

## PROJECT

Reinforcing protected areas capacity through an innovative methodology for sustainability (BIO2CARE)

in the context of the Cross-border Cooperation Programme  
INTERREG V-A GREECE-BULGARIA 2014 – 2020

## INTERNAL DOCUMENT

Conclusions and lessons learnt  
from accessibility inspections in ecotrails of the BIO2CARE project

**Type of document:** Report • **Classification:** Internal • **Status:** Final • **Date of issue:** 17.12.2020

**Work package / Deliverable:** WP5. Integrated Approach - Policy Recommendation / D5.5.4 ESAmEA visiting and promoting the new pathways

**Brief description:** This deliverable constitutes the final report of the knowledge accumulated from the conduct of accessibility inspections on new eco-trails designed and delivered in the context of the BIO2CARE project. It summarizes: (a) the conclusions of the inspections / autopsies on the new trails in Keramoti and Prangalitsa, and (b) the lessons learnt from the use/application in practice of the BIO2CARE "Guidebook for Accessible Nature Trails" and in particular of the new evaluation system included in it. The report is available in various alternative formats for different types of readers with disabilities.

The Project is co-funded by the European Regional Development Fund and by national funds of the countries participating in the Interreg V-A "Greece-Bulgaria 2014-2020" Cooperation Programme.

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## Preface

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In the context of the Project "[Reinforcing protected areas capacity through an innovative methodology for sustainability \(BIO2CARE\)](#)", the company [EUOPRAXIS MIKE](#), with years of experience in accessibility projects for people with disabilities, undertook on behalf of the [National Confederation of Disabled People in Greece \(E.S.A.meA.\)](#) that participates in BIO2CARE as a Beneficiary, to develop a prototype [Guidebook for Accessible Nature Trails](#). This Guide was developed with the main goal of supporting the creation of two new accessible leisure and bird watching trails in the two countries of the [Cross-Border Cooperation Program "INTERREG V-A GREECE-BULGARIA 2014-2020"](#).

In this context, the Guide (see Part A) offers specific, legal and practical guidelines, in accordance with the national legislation of the two countries and utilizing specifications, guidelines and good practices from the European and international environment, in order to ensure that the visit to the new trails will be possible and satisfactory for the widest possible range of visitors, including people with reduced mobility.

Then, based on these instructions, in the framework of BIO2CARE, the [Municipality of Nestos](#) (Project Beneficiary) undertook the responsibility to complete and open to the public a new eco-trail within the National Park of Eastern Macedonia-Thrace, in the area of the Municipal Department of Keramoti, where the KOTZA-ORMAN forest is located, while the [Directorate of the Rila National Park](#) (also Project Beneficiary) to create an accessible eco trail within the Park of its responsibility, in the area of the PARANGALITSA reserve.

Following the completion of the technical works on the two paths, [Domi Anaptyxis IKE](#), on behalf of E.S.A.meA., undertook the responsibility to inspect these two new trails in terms of their accessibility and friendliness to potential visitors with a disability and generally with reduced mobility / independence. For these inspections, the company followed the methodology and applied the techniques described in the aforementioned Guide, as part of the *Accessibility Assessment System* included in it (see Part B).

The objectives of the evaluation of each trail were:

- To identify any points/issues of non-compliance of the delivered works with what is specified in Part A of the aforementioned Guide, and thereby formulate proposals for future improvements.
- To collect detailed information and accessibility data, in order to formulate the "Accessibility Profile" and the "Accessibility Statement" (see Guide part B, sections D2 and D3) for each route, as this is considered necessary for informing and attracting (new) potential visitors with reduced mobility.
- To design appropriate promotional material and campaigns to promote the new eco-tails to new markets/visitors.

In the light of the above, this brief report includes:

- the conclusions that emerged from the systematic inspections/autopsies carried out by Domi Anaptyxis on behalf of the E.S.A.meA, at the new trails of the BIO2CARE Project and
- the lessons learned from the practical application of the "BIO2CARE Guidebook for Accessible Nature Trails".

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# 1 Conclusions of the autopsies

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## 1.1 New eco-trail in Keramoti, at the KOTZA-ORMAN forest

The [new eco-trail in Keramoti](#) for the observation of flora and fauna in the [National Park of Eastern Macedonia-Thrace](#) is designed to attract various categories of visitors, from nature lovers, students and hikers, to locals looking for a little exercise and contact with nature.

It consists of a "circular" pathway with a total length of about 650 meters, which begins and ends at the same point, at the [Delta Nestos Information Center](#) that operates in the area of Keramoti from the [Delta Nestos - Vistonida - Ismarida and Thassos Delta Management Agency](#) and extends northeast through of the adjacent [Kotza Orman forest \(Mega Forest\)](#).

Now, after the completion of the interventions and the smoothing of the trail, the path is completely gentle, has a straight, hard surface, without irregularities and with almost zero transverse slopes as well as minimal slopes locally along the direction of the path, where the altitude varies between 1 and 4 m from the sea level.

In collaboration with the Municipality of Nestos and the Management Body of Delta Nestos - Vistonida - Ismarida and Thassos, Domi Anaptyxis and Europraxis, on behalf of E.S.A.meA. scheduled and completed two (2) on-site autopsies to check the accessibility and general friendliness of the trail to the various categories of visitors with reduced mobility.

The first autopsy was carried out on 24.09.2020, when the technical works of shaping the path were in progress, and it had a formative character. This means that the main purpose of the audits was to identify significant "accessibility gaps" and to formulate proposals to address them in the context of the completion of ongoing work. As the technical works were still in progress, many remarks were indeed be taken into account by the technical team and finally included in the completed works.

Prior to the autopsy and the on-site measurements and controls in the field, a targeted meeting took place, which was coordinated by the members of the Domi Anaptyxis-Europraxis project team, with:

- Representatives of the Coordinating Partner of the BIO2CARE project, i.e., from the [Democritus University of Thrace](#).
- Representatives of the Municipality of Nestos, i.e., of the implementation body.
- Representatives of the Contractor of the Municipality of Nestos who undertook the construction/landscaping of the path, i.e., members of the technical team for the implementation of the new trail.
- Representatives of the Management Body Delta Nestos - Vistonida - Ismarida and Thassos, i.e., of the operating body of the trail.
- Representatives of the [Prefectural Association of the Disabled of the Prefecture of Kavala](#), as representative users of the new trail.

During this meeting, the team of auditors was given the opportunity to ask questions in the form of an interview and receive answers from all stakeholders related to the completion of the preliminary control sheets (see Evaluation system, Forms "A"). The meeting was hosted in a meeting room at the Delta Nestos Information Center.

The second autopsy was carried out one month later, on 27.10.2020, upon the delivery of the eco trail and had a summative character. That is, the (re-) controls had as their main objective the recording of the final access conditions and the collection of detailed measurements and accessibility data for the complete and valid information of the potential / interested visitors of the trail.

For both autopsies, the team of inspectors applied the methodology and techniques of inspection and measurement specified in the "Accessibility Evaluation System" developed under the BIO2CARE Project and included in Part B of the aforementioned Guide.

The process was attended, as representative users/visitors, by a blind person/user of a white cane (the president of the Prefectural Association of the Disabled of Kavala) as well as a person with a wheelchair (member of the Board of the Association). Also, part of the process was attended by officials of the Municipality and executives of the Operating Body, which gave the opportunity to their representatives to discuss with the inspectors the findings, weaknesses and their possible effects on various categories of visitors, which aroused their interest to restore a number of issues that were identified as soon as possible and even beyond the life cycle of the Project.

Based on the findings of the audit, it is judged that the new trail presents the following positive elements (in summary):

- It is easy to access, as it starts from the Delta Nestos Information Center, which is known to the locals, is connected by local means of transport, has a courtyard with parking spaces designed for the disabled, has an access ramp to the building and its staff is ready to welcome the public and provide information and information about the trail, as well as a tour of the trail depending on their availability and the weather conditions.
- It is of special ecological interest, since in the self-sustaining riparian forest Kotza Orman are preserved small freshwater wetlands where one can easily admire birds that either live there or visit them periodically and generally it nests and feeds many birds, mammals, amphibians and reptiles.
- It is circular, which facilitates the disembarkation / boarding of visitors with reduced mobility from the same point, without the need to move their transport vehicle to another point to pick them up after the end of their walk.
- It is designated as "EASY " and has a suitable length, neither too short nor too long, which will be expected to serve various categories of visitors with reduced mobility.
- Has minimal slopes, specially shaped, hard and solid, moving surface, without narrow or dangerous passages / points.
- Creates a safe "corridor" that is free of obstacles both in width (at least 1.5m., which allows wheelchair users to rotate) and in height (at least 2.3m. clear of trees and branches) and which is protected by a wooden railing on both sides.
- There are signposts for guidance and for information both at the starting point and along the route to guide visitors and inform them about the points of interest and the facilities included in them.
- The railings that exist along the entire length of the path, on both sides of the path, are placed at two different heights (75 and 90 cm), so that they also function as (a) handrail-guide for blind people, (b) auxiliary handle for the visually impaired and persons with reduced mobility and (c) auxiliary handle for wheelchair users.
- The route includes at regular rest points (six in total, every 70-90 m.), with wooden seats and extra space on the sides for wheelchair parking.
- The route includes equipment (e.g., trash cans, WC) in appropriate dimensions and specifications for people with disabilities, including wheelchair users.
- The route leads to a point where the path meets the river / lagoon where an accessible place for bird watching and observation has been set up, on a



special platform accessible to wheelchair users, with a covered area (kiosk) and information signs about the riparian forest Keramoti.

- On the route it is allowed to visit with guide dogs and / or help dogs.
- The route can be visited all year round and is suitable for visiting most hours of the day, if of course the weather conditions allow it<sup>1</sup>.

On the other hand, based on the findings of the audit, it is judged that the new trail presents the following elements that need to be addressed, improved or taken into account (in summary):

- It is considered necessary to configure parking places with appropriate specifications for vehicles for the disabled according to national standards.
- It is considered necessary to configure an accessible route (paved pathway, according to national standards) that will connect the Center with the starting / ending point of the accessible trail (approximately 40m.)
- It is necessary to further process the handrails (top of the railings) along the route so that (a) they are not rough (no pins, etc. that may cause injury) and (b) they carry notifications in Braille format (labels) for pointing out changes and identifying along the path features of interest to the visitor (e.g., information boards, rest / viewing points, bins, toilets, etc.)
- It is necessary to integrate tactile signage in general (embossed and / or in Braille) into the existing signage system, so that the information available (orientation instructions and visitor information) is accessible to blind / visually impaired people.
- It is desirable to incorporate a protective bar up to 10 cm high (e.g., at the bottom of the railings) along the path for the convenience of white cane users.
- Regular maintenance of the route (cleaning, pruning, removal of fallen branches, weeding, maintenance of wooden structures, etc.) is considered particularly important.
- It is considered important for the staff of the Information Center to receive specialized training for the service / tour / information of people with disabilities.
- It is desirable to equip the Center with equipment and devices suitable for disabled guests (e.g., suitable manual wheelchairs with thick wheels for public

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<sup>1</sup> It is not recommended to visit the route in cases of strong winds, rain, snowfall, frost, etc.

use, small electric vehicle golf-type with seat for wheelchair users for trail tours, installation of periscopes at suitable heights for all, autonomous guiding tour system, etc.).

- It is desirable to transcribe the information material that is available to the visitors at the Information Center in alternative accessible formats (accessible electronic formats, in audio format, in video format with rendering in sign language, in Braille format, in LargePrint, in easy-to-read format, etc.).
- It is desirable to improve the accessibility of the Center (construction of an accessible WC, addition of tactile markings to the exhibits and the photo exhibition, integration of alternative ways of information/presentations, e.g., audio descriptions, descriptions in sign language, etc.)
- It is considered important for the Information Center to formulate a special emergency plan that takes into account the needs of visitors with disabilities.

In conclusion, the new eco-trail in Keramoti is an important, and innovative for the country, opportunity for persons with reduced mobility to enjoy access to nature. In particular, it is considered to have features that will greatly facilitate the visit, either independently or with an escort, by people with mobility impairments (people using a cane, etc.), people in wheelchairs (almost all types), people with limited vision and blind people using a guide dog and/or a white cane. In the case of blind visitors, visually impaired guests and wheelchair visitors, it is recommended that the visit be accompanied by an attendant/assistant and/or company. The route is also accessible for deaf or hard of hearing people, as well as for people with intellectual/cognitive disabilities, despite the fact that at this stage some possibly desirable adjustments/facilities specifically targeted to these categories are not included.

## 1.2 New eco-trail at the Parangalitsa nature reserve

The [new eco-trail in Pranglitsa](#) for the observation of flora and fauna at the [Rila National Park](#) is designed to attract different categories of visitors, from nature lovers, students and hikers, to locals looking for a little exercise and contact with the nature.

It is a straight, but essentially "circular" route with a total length of about 400 meters, which starts and ends at the same point, at a [Bird Watching Site](#) located on the outskirts of the Parangalitsa Nature Reserve, on the European Trail E4, where presentations, tours and educational activities take place by the [Rila National Park Directorate](#), and extends southeast through the adjacent forest where one of the eight entrances to the National Park is located.

Now, after the interventions and the smoothing of the trail, the path is relatively gentle, has a surface that consists mainly of natural soil with some natural irregularities locally and small transverse slopes (less than 7 degrees) as well as some relatively steep slopes locally along the route (less than 10 degrees), which is uphill with the altitude starting from 1,484 m. ending at 1,500 m. (i.e., 16 m. difference)

In collaboration with the Directorate of the Rila National Park, the companies Domi Anaptyxis and Europraxis, on behalf of E.S.A.meA. planned and conducted an on-site autopsy to check the accessibility and general friendliness of the route to the various categories of visitors with reduced mobility.

The autopsy was carried out on October 29 & 31, 2020, when the technical works for the landscaping of the path had been completed, and it had a summative character. That is, the main purpose of the audits was to capture the final access conditions and to collect detailed measurements and accessibility data for the complete and valid information of the potential / interested visitors of the route.

For the audit, the team of auditors/inspectors applied the methodology and techniques of inspection and measurement specified in the "Accessibility Assessment System" developed under the BIO2CARE project and included in Part B of the aforementioned Guide.

Due to the restriction measures applied for dealing with the COVID19 pandemic, at the last minute, the representative users / visitors were not able to participate in the process, as originally planned. Also, part of the process was attended by executives of the Directorate as "implementation & operation body" of the new trail, which gave the opportunity to its representatives to discuss with the inspectors the findings, weaknesses and their possible effects on various categories of visitors, which aroused their interest in restoring a number of issues that were identified as soon as possible and even beyond the life cycle of the BIO2CARE project.

Just before the on-site visit to the landscaped trail, a targeted meeting took place with members of our companies' project team (i.e., the inspectors) and representatives of the Directorate. During this meeting, the team of auditors had the opportunity to ask questions and receive answers from all those involved in the construction and management of the new trail, which are related to the completion of the preparatory

forms (see Evaluation System - Forms "A"). The meeting was hosted at the new Park Information Center of the Park (also contracted with funding by the BIO2CARE project), next to the headquarters of the Directorate in the city of Blagoevgrad.

Based on the findings of the audit, it is judged that the new trail presents the following positive elements (in summary):

- Is easy to access, starting from an existing bird watching area (with kiosks, picnic tables, chemical toilet, etc.) located on the outskirts of Paragalitsa Nature Reserve, just 500 m after [Kartala Ski Resort](#)<sup>2</sup>, a location well known to the locals, has a parking space, has an access ramp to the landscaped trail, and occasionally hosts visits, guided tours, organized / group bird watching and educational activities by the staff of the Park management, depending on availability and weather conditions.
- It is of particular ecological interest, as it is a natural refuge for endemic birds and animals in an environment of unparalleled beauty on the outskirts of the strictly protected area.
- The entrance to the path has free space for disembarkation, for example, of people in wheelchairs, from a car or small van, and there is a special platform/ bridge made of wood, which has information/information signage for the park, in Bulgarian, English and Braille.
- It is essentially circular, which facilitates the disembarkation/boarding of visitors with reduced mobility from the same point, without having to move their transport vehicle to another point to pick them up after the end of their walk.
- It is relatively short, which will be expected to serve different categories of visitors with reduced mobility.
- It has small slopes, relatively smooth surface of movement, mostly hard and solid, without narrow or particularly dangerous passages/points.
- Creates a safe "corridor" that is free of obstacles both in width (at least 1.5 m, which allows wheelchair users to rotate) and in height (at least 2.3 m clear of trees and branches) and which is protected by a wooden railing on one side.

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<sup>2</sup> A 2-star hotel that provides ski-to-door access with 3 lifts and accommodation with a restaurant, free private parking, a bar and a garden.

- There are signposts for guidance and information both at the starting point and along the route to guide visitors and inform them about the points of interest and the facilities included in them.
- The railings that exist along the entire length of the path on one side of the path, are placed at a height of 90-95 cm, so that they function as (a) guide handrail for blind people, and (b) auxiliary handle for people with limited vision and people with reduced mobility.
- The railings that exist along the entire length of the path on one side of the path, have a suitable treatment of the handrails (upper part of the railings): (a) so that they are not rough (have no pins, etc. that can be injure) and (b) have Braille notifications (labels) for changes of address and for identifying features of interest to the visitor (e.g., information boards, rest points, etc.)
- There is tactile signage (in Braille) in the existing signage system, so that the information available (information information) is accessible to blind/visually impaired people.
- The route includes at regular intervals rest / rest points (six in total, every 35-40 m.), with wooden seats and extra space on the sides for wheelchair parking.
- After the first 200 meters which have been designed for the needs of visitors with disabilities, the old path continues for an additional 150-200 m. At a point where the path meets the river (bridges), without any particular obstacles, very steep slopes or narrow passages, but with clearly more irregularities on the ground and without a guide railing.
- On the route it is allowed to visit with guide dogs and/or help dogs.
- The route can be visited all year round and is suitable for visiting most hours of the day, if of course the weather conditions allow it<sup>3</sup>.
- The information material available to the visitors of the Information Center is also available in printed Braille format.

On the other hand, based on the findings of the audit, it is judged that the new route presents the following elements that need to be addressed, improved or even more generally (briefly):

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<sup>3</sup> It is not recommended to visit the route in cases of strong winds, rain, snowfall, frost, etc.

- It is considered necessary to configure parking points (parking) at the point of arrival, with appropriate specifications for vehicles for the disabled according to national standards.
- It is considered important to configure the existing infrastructure at the point of arrival (kiosks, WC, benches, driveway, etc.), with appropriate specifications for visitors with disabilities, in accordance with national standards and international good practices.
- It is necessary to configure an accessible route that connects the bird watching/observation point with the starting/ending point of the constructed trail (approximately 200m.)
- It is desirable to incorporate a protective bar up to 10 cm high (e.g., at the bottom of the railings) along the path for the convenience of white cane users.
- It is considered important that the break positions be redefined, so that they are in extension of the path and not within the minimum necessary free width. Also, their present position (from the side that is the guide railing), in essence, creates breaks in the blind guidance system (they fall on the benches and on my guests may sit on them), and it is recommended that they be repositioned by opposite side. Also, the height and depth of the seats are recommended to be adjusted (they are very low and shallow).
- It is important to inform visitors about the height of the roofs of the information boards as very tall people can hit them.
- Regular maintenance of the route (cleaning, pruning, removal of fallen branches, weeding, maintenance of wooden structures, etc.) is considered particularly important. Especially from the side of the railing that acts as a guide, it should always be ensured that there are no protruding branches and grass on the ground, so that there is no risk of injury.
- It is desirable to include provisions for visually impaired and deaf people / sign language users in the existing information / information signage (existing conventional signs have very small letters, long texts, etc.).
- It is desirable to make further bridging in some parts of the route where the ground shows relatively strong natural irregularities (protruding rocks/stones) and transverse or longitudinal slopes.
- It is considered important for the staff of the Information Center to receive specialized training for the service/tour/information of people with disabilities.
- It is desirable to equip the Center with equipment and devices suitable for disabled guests (e.g., suitable manual wheelchairs with thick wheels for public use, small electric golf wheelchair with seat and wheelchair for tours, supplies

and installation of periscopes at suitable heights for all, autonomous tour system, etc.).

- It is desirable to transcribe the information material available to the visitors of the Information Center in additional alternative accessible formats (accessible electronic formats, in audio format, in video format with rendering in sign language, in Braille format, in LargePrint forma, in easy-to-read format etc.).
- It is desirable to improve the accessibility of the Center (configuration of parking space for disabled vehicles, creation of an accessible WC, integration of alternative ways of information, e.g., audio descriptions, descriptions in sign language, etc.)
- It is considered important for the Information Center to formulate a special emergency plan that takes into account the needs of visitors with disabilities.

In conclusion, the new eco-trail in Parangalitsa is an important, and pioneering for the country, opportunity for persons with reduced mobility to enjoy access to nature. In particular, it is considered to have features that will significantly facilitate the visit by people with mobility impairments (people using a cane, etc.), people using wheelchairs (almost all types), visually impaired and blind people using a guide dog and/or a white cane. Some visitors may need to visit the trail escorted by an assistant. The route is also accessible for deaf or hard of hearing people, as well as for people with intellectual/cognitive disabilities, despite the fact that at this stage some possibly desirable adjustments/facilities specifically targeted to these categories are not included.

## 2 Lessons learnt from the use of the BIO2CARE Guidebook in practice

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The [Guidebook](#) (in part B) presents techniques and practical tools which can be used when constructing and/or improving accessible nature trails (e.g. within a Natura 2000 site), but they can also support:

- the trail inspection process to identify obstacles and issues for various categories of visitors with reduced mobility, e.g., aiming to improve accessibility and experience in general for as many visitors with reduced mobility as possible,
- the trail accessibility description process, e.g., aiming to attract, inform and guide visitors with reduced mobility.

Specifically, it presents techniques and tools for the following processes:

- Set-up – planning, i.e., the initial collection of necessary information and details to design and prepare inspections, such as general information on the area's/trail's location, nature, content and management body, the evaluation motive and objectives, any restrictions, etc.
- Performing an inspection, i.e., collecting primary data on the area's/trail's accessibility and use by various types of visitors with reduced mobility, such as measurements and data recorded by inspectors, interviews, photos, etc.
- Data analysis – reporting, i.e., organising and analysing data, and drawing conclusions on obstacles, shortfalls, adversities, risks, etc. of the area/trail for various types of visitors with reduced mobility, as well as presenting aggregate results.
- Decision making, i.e., ranking recorded issues and shaping proposals to address them, as well as compiling integrated work plans and appropriate measures to improve and boost the site's traffic.
- Creating useful descriptions for the target groups, i.e., collecting additional data and information (e.g., additional photos and videos, information on other nearby sites and places of interest, etc.), and producing useful informational material ("accessibility profile") for visitors with reduced mobility, which assists them to become familiar with and appreciate the available options and act/prepare accordingly, before and/or during their visit.



With the experience we have gained from conducting the above inspections further to the Guidebook's specifications ensured us that the techniques and tools specified in it:

- constitute a unified integrated assessment system for trails and infrastructures in nature,
- serve the evaluation of a number of features and factors that affect the visit and experience for various types of visitors with reduced mobility, and not simply evaluate accessibility or compliance with directives and regulations in force,
- can be easily applied by inspectors of various backgrounds, without requiring special expertise in or deep knowledge of disability or accessibility issues, or evaluation techniques for people with disabilities, etc.,
- may be applied by the personnel of various bodies, in the context of self-evaluation, without requiring representative/real user testing,
- should be easy to use, without requiring excessive cost in terms of time, required resources or equipment,
- may help identify and promote not only problems, but also positive features that are deemed important in terms of both showcasing them and protecting them, when it comes to forthcoming/future redesigns and additional interventions,
- could be applied only by one person, although it is proposed to set up a small group of at least three (3) inspectors, who will work collectively in order to achieve more objective and reliable results and complete the process faster (depending on its scope area/trail and the desired "depth" of the assessment).

However, as conclusions, the following are pointed out:

- Depending on the needs, purpose and scope of each assessment, careful preparation is required for the completion and organisation of the preliminary sheets (forms "A") and the selection of the necessary control sheets (forms "B").
- It is estimated that it might be useful to create in the future a shortened version of the System (with fewer sheets, checkpoints, etc.) which will be more practical for small-scale inspections (short routes with a limited number of features, equipment, etc.).
- The sheets in their existing form (printed), depending on their number (which subject to the range of infrastructures, equipment, intersections within the trail's pathways, the number of entrances/exits, etc.), can be difficult for the

inspectors to manage and fill-in during the walkthrough of each trail. Therefore, it is considered critical to proceed with the creation of an electronic application, as the digital version of the current Evaluation System, which will allow the design and conduct of the entire inspection process via a tablet, including the recording/storage of measurements and photos on the spot. Important elements/advantage of this application will be the ability to directly export only the necessary sheets for each case, the ease of organizing and sharing information, and the ease of exporting automated summaries and reports (accessibility statement, accessibility profile, lists of features/issues that need improvement, etc.).