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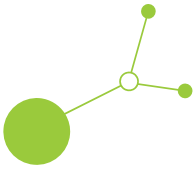
HealthyForestRegions

D.1.2.4 Good Practice Guide:

How to integrate forest ecosystems and their services for human well-being into education



Guideline document

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The *HealthyForestRegions Project - Supporting Healthy Forest ecosystems for human well-being in forest regions* (CE0100310) operates under Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE's 2021-2027 funding. It is aligned with Priority 2 '*Cooperating for a greener Central Europe'*, and addressing Objective 2.4, '*Safeguarding the environment in Central Europe*'. The project spans form April 2023 to March 2026, with a budget of €2.78 million, of which 80% are funded by ERDF. Involving nine partners across six Central European countries with six project regions, the project fosters commitment among policy- and decision-makers to maintain and create conditions that support the health of the regional forest ecosystems. Thereby, the *HealthyForestRegions Project* supports the long-term well-being of the people living, working and spending time in the targeted regions.

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D.1.2.4 GOOD PRACTICE GUIDE:

HOW TO INTEGRATE FOREST ECOSYSTEMS AND THEIR SERVICES FOR HUMAN WELL-BEING INTO EDUCATION

1. Introduction

Forests provide a wide range of ecosystem services that are essential for human well-being, including climate change mitigation and adaptation, physical and mental health benefits, and opportunities for social learning and personal development. Integrating forest ecosystems and their services into education is therefore a powerful way to foster environmental awareness, strengthen the connection between people and nature, and promote sustainable behaviour from an early age. Educational activities that take place in forests help learners to experience these benefits directly, supporting holistic learning that combines knowledge, skills and values.

The *"Good Practice Guide: how to integrate forest ecosystems and their services for human well-being into education"* builds on practical experiences gained within the Interreg project *HealthyForestRegions*[1]. The guide aims to support forest managers, educators, protected area authorities and other stakeholders in planning and implementing educational activities in forest environments. It provides guidance on establishing forest classrooms as outdoor learning environments, developing forest-based educational packages, and engaging forest visitors through forest guards, with a strong focus on applicability and transferability to different regional contexts.

The recommendations presented in this guide are grounded in pilot activities carried out in four European regions: the Jizera Mountains (Czech Republic), Angermünde (Germany), Paklenica National Park (Croatia), and Kočevsko (Slovenia). These pilot actions served as real-life testing grounds, allowing partners to identify success factors, challenges and enabling conditions. The lessons learned from these pilots form the backbone of this good practice guide.

1 https://www.interreg-central.eu/projects/healthyforestregions/

2. Good Practices: Lessons learned from pilot actions

Within the framework of the Interreg CE project *HealthyForestRegions*, three complementary pilot activities were implemented to explore practical approaches for integrating forest ecosystems and their services into formal education. These pilots were carried out in different geographical, institutional and cultural contexts, providing a rich knowledge base for the development of this guide.

Forest Classrooms as Outdoor Learning Spaces

Forest classrooms were established in Kočevje (Slovenia), Angermünde (Germany), and Paklenica National Park (Croatia). Their objective was to create permanent, physical learning spaces within forest environments that can be regularly used by schools and other learner groups. These classrooms were designed to enable young people to spend more learning time in nature and to experience forests as places of knowledge, health, and well-being. The pilot activities demonstrated that careful site selection, accessibility, and close cooperation with schools are key factors for ensuring successful long-term use.

Forest-Based Educational Packages

Educational packages for kindergartens, primary and secondary schools were developed and tested in Kočevsko (Slovenia), Angermünde (Germany), in the Paklenica National Park (Croatia) and in the Jizera Mountains (Czech Republic). The aim was to provide ready-to-use, high-quality materials that enable teachers and educators to independently conduct educational activities in forest settings. The pilot highlighted the importance of age-appropriate content, curriculum alignment, flexibility, and practical guidance to empower educators to regularly use forests as learning environments.

Forest Guards for Visitor Engagement

In Kočevsko (Slovenia), a forest guard pilot was implemented to strengthen visitor education and awareness. The objective was to have a trained person present in the forest who actively engages with visitors, informs them about forest ecosystems and services, and raises awareness about appropriate behaviour to avoid harming nature. This pilot illustrated the value of personal interaction, communication skills and local knowledge in fostering respectful use of forest areas.

Together, these three pilot actions generated valuable insights into how forests can be effectively integrated into educational practices. The experiences, challenges and success factors identified during their implementation are reflected throughout this good practice guide and translated into practical recommendations for replication and scaling in other regions.

2.1. Forest Classrooms as outdoor learning environments

A forest classroom is a designated outdoor learning space located in or near a forest, used regularly by schools and other educational groups and actors. It functions as an open-air classroom where learners can experience forest ecosystems directly and engage with topics related to forest functions, biodiversity, nature conservation, ecosystem services and human well-being.

Forest classrooms can range from simple meeting points with seating (e.g., logs or benches) to more structured spaces with prepared learning materials. However, the focus is not on infrastructure, but on learning through direct experience in a functional forest ecosystem.

2.1.1. Objectives

The main objective of a forest classroom is to integrate knowledge about forest ecosystems and their services into everyday educational practice. Specific goals include:

- Enhancing the understanding of how forests function as ecosystems;
- Demonstrating the links between forests and human well-being (e.g., climate regulation, recreation, health, water supply, biodiversity conservation);
- Supporting experiential, place-based and interdisciplinary learning;
- Strengthening environmental awareness and stewardship from an early age.

The expected outcomes of forest classrooms as outdoor learning environments include increased ecological literacy, stronger connections between learners and nature and direct health benefits through increased time spent outdoors.

2.1.2. Target groups

Forest classrooms primarily address:

- School pupils of all age groups and
- Teachers and educators.

They can also be used by:

- Early childhood education groups;
- Vocational schools and universities;
- Youth groups and adult learners;
- Education for sustainable development (ESD) initiatives;
- Scouts or junior rangers.

2.1.3. Resources and requirements

Forest classrooms require limited resources. Key requirements include:

- Access to a suitable forest area that is safe, regularly accessible and ideally reachable by public transport;
- Agreement and cooperation with forest owners and forest managers of the forest classroom site;

- Simple seating or gathering structures that allow school classes and other target groups to spend time on site;
- Educators and/or teachers who are trained or motivated to teach in outdoor settings.

Preconditions include the interest and willingness of schools to use the forest classroom for school activities, a designated coordinator responsible for maintenance and for facilitating its use by schools and other target groups and basic safety considerations.

2.1.4. Implementation

The implementation of a forest classroom can follow these key steps:

1) Appoint a coordinating body or person who initiates the process, coordinates funding and is responsible for the long-term management of the forest classroom including its use and maintenance.
2) Identify a suitable forest site that is close to or easily reachable by schools or other educational institutions. The site should be safe, accessible, and not subject to strict protection rules, allowing children to move, explore and learn freely.

Figure 1: Location and design of Forest classroom in Kočevje (SI) (author: Maj Hočevar, MK)

3) Involve key stakeholders early on, especially teachers and other educational actors of the region as well as relevant authorities (e.g., municipalities) to ensure support, shared ownership and long-term commitment.
4) Define educational goals and plan how forest ecosystem topics and ecosystem services can be integrated into existing school curricula. Develop simple, ready-to-use activities or materials that schools can use independently or book from external providers. In the initial phase, offering guided activities can help lower barriers for teachers with limited time or experience in outdoor education.

5) Prepare the site with minimal infrastructure, always respecting natural conditions. This may include a simple seating or gathering area. Where feasible, basic sanitary facilities (e.g. an ecological compost toilet) and a small storage space for materials can make longer visits easier. Forest classrooms can range from very simple "rucksack schools" with no fixed infrastructure to sites with basic, low-impact facilities. The level of infrastructure should be defined in consultation with the potential users of the forest classroom. It is important to check whether any infrastructure can be installed on the site and, if so, what legal requirement apply, since forest classrooms are located on forest land rather than building land.

6) Support and motivate teachers through guidance, ready-to-use materials, training opportunities and inspiring educational offers. This support is essential, as many teachers face time constraints and may hesitate to organise outdoor learning activities on their own.

Figure 2: Concept for Forest classroom in Angermünde (DE) (source: Municipality Angermünde)

Figure 3: Forest classroom in NP Paklenica (HR), autumn 2025 (author: Iva Parić, PNP)

2.1.5. Success factors and challenges

Key success factors include:

- Clear coordination of the forest classroom, with defined responsibilities and sufficient resources;
- Strong cooperation between the coordinating body and users, particularly schools;
- Regular, long-term use rather than occasional visits;
- Flexibility in teaching methods and openness to outdoor learning by teachers and educators;
- Clear links between forest experiences and classroom learning;
- An attractive and inviting design combined with a durable, vandalism-proof construction.

Challenges may include:

- Finding a suitable coordinating body and ensuring sustainable support;
- Funding for infrastructure installation, maintenance and coordination of use and ongoing activities;
- Weather conditions and seasonal limitations;

- Time constraints and heavy workloads of teachers;
- Limited experience or motivation of teachers for outdoor education;
- Legal and practical constraints for installing infrastructure, as forest classrooms are typically located on forest land rather than building land, which may require permissions;
- Safety considerations for outdoor learning.

2.1.6. Replicability and recommendations

Forest classrooms are highly replicable due to their low-cost and flexible nature. Successful experiences show that it is best to start simple, focus on regular use rather than extensive infrastructure, integrate forest topics across subjects and share materials among educators.

They are an effective way to teach about functional forest ecosystems and their services to human well-being, but they do not run automatically. A designated coordinator, active support for schools and sufficient funding are essential. Schools may need guidance on using the site, educational materials and practical aspects such as transportation.

Forest classrooms play a crucial role in integrating knowledge about forest ecosystems into school teaching because this knowledge cannot be fully conveyed within a traditional classroom. Children need to experience, explore, and interact with the forest directly. While installing a forest classroom and providing basic infrastructure is a necessary first step, it is not sufficient on its own. Schools must be actively accompanied and supported. Maintaining and using a forest classroom is an ongoing process that requires continuous engagement.

2.2. Forest-based educational packages

Forest-based educational packages are structured sets of learning materials designed for use with kindergartens, schools and other groups of learners. Their purpose is to support educators in teaching about healthy and functional forest ecosystems, forest ecosystem services and their contribution to human health and well-being. Such packages are age-adjustable, modular and adaptable to different educational contexts. They typically include a combination of lesson plans, activity descriptions, outdoor exercises, games, didactic materials and background information for teachers. Their modular design allows educators to select and combine elements according to specific curriculum requirements, available time and local forest conditions.

A key characteristic of forest-based educational packages is the integration of classroom-based learning with outdoor, experiential activities in forest environments. Preparatory and follow-up lessons in the classroom are combined with hands-on learning in forests, applying principles of forest pedagogy and nature interpretation. This approach supports experiential learning, strengthens learners' connection to nature and enhances the understanding of ecological processes and forest ecosystem services.

2.2.1. Objectives

The main objective of forest-based educational packages is to integrate and disseminate knowledge about healthy, functional forest ecosystems and their ecosystem services, with a particular focus on their contribution to human health and well-being, within educational practice.

Key objectives include:

- Aligning forest-related content with national and regional school curricula;
- Supporting experiential, outdoor, and hands-on learning approaches;
- Providing teachers and educators with ready-to-use, low-threshold educational resources;
- Increasing learners' understanding of forest ecosystems, biodiversity, and forest health;
- Fostering responsibility, stewardship, and pro-environmental attitudes from an early age;
- Demonstrating the links between healthy forests and human well-being (physical, mental, social).

2.2.2. Target groups

Educational packages primary target:

- Learners in primary, lower secondary, and upper secondary school pupils and
- Teachers and educators in formal education settings

The packages are also suitable for use by:

- Forest educators and forestry professionals;
- Schools and other educational institutions;
- Special interest groups (e.g., scouts, mountaineering or other outdoor clubs);
- Tourism organisations offering nature-based or forest-related experiences.

In addition, forest-based educational packages can indirectly reach the wider public, particularly in *Healthy Forest Regions*, as knowledge and experiences gained by children and young people are often shared with families and local communities.

2.2.3. Resources and requirements

The development and implementation of forest-based educational packages require adequate resources and supportive conditions.

Key resources and requirements included:

- Interdisciplinary cooperation between forest experts, educators, and pedagogical specialists;
- Sufficient time and capacity for cooperation, development, testing, and revision of materials;
- Alignment with curriculum requirements and relevant learning objectives;
- Consideration of seasonal aspects when planning and testing season-specific activities and learning sites;
- Access to suitable local forest areas for outdoor and experiential learning components (e.g., forest classrooms);
- Graphic design and didactic support to ensure clarity, usability and visual attractiveness of materials;
- Institutional support from schools, forestry institutions, municipalities, or other relevant organisations.

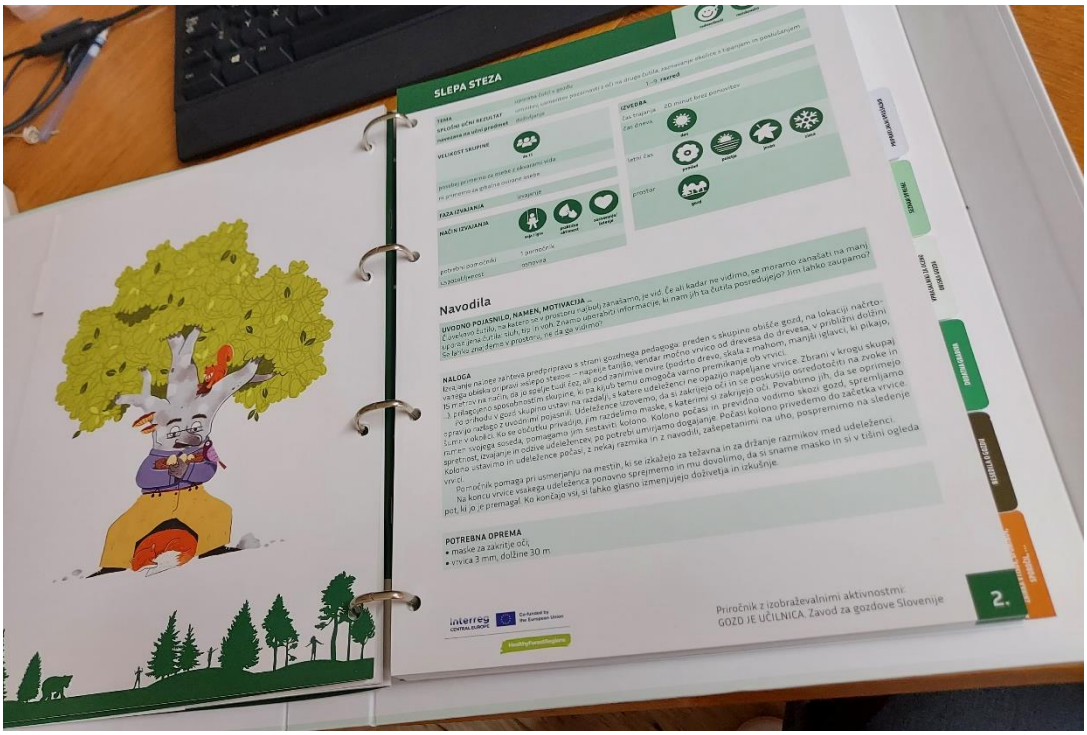

Figure 4: Design of handbook with educational packages FOREST is a classroom by Slovenia Forest Service (SI) (source: SFS)

2.2.4. Implementation

The development and implementation of forest-based educational packages should follow a structured and participatory process. The following steps are recommended:

1. Establish co-operation with educational organisations and other relevant target groups;
2. Conduct a needs assessment and curriculum analysis to ensure relevance and applicability;

3. Research and review of existing educational materials and resources;
4. Co-create materials in collaboration with educators and forest experts;
5. Develop age-differentiated educational packages;
6. Pilot-test materials and activities with schools or other learner groups and refine them based on feedback;
7. Offer training sessions, workshops, and guided field activities for teachers and educators;
8. Disseminate materials to schools and other educational stakeholders.

Figure 5: Training of teachers in Kočevje (SI) (author: Miha Varga, SFS)

Forest-based educational packages should be designed to be flexible and modular, allowing teachers and other educators to use them directly or adapt them for different:

- age groups;
- group sizes,
- timeframes (e.g., single lessons, project days, or longer learning sequences);
- seasons;
- learning objectives;
- or other educational contexts or purposes.

2.2.5. Success factors and challenges

Key success factors for forest-based educational packages include:

- Strong involvement of teachers in the development, testing and refinement of materials;
- Clear alignment with curricula or other learning frameworks and a user-friendly, teacher-oriented structure;
- Hands-on, outdoor learning activities that engage learners directly with forest environments;
- Use of local forest examples and regional natural values to enhance relevance and connection;
- Incorporation of game or play elements to increase attention, motivation and goal orientation;
- Institutional support from schools, forestry organisations or other educational stakeholders (e.g., rangers).

Figure 6: Materials and equipment in support of educational packages (source: Katja Konečnik, SFS)

Challenges to consider during development and implementation include:

- Limited time and funding for creating, producing, and distributing materials;
- Demand for materials exceeding available quantities;
- Weather or seasonal constraints that may affect outdoor learning activities;
- Balancing scientific accuracy with age-appropriate language;
- Ensuring the long-term continuation of educational packages beyond initial development.

2.2.6. Replicability and recommendations

Forest-based educational packages are highly replicable and can be implemented across different healthy forest regions.

The core elements that are to be retained include:

- Curriculum-linked content;
- Age-appropriate, modular structure;
- Experiential and outdoor learning approaches;
- Foundations in nature interpretation and forest pedagogy concepts;
- Teacher-friendly, ready-to-use materials;
- Focus on forest ecosystems and ecosystem services with their contributions to human health and well-being.

Elements to adapt according for specific regions:

- Local forest types, species, and ecosystem services;
- National curricula and educational frameworks;
- Language and locally relevant historical and cultural context;
- Local forest health issues.

Figure 7: Learning about mediteranean tree species in NP Paklenica (HR) (author: Mihovila Milin, PNP)

Recommendations for effective implementation:

- Plan sufficient time for development, testing, and quality assurance;
- Combine educational packages with forest classrooms and guided programs;
- Provide training, guidance and ongoing support for teachers and educators;
- Foster long-term cooperation with schools, forestry organisations and other educational partners;
- Ensure institutional, organisational and policy-level support to enable sustained use of the packages;
- Promote dissemination beyond initial regions to maximise impact;
- Seek for innovations and continuous improvement of materials and approaches.

Figure 8: Testing educational packages in Jizera Mountains (CZ) (author: Anna Randakova, LAG Frydlantsko)

The following video provides an insight into the educational packages developed by the City of Angermünde as a good practice example: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A1pgWdhGgPw

2.3. Forest Guard for Visitor Engagement

A forest guard serves as a key point of contact for visitors in forest areas, combining supervisory responsibilities with educational and communicative functions. In addition to monitoring forest health, safety, and compliance with regulations, the forest guard actively engages with visitors to promote awareness of ecological processes, forest functions, and ecosystem services.

Through regular presence on trails, at forest entrances, and in frequently visited areas, forest guards provide guidance, answer questions, and encourage responsible behaviour. By facilitating direct interactions with the public, they help visitors gain a deeper understanding of the value of forests and their significance for human well-being, fostering appreciation and support for sustainable forest management.

2.3.1. Objectives

The involvement of forest guards in visitor engagement is intended to enhance awareness sf forest ecosystems and foster respectful behaviour in nature. The main objectives include:

- Increasing visitors' knowledge of forest ecosystems, their functions and services, and their contributions to human health and well-being;
- Promoting responsible, low-impact and safe behaviour in forest areas;
- Reducing negative impacts of recreational activities on sensitive habitats;
- Strengthening the connection between people and forests through direct communication and personal interaction.

2.3.2. Target groups

Forest guard interacts with a wide range of visitors in forest areas, including tourists, hikers, families, school groups and local residents. As visitors differ in their expectations and level of knowledge, communication needs to be flexible and adapted to the respective target group and context. Some visitors may only need basic information and guidance on trail sefatey, rules, or general forest information, while others may seek more detailed explanations about ecological processes, forest functions, biodiversity, or natural/ cultural heritage.

Forest guards should be aware of these differences and adjust their approach accordingly, using a mix of verbal explanations, visual aids, and interactive methods to engage visitors. For example:

- Families and children: Short, engaging explanations, hands-on activities, or storytelling can help make learning memorable and fun.
- School and educational groups: More structured educational content aligned with curriculum topics, including field-based demonstrations and discussions.
- Tourists and recreational visitors: Clear guidance on responsible behaviour, safety, and orientation, supplemented by interesting facts about the local forest ecosystem.
- Local residents: Opportunities for deeper dialogue on forest management, conservation initiatives, and the benefits of sustainable forest use.

By tailoring communication to the needs and interests of different groups, forest guards can foster a greater appreciation of forests, promote responsible behaviour, and support positive experiences in the forest.

2.3.3. Resources and requirements

Effective visitor engagement by forest guards relies on a combination of practical skills, professional knowledge and organisational support. To perform visitor-oriented tasks safely and effectively, forest guard require the folowing:

- Knowledge of forest ecosystems, nature protection rules and conservation principles;
- Competence in nature interpretation, public communication and conflict management skills;
- Practical competencies related to visitor safety, orientation and outdoor first aid;
- Access to basic equipment, clear identification, transport, and institutional support to maintain authority and credibility with visitors;
- Continuous learning and adaptability to respond effectively to evolving visitor needs and environmental challenges.

By combining these competencies with organisational support, forest guards can facilitate meaningful interactions with visitors, promote responsible behaviour, and strengthen public understanding of forests and their value.

Figure 9: Nature interpretation training in Kočevje (SI) (author: Maj Hočevar, MK))

2.3.4. Implementation

In practice, effective visitor engagement is achieved through visible and regular presence in key forest areas, combined with direct, informal interactions with visitors. Forest guards act as accessible points of contact, providing guidance, information, and support to enhance visitor experiences while promoting responsible behaviour.

Key aspects of implementation include:

- Regular presence in strategic locations to ensure visibility, offer assistance, and monitor visitor behaviour
- Providing essential information for visitors about forest rules, trail conditions, safety considerations, and any seasonal or location-specific hazards.
- Interpretation and education explaining natural features, ecological processes, and the functions and services of forest ecosystems. Short interpretive talks, demonstrations, or guided activities can be offered when appropriate to deepen visitors' understanding and appreciation of the environment.
- Promoting respectful and low-impact behaviour encouraging visitors to stay on marked paths, avoid disturbing wildlife, and minimise environmental impacts, helping to protect sensitive habitats and reduce conflicts between recreational use and conservation goals.
- Adaptable engagement methods depending on visitor groups and circumstances ranging from brief explanations and advice to more structured activities such as educational games, nature walks, or storytelling sessions.

By combining regular presence, clear guidance, educational interactions, and practical support, forest guards contribute to a safer, more informed, and enjoyable forest experience while fostering public awareness of the value of forests and the importance of conservation.

Figure 10: Importance of continuous training - nature interpretation training in NP Paklenica (SI) (source: PNP)

2.3.5. Success factors and challenges

Effective visitor engagement by forest guards depends on several key factors, but it also comes with practical challenges that need to be addressed. Understanding both is essential for planning and supporting successful interactions with visitors.

Success Factors:

- Professional knowledge, communication abilities, and practical safety skills;
- Visible and regular presence in forest areas to foster trust and encourage interaction;
- Tailored communication adapting messages to different visitor groups ensuring that information is relevant, understandable, and engaging;
- Institutional support: adequate resources, clear identification, transport, equipment, and backing from management enable guards to perform their duties effectively;
- Interactive and flexible engagement methods: combining informal advice, interpretive explanations, and guided activities allows guards to respond to varying visitor needs and interests;
- Continuous learning: ongoing training in ecological knowledge, safety procedures, and communication techniques helps forest guards stay effective in dynamic forest and visitor contexts.

Challenges:

- Diverse visitor expectations and knowledge levels: visitors differ in their interests, motivation, and understanding of forest ecosystems, requiring flexible and sometimes rapid adaptation of communication style.
- High visitor numbers or peak periods: large crowds can limit opportunities for meaningful engagement and make monitoring behaviour more difficult.
- Resource limitations: insufficient staff, equipment, or institutional support can reduce the visibility and effectiveness of forest guards.
- Managing conflict or non-compliance: visitors may ignore rules or exhibit unsafe behaviour, requiring diplomacy, patience, and conflict management skills.
- Environmental and seasonal factors: weather, accessibility, or environmental hazards can impact both guard presence and visitor experience, requiring careful planning and adaptability.

By recognising these success factors and proactively addressing challenges, forest managers and guards can enhance visitor engagement, support conservation objectives, and foster positive experiences in forest areas.

Figure 11: Leaflets distribution with information for visitors of the forest of Kočevsko (SI) (source: Municipality Kočevje)

2.3.6. Replicability and recommendations

The forest guard approach to visitor engagement can be applied in many forest regions where visitor pressure and conservation objectives need to be balanced. Clear organisational frameworks, appropriate training and cooperation between forestry, tourism and education actors support successful replication. Strengthening communication and interpretive skills and ensuring long-term institutional support are recommended to maximise the contribution of the forest guard to healthy forests and positive visitor experiences.

Figure 12: Important task of forest guard - prevention of illegal dumping of materials, Kočevsko (SI) (source: Municipality Kočevje)

3. Conclusion

The *Good Practice Guide: Integrating Forest Ecosystems and their Services to Human Well-being into Education* demonstrates that forests can play a central role in education when supported by appropriate infrastructure, well-designed educational materials and dedicated engagement mechanisms. The experiences gained through the *HealthyForestRegions* pilot activities show that learning in and about forests not only strengthens environmental knowledge, but also contributes to physical, mental and social well-being, especially for children and young people.

The three pilot actions – forest classrooms, forest-based educational packages and the forest guard –proved to be complementary and mutually reinforcing. Forest classrooms provide a tangible and inviting space for outdoor learning, educational packages empower teachers and educators to independently integrate forests into their teaching, and forest guards strengthen awareness and responsible behaviour among a broader group of forest visitors. Together, these approaches highlight that successful forest education requires both physical settings and human capacities.

A key lesson learned is the importance of cross-sectoral cooperation. Close collaboration between forest managers, educational institutions, protected area authorities and local communities was essential for the successful implementation of the pilot activities. Long-term commitment, clear responsibilities and alignment with existing educational frameworks significantly increased acceptance, usability and sustainability of the measures.

This guide translates the practical experiences from the pilot regions into transferable recommendations that can be adapted to different regional and cultural contexts. While local conditions may vary, the underlying principles – experiential learning, accessibility, inclusiveness and respect for forest ecosystems- are widely applicable.

By promoting forests as places of learning, well-being and responsible interaction with nature, this good practice guide contributes to fostering a deeper connection between people and forests. It aims to support stakeholders across Europe and beyond in developing educational initiatives that strengthen both human well-being and the long-term protection of forest ecosystems.

Figure 13: Circle in the forest (source: Maren Michaelsen, AC)