: younger travellers (18–44) and seniors (50–70). Young ecotourists are tech-savvy, using digital tools for trip planning and evaluation. Within this group, some have high incomes and limited time, seeking unique, high-impact adventures; others travel on a budget, favouring longer, immersive experiences.

About 71% of under-30 travellers prioritise sustainable travel. Families with children are less involved due to higher costs and logistics. Seniors, the largest ecotourism group, value comfort, authenticity, and peaceful nature settings.

Key insights from the *2024 State of Student Youth Travel*:

- **Sustainability:**
  - 47% of Gen Z worry about their environmental impact (YouGov).
  - 50% prefer booking with green-certified companies; 23% would pay for carbon offsetting.
- **Experience-Driven:**
  - Young travellers favour meaningful, nature-based and cultural experiences.
  - Many participate in volunteering and see travel as a form of personal development.
- **Tech Use:**
  - 92% are aware of AI travel planning tools; 51% trust them, though 87% still prefer human help when issues arise.
- **Transport Habits:**
  - 13% avoid flying due to climate concerns, favouring trains and carbon-offsetting options.
- **Tourism Evolution:**
  - Businesses are adapting to Gen Z's ethical expectations with eco-lodges, conservation projects, and responsible tours.

References

Ecobnb. (2024, October). Exploring the benefits of ecotourism for students. https://ecobnb.com/blog/2024/10/exploring-benefits-ecotourism-students/

Smith, J. (2025, February 9). Over 60s more likely to fly than Gen Z travellers. *The Times*. https://www.thetimes.com/uk/transport/article/over-60s-more-likely-to-fly-than-gen-z-travellers-k5m5l9vhz

StudentUniverse. (2025). The State of Student & Youth Travel in 2024 [PDF]. https://indd.adobe.com/view/3dafa77f-ec4f-495a-98b0-5f689bd05a22

4.1 Fostering Youth Participation in Ecotourism through Education and EU Programmes

As ecotourism gains traction across Europe, youth workers play a vital role in guiding young people toward sustainable travel practices. Ecotourism isn't just a niche interest—it's a powerful educational tool that supports environmental awareness, cross-cultural understanding, and active citizenship. Through EU-funded programmes, youth workers can integrate ecotourism into educational initiatives, enabling young people to explore, learn, and act responsibly.

Key EU Programmes Supporting Ecotourism Education:

- **DiscoverEU** offers 18-year-olds the chance to travel across Europe by train, promoting low-carbon travel and cultural exchange. It supports young people in developing independence, intercultural skills, and environmental awareness.

- **European Solidarity Corps (ESC)** provides opportunities for volunteering and paid placements in social and environmental projects. Youth workers can connect young people with initiatives focused on sustainability, conservation, and eco-tourism development.

- **Erasmus+ Youth Exchanges (KA1)** promote non-formal education and intercultural dialogue. Youth workers can design exchanges with themes such as green tourism, eco-innovation, or nature conservation—combining travel with practical learning and youth engagement.

These programmes not only empower youth through travel and exploration but also align with broader EU strategies to create sustainable tourism ecosystems. According to the EU's *Transition Pathway for Tourism* (2024), sustainable tourism efforts include stakeholder engagement (94% of destinations), digital tools (50%), and investment in eco-friendly infrastructure (48%). Youth involvement in these trends ensures fresh perspectives and long-term impact.

Ecotourism as a Learning Opportunity

Tourism represents nearly 10% of the EU's GDP and around 23 million jobs. Embedding sustainability into youth programmes prepares young people to be part of this evolving sector—not just as tourists, but as future professionals and changemakers.

According to the **EU Youth Strategy 2019–2027**, Pillar 10 (*Sustainable Green Europe*) and Pillar 11 (*Youth and the World*) support youth participation in environmental action and global mobility.

#10 Sustainable Green Europe

Achieve a society in which all young people are environmentally active, educated and able to make a difference in their everyday lives.

#11 Youth Organisations & European Programmes

Ensure equal access for all young people to youth organisations and European youth programmes, building a society based on European values and identity.

Ecotourism offers a platform for this, especially when implemented through:

- **VET and tourism education**: Youth workers can collaborate with vocational trainers to bring real-world, community-based eco-projects into tourism education.

- **Outdoor sports initiatives**: Programmes promoting physical activity can incorporate environmental themes, helping young people engage with nature and sustainability.

- **Accessible travel experiences**: Youth workers must ensure inclusivity, enabling participation for young people with physical or socio-economic barriers.

Challenges and the Role of Youth Workers

Despite the opportunities, there are challenges—especially in reaching vulnerable youth and creating strong partnerships with local eco-venues and agrotourism sites. Youth workers are key to bridging this gap. However, more institutional support is needed to recognise youth workers as essential actors in sustainable development and lifelong learning.

By aligning youth work with EU ecotourism efforts, we can foster a generation that not only explores Europe but does so with a sense of responsibility, purpose, and active environmental citizenship.

References

EC, 2024. Sustainable EU Tourism – Shaping the Tourism of Tomorrow https://transport.ec.europa.eu/tourism/transition-eu-tourism/sustainable-eu-tourism-shaping-tourism-tomorrow_en

Moxon, D., & Barta, O. (2018). Structured Dialogue Cycle VI Thematic report. Zenodo. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.3716212

YouthTRAILS

5. Territories of Action and Ecotourism Tendencies

YouthTrails **operates in remote and diverse European regions where natural beauty, cultural richness, and rural settings offer ideal grounds for ecotourism.** Yet, each area faces distinct social, infrastructural, and youth engagement challenges. **For youth workers aiming to foster ecotourism, understanding both the** local context **and the** necessary competencies **is essential to empower young people—both as hosts and participants—in sustainable travel and environmental education.**

5.1 Regional Snapshots and Local Dynamics

- **Reykjanes UNESCO Global Geopark, Iceland**

Located on a geologically active peninsula shaped by rifting tectonic plates and frequent volcanic activity, Reykjanes UNESCO Global Geopark is a living laboratory of Earth's forces. It offers unparalleled opportunities for ecotourism, outdoor education, and environmental storytelling. Yet, the region faces unique challenges in youth participation, mobility, and community connection, particularly in the wake of recurring volcanic events and rural outmigration.

Iceland's rural regions offer rich opportunities for youth ecotourism through dramatic volcanic landscapes and coastal ecosystems. However, barriers include limited transport, high travel costs, harsh weather, and depopulation of young people to urban areas. These factors limit both local and incoming youth engagement. To foster youth ecotourism, young people must understand ecotourism as more than nature preservation, including respect for local culture and sustainable community engagement. They need knowledge of local stories, places, and experts to create meaningful experiences, plus awareness of greenwashing and tourism pressures driven by influencers. Key competencies include local knowledge, communication skills, resilience, and the ability to plan sustainable activities. Youth workers must connect youth with local stakeholders, promote authentic experiences beyond crowded tourist hotspots, and advocate for better infrastructure to make rural areas accessible, safe, and appealing for responsible youth travel.

YouthTRAILS

Reykjanes UNESCO Global Geopark, Iceland

Reykjanes sits on one of the most geologically active parts of Iceland. With its lava fields, geothermal areas, and coastal cliffs, it offers an exceptional setting for ecotourism and place-based education. But while the potential is clear, there are real challenges when it comes to youth engagement. Volcanic activity, poor public transport, high travel costs, and limited digital connectivity make it difficult for both local and visiting youth to access the region meaningfully. Youth outmigration adds to the gap, with many young people moving away for school or work, leaving fewer peers to welcome and host others.

Understanding ecotourism locally

For many, ecotourism is still an unclear term. It's often confused with general sustainability or environmentally friendly travel, without fully recognising its emphasis on respect for local culture, community involvement, and thoughtful interaction with the place. At Reykjanes UNESCO Global Geopark, we see ecotourism as a tool for learning and connection, e.g. through storytelling, reflection, and participation in daily life. There's growing awareness of greenwashing and the downsides of trend-based tourism, but young people need support to develop a more grounded and critical understanding of what ecotourism can be.

Barriers to Youth Participation

The main barriers are practical and structural. Public transport options are limited outside the main towns. Costs of travel and accommodation are high, and mobile connectivity in rural areas is inconsistent. These issues affect both host communities and visitors. On top of that, the region's volcanic activity, while a major draw, can create uncertainty or safety concerns. Information about lesser-known activities and local experts is hard to come by. Without clear, accessible tools, even motivated young travellers may not know where to start—or how to find experiences that align with their values.

The Role of Youth Workers

Local youth workers are active in education, environmental projects, and community initiatives, especially through the UNESCO school network. Many are experienced in non-formal learning and science outreach. However, few are directly engaged in tourism, and partnerships with local

providers (guides, venues, or cultural stakeholders) tend to be informal. There's strong potential to build on existing strengths by supporting youth workers with training in ecotourism facilitation, access to local networks, and opportunities to co-create meaningful activities with and for young people.

Who Are the Youth Engaged Here?

We see a mix of participants:

- Local youth aged 13–25, often through schools, clubs, and environmental activities.
- Visiting youth aged 18–30, arriving through Erasmus+, university programmes, or volunteering.
- Independent travellers looking for quiet, authentic experiences off the tourist trail.
- Others who come for personal reasons, e.g. curiosity, challenge, or simply the need to disconnect and reconnect.

What's often missing is a structure that helps them meet, share, and take part in something lasting.

Unlocking Youth-Led Ecotourism

Reykjanes has the right ingredients to support youth-led ecotourism. What's needed is better coordination. That includes shared digital tools to make local knowledge visible, venues that actively involve young people, and community spaces where youth (regardless of background or personality) can engage on their own terms. Some places already work this way, but many still treat youth as guests rather than participants.

Looking Ahead

A youth- and eco-friendly region is one that's accessible, open, and willing to listen. It doesn't require major infrastructure, just clear paths for participation, partnerships that value young voices, and places that invite more than passive sightseeing.

Latina Province, Italy

Latina Province, in central Italy, shows clear contrasts between its coastal areas, which attract seasonal tourism, and its inland and mountain zones,

which struggle with depopulation, weak infrastructure, and limited opportunities for young people.
Public transport remains one of the biggest barriers for both residents and visitors, making it difficult to reach rural areas where nature-based activities could thrive. In this sense, if you don't rent or own a car, it is really hard to move among the towns, even from the stations (the only high-traffic line is the one connecting Rome to Naples) to the towns. In this sense, youth tourism is hard to implement unless you know people locally.

Local youth often face economic difficulties, lack of tourism infrastructure, and few dedicated youth programmes. Youth entrepreneurship is there, but hard to be 'systemic'. Seasonal and precarious jobs dominate the tourism sector, leaving little incentive for young people to stay or build a future in the area. Only a few green in

At the same time, there are initiatives that show the potential of youth engagement, such as cultural festivals and proposals from youth groups to improve transport, info points, and spaces for cultural interaction. If strengthened, ecotourism could become a tool for revitalisation, helping young people rediscover pride in their heritage, build sustainable projects, and create connections between visitors and the community. For this to happen, investment in transport, digital hubs, training, and youth entrepreneurship is essential, alongside efforts to make tourism jobs more stable and attractive.

Javea Province, Spain

Although rich in natural assets like coastal landscapes and mountain routes, the region struggles with a lack of dedicated ecotourism for youth and limited organisational involvement. There's a strong need for local networks and capacity-building among youth organisations to promote sustainable alternatives to mainstream party tourism.

Natural resources and beauty make Javea a prime candidate to be a top ecotourist destination, but development of any non-standard tourism activities has been stagnated by the economic gains from more traditional and party-focused tourism. The promotion of ecotourism, however, has increased in the past 5 years, with various organisations pushing not only to offer further offers, but also to entice the local and regional governments to take a strong role in promoting these strands of tourism. A need for

cooperation within these organisations to create a stronger network highlights the potential YouthTRAILS has for ecotourism organisations and young people interested in participating.

Slovenia

A country with rich ecological zones—from alpine mountains to karst plateaus—but inland and rural areas face depopulation and limited services. Tourism is highly developed in specific zones, yet vulnerable to seasonal overcrowding. Youth programmes can serve as bridges, decentralising tourist flow while fostering youth-led exploration and storytelling about hidden areas.

Slovenia is well-positioned to support the development of youth-led ecotourism due to its strong environmental ethos, rich natural landscapes, and a relatively well-developed youth sector. Many organisations already engage in outdoor, cultural, and non-formal education activities. However, there is room for more targeted and systemic integration of ecotourism as a strategic focus. In Slovenia there are currently 12 youth centers that also have hostels as part of the youth center, that cater to young travellers and groups, often also in the scope of Erasmus+ youth exchanges or ESC volunteers. They are mostly located in smaller urban areas, with some of them in rural, more remote locations, which offers a good starting point for the development of ecotourism.

Youth centers part of the MaMa network and Youth centers - hostels (marked with the red geotag).

Understanding of Ecotourism:

While the concept of sustainability is familiar within Slovenian youth spaces, ecotourism as a structured educational and community-engaging practice is still developing. Youth workers often associate sustainability with environmental actions (e.g. cleanups, recycling), while the broader social and cultural components of ecotourism (e.g. engaging with local heritage, storytelling, supporting local SMEs) are less commonly emphasised. Youth workers participating in the field showed relatively high interest in sustainability-related topics. This strong motivation signals significant potential for further development and active participation in sustainable initiatives.

Access to local knowledge and experts:

Many youth centres in Slovenia operate in rural or semi-rural areas, but systematic databases of local knowledge and ecotourism

resources are rare. Partnerships between youth centers and tourism boards or nature conservation institutions exist but are often informal or underutilised. Youth workers participating in the field research gave the lowest ratings to cooperation with local experts in the field of tourism, indicating weak networking and a need for greater involvement of external stakeholders - however they are often involved in organising touristic events in the local community themselves and are in contact with local stakeholders from municipalities to gather support for actions in the field of tourism. Training and education on ecotourism received somewhat higher scores, suggesting a basic readiness to improve knowledge.

Digital and Communication Skills:
There is a growing awareness in Slovenia of the need for youth workers and young people to improve digital storytelling and promotional competencies, as this presents a challenge to some organisations. This is particularly relevant for smaller or remote youth centres that struggle to promote their activities to incoming youth or potential international volunteers. Some organisations have started to incorporate these skills via Erasmus+ and ESC projects, but digital skills often remain uneven across regions. Most young respondents involved in the survey on eco-tourism follow content creators or use tools like AI or social media (TikTok, Instagram) to plan their trips, but there is relatively low active involvement of youth in promoting sustainable practices online. This suggests a gap and a potential opportunity to engage young people more effectively in awareness-raising through digital platforms.

Barriers in Remote Areas:
The most common barriers to eco-tourism in Slovenia are:

- Public transport is limited in rural areas.
- Young people lack information and knowledge about rural ecotourism opportunities.
- Lack of knowledge on how to look for trust-worthy eco-friendly venues.
- Lack of opportunities to meet and connect with local youth in rural areas.Depopulation, especially among youth, leads to intergenerational gaps and lack of peers for social connection.
- Perceived exclusivity of eco-tourism projects (e.g., language barriers, cultural differences).

- Rural communities sometimes show hesitation towards tourism development, especially if prior experiences were extractive or disruptive.
- Youth workers point out lack of funding and staff, as well as **limited involvement of the local community, insufficient connection with the tourism sector**, and difficulties in actively engaging young people as the main barriers to ecotourism.
- Tourism providers point out difficulty in reaching youth groups/students and lack of interest among youth, along with the fact that ecotourism is seen as a new or unfamiliar concept.

However, Slovenia's compact geography and strong network of youth organisations present an opportunity to build youth-friendly and eco-friendly rural destinations through cooperation between municipalities, youth centres, and local stakeholders, as there seems to be a strong internal motivation and interest, which can be strategically nurtured and enhanced.

Youth Worker Capacities and Gaps:
Youth workers in Slovenia are highly skilled in non-formal education and facilitation**, and many care deeply about sustainability. However, the** ecotourism-specific dimension — such as market understanding, advocacy, or connecting with regional tourism development plans — is rarely part of their standard training**. There's a clear** opportunity for training programmes **to help youth workers build these ecotourism-related capacities.**

Youth centres often run workshops or host volunteering programmes that could be enriched with ecotourism-specific themes — especially if they link local traditions, sustainability, and youth agency**. In terms of community engagement, the results are relatively encouraging. Organisations express a positive attitude towards connecting with the local environment, although the role of youth workers in these processes is not yet fully consistent and the passing of information on eco-tourism to young people is not a common practice with youth workers.** The highest scores were observed in the section measuring the interest of youth workers in sustainability-related topics. This strong motivation signals significant potential for further development and active participation in sustainable initiatives.

Stakeholders in the field of tourism recognise the multi-faceted role youth workers can play — as innovators, connectors, and advocates. Stakeholders are open to co-developing initiatives if youth involvement is structured and supported.

Motivated Youth, But Limited Pathways:
Slovenian youth show strong interest in outdoor, cultural, and experiential activities, particularly when they involve international peers (e.g. ESC, Erasmus+ Youth Exchanges). However, the lack of visible ecotourism routes, programmes or career paths can limit their long-term engagement. Projects that frame ecotourism as a pathway for employment, entrepreneurship, and self-development would likely resonate well.

Young people involved in the survey revealed a high level of interest in learning about sustainable practices and engaging in responsible travel. More than half of the respondents gave the highest rating to statements related to learning about nature protection, acting responsibly when traveling, valuing local traditions, and gaining environmental skills. This shows a clear willingness among young people to contribute to environmental protection and the preservation of cultural heritage. However, concerning actual participation in environmental or community-friendly activities, the most common response was a neutral. his could reflect uncertainty, lack of knowledge, or limited opportunities. Notably, 44% somewhat agreed that there is not enough support or information for young people to make sustainable travel choices. Many also indicated the need for financial assistance to engage in ecotourism projects. Many respondents expressed a strong interest in leading ecotourism or cultural activities, working in areas such as eco-guiding or nature tourism, and joining short-term ecotourism opportunities (e.g., through Erasmus+). There is also a clear desire to connect with more experienced individuals who can provide support and guidance.

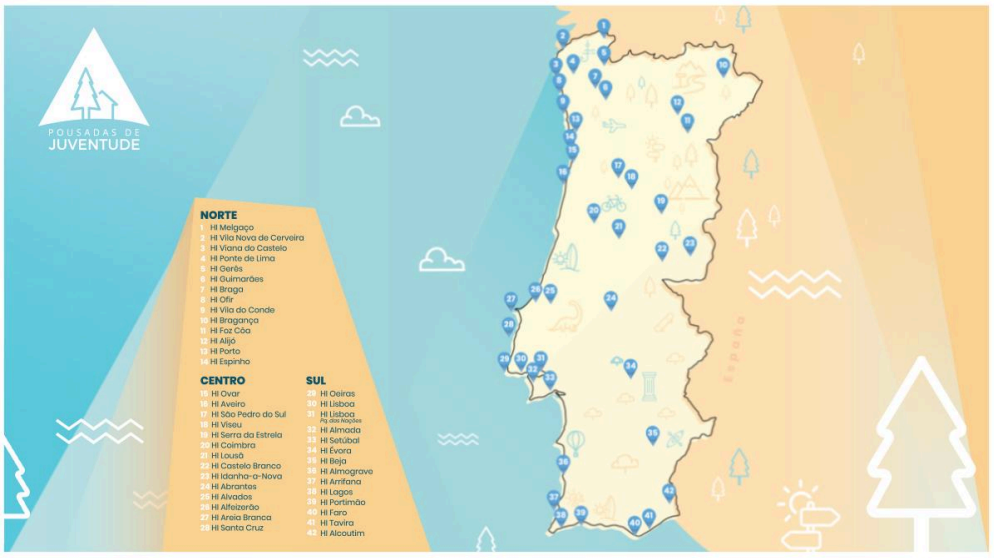
Slovenia offers fertile ground for the development of youth ecotourism — both due to its natural assets and its active youth infrastructure. However, to fully activate this potential, systemic support is needed to connect youth work with tourism, sustainability, and community engagement.

YouthTRAILS

Viseu, Portugal

With ESC and Erasmus+ involvement, young people engage in plogging, cultural exchange, and nature-focused education. Despite promising programmes, accessibility and transport remain barriers. Youth workers here can strengthen connections between schools, NGOs, and rural stakeholders to make local eco-activities more visible and frequent.

In Portugal, the **Youth Hostel Network (Rede de Pousadas de Juventude)** is one of the strongest national infrastructures supporting youth travel and sustainable tourism. With **42 hostels across the mainland and islands** (including remote destinations such as Serra da Estrela, Alentejo interior, Azores and Madeira), the network ensures that young people can access affordable, eco-friendly accommodation throughout the country. The hostels are linked to the **Cartão Jovem Euro<26**, which provides discounts and makes sustainable travel more inclusive for youth.



A leading example within this system is the **Youth Hostel of Viseu**, managed by **Associação Adamastor**. Located in the Dão-Lafões region, Adamastor uses the hostel not only as a place for accommodation but also as a **hub for youth mobility, community engagement and sustainable tourism education**. Through **Erasmus+, the European Solidarity Corps (ESC), and DiscoverEU**, the organisation regularly hosts international young people, who collaborate with local youth in designing and implementing ecotourism-related initiatives.

YouthTRAILS

Activities and practices

- **Eco-volunteering**: international and local youth engage in activities such as reforestation, trail cleaning, heritage preservation, and environmental awareness campaigns.

- **Nature and culture discovery routes**: youth workers and volunteers guide groups through local biodiversity areas, vineyards, and cultural heritage sites of the Dão-Lafões region, connecting sustainability with cultural identity.

- **Community-based events**: Adamastor co-organises intercultural festivals, storytelling workshops, and gastronomy exchanges where local residents and international youth learn from one another.

- **Training and non-formal education**: the hostel is used as a learning laboratory for workshops on eco-guiding, climate literacy, and digital promotion of sustainable destinations.

Youth perspectives

Consultations with young people in central Portugal indicate that **costs, lack of accessible transport to rural areas, and limited information about eco-routes** are the main barriers to engaging in ecotourism. However, young travellers increasingly show interest in:

- **Low-impact travel options** (train, bus, cycling routes),

- **Digital tools** that make planning eco-trips easier,

- Opportunities to **combine travel with volunteering**.

DiscoverEU participants hosted by Adamastor frequently report that staying at youth hostels allowed them to combine affordable travel with opportunities for intercultural exchange and local engagement.

Youth workers' perspectives
Youth workers connected to Adamastor highlight the need for:

- More **training in eco-guiding and environmental education**,

- Stronger **partnerships between hostels and tourism operators** in rural areas,
- Access to **digital tools** for promoting youth-friendly eco-routes.

They also underline the value of involving young volunteers not just as participants but as **co-creators of activities** – a practice that increases ownership and long-term impact.

Challenges and barriers

- **Transport**: limited connections to remote destinations make it difficult for young people without private cars to explore natural parks or mountain areas.
- **Funding**: ecotourism activities led by youth organisations often depend on project-based funding (Erasmus+, ESC) rather than stable resources.
- **Visibility**: youth hostels are still perceived primarily as cheap accommodation rather than as **educational and sustainability hubs**.

Innovation and national outlook

Portugal has piloted initiatives that link **youth travel with sustainability**, such as the **ANDA – Andar e Conhecer Portugal** campaign, which encouraged young people to use trains and youth hostels together. Several hostels in the network have adopted **eco-certification measures** such as solar panels, waste separation systems, and water-saving technologies.

Adamastor's experience in Viseu shows how youth hostels can be transformed into **laboratories for sustainable tourism**, combining international mobility, non-formal learning, and local community involvement. By bridging the gap between **urban youth mobility programmes and rural ecotourism opportunities**, the Portuguese case demonstrates a replicable model where youth hostels become hubs for climate action, intercultural dialogue, and sustainable development.

Hopeland, Greece (Peloponnese)

A region with “eco-community members”, climbers, and young visitors seeking redemption or spiritual escape. Youths often come from marginalised backgrounds or are in transitional life phases. Local engagement and safe, inclusive programming are vital to supporting these youth meaningfully and respectfully.
While the Hopeland area in the Peloponnese has rich potential for sustainable tourism, it faces several significant challenges. Environmental pressures such as water shortages, habitat degradation, and weak enforcement of protection measures threaten its natural assets. Socially, rural depopulation and lack of opportunities often drive young people away, while local infrastructure struggles to meet the needs of both residents and visitors. Additionally, the economic benefits of tourism do not always reach the local community, and cultural authenticity risks being diluted in pursuit of profit. Overcoming these issues requires careful planning, genuine community engagement, and a commitment to sustainability at every level.

5.2 Key Competencies for Youth Ecotourism Engagement

Youth workers must foster both host youth **and** incoming youth **in developing or joining ecotourism experiences. Competencies should include:**

- Understanding Ecotourism**: More than nature preservation—true ecotourism involves cultural respect, community benefit, and environmental care. Workers must explain the difference between ecotourism and “greenwashed” commercial tourism.**

- Local Knowledge**: Youth must be trained to navigate and promote local areas, including “hidden gems.” Workers should create shared databases with details on experts (e.g., butterfly specialists), local trails, traditions, and services.**

- Activity Design**: Skills in planning sustainable workshops, cultural exchanges, and nature-based volunteering are essential. Activities should connect ecological education with personal development.**

- Communication Skills**: Hosts should be trained in basic facilitation and welcoming practices. This includes supporting introverted**

visitors, managing language barriers, and fostering meaningful interactions with locals.

- Business and Digital Skills: **To sustain and promote activities, youth need foundational knowledge in promotion, digital platforms, and local tourism economics.**

- Soft Skills: **Empathy, resilience, and leadership—especially when encouraging youth to step outside their comfort zones and engage with unfamiliar environments or communities.**

5.3 Challenges in Remote Regions

Across all YouthTrails regions, youth workers face overlapping challenges when developing ecotourism initiatives:

- Accessibility: **Lack of public transport and high travel costs deter youth from exploring or participating.**

- Digital Disconnection: **Poor internet limits access to information and visibility of youth-oriented initiatives.**

- Service Gaps: **Limited youth-friendly accommodations, health services, or structured activities reduce the appeal of rural visits.**

- Community Readiness: **Host communities may not be prepared to receive or welcome youth visitors, especially due to depopulation or generational gaps.**

- Social Media Trends: **Popular tourist spots promoted by influencers draw attention away from authentic, off-the-beaten-path experiences.**

- Lack of Awareness: **Many young people, especially from vulnerable backgrounds, are unaware of the programmes and funding available to support responsible travel.**

5.4 Youth Worker Capacities for Ecotourism Implementation

Youth workers serve as facilitators and connectors between young people, nature, and local communities. To do so effectively, they should develop the following:

- Capacities:
    - Profound knowledge of ecotourism principles and local strengths.
    - People skills for bridging youth with locals, including emotional intelligence and multilingualism.
    - Ability to design, implement, and evaluate non-formal learning experiences.
- Connections:
    - Strong networks with local providers, municipalities, NGOs, and Destination Management Organisations (DMOs).
    - Ties to European programmes and platforms (e.g., Erasmus+, DiscoverEU, ESC) to channel mobility and funding opportunities.
- Resources:
    - Access to financial support and volunteers.
    - Training opportunities for continuous development in sustainable tourism, facilitation, and advocacy.
    - Tools for measuring long-term impact and ensuring sustainability beyond the project cycle.

Creating Meaningful Youth Ecotourism Paths

To effectively engage youth in ecotourism, youth workers must act as educators, advocates, and designers of meaningful local experiences, in connection with tour operators, environmental guides, municipalities, facilities etc. Youth engagement should not only contribute to tourism,

but also address local needs—revitalising depopulated areas, nurturing pride in cultural heritage, and promoting sustainable living. By anchoring ecotourism in values of inclusion, authenticity, and youth empowerment, YouthTrails regions can become models for responsible and regenerative tourism in Europe.

6. Synthesis of the field research

In order to better understand the relationship between youth work, ecotourism, and remote regional development, **YouthTrails conducted a targeted field research initiative across its partner regions**. Three key stakeholder groups were surveyed: **youth, youth organisations, and tourism entities**. The research aimed to assess the levels of awareness, engagement, and readiness to participate in or support ecotourism as a meaningful avenue for youth empowerment and sustainable local development. This synthesis distills the main findings, offering a snapshot of the current landscape and identifying potential leverage points for future action.

Youth

The survey engaged a total of 90 youth participants across the partner countries, examining their attitudes toward ecotourism, sustainable travel practices, and their current involvement in ecological activities. Youth were reached across the different networks, local groups, youth participating in mobilities etc by each organisation.

Among the respondents, 24 individuals (27%) declared they “study and work,” making this the most prevalent category of youth activity, followed by 13 individuals (14%) who “mostly work” and 8 (9%) who “mostly study.” These numbers suggest that a significant portion of youth already balance work and education, which could be leveraged to integrate ecotourism training into their routines. However, 13 individuals (14%) stated they “mostly volunteer,” indicating a smaller but meaningful group with existing interest in community-based initiatives.

When asked about their interest in learning how to protect nature and explore places responsibly, 16 individuals (18%) rated their interest as "quite," while 29 (32%) rated it as "a lot." This demonstrates a strong inclination among youth toward environmental stewardship, with nearly half of the respondents expressing high levels of interest. Similarly, 15 individuals (17%) actively seek eco-friendly venues while traveling, and 28 (31%) reported engaging in activities that support local traditions and communities, such as buying handicrafts or participating in clean-up days. **These findings underscore the potential for youth to act as agents of change in promoting ethical and sustainable tourism practices.**

Despite this enthusiasm, significant barriers remain. 32 individuals (36%) expressed feeling that **starting eco-activities is challenging** due to a lack of places, guidance, or financial support, while 20 (22%) noted difficulties in **accessing information about ecotourism opportunities**. These figures highlight the need for targeted interventions to address logistical and informational gaps, as well as the importance of financial support mechanisms to enable youth participation in ecotourism projects.

Youth Workers Perspective

The survey engaged 67 youth workers, focusing on their role in facilitating ecotourism activities, collaborating with stakeholders, and supporting youth engagement. Among the respondents, 16 youth workers (24%) reported that their organizations conduct outreach or educational sessions about ecotourism, while 18 (27%) stated they have established partnerships with local stakeholders, such as NGOs, tour operators, or small businesses. This suggests a growing but uneven effort to integrate ecotourism into youth work practices.

Training and capacity-building appear to be limited. 18 youth workers (27%) stated that their organizations offer training sessions or workshops on ecotourism principles, while only 14 (21%) reported having systems in place to evaluate the success of ecotourism activities. Furthermore, 13 respondents (19%) noted that their organizations have successfully applied for grants or sponsorships to support ecotourism initiatives, indicating a need for more structured funding channels and partnerships.

Youth workers also face challenges in engaging local communities and stakeholders. 26 respondents (39%) reported that their organizations rarely involve community members in planning tourism projects, and 23 (34%) noted limited collaboration with local authorities to gather support for ecotourism initiatives. This lack of community engagement could hinder the long-term sustainability and local impact of ecotourism projects.

Despite these challenges, youth workers recognize the transformative potential of ecotourism. 21 respondents (31%) emphasized the importance of minimizing environmental impacts in tourism activities, while 18 (27%) stated that their organizations prioritize collaboration with eco-friendly service providers. These findings point to an emerging commitment to sustainability, albeit one that requires further institutional support and capacity-building.

Tour Operators/Agencies Perspective

The survey engaged 69 tour operators, exploring their involvement in ecotourism and their collaboration with youth organizations. Among the respondents, 24 tour operators (35%) reported using social media and newsletters to promote ecotourism offers, indicating a reliance on digital platforms to reach audiences. However, only 18 respondents (26%) stated that their ecotourism activities include educational components about sustainability and climate change, suggesting room for improvement in integrating environmental education into tourism offers.

Collaboration with youth organizations remains limited. 15 respondents (22%) reported working closely with youth groups to promote ecotourism, and only 10 (14%) stated they involve young ecological entrepreneurs in their activities. These numbers highlight a disconnect between tour operators and youth-led initiatives, which could be addressed through targeted partnerships and networking opportunities.

Tour operators also face significant challenges in engaging younger audiences. 17 respondents (25%) noted difficulties in using the right digital platforms to reach youth, while 10 (14%) reported a lack of interest among younger generations in ecotourism. Additionally, 9 respondents (13%) stated that ecotourism is often perceived as an expensive or inaccessible

form of travel, which may deter youth participation. These barriers underscore the need for innovative marketing strategies and affordable ecotourism models tailored to younger demographics.

Despite these challenges, tour operators recognize the value of ecotourism in addressing climate change and promoting sustainability. 19 respondents (28%) emphasized the importance of collaborating with local providers of eco-friendly accommodations, and 20 (29%) stated they prioritize sustainable tourism activities involving local producers and communities. These findings suggest that tour operators are open to adopting more sustainable practices, provided they receive adequate support and training.

The combined results from youth, youth workers, and tour operators highlight a shared enthusiasm for ecotourism as a tool for sustainability and community development. However, significant gaps remain in training, funding, collaboration, and outreach strategies. To address these challenges, six key areas could be developed as courses to empower youth workers as ecotourism practitioners:

- **Ecotourism Fundamentals and Sustainability Principles:** A course focused on the core concepts of ecotourism, including biodiversity conservation, cultural respect, and low-impact travel practices. In this part, aspects functional to the acquisition of the YEL! certification will be depicted and assessed.

- **Community Engagement and Stakeholder Collaboration**: Training on how to involve local communities, municipalities, and small businesses in planning and implementing ecotourism projects.

- **Digital Marketing and Outreach**: A course to equip youth workers with skills to use social media, digital platforms, and eco-influencers to promote ecotourism among younger audiences.

- **Grant Writing and Funding Strategies**: Training on how to apply for grants, sponsorships, and crowdfunding to sustain ecotourism projects financially.

- **Educational Programme Development**: A course on designing workshops, guided tours, and interactive activities that emphasize sustainability and climate change.

- **Innovative Ecotourism Models**: Training on new trends such as regenerative tourism, city escape rooms, and eco-hackathons to attract diverse audiences and foster innovation.

Potential for Synergy

There is significant potential for cross-sectoral collaboration, though currently underutilized. The responses highlight an opportunity to better integrate ecotourism training and youth participation through structured frameworks and initiatives.

The field research affirms that while interest in ecotourism and sustainable youth engagement exists across partner territories, significant disparities remain in awareness, participation, and institutional readiness. Youth engagement is often driven by organisational outreach, and both youth organisations and tourism entities require additional capacity-building to bridge the gap between ambition and implementation.

To strengthen the role of ecotourism in youth work, it is essential to invest in long-term partnerships, knowledge sharing, and the development of supportive ecosystems that connect youth with meaningful local opportunities. By reinforcing the relationships among youth, youth organisations, and tourism actors, YouthTrails can help build inclusive, resilient, and future-oriented models of rural development.

6.4 Iceland

Reykjanes Peninsula, located in the southwest of Iceland, is a geologically active area defined by lava fields, geothermal activity, and a rugged Atlantic coastline. As the home of the Reykjanes UNESCO Global Geopark, the region presents a compelling setting for ecotourism and youth engagement. However, the field research conducted in Reykjanes for the YouthTrails

project reveals a complex landscape of enthusiasm, barriers, and unrealised potential in activating youth through ecotourism pathways.

Among the 17 youth surveyed, over 70% expressed a strong interest in protecting nature and exploring responsibly, while 67% reported they would like to lead or start local activities that promote nature and culture. This clearly demonstrates a high level of ecological awareness and personal motivation among the region's young people. Yet, only 20% stated that they already feel confident starting eco-activities, with 100% indicating they would need some form of financial, social, or expert support to begin. This points to a readiness to act, but only if properly supported.

Sustainable travel behaviours are already present: 80% of youth respondents claimed they actively participate in eco-friendly travel behaviours, such as reducing their environmental impact or supporting local communities by buying local crafts or joining clean-up days. However, 60% also noted that they feel lost when trying to find reliable information or digital content on sustainable venues. Nearly 9 out of 10 young people expressed a desire to learn new environmental skills (such as eco-guiding or conservation) and over 50% showed interest in career paths related to environmental education or nature tourism. Despite this potential, most respondents perceived the lack of transportation, digital visibility, and local youth networks as major barriers to engagement in remote ecotourism.

Youth workers

While the youth responses reflect high motivation, the youth organisation landscape in Reykjanes appears limited in formal structure. The field survey registered very low activity among youth workers responding from the region. Informal conversations and previous project involvement with GeoCamp Iceland and the network of UNESCO Schools in the region suggest that most youth-led initiatives occur through temporary Erasmus+ exchanges, local nature clubs, or environmental days held in schools. However, consistent infrastructure and institutional support for youth workers in ecotourism appears underdeveloped.

There is also a need for greater digital capacity and collaborative planning with tourism stakeholders. For example, youth workers in previous programmes often express difficulty sustaining projects beyond initial funding or involving municipalities in long-term planning. Moreover, while awareness of ecotourism exists, training for youth workers on how to

mentor youth in sustainable project design remains fragmented. These limitations signal the need for targeted investment in youth worker training, local anchoring of international projects, and tools for long-term capacity building.

Tourism operators

Tourism providers on the Reykjanes Peninsula range from established tour companies and geothermal spas to smaller adventure operators and local museums. However, only a few actively involve youth in co-creating ecotourism offers. Data from the broader YouthTrails tour operator survey suggests that while Icelandic operators are generally sustainability-oriented, their engagement with youth organisations remains infrequent.

Challenges for operators include a lack of mechanisms to involve young people directly in product design or storytelling and a perception that younger travellers are harder to reach or less financially viable. At the same time, many operators highlight the importance of conservation, and express interest in collaborating with schools or volunteer programmes if supported by local networks or EU frameworks. This latent potential could be unlocked through certification schemes, youth-to-operator bridges, and digital campaigns that highlight youth contributions to sustainable tourism.

Reflections and priorities for Reykjanes

To harness the full potential of youth-driven ecotourism in Reykjanes, the following priorities should be addressed:

- **Bridging Awareness and Action**: Youth in the region express clear readiness and interest in participating in ecotourism, but require local structures, mentorship, and financial access to take the first step.
- **Empowering Youth Workers**: Investments in ecotourism training and project-based funding for youth workers would provide the needed support for long-term youth engagement.
- **Engaging Tourism Stakeholders**: Establishing platforms for co-design between youth and operators, such as summer eco-guiding labs or community story trails, can increase the visibility and appeal of youth-driven initiatives.
- **Enhancing Digital Access and Outreach**: Improving how sustainable travel options are communicated online, and fostering

digital literacy among both youth and operators, would help youth feel more equipped to act.

Incentivising Local Collaboration: Encouraging municipalities, schools, NGOs, and businesses to co-create long-term strategies around youth and ecotourism can support community resilience and local identity.

By aligning these actions with Iceland's sustainability goals and the educational priorities of the Reykjanes UNESCO Global Geopark, youth workers and local institutions can turn Reykjanes into a leading example of meaningful, place-based ecotourism led by youth.

6.5 Italy

The northern region of the province of Latina, located in the Lazio region of Italy, is a striking example of a territory that balances rich cultural heritage with diverse natural ecosystems. This area, characterized by its proximity to the Circeo National Park, ancient Roman ruins, and coastal landscapes, holds immense potential for ecotourism development. The field data collected from Polygonal, which represents organizations and individuals in this region, reveals a mix of enthusiasm and challenges in leveraging these assets.

Among the youth surveyed, 57% expressed strong interest in learning about protecting nature and exploring responsibly, while 33% actively look for eco-friendly venues when traveling. These figures highlight a growing awareness and readiness among younger generations to engage in sustainable tourism. However, a striking contrast emerges when considering practical engagement: only 25% of respondents reported participating in local ecological activities, such as clean-up drives or conservation projects. This gap between interest and action suggests that while the natural and cultural resources of northern Latina are recognized, they remain underutilized due to barriers like limited infrastructure, lack of guidance, and minimal financial support.

Youth workers

The collection of answers is based on 8 youth organizations - notwithstanding the efforts to reachout, youth work in Latina province is

still limited and fragmented. According to the interviewed youth workers, youth organizations play a crucial role in bridging the gap between ecotourism potential and practical implementation, yet their efforts are often constrained by systemic challenges. According to the survey, 37.5% of youth workers reported "very little" collaboration with local stakeholders, such as NGOs, municipalities, or small businesses, to co-develop ecotourism initiatives. This lack of collaboration limits their ability to design and execute impactful projects that align with both community needs and environmental goals.

Interestingly, 50% of youth workers identified digital tools and platforms as underutilized in promoting ecotourism. While social media and online campaigns have proven effective in other regions for engaging younger audiences, this potential remains largely untapped in northern Latina. The field data also reveals that only 12% of youth workers have received training in using digital platforms for community engagement or marketing eco-tourism experiences. This highlights a critical need for capacity-building programs that equip youth workers with the skills to harness digital tools effectively.

Despite these challenges, there are success stories that offer a blueprint for future efforts. For example, youth workers who collaborated with local cultural organizations to organize eco-trails and educational workshops reported higher levels of community participation and satisfaction. These initiatives not only showcased the natural beauty of the region but also emphasized the importance of preserving its unique ecosystems. However, such projects remain isolated, with only 25% of youth workers reporting "quite" or "a lot" of involvement in similar activities. The lack of widespread replication indicates the need for systemic support, including funding, training, and policy alignment.

Despite being key players in the tourism industry, tour operators face significant challenges in aligning their practices with ecotourism principles. According to the survey, 62.5% of tour operators rely heavily on social media and newsletters to attract visitors, yet only 30% include educational components about sustainability or climate change in their offerings. This imbalance suggests that while digital platforms are being used to market the region, they are not fully leveraged to promote responsible tourism practices.

The data also reveals a notable disconnect between tour operators and local youth organizations. Only 22% of tour operators reported collaborating with youth groups to promote ecotourism activities, and a mere 14% stated that they involve young ecological entrepreneurs in their projects. This lack of collaboration not only limits the scope of ecotourism initiatives but also excludes a valuable demographic that could bring fresh perspectives and innovative ideas to the table.

One of the most striking findings is the perception of ecotourism as an expensive or inaccessible form of travel. 25% of tour operators reported difficulties in attracting younger audiences due to cost concerns, while 18% noted logistical barriers, such as limited transportation options to remote areas (e.g. Circeo areas, mountains' areas etc). Addressing these issues will require a multi-faceted approach, including the development of affordable travel packages, improved infrastructure, and targeted marketing campaigns that emphasize the accessibility and benefits of ecotourism.

Some reflections:

To unlock the region's ecotourism potential, it is essential to address the following priorities:

- **Strengthening Youth Engagement**: Programs that bridge the gap between interest and action are crucial. This could include hands-on ecological activities, mentorship opportunities, and financial support for youth-led initiatives.
- **Building Capacity for Youth Workers**: Training in digital tools, stakeholder collaboration, and project management will empower youth workers to act as effective facilitators and educators.
- **Fostering Collaboration with Tour Operators**: Partnerships between youth organizations and tour operators can create synergies that benefit both parties, such as co-developing affordable eco-tourism packages and integrating educational components into tourism offers.
- **Improving Accessibility**: Investments in infrastructure, such as transportation to remote areas, and the development of affordable travel options are critical to making ecotourism more inclusive.

- **Promoting Digital Innovation**: Leveraging social media and other online platforms to market the region's ecotourism potential can attract a wider audience and foster a culture of sustainability.
- **Aligning Policy and Practice**: Local authorities must play a proactive role in supporting ecotourism through funding, policy alignment, and community engagement.

6.6 Spain

The local area of the Marina Alta province, located in the south of the Comunitat Valenciana, is one of Spain's top tourist hotspots, with thousands of people from Spain and Europe coming to enjoy the beautiful weather and natural beauties such as beaches, coves and mountains. The issue in the area is a case of sustainability, not only in environmental terms, but also culturally and in terms of lifestyle change for local people. Not only is the most consumed type of tourism environmentally damaging, with sometimes scarce water being used to fill swimming pools and local natural beauty being destroyed to build more tourism opportunities, but local people are being priced out of their homeland in favour of theme-park like resorts and gated communities.

Youth

Young people in Spain, especially in the Marina Alta area, are keenly aware of the challenges of predatory tourism and the prioritisation of economic benefits over sustainability, with 100% of those polled being interested in learning more on how to protect nature and responsible exploration and discovery. In practice, though, they showed the effects of a lack of information and promotion, with only 50% being aware of eco-friendly venues and sustainable tourism options in their local areas. All valued local support and community participation as a key factor in enjoying their travels and adventures, but expressed lack of opportunity as the main factor in not realising these activities more, with many expressing interest in potential eco-tourism mobilities through the Erasmus+ programme.

All youth surveyed expressed interest in learning more on eco-tourism, with some interested in getting in touch with people able to help, and others simply desiring more information and opportunities.

Youth Workers

Of youth workers surveyed, all were currently focused on their work and not involved in any volunteering schemes regarding eco-tourism, though 75% expressed interest in these. Most of the surveyed declared experience in these types of activities previously, and also mentioned at least semi-regular community engagement from their respective organisations.

The surveyed groups indicated outside of certain local initiatives, their experience was mainly through the implementation of other European initiatives with ecotourism focus, and cited the lack of connections with other possible stakeholders as the main obstacle in their further participation, especially regionally and nationally.

The conclusions between all demographics were a severe lack of promotion of the types of initiatives and opportunities that provide real benefits around Spain, with those interested struggling to find their way in an accessible manner and being tackled by these obstacles to end up not participating. The positive side of this insight is that in Spain, youth and youth workers alike are interested in a change of the status quo in terms of ecotourism, with YouthTrails having a great opportunity ahead to do this.

6.7 Slovenia

Slovenia is well-positioned to support the development of youth-led ecotourism due to its strong environmental ethos, rich natural landscapes, and a relatively well-developed youth sector. Given Slovenia's small geographic size, our research did not focus on just one specific region but rather took into account the entire country. In the field research we included 25 young people, 10 youth workers from youth center-hostels (in Slovenia there are 12 youth centers that also have hostels as part of the youth center. They are mostly located in smaller urban areas, with some of them in rural, more remote locations) and 8 people connected to the tourism sector (employees at municipality tourist offices, small tour operators and youth tourism organisations).

Youth

Young people in Slovenia demonstrate a strong sense of environmental awareness and curiosity, with over half of respondents expressing high

interest in learning how to protect nature and travel responsibly. This shows that ecological values are already embedded in the mindset of youth, who also showed strong enthusiasm for participating in activities that support local traditions and learning practical environmental skills like conservation or low-impact travel.

Despite this motivation, actual engagement seems hindered by structural gaps. 92% of respondents feel confused by regulations or lack clarity on how to begin their own eco-initiatives, with 64% stating they actively use digital tools like TikTok, Instagram, or AI to plan eco-friendly trips. This indicates both a digital and informational disconnect when it comes to converting awareness into action.

The majority of respondents placed themselves at a neutral midpoint when asked about participation in activities that help the environment (e.g., clean-ups, buying local), or finding support when planning sustainable travel. 88% stated they feel that there isn't enough support or information for young people to engage in ecotourism, and nearly as many (84%) identified financial barriers as a main reason they do not take part more actively.

There is, however, openness to take the next step: 80% of respondents were interested in leading or initiating their own eco-activities and 72% working in areas like eco-guiding or environmental education, or joining short-term mobility programmes like Erasmus+ focused on sustainability (92%). They also showed readiness to reach out to local youth clubs or cultural organisations while traveling, indicating that social and educational elements of ecotourism are attractive to them.

Yet digital activism still lags behind. Only 56% actively promote sustainable practices online — showing that while awareness is present, online engagement in sustainability remains underdeveloped among youth.

In summary, Slovenian youth are motivated but under-supported: they care deeply about nature, local culture, and sustainability, but often lack tools, networks, and financial means to act on this interest. Clearer guidance, real-life role models, and accessible, affordable opportunities — especially through international programmes — could be key to transforming this potential into real, lasting action.

Youth workers

Youth workers and hostel managers surveyed across various regions display a high level of awareness and engagement with sustainability and

youth-oriented travel, even if practical implementation is still developing. All respondents indicated strong interest in promoting responsible tourism, with many already involved in local or international mobility programmes, including Erasmus+, to engage young people in ecotourism activities.

70% of the respondents reported offering non-formal learning opportunities related to tourism and sustainability, such as youth exchanges or thematic workshops, and expressed willingness to continue or expand these initiatives. While many are already working with youth organisations, hostels, or local associations (50%), the responses also revealed that direct collaboration with tourism stakeholders (such as DMOs or eco-tourism businesses) remains limited. This signals an opportunity for building stronger partnerships between youth work and the tourism sector.

Interest in new promotional models and digital tools is high, with several respondents open to exploring formats like city-based treasure hunts, escape rooms, or gamified apps to attract young people to sustainable tourism concepts. There is also strong support for creating local hubs for ecotourism, and for involving young people in participatory planning and implementation, such as co-designing sustainable travel routes or leading community-based tourism projects.

Despite this enthusiasm, youth workers and hostel managers also pointed out several obstacles. These include insufficient access to training on sustainable tourism, a lack of dedicated funding or policy frameworks, and limited knowledge among youth about ecotourism opportunities.

When asked about support needs, the most frequently mentioned included:

Training on ecotourism and regenerative tourism concepts

Stronger partnerships with tourism professionals and educational institutions

Financial and logistical backing for grassroots initiatives

Digital tools and guidance to better engage youth audiences

Overall, these respondents demonstrate strong potential to act as bridge-builders between young people and sustainable tourism practices. Their readiness to innovate, host, and educate is evident — what's needed now is more systemic integration with the tourism sector, better access to resources, and stronger cross-sectoral collaboration to fully unlock youth engagement in ecotourism.

Tour operators

Tour operators and tourism stakeholders in Slovenia who responded to the survey show strong alignment with the principles of sustainable and youth-inclusive tourism. Despite the small sample size, there is a clear willingness among these actors to engage with ecotourism models that are participatory, educational, and community-based.

97% of respondents report that they have already engaged in eco-tourism activities with youth and 76% collaborate with youth organisations, schools, or universities, and involve local stakeholders (88%) in planning and implementing ecotourism activities. 76% stated they offer youth opportunities for participation. These findings show a solid foundation and openness to engaging youth in tourism strategies, both operationally and ideologically.

Many organisations also include an educational component in their ecotourism activities, addressing topics such as climate change, sustainability, and biodiversity. They are open to innovative promotional formats, such as escape rooms or interactive tools, to attract and engage younger audiences. Importantly, all stakeholders indicate a proactive role in reducing environmental impact — promoting sustainable mobility, renewable energy, and partnerships with eco-friendly accommodation providers.

Despite this commitment, several challenges still obstruct deeper youth engagement. Respondents cited difficulty in reaching youth groups and students (25%) and acknowledged that ecotourism is still perceived as a niche or expensive activity (25%). Some noted lack of youth interest (17%) or the absence of such work in their current agendas (8%), suggesting a need for more targeted strategies and support mechanisms to effectively reach this demographic.

Tourism stakeholders also identified concrete roles for youth workers and young leaders in advancing sustainable tourism. These include:

- Proposing business ideas in sustainable tourism
- Organising educational events and networking spaces
- Facilitating connections with universities
- Providing advocacy and guidance on ecotourism values
- In terms of support, the respondents emphasized the need for:
- Specialised training on emerging tourism trends for young people
- University partnerships in tourism or related studies
- Pilot projects within Destination Management Organisations (DMOs)
- Erasmus+ collaborations with youth organisations

- Networking opportunities and digital training to enhance outreach

Overall, the stakeholders express a strong readiness to collaborate, matched with a need for better systemic support, innovative tools, and more direct bridges to youth networks. Their capacity and motivation are clear — now they seek the frameworks and partnerships to make youth-led and sustainable tourism a widespread, actionable reality.

6.8 Portugal

In Portugal, the YouthTRAILS project found fertile ground for exploring how youth ecotourism can be both a driver for local development and a tool for youth empowerment. The activities were coordinated by Associação Adamastor in the Viseu Dão-Lafões region, a central inland territory known for its rich cultural traditions, natural landscapes, and growing investment in youth participation. To better understand the local realities, a field consultation was carried out with 128 participants, gathering data from three main stakeholder groups: young people, youth workers, and tourism operators. Their responses helped shape a comprehensive understanding of the potential, limitations, and aspirations linked to youth ecotourism in Portugal.

Young respondents demonstrated a clear alignment with the values of ecotourism. A large majority expressed concern for environmental protection and showed a strong preference for low-impact travel modes such as walking or cycling. Cultural authenticity, contact with local communities, and opportunities to learn while travelling were all rated as key motivators. However, despite this enthusiasm, most of the respondents had never participated in ecotourism activities. The main barriers identified were the lack of accessible information, limited transport connections to natural areas, and the perception that sustainable options are more expensive or less visible. Still, many participants expressed a strong interest in volunteering, acting as local eco-guides, or participating in green projects, especially if these were connected to programmes such as Erasmus+, the European Solidarity Corps, or DiscoverEU.

Youth workers also showed a high level of interest in using ecotourism as a pedagogical approach. Many already use outdoor learning or sustainability

themes in their work but identified a clear need for structured training in eco-guiding, non-formal methods for environmental education, and tools to develop inclusive ecotourism activities. Their responses highlight the importance of establishing stronger connections between the youth and tourism sectors. Several professionals shared experiences where young participants in mobility projects contributed to mapping hidden heritage, developing creative eco-routes, or initiating environmental storytelling with the local community. These small-scale initiatives show how ecotourism can be a meaningful framework for experiential learning, but they remain largely isolated and disconnected from wider territorial strategies.

Tourism operators, though fewer in number, provided valuable insights into the existing gaps and opportunities. While most acknowledged the growing interest of young travellers in sustainability, they admitted to lacking effective channels to reach this audience. Moreover, few were aware of the possibilities offered by European youth programmes or of the educational potential of collaboration with youth organisations. Those who had collaborated with Associação Adamastor or similar structures expressed a positive view of the outcomes, particularly when young people were involved in co-creation processes, cultural promotion, or environmental volunteering. However, there is still considerable hesitation in integrating these models into mainstream tourism offerings, largely due to perceived administrative complexity or lack of specialised staff.

Across all three groups, there is a shared sense of possibility. Young people are eager to engage, youth workers see ecotourism as a valuable tool for education and inclusion, and tourism providers are beginning to see the added value of sustainability-oriented initiatives. What is missing is a coherent infrastructure that allows these energies to converge. The findings suggest that Portugal needs to move beyond sporadic projects and invest in structured support systems that link mobility, education, and tourism.

The YouthTRAILS methodology offers a promising starting point. In Viseu, Adamastor has begun transforming the local youth hostel into a dynamic ecotourism hub, where international volunteers, local youth, and visitors co-create activities that connect nature, culture, and sustainability. From eco-hackathons and cultural escape rooms to community mapping and digital storytelling, the hostel is becoming a living lab for green youth participation. The ambition is to replicate this model in other areas and to establish a national network of youth-friendly eco-itineraries.

The Portuguese case reveals that the success of youth ecotourism depends not only on protecting natural resources but also on rethinking how young people experience and shape their territories. It is about creating spaces where they are not just visitors or consumers, but active protagonists in building a more sustainable and inclusive tourism landscape.

6.9 Greece

The area around Hopeland, in the eastern Peloponnese, offers a promising landscape for ecotourism, characterized by olive groves, hiking paths, and small-scale sustainable farms. Nearby, the historically and culturally rich Argos region, including Nafplio, Mycenae (Mikines), and Epidaurus, faces parallel challenges. Although renowned for archaeological and cultural tourism, these locations suffer from overtourism and lack sustainable infrastructure to manage environmental impacts effectively. Ecotourism activities like guided nature hikes, biodiversity education, or structured conservation projects are scarce. Even the ancient theatre of Epidaurus, despite its natural setting, rarely integrates ecological experiences into its cultural offerings, highlighting the lack of coordinated action and specialized knowledge in ecological education. To truly leverage ecotourism potential across Hopeland and the Argos region, coordinated investments are needed to improve infrastructure, train local stakeholders in sustainability practices, enhance digital communication, and establish partnerships that unite cultural, historical, and ecological experiences into cohesive, sustainable tourism offerings.

Data gathered from 28 young respondents clearly illustrates a strong interest in actively engaging in ecotourism, with approximately 82% (23 out of 28) expressing willingness to join funded short eco-trips combining volunteering with cultural exchange. Furthermore, about 90% expressed interest in learning how to protect nature and explore responsibly during their travels, and over 80% indicated that they value activities involving interaction with local communities, such as tasting or preparing local foods, participating in outdoor volunteering, photography projects, and conservation activities like trail clean-ups or tree planting. However, the respondents consistently identified barriers including poor public transport to remote areas (mentioned by around 75%), lack of clear digital

information or platforms for discovering eco-friendly venues (approximately 70%), perceived cultural or language barriers (nearly 60%), and limited financial or practical support for starting their own eco-projects (over 70%).

Similarly, the three youth organisations surveyed already run small-scale eco-initiatives but face difficulties scaling and sustaining these activities. Key issues mentioned were limited collaboration with local tourism operators, insufficient continuity in funding, inadequate digital outreach skills, and difficulty maintaining activities beyond short-term funding cycles. Local tourism entities, represented by four operators, confirmed these limitations.

7. What a youth worker can do

Youth workers are at the frontline of change in remote communities. With the power to inspire, connect, and equip young people, they play a key role in unlocking the potential of ecotourism as a tool for local development. But how does one move from an inspiring idea to a meaningful and effective initiative? This chapter serves as a practical roadmap for youth workers who wish to engage young people in sustainable tourism projects grounded in community needs, environmental values, and real-world impact.

7.1 Embrace the Principles of Ecotourism

At every stage of planning, youth workers must stay anchored in the three core principles of ecotourism:

- Conservation: Support actions that protect biodiversity and natural resources.
- Community: Ensure local people benefit socially, culturally, and economically.
- Interpretation: Promote learning, awareness, and cultural exchange.

Ask yourself regularly: *Does my project idea align with these principles?* If not, don't hesitate to reshape it. Flexibility and reflection are the keys to staying on course.

7.1 Engage Local Communities Early and Respectfully

The best ecotourism projects are those built *with* local people—not merely *for* them. As a youth worker, you should:

- Involve local stakeholders from the start.
- Recognize and respect community rights over land, culture, and heritage.
- Align project goals with local needs, priorities, and rhythms.

Listening before acting is not just respectful—it ensures that the project will be embraced and sustained.

7.2 Shape Your Idea: From Vision to Action

Youth workers can guide young people to structure their ideas using a simple step-by-step process:

Identify the Problem

Help young people observe and name local issues—pollution, loss of cultural heritage, youth unemployment, etc.

Find the Aim

Encourage them to dream big: *What would the world look like if this problem was solved?*

Set Objectives

Break the aim down into SMART objectives (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, Timed) to make the project focused and actionable.

Choose the Method

Decide on the form of action—Is it a service (guided tours, experiences)? A physical initiative (clean-up, signage)? A campaign?

7.3 Start Small and Stay Specific

It's better to begin with a small, well-defined project than to try solving everything at once. Youth workers should remind their groups:

- Specificity leads to clarity and feasibility.
- Small wins build confidence and support.
- Projects can always grow as experience and capacity increase.

7.4 Define Your Target Group

Encourage young people to clearly define who they're designing their project for:

- Locals or tourists?
- Eco-conscious travelers or casual visitors?

The better defined the audience, the easier it is to create engaging, impactful experiences and measure success.

7.5 Map Out Resources

Every project needs an honest assessment of what's available and what's missing:

- What skills, equipment, contacts, or spaces do you already have?
- What funding, permissions, or expertise will you need?

Youth workers can help young people see beyond financial resources by activating networks and community support.

7.6 Make an Action Plan

Help your group create a realistic timeline and division of tasks:

- Set a project launch date.
- Break the plan into smaller, manageable tasks.

- Prioritize deadlines and delegate responsibilities.
- Encourage review and adaptability—plans can evolve with the project.

7.7 Learn from Others and Share Your Journey

Great ideas rarely exist in isolation. Youth workers should:

- Encourage research into successful ecotourism initiatives elsewhere.
- Connect young people with similar projects or mentors.
- Promote a culture of knowledge-sharing and collaboration.

Celebrate creativity, but also remind your group: *It's better to share and grow than to struggle alone.*

7.8 Articulate Vision and Mission

Support young people in formulating clear vision and mission statements:

- Vision: What is the long-term change they hope to see?
- Mission: What will they do daily to work toward that change?

These statements serve as motivational compasses and communicative tools for explaining the project to others.

7.9 Policy recommendations

The role of a youth worker in remote areas is not just to lead or organise, but to guide, empower, and sustain. In ecotourism, youth workers act as catalysts—connecting young people to nature, to their communities, and to each other, while also nurturing a sense of purpose and environmental stewardship.

By staying grounded in the principles of ecotourism, embracing collaboration, and applying practical tools for planning and execution, youth

workers can transform ambitious ideas into projects that enrich lives, protect ecosystems, and breathe new life into rural territories.

THANK YOU!

YouthTRAILS