

RE-EVALUATION

Verifier's Report to the Evaluation Committee

Name of protected area: Lahemaa National Park

Name of verifier: Rolands Auziņš.

Date of verification visit: 5th, 6th and 8th of May, 2025.

Date of completion of this report: 26th of June, 2025.

NOTES FOR THE VERIFIER

Where is shown, verifiers are asked to indicate a score, using the following system:

- X** Not relevant
- 0** Not happening
- 1** Weak – little action
- 2** Moderate – action happening in this area, sufficient at present
- 3** Good – significant action, totally satisfactory

A star * may be added to a “3” score to indicate an excellent example of best practice (3*).

Verifiers are asked to comment on individual questions to provide further information or explanation, keeping their answers concise. In particular, the reasons for any score under 2 should be briefly explained, highlighting any particular causes for concern.

The reasons for any score of * awarded should also be explained: what makes this an example of best practice? The star should be used sparingly and only for outstanding initiatives or actions which can serve as models at the European level.

Answer the report in black text colour.

The format for this verifier's report is linked closely to that of the Application Report completed by the protected area. You may copy information from the Application Report into this report to support particular answers where this is helpful. **If you do this, please indicate very clearly (by using blue text colour or by italics) the text that has been copied from the Application Report.**

Your own observations relating to the information provided by the protected area and gained on site are, of course, particularly important.

Please attach to this report: i) a list of any documents received from the protected area or presented during the visit which were not included in the original application; ii) a full list of people interviewed with job titles and the final programme of the visit (key sites and partners visited).

Note: Before sending your report, please refer to the complete checklist and guiding notes for formatting it [here](#) and fill out the assessment form for verifiers [here](#).

Brief details of the PA and overall impressions

Please indicate very briefly (2 pages maximum):

- ***Location, size, population, IUCN Category (or equivalent), nature of the PA Authority, key features of the PA, level of tourism***
 - ***Context of the re-application (e.g. any issues relating to the decision to reapply)***
 - ***Overall impressions of the PA***
-
- ✓ **Location:** Northern Estonia, Harju County (Kuusalu Municipality), Lääne-Viru County (Haljala and Kadrina Municipalities).
 - ✓ **Size:** 74 784 ha in total, including 47 910 ha land area and 26 874 ha sea area (Protected Area); 209 800 ha (ECST Application Area).
 - ✓ **Population:** ~ 3 000 permanent residents in the National Park; 26 000 in the ECST area (as of 01.01.2025).
 - ✓ **IUCN Category:** II – National Park.
 - ✓ **Natura 2000:** 100% of the National Park area
 - ✓ **Protected Area Authority:** Estonian Environmental Board (EB), in cooperation with NGO Arenduskoda (AK) and local partners.

Lahemaa National Park, Estonia's oldest and largest national park, is managed by the Environmental Board (Keskkonnaamet), which oversees conservation, zoning, and nature protection. Charter implementation is carried out jointly with the NGO Arenduskoda (AK), the LEADER Local Action Group, reflecting a strong partnership between public authority and local community actors. Visitor infrastructure and arrangements on state-owned land are the responsibility of the State Forest Management Centre (RMK), which maintains trails, manages nature centres, and promotes environmental education.

Lahemaa National Park is internationally recognized as Important Bird Area and belongs to HELCOM network.

The protected area is characterized by extensive coastal forests, bogs, rivers, and geological features such as the Baltic Clint and massive boulders. Its cultural richness includes historical fishing villages, manor parks, sacred natural sites, and military heritage. With over 120 km of marked hiking trails, educational programmes, and restored heritage sites, Lahemaa offers a wide range of high-quality, low-impact tourism experiences. The park's zoning system balances strict protection (0.1% of the area), conservation zones (23.8%), and broader limited-management areas where traditional land use and sustainable tourism are permitted.

Tourism in Lahemaa is well-established, with more than 200 000 day visitors and over 108 000 overnight stays annually. Most tourism businesses are micro-enterprises, offering nature-based experiences, small-scale accommodation, and locally rooted services. Key activities include hiking, nature education, cultural events, and eco-tourism, with an emphasis on year-round accessibility. The tourism region surrounding the national park spans approximately 209 800 ha and involves five municipalities, with a population of around 26 000 people. Accessibility is supported by proximity to Tallinn and a functioning, though uneven, public transport system.

The Lahemaa National Park successfully upholds the principles of the European Charter for Sustainable Tourism in Protected Areas. Strong local cooperation, strategic vision, and the integration of nature conservation with sustainable tourism development are evident. Stakeholder involvement is broad and structured, especially through the Sustainable Tourism Forum. Despite some challenges related to visitor pressure at popular sites (e.g., Viru Bog), the overall governance system is mature and effective.

One of the positive outcomes of the Charter is that the NGO Lahemaa Tourism Association (operating under the Visit Lahemaa brand) was founded in March 2020 within the framework of the previous strategy plan.

The re-evaluation was originally scheduled for 2024, but the deadline was extended by one year, resulting in the re-evaluation of all three Charter parks in Estonia taking place in the same year.

Comments on the application from the Charter area and re-evaluation visit:
Please raise any points and issues relating to the process

To optimize resources during the ECST re-evaluation visits to Lahemaa National Park and Soomaa National Park, I visited both parks during a single trip. Throughout the visit, I was accompanied and provided with transportation by Nele Sõber from the Environmental Board. On-site, I met with the LEADER group management and members who are driving the Charter process in their respective areas. I also had meetings with stakeholders from various fields, which provided valuable insights into tourism-related topics.

The entire process went smoothly, and the planned program was completed. I would like to express my sincere thanks to Nele Sõber, her local support teams in the park, and all stakeholders for the opportunity to witness their work and commitment to sustainable tourism from different perspectives.

SECTION A – GENERAL INFORMATION

- A.1 Has full and clear factual information been supplied by the Charter area in answer to sections A1 – A15 of the Application Report framework? 3**

The information was provided to the necessary extent. Some questions were clarified during the on-site meeting at the park.

- A.2 Have you received additional/amended information not contained in the protected area's application?**

I asked to have some information translated and sent to me in English.

- A.3 Indicate if any information is not available and the reasons for that:**

All necessary information is available.

- A.4 Are you satisfied that the information supplied is accurate? 3**

Yes

- A.5 Are there any factual issues that might affect the eligibility of the protected area for re-award of the Charter?**

No

SECTION B – Sustainable Tourism FORUM

- B.1 Is there a permanent stakeholder structure, with a defined membership, that enables the protected-area authority to work with others on the development and management of tourism, including in taking decisions and implementing and reviewing the strategy? 3**

Yes

Briefly describe this structure, including size and membership, frequency of meetings, responsibility, functions etc. Please identify and distinguish between:

- ***Any Executive Committee/Working Group – e.g. responsible for delivery of the action plan***
- ***Any wider structure – e.g. enabling wider stakeholder engagement and communication***

The governance structure for implementing the European Charter for Sustainable Tourism in Lahemaa National Park comprises a two-level system that enables both strategic coordination and broad stakeholder participation.

The Executive-level coordination is shared by three core organisations: the Environmental Board, the NGO Arenduskoda, and Visit Lahemaa. These bodies jointly oversee the implementation and delivery of the Sustainable Tourism Strategy

and Action Plan, with clearly divided roles. EB, as the protected area authority, provides conservation oversight; AK leads coordination and stakeholder engagement through its LEADER role; and Visit Lahemaa acts as the tourism destination management organisation. This tripartite coordination group is not formalised as a separate committee, but it operates as a de facto steering group, meeting regularly—at least twice per year—with additional sessions during planning or evaluation phases. AK also organises specific meetings related to strategy implementation and funding, with minutes and documentation maintained throughout the 2019–2025 period.

The wider stakeholder structure is the Lahemaa Sustainable Tourism Forum, an open and participatory platform that brings together public authorities, private tourism businesses, NGOs, village societies, conservation organisations, and local inhabitants. Forum meetings are typically attended by 40–50 participants for tourism-focused events and 20–30 for general sessions, and take place 2–3 times per year, including strategic workshops, action plan consultations, and public discussions.

The Forum has both informative and advisory roles—it shares updates on strategy implementation and visitor management, gives feedback on draft documents, and proposes solutions to emerging issues. It also ensures transparency, facilitates two-way communication, and strengthens local ownership of sustainable tourism in the protected area.

The Forum involves key organisations such as EB, AK, RMK, Visit Lahemaa, the Estonian National Heritage Board, and Virumaa Museums. It also includes local municipalities, tourism businesses, conservation NGOs (e.g. Estonian Fund for Nature), and regional bodies like Visit Estonia and the Estonian Rural Tourism Association

How has this forum developed or changed over the past five years (in terms of its work, membership and the stakeholders within it)?

Forum consists of people from different sectors and has grown with the help of Visit Lahemaa. More generic Forum is hosted by EB and tourism related Forum by Visit Lahemaa. Still, all the stakeholders can participate these meetings.

B.2 Are local tourism enterprises involved? 3

Yes, local tourism enterprises are actively involved in the Lahemaa Sustainable Tourism Forum.

The Forum includes private tourism service providers as key stakeholders. These include accommodation providers, tour operators, museums, and eco-tourism businesses, many of whom are certified under the EUROPARC Charter II. I met several of them during the visit and heard very positive feedback about the work of the Forum and the joint progress in sustainable tourism development.

The Forum also serves as a platform for networking among tourism businesses and for aligning their activities with the principles of sustainable tourism within the protected area.

Charter area has been awarded with Green Destination certificate (2021 – Gold level; 2023 – Platinum level, which is the highest recognition!), which was applied by Visit Lahemaa.

Please describe how the Charter area has progressed and strengthened relationships with local businesses.

The Lahemaa Charter area has significantly strengthened its relationship with local tourism businesses through regular engagement, joint initiatives, and recognition schemes. The Lahemaa Sustainable Tourism Forum, meeting 2–3 times annually, includes active participation from different stakeholders enabling direct input into planning and decision-making.

Coordinating bodies like NGO Arenduskoda and Visit Lahemaa have supported businesses via training, collaborative marketing, and funding guidance. These efforts have led to more professional, responsible, and involved local enterprises.

Have any schemes been set up to link businesses more closely with the Charter area/Charter implementation?

Such schemes are not obligatory for re-award of the Charter

Environmental Board has introduced the European Charter for Sustainable Tourism Part II, which facilitates formal partnerships between the protected area authority and local tourism businesses. This involves signing voluntary agreements that commit both parties to sustainable tourism practices, aligning with the Charter's principles.

B.3 Has the involvement of the following key groups progressed satisfactorily over the past five years?

Local government? 3

Yes, local governments - including Kuusalu, Haljala, Kadrina, and Tapa municipalities - have remained active participants in the Charter process. They have contributed to the Sustainable Tourism Forum, supported tourism development aligned with the ECST, and engaged in joint planning and cultural heritage initiatives. Their involvement has ensured integration of tourism with local spatial planning and community development efforts.

The local community? (e.g civil society bodies, interest groups etc.)? 2

Yes, community engagement has grown steadily. Village associations, NGOs, cultural organisations, and local residents have participated in stakeholder meetings, provided feedback on tourism strategy updates, and contributed to events and initiatives.

Conservation interests? 2

Conservation interests have been well represented and actively involved in the Forum. The Environmental Board leads the Forum and represents national environmental policies at both the local and national levels.

The State Forest Management Centre is responsible for visitor management and nature education.

Conservation NGOs, such as the Estonian Fund for Nature (which organises volunteer camps and restores bogs), Lahemaa Nature School, and local village societies, have also participated in Forum activities.

Any wider (regional) bodies responsible for tourism, conservation and regional development? 2

Yes, collaboration with regional organisations has been active. Visit Estonia, the Estonian Rural Tourism Association, and Virumaa Museums have participated in the Charter Forum or supported marketing, training, and visitor service development. These bodies have strengthened links between local and regional strategies

Any other key groups (please state which), either within or outside the formal partnership structure described above, which have been actively involved? ☒

I was not provided with information about other key groups that might be involved, nor is there any information indicating that a key group exists but is not involved. At the same time, I believe that the most important stakeholders are involved in the Forum to ensure its functioning.

SECTION C - SUSTAINABLE TOURISM STRATEGY AND ACTION PLAN

PREVIOUS STRATEGY AND ACTION PLAN - Implementation over the past 5 years

C.1 Overall comment on the progress of the Charter area towards excellence in sustainable tourism, bearing in mind where it started from five years ago

I see that there has been significant progress in the Charter area towards excellence in sustainable tourism. Cooperation between local governments, entrepreneurs, and non-governmental organisations for the joint development of the region has notably improved. This has mainly been achieved thanks to several projects implemented by NGOs and the establishment of Visit Lahemaa.

Sustainable tourism development is top priority. This is promoted by all the major partners in the area. Lahemaa area is implementing Charter I and II and is a Green Destination, and local DMOs promote sustainability.

C.2 Could all of the planned actions be implemented? If not, how much of the action plan was implemented (estimate)?

22 activities have been completed. One was not implemented.

C.3 Main reason for the Charter area not being able to complete the full programme (if applicable)?

The activity *Reviewing and organizing the reference of objects of interest (including outside the territory of Lahemaa National Park)*, was not implemented because *the current legislation does not permit it*.

C.4 What are the most positive achievements in your view?

1. Significant progress has been made in cooperation within Lahemaa Charter network, good cooperation projects covering Charter parks inside Estonia and abroad.
2. Establishment of Visit Lahemaa.
3. Implementation of the Charter II.
4. Guide training for local people and entrepreneurs.

C.5 What are the main challenges still faced?

1. Population decline.

2. Seasonality.
3. Geopolitical situation leading to a decrease in the number of foreign tourists.
4. Increase in national taxes.

C.6 Has the Charter area monitored the results of its action plan over the past five years? 2

Yes, the action plan has been monitored, and the most comprehensive analysis of the activities carried out was prepared in 2024.

C.7 Have the specific recommendations made by the verifier and Evaluation Committee at the original evaluation 5 years ago been addressed? 2

Significant work has been done to implement the recommendations. This is explained in more detail below.

Please list the recommendations and give a score for each:

1. There is co-operation between Environmental Board of Estonia and State Forest Management Centre. However, it should be more focused on visitor management. Definitely, this requires active participation of non-governmental sector and local municipalities, but most of the mutually coordinating actions should come from governmental institutions.

Score 2. Cooperation has improved at all levels. This is evident both from the work accomplished and from observations made during the visit.

EB has developed a „virtual office“ database (the database was reviewed during the visit on May 8) about the tourism infrastructure in private and public land, highlighting the condition of facilities and objects. This includes information about State Forest Management Centre's objects, who updates the data every month.

2. The present offer should be analyzed comparing with demand for facilities and services for people with disabilities. This should be also taken into account when revising the Strategy and Action Plan.

Score 2. Solution-based design is being increasingly implemented. When constructing new infrastructure or renovating existing ones, universal design principles are taken into account.

3. It is easy to find proper information about Lahemaa NP on the Internet concerning both values and offers; there are also other homepages that provide information about territories nearby the NP. A united medium should be created to provide information not only about the news but also about tourism products and services in the whole Charter territory.

Score 2. Visit Lahemaa <https://visitlahemaa.com/en/>, established in March 2020 within the framework of the previous strategy plan, serves as the main platform for information about the Lahemaa National Park Charter area. *Other websites support the Charter area. Information about PA is still mainly described on EB website www.kaitsealad.ee, which is the official portal for PAs, and visitor management on state land is on State Forest Management Centre website: www.loodusegakoos.ee.*

4. It is important to develop united terminology in the documentation. The reason for differences probably is translation issues from initially developed documentation in

Estonian. For example, Advisory Board is also mentioned as Forum or Strategy Forum or Lahemaa National Park Cooperation Assembly.

Score 1-2. *In Estonian language more proper word is used as Forum is not an Estonian word.* The term Forum is used as the main designation in English in the Re-evaluation Report. However, the Strategy and Action Plan still use Lahemaa National Park Co-operation Assembly in English, which can be considered equivalent to Forum.

5. The territory of Lahemaa NP has been a well-known tourism destination for decades, while the history and tourism experience of the Charter area has miscellaneous character. There should be united identity for the whole territory.

Score 1. With the establishment of Visit Lahemaa, the situation has improved by creating a unified media channel for the Charter area; however, a common identity has not yet been sufficiently developed. During the visit, local entrepreneurs acknowledged that the new visual identity of the Soomaa National Park Charter area is a good example of how to develop one, and I fully agree with this. This recommendation is therefore retained for the next period as well.

6. There are several empty spaces in the Action plan, as well there is no clear evidence about usage of Evaluation indicators for monitoring and testing the results.

Score 1-2. The previous Action Plan has been evaluated, and the new one includes "evaluation indicators". However, some of the indicators are too broad. For example: "Awareness of service providers". Too broad - "Awareness" does not specify what the service providers should be aware of (e.g., maintenance of cultural and natural heritage, or respectful and non-offending behavior). It is difficult to measure without further specification, as the indicator does not define a clear level of knowledge or expected behavioral change.

7. The Strategy for the sustainable development of the Lahemaa National Park Tourism Area 2019-2030+ is the first document of that kind for the territory. It is voluminous and contains a lot of descriptive details, substantive information and supplements, which is necessary when first-time development is implemented and a wide range of interested parties is involved. When working on the new strategy (reviewing the existing one), it is recommended to familiarize with experience from abroad concerning documents of this kind and to make the document more focused and concise.

Score 1. The new strategy – Lahemaa Sustainable Tourism Strategy 2025–2029 – is structurally very similar to the previous one and equally extensive. It is recommended to prepare such a document in a much shorter and more concise format. Good examples can be found in Charter parks in Estonia and abroad.

8. Although Action Plan (2019-2024) has already been developed, it should be improved by specifying the Strategy providing specific performers for each activity and indicators that can be monitored and used for verification of results.

Score 2. Has been taken into account.

C.8 Were the envisaged financial resources available for the implementation, and were they sufficient?

Yes, the action plan envisioned resources. Funding was mainly by projects and it was sufficient.

- C.9 Have there been changes in staffing levels, both in the protected area generally and in the staff dealing with tourism issues, over the past five years? Has the level of staffing affected the implementation of the action plan?**

In the previous period, this was not an issue and had no impact. However, as budget cuts for state institutions continue in Estonia, this will likely be felt over the next five years.

NEW STRATEGY AND ACTION PLAN - Plans for the next five years

Revision of strategy, new action plan

- C.10 Has the tourism strategy been revised for the next five years? 2**

Yes

- C.11 Has a new action plan been prepared for the Charter area and its partners? 2**

Yes

- C.12 How is the strategy and new action plan presented (in terms of documents)?
*Please comment briefly on the strategy/plan documentation (e.g. level of detail etc.)***

The Lahemaa sustainable tourism strategy 2025–2029 and the Action Plan (2025–2029) have been prepared as a single document. The work process was designed in accordance with the recommended activities for sustainable development strategy formulation as outlined by the EUROPARC Federation. The structure of the strategy is based on EUROPARC's guidelines and recommendations. The Strategy sets out four development targets and four development objectives for the coming years.

- C.13 How does the tourism strategy relate to the protected-area management plan?**

The Lahemaa sustainable tourism strategy 2025–2029 aligns with the Lahemaa national Park Management Plan (management plans are without due date) and its set activities, principles, and analyses.

Lahemaa NP Visitor Management Plan activities relate to the Charter area action plan (compiled by State Forest Management Centre).

- C.14 Are there any apparent contradictions between tourism and protected-area management objectives and actions?**

No contradictions between tourism and protected-area management objectives and actions have been observed.

- C.15 What process has been used to review/revise the strategy and develop the new action plan, and how have local stakeholders been involved?**
Please describe briefly the process, making reference to the role of the stakeholder structures described under Question B.1, as appropriate.

The development of the Strategy involved various stakeholders representing local businesses, non-profit organizations, and public sector institutions who contributed input and feedback through seminars.

The strategy document was drafted by the end of 2024, consultations took place during January and early February 2025, dissemination in February 2025. The process was a bit delayed due to the delay in the project start where the new strategy and action plan was planned to finance.

Most of the work was carried out by NGO Arenduskoda – one of the Forum executive-level coordination core organisations.

Forum has been involved in strategy process through meetings where partners are giving updates on implementation or planning concrete actions.

- C.16 Was there wider consultation with local tourism enterprises in preparing the revised strategy/action plan?**

From April 2024 to February 2025, several Forum meetings were organized, both face-to-face and online, involving *representatives from all the main organisations (EB, AK, State Forest Management Centre, Visit Lahemaa)*, tourism enterprises, the local community, and other stakeholders.

- C.17 Was there wider consultation with the local community and other interests/stakeholders in preparing the revised strategy/action plan?**

From April 2024 to February 2025, several Forum meetings were organized, both face-to-face and online, involving representatives from all the main organisations (EB, AK, State Forest Management Centre, Visit Lahemaa), tourism enterprises, the local community, and other stakeholders.

- C.18 Has there been any further assessment of natural and cultural resources, their sensitivities (capacity) and opportunities for tourism? 2**

Yes, assessment of resources and opportunities for tourism is provided in Chapter 2.1. of the Strategy – Review and evaluation of the resources of Lahemaa National Park Tourism Area by analysing each resource in a separate subchapter.

- C.19 Has there been any further assessment of visitor patterns and needs? 2**

Yes, the results of the national surveys and local visitor surveys were taken into account.

The quality of the services and facilities of the national park and the environment were rated positively. Visitors rated the quality of the road network, camping and campfire sites, trails, parking lots, visitor center, and campfire sites as the best. Visitors gave the worst ratings to consideration for people with special needs, toilets, and waste management.

The comparable visitor satisfaction index of Lahemaa NP, calculated based on the results of the visitor survey, was 4.57 (the national visitor satisfaction index for recreation and protected areas was 4.45).

C.20 Has there been any further assessment of future visitor markets offering potential? 2

Yes, future markets have been assessed. Although the focus is primarily on Estonia as a whole, the findings can also be applied to the Lahemaa Charter area.

Implementation

C.21 Does the new action plan include an indication of phasing/staging of action over time? 1

The action plan indicates that mainly the action is continuous.
No phases needed. Actions have expected results and indicators.

C.22 Does the action plan indicate the relevant stakeholders or partners for each action? 2

Yes, it is indicated in the action plan.

C.23 What is the approximate annual budget (euros) that the protected area authority is proposing to make available from its own resources, excluding staff costs, for implementing the action plan?

The amount EB provides is quite small. EB contributes mostly with personnel and additional fundings from nature conservation projects that are usually implemented all over Estonia and not specifically in Lahemaa NP.

C.24 Approximately, what percentage is this of the protected area authority's total annual budget, excluding staff costs?

The EB contributes only its human resources to the implementation of the plan, thus here – 0%.

C.25 Have funds been provided (or are they being sought) from other sources to implement the action plan, in addition to the PA's contribution? If possible, please indicate the sources and the amount of additional funding (per year or total).

Approximate cost for tourism related actions is ca 1,03 million euros for the period. Indicative budget:

- AK – ca 530,000 euros for the strategy period.
- State Forest Management Centre – maintenance and renovations and investments for the whole strategy period ca 500,000€.

Each partner has its own budget possibilities that support the activities in Charter action plan.

Additional funding comes from projects and are paid by for example: LEADER Action Groups, Environmental Investment Centre, National Foundation of Civil Society and Estonian Agricultural Registers and Information Board, etc.

C.26 Do you judge the level of funding already secured/applied for to be sufficient to meet the actions proposed? 2

Yes, especially because many of the activities will be implemented using funding received through LEADER projects.

C.27 What is the staffing that the protected-area authority is devoting to the implementation of the action plan?

Involved employees are working in the fields of nature protection planning and implementation, land management, water management, regulating hunting and forestry. See also C.23.

C.28 Is staffing being provided from other sources?

External human resources come from AK, State Forest Management Centre and Visit Lahemaa.

C.29 Do you believe the action proposed can be implemented with this level of staffing?

At present, yes; however, the future of the EB staff remains uncertain if budget cuts continue in the coming years. Nevertheless, I believe that human resources will be found to implement the plan.

C.30 Is there a good indication of commitment from partners/stakeholders to implementing the new action plan? 2

Yes, especially from the NGO Arenduskoda, which is actively working on projects for the benefit of this area.

C.31 Does the Charter area have any formal arrangements with partners for the implementation of this action plan?

Yes, formal agreements between:

- *EB and Visit Lahemaa*
- *AK and Visit Lahemaa*

Both are signed to develop and market Lahemaa Charter area in coordination. Agreement between AK and Visit Lahemaa determines that Visit Lahemaa implements activities which contribute to the Charter action plan and that AK participates in NGO Visit Lahemaa Council. In addition, EB has good will agreements with Charter II tourism businesses.

C.32 Has a process been put in place for monitoring and reporting on progress with the implementation of the Action Plan? 2

Yes, AK together with EB does the monitoring each year.

C.33 Have indicators been identified for the impact/success of the strategy and action plan, including how these will be monitored? 2

Yes, there are. Some indicators are very broad and difficult to apply without additional specification.

SECTION D – ADDRESSING THE KEY TOPICS

Please indicate below:

[A] Level of current activity. This may reflect action (or lack of it) in the previous action plan.

[B] Level of planned activity in the new plan

Please provide brief comments of explanation, as indicated in at the start of this form.

D.1 Protecting valuable landscapes, biodiversity and cultural heritage

D.1.1 Influencing land use planning and the control of potentially damaging developments

A **2** B **2**

The protection rules and management plan of Lahemaa National Park define the zoning of the area, which regulates the management and development of the territory. The management plan was developed by the EB.

It is planned in 2025, it is planned to order additional inventories of Natura 2000 habitats (forests, meadows and bogs) in Lahemaa, which would focus on state lands in the restricted zone and habitats with incomplete and old data.

D.1.2 Influencing the location, type and design of tourism developments

A **2** B **2**

NP Protection Rules and Management Plan define restrictions on where to build and develop. Besides rules and regulations there have been many information days, meetings and trainings for local people and service providers on topics such as national park values, sustainable development and tourism, cultural heritage.

Next period:

Most of the previous action plan activities will continue.

Gather information for the renewal of strategical documents (Management Plan).

D.1.3 Visitor Management Approaches

A **2** B **2**

Visitor management in Lahemaa includes surveys (2020/2021) and annual monitoring of carrying capacity (see C1.3 II). Awareness is raised through brochures, websites, and the State Forest app. Signs inform visitors about rules and local nature, while zoning restricts access and activities in certain areas. Guided tours promote respectful behavior and heritage education. In summer, parking rules apply in busy areas like Käsmu. There are no entry or parking fees for state-owned nature sites, though local museums charge admission. The Viru bog trail car park was expanded from 6 to 90 spaces due to high visitor numbers.

For the next period:

Making tourism offer more diverse (trainings, workshops, study trips; actions 2.2, 2.3).

D.2 Supporting conservation through tourism

D.2.1 Encouraging visitors and tourism businesses to support conservation

A ☒ B ☒

The activities take place indirectly.

There are no concrete actions that support this action as in Estonia it is not allowed to make revenue at the NP management level. It is done only by communicating the values of the NP.

Estonian Fund for Nature organises volunteer camps in PAs to do practical conservation work.

Next period:

As direct contributions are not allowed, the focus is still on communication, raising awareness and promotion.

D.2.2 Using revenues obtained from tourism-related activity to support conservation

A ☒ B ☒

According to the law, the EB is not entitled to receive revenue.

D.2.3 Establishing, supporting and promoting tourism-related investments, projects and activities that help to conserve the natural and cultural heritage

A ☒ B ☒

Tourism-related investments and activities that support the conservation of natural and cultural heritage are promoted through the renewal of sustainable infrastructure, such as trails and towers, with building guidance provided by the Environmental Board. Funding is available via the Environmental Investment Centre to support municipalities in addressing conservation-related issues, while projects like LIFE help restore semi-natural grasslands for nature tourism. Additionally, educational programs, guided tours, and collaboration with partners such as universities and tourism organisations enhance sustainability and raise awareness.

Next period:

State Forest Management Centre is planning to build small huts in Viru bog trail car park to promote local businesses who can offer food and souvenirs to visitors. There will also be some improvement to the new dry closets.

Sagadi exhibition will be renewed with the elements from Palmse exhibition during the next period.

D.3 Reducing carbon footprint, pollution and wasteful resource use

D.3.1 Working with tourism businesses to improve environmental management, including use of energy and water, waste management, and noise and light pollution

A 2 B 2

The implementation of Charter II, along with seminars and training on sustainable development, as well as Green Key and Green Destinations initiatives in the area, demonstrate that active work is being done on this issue. During the visit, several farms showed the use of solar energy, waste sorting, water-saving measures, and a focus on "slow tourism".

Next period:

It is planned to introduce sustainable development principles and tourism trends, as well as to assess their implementation in the delivery of services and products.

D.3.2 Promoting the use of public transport and other alternatives to cars

A 2 B 1

The Lahemaa area is accessible by various modes of transport, including public transport, rental cars, and bicycles. Buses from Tallinn and Rakvere to Lahemaa run nearly every hour, making them a viable alternative to cars for reaching main settlements. Cycling is also encouraged, with routes like the Kõrvemaa cycling trail and rental options available in Kuusalu. However, access to more remote areas within the region by public transport remains limited due to sparse service.

Next period:

Not directly, but via communication/marketing activities promote more the usage of public transport and other sustainable means of transport.

D.4 Providing safe access, quality facilities and special experiences of the protected area, available for all visitors

D.4.1 Providing a wide range of access opportunities, with attention to safety and risk management

A 3 B 3

Lahemaa National Park offers a well-developed and safe infrastructure for visitors, including around 120 km of well-marked hiking and study trails that highlight the area's natural and cultural heritage. Visitor centres provide maps, information, and exhibitions, while free access to nature trails and designated campsites ensures a low environmental impact. Seasonal restrictions, such as those during bird nesting periods, help protect sensitive habitats. Motorized vehicles are restricted on certain forest roads, and safety information is widely available both on-site and online.

D.4.2 Improving the quality of visitor facilities and services

A 3 B 3

During last five years the State Forest Management Centre has improved many objects and installed also new ones:

- *Building/enlarging Viru bog trail car park*
- *Enlarging Sagadi visitor centre car park*

- *Renewing Sagadi forest museum expo*
- *Connecting Sagadi-Oandu trail*
- *Renewing Tsitre trail signs and information boards*
- *Improving Oandu plant trail.*

Local governments have made investments (improvements) in local roads and other public facilities (such as churches, cultural houses) owned by the municipality.

The new Action Plan also includes activities focused on infrastructure improvements as well as training for those involved in the tourism sector.

The infrastructure visited during the visit was well maintained.

D.4.3 Providing visitors with specific tourism offers which involve discovery, interpretation and appreciation of the area's special natural and cultural heritage

A 2 B 2

Visitors can access a wide range of information about opportunities in the area from the three National Park Visitor Centres located in Palmse, Oandu, and Sagadi, as well as through various media channels such as websites (e.g., www.kaitsealad.ee, www.visitlahemaa.ee) and Facebook pages (e.g., <https://www.facebook.com/VisitLahemaa>). A wide range of tourism activities and experiences is available in Lahemaa, including over 120 km of well-marked trails, guided bird and mammal watching tours, visits to historic manor houses, exploration of a restored fishing village, several cycling routes, canoeing and kayaking, picnic areas, beaches, and much more.

Next period:

State Forest Management Centre will work on a new concept to greet people when they have arrived. The concept is about creating "gates" – physical gates at the beginning of trails. The idea is to create Lahemaa specific image also in terms of state land facilities.

D.4.4 Providing facilities and information for visitors with special needs

A 2 B 1

Efforts have been made in the area to improve accessibility for visitors with special needs, for example,

- *Providing accessible and enjoyable experiences for visitors with special needs in visitor centres (also restrooms there) and during educational programs.*
- *Several trails are designed to be accessible for visitors with mobility challenges, with smooth surfaces and gentle gradients' bog trail is partially accessible with wheelchair.*
- *Designated parking areas for visitors with disabilities are available near visitor centres and popular attractions.*
- *Offering guided tours that cater to visitors with special needs, including those with visual or hearing impairments.*

In the next period, it is planned to diversify mobility options for visitors with special needs and to promote year-round use by implementing targeted activities on the trails in the Oandu area.

D.5 Effectively communicating the area to visitors

D.5.1 Ensuring that marketing materials and activities promote the area effectively and responsibly

A 2 B 2

Click or tap here to enter text.

D.5.2 Providing good quality and effective visitor information and interpretation

A 2 B 2

Visitors can access a wide range of information through various media channels such as websites (e.g., www.kaitsealad.ee, www.visitlahemaa.ee, www.loodusegakoos.ee) and Facebook pages (e.g., <https://www.facebook.com/VisitLahemaa>, <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100064627334081>).

Brochures and other materials are also available online:

https://kaitsealad.ee/sites/default/files/uploads/Lahemaa%20rahvuspark/Infomaterjali_d/Lahemaa_EE.pdf, <https://kaitsealad.ee/et/kaitsealad/lahemaa-rahvuspark/kaitsealast-5/infomaterjalid-7> Lahemaa Ring: <https://visitlahemaa.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Visit-lahemaa-tru%CC%88kis-eng.pdf>

The new Action Plan foresees continuing to provide up-to-date information on websites and in information materials.

D.5.3 Ensuring that tourism businesses and other local stakeholders are well informed about the area and provide relevant and accurate information to visitors

A 2 B 2

NP visitor centres are open all year. The activities carried out so far, including guide training, organized meetings, and information shared on social media, have contributed to the provision of good-quality information for visitors.

Similar activities are planned for the next period.

D.5.4 Providing specific information and interpretation for young people, schools and student groups

A 2 B 2

Nature-related events, special educational programs and camps are developed for kindergartens, schools, universities and wider public.

So far, there has also been good experience with the Junior Ranger program. However, in order to reduce costs, the EB is dissolving its Education Department, which makes the future of the Junior Ranger program uncertain.

D.6 Ensuring social cohesion

D.6.1 Anticipating, monitoring and minimising any existing and potential conflicts with local residents

A 2 B 2

Regular meetings, including Forum gatherings, local events, and various training sessions involving a wide range of stakeholders, help foster mutual understanding.

During the visit, no conflicts with local residents were observed or reported.

In the next period, *more regular meetings between EB and tourism businesses and also locals* are planned.

D.6.2 Maintaining good communication and engagement between local residents, businesses, visitors and the protected area authority

A 2 B 2

Same as D.6.1.

Newsletter was planned to for 2 target groups: for tourists and Forum members, but it was quite time consuming to do both as the content is different. So only internal one was done.

D.6.3 Encouraging and developing appropriate partnership activity with and between stakeholders

A 2 B 2

Regular meetings and study trips, both within Lahemaa and to other protected areas, support active stakeholder engagement and cooperation. Participation in the Lahemaa NP Forum, as well as in various training sessions and study trips, has had a positive impact on mutual collaboration.

These activities have strengthened partnerships among stakeholders, and similar initiatives are planned to continue in the future through projects.

D7 Strengthening prosperity in the local community

D.7.1 Promoting the provision and identity of local produce and services and their purchase and use by visitors and tourism businesses

A 2 B 2

In the previous period, notable efforts were made to promote local products and services in Lahemaa. Local entrepreneurs confirmed a growing interest in their offerings from both residents and tourists. Study trips to other Charter areas were organized, mainly through LEADER cooperation projects, to support experience exchange. Additionally, local producers and services were promoted through initiatives like the Lahemaa NP logo and the Visit Lahemaa brand, with around 10 businesses applying to use the logo.

It is planned to *continue with the promotion of NP logo and valuing the natural and cultural heritage.*

D.7.2 Supporting the economic viability and performance of local tourism businesses and the provision of local employment in tourism

A 2 B 2

Results over the past five years:

Offer workshops and trainings for tourism businesses (one LEADER project offered “work shadowing” with Latvian and Finnish businesses on 1:1).

Market the whole Charter area.

Within the framework of approved and planned projects, activities are foreseen to continue the work that has already been started.

D.8 Providing training and capacity building

D.8.1 Providing relevant training for staff of the protected area authority in sustainable tourism development and management

A 2 B 2

PA authority itself does not organise specific sustainable tourism training. Training sessions are usually organised within the framework of various projects and involve not only the PA authority.

PA staff can take part in Charter LEADER projects that include trainings and capacity building in mostly sustainable development and nature tourism topics.

Trainings will continue within the framework of various projects.

D.8.2 Providing and encouraging relevant training and capacity building for tourism businesses and other stakeholders in sustainable tourism

A 2 B 2

Training, seminars, and study trips—both within the country and abroad—have been regularly organised, mostly with LEADER project funding. These activities ensure continuous capacity building and offer participation opportunities to all involved stakeholders.

Training will continue within the framework of various projects.

D.9 Monitoring tourism performance and impacts

D.9.1 Monitoring of visitors – volumes, patterns, spending and satisfaction

A 2 B 2

Visitor monitoring is carried out by the State Forest Management Centre using a range of methods, including regular surveys and visitor counters. Annual capacity surveys and more comprehensive visitor surveys every five years help assess visitor volumes, usage patterns, and the spatial and temporal distribution of visits in State Forest Management Centre recreational and protected areas.

Next NP visitor survey will be in 2026.

D.9.2 Monitoring of tourism businesses – performance and needs

A 1 B 1

This type of monitoring is not carried out directly. Information about the tourism business is mostly gathered during meetings, including the Forum.

D.9.3 Monitoring of tourism impacts - on the environment, economy and community

A 2 B 2

Results over the past five years:

- *University of Life Sciences made carrying capacity research in Lahemaa area to monitor the impact of bog shoeing.*
- *Regular surveys by State Forest Management Centre on visitor behavior and impact to resources.*
- *Inventories on habitats done by either EB or Environmental Agency.*
- *Gathering relevant information during Forum meetings from businesses and local village societies.*

In the new Action Plan it is planned to have regular surveys and continue collaboration with the University of Life Sciences.

D.9.4 Monitoring progress in implementing the action plan.

A 2 B 2

The Action Plan has been monitored through regular meetings with partners, either during Forum meetings (mainly involving AK and EB) or in separate sessions. The most comprehensive analysis of the activities carried out was prepared in 2024, when the new Strategy and Action Plan were developed.

D.10 Communicating actions and engaging with the Charter

D.10.1 Communicating sustainable tourism actions and results to local stakeholders and more widely at a local, regional and national level

A 2 B 3

In the previous period, various communication activities have been carried out at different levels:

- *Share regular information on best examples, collaborations and projects activities.*
- *Promote Charter and Charter II.*
- *Organise events for wider public (Nature Conservation Month, NP birthday).*
- *Cooperation with Estonian Charter parks and inside EUROPARC Charter network.*
- *Cooperation with Visit Estonia, Nature Tourism Association and Rural Tourism Association.*

3Similar activities are planned for the next period.

D.10.2 Promoting and making visible the award of the Charter

A 3 B 3

Information about the Lahemaa NP Charter award can be found both on social media and in printed materials. The Charter II award was also visible in the tourism businesses visited during the visit.

D.10.3 Engaging with EUROPARC and the Charter Network, including participating in related events and activities

A 3 B 3

Charter II is implemented in close cooperation with the other two Charter areas in Estonia - Soomaa and Matsalu - to strengthen collaboration within the Charter network.

In Lahemaa, twelve tourism businesses have received the Charter II award, having signed good will agreements with the EB.

The three Charter Parks in Estonia actively work together on sustainable tourism development and also participate in EUROPARC and Charter Network events to exchange knowledge and promote best practices.

D.10.4 Taking steps for re-application and renewal of the Charter.

A 2 B 2

The EB, together with the Arenduskoda, is responsible for the renewal of the Charter. The necessary funding was included in the project application, which received approval. This approach is also planned to be continued in the next period.

SECTION E – EXPERIENCE AND FINAL COMMENTS

Please comment briefly on any points made by the applicant in this section which you believe are of particular interest.

E.1 Examples of excellence and best practice

Please mention briefly the best examples of excellence or best practice you have seen in this Charter area (by cross-referencing to the above questions if appropriate)

The European Charter for Sustainable Tourism in Protected Areas is founded on the principle of cooperation, and Lahemaa serves as a strong example of this approach. The Charter's implementation in Lahemaa is based on collaboration between state institutions and the NGO sector, supported by local municipalities. This joint effort has enabled the mobilisation of funding both for the Charter process and the implementation of the Action Plan. Various projects have provided opportunities for tourism-related businesses to learn about sustainable tourism in Estonia and to gain international experience. As a result, interest in tourism has grown, and new guides have been trained. The efforts invested in building partnerships and preparing projects have proven highly successful and impactful.

E.2 Marketing and promotion of the Charter

Is the protected area helping to promote the Charter, e.g. in its publications, website, etc.?

See D.10.2.

E.3 Experience of working with the Charter – final comments

Lahemaa National Park is the oldest national park in Estonia, while tourism in the area has an even longer tradition. The preservation of natural, cultural, and historical heritage goes hand in hand with tourism development. The Charter brings together tourism and other stakeholders in the Lahemaa area. Based on my observation,

working with the Charter changes people's understanding, attitudes, and knowledge - not only about tourism, but about sustainability as a whole.

SECTION F – OVERALL ASSESSMENT AND CONCLUSIONS

F.1 Please provide your brief overall assessment of the management of sustainable tourism and the content and delivery of the strategy and action plan in the protected area, in relation to the European Charter. Please include an overall comment on the progress of the Charter area and its partners over the past five years:

Over the past six years, Lahemaa National Park has shown strong progress in managing sustainable tourism in line with the principles of the European Charter for Sustainable Tourism. Tourism activities continue to respect the area's rich natural and cultural heritage, while cooperation among public institutions, NGOs, local governments, and tourism businesses has become more efficient and well-coordinated. The surrounding areas support this work by offering access and additional services. Overall, the Charter process has helped to strengthen local collaboration and shared understanding of sustainability.

F.1.1 Main strengths: (relating to the Charter process and sustainable tourism management)

Lahemaa National Park's main strengths lie in its rich natural and cultural diversity, coastal village architecture, and long-standing tradition as a recreation area. The park offers a wide range of hiking and study trails, museums, visitor centres, and nature-based activities suitable for all age groups and interests. Good accessibility, proximity to major cities and airports, and well-developed infrastructure further support its competitiveness as a tourism destination.

The area is supported by active local communities and tourism associations, fostering authenticity and cultural preservation. Tourism services are diverse and increasingly aligned with sustainable practices, attracting both ethical travellers and nature enthusiasts.

International recognition, certified guides, and a growing number of businesses committed to sustainability highlight Lahemaa's strength in managing tourism effectively.

F.1.2 Main weaknesses: (relating to the Charter process and sustainable tourism management)

Lahemaa National Park faces strong seasonality, with most services and visitor activity concentrated in the summer, leaving other seasons with limited availability and lower service quality. Individual travelers often struggle to find information about off-season services, and public transport options are limited, making access difficult without a private vehicle.

The potential of cultural and natural assets is underused, and the outmigration of young people further threatens long-term sustainability.

F.2 Conclusions and recommendations for the Charter area:

Please set out briefly your main conclusions and recommendations that you wish to draw to the attention of the protected area (also considering previous point F.1.2)

1. Lahemaa National Park has its logo and identity, as do NGO Arenduskoda and VisitLahemaa. It is recommended to develop a unified visual identity for the entire Charter area and to intensify efforts towards coordinated marketing of the Charter territory.
2. The previous evaluation noted that the strategy was too extensive. The new strategy (Lahemaa Sustainable Tourism Strategy 2025–2029) follows the same structure and remains equally extensive. It is recommended to prepare such a document in a much more concise format. Good examples can be found in Charter parks in Estonia and abroad.

3. To avoid misunderstandings, consistent English terminology should be used across all Charter documents. For example, "Forum" in the Re-evaluation Application Report appears as "Lahemaa National Park Cooperation Assembly" in the Action Plan.

4. In the next Re-evaluation Application Report, provide a broader explanation of what was achieved in the previous period by clearly clarifying how the listed Action Plan activities were implemented.

5. Recommendations for the Action Plan to be considered when developing the next plan:

5.1. The implementing bodies (executors) are specified for each activity, and there are multiple bodies per activity. It is necessary to determine which institution is responsible to ensure clarity on who is accountable. Avoid using vague terms, e.g. "entrepreneurs" or "companies" as responsible parties.

5.2. For several activities, no budget is indicated. A budget should be specified even if the activity requires no additional funding and is carried out as part of other work. Every activity has a cost.

5.3. Use more specific and measurable evaluation indicators that do not require additional specification.

F.3 Recommendation on re-award of the Charter:

You are asked below to give your recommendation on the re-award of the Charter. Please indicate here any clarification or qualification that you may wish to make concerning your recommendation, including any suggested conditions relating to the award.

Continue the successfully initiated work by complementing it with new and bold ideas!

Please check one box

☒ **I recommend that the protected area be re-awarded the Charter.**

☐ **I do not recommend that the protected area be re-awarded the Charter.**

Attachments

1. Programme of the visit and people interviewed.



EVALUATION visit to Lahemaa National Park PROGRAMME

Monday May 5, 2025 (Lahemaa NP)

07.00 Travel to Lahemaa NP

10.00 Meeting with Lahemaa Charter representatives in Aru manor (Charter II; owner Katrin Kull, https://www.facebook.com/arumois/?locale=et_EE)

Additional participants:

1. Tiina Viirna – NGO Arenduskoda, member of the board, member of Visit Lahemaa
2. Heikki Vuntus – NGO Arenduskoda, CEO
3. Riina Kotter – Environmental Board

12.00 Lunch and company introduction at Õnnela guesthouse (owners Ahto & Õnnela Neidek; <https://onnela.ee/>)

14.15 Visiting Lahemaa cultural and natural objects:

- Muinastaide Koda / Anne Kurepalu, <https://muinastaideselts.ee/muinastaideskoda>
- Oandu visitor center / manager of the visitor centre Tiina Neljandik, <https://rmk.ee/looduses-liikumine/kuhu-minna/oandu-kulastuskeskus/>

17.00 Vergi harbor, restaurant Wirkes (Charter II, owners Kelli Suigusaar & Lauri Loit, <https://www.wirkes.ee/>)

19.00 Dinner and accommodation in Vihula manor, <https://www.vihulamanor.com/et/>

Tuesday May 6, 2025 (Lahemaa NP)

8.00 Breakfast at Vihula manor

9.30 Hike on the Majakivi hiking trail with Wanderlust (Charter II, representative Signe Ohakas, <https://wanderlust.ee/en>, <https://rmk.ee/looduses-liikumine/kuhu-minna/majakivi-pikanomme-loodusopperada-7-km/>)

11.00 Annenhof guesthouse introduction (owner Anne Jane Luik, https://www.facebook.com/annenhofpuhkemaja/?locale=et_EE)

11.30 Lunch and company introduction at home restaurant MerMer (owner Merrit Kiho, <https://www.kodurestoranmermer.com/>)

12.30 Drive towards Soomaa NP


Thursday May 8, 2025


09.00 Wrap-up meeting with Environmental Board (Nele Söber and advisor Kaja Lotman)


13.00 Lunch at local cafe

14.00 Departure

2. List of documents received from the protected area or presented during the visit which were not included in the original application.

 Lahemaa presentation

 Lahemaa_Advisory_Board_statuti_EST

 Monitoring of the Sustainable Development Strategy for the Lahemaa National Park Tourism Area 2019–2024