

## Changes in the number of forest visitors in the Bakony region (Hungary) during and after the COVID-19 epidemic waves

György Czibula

PhD, University of Sopron, Faculty of Forestry, Gyula Roth Doctoral School of Forestry and Wildlife Management Science, Sopron

E-mail: [czibula.gyorgy@phd.uni-sopron.hu](mailto:czibula.gyorgy@phd.uni-sopron.hu)

### Introduction

The 21 state-owned forest holdings that manage more than half of the domestic forest stands, are responsible for forest public welfare investment, too. The most visible and one of the most popular investments are lookout towers across the country. The lookout towers in the operation area of Bakonyerdő Zrt., which is the subject of the study, were typically placed in the most visited forest blocks.

The Covid epidemic between the spring of 2020 and the summer of 2021 revealed an increasing demand for various forms of forest-related tourism. Number of visitors broke records in many places: for eg. Pilisi Parkerdő Ltd. on its operation area estimated 30 million visitor days in 2021. Vast majority of the hikers were one-day visitors.

We know that during the years of the Covid pandemic waves, an increasing number of hikers headed towards the forests. The growing popularity of healthy lifestyle, the possibility of active leisure time in nature and the experiential factor of forest hikes have directed attention to the forest areas. The forest lookout towers have already become the permanent destinations of various tour recommendations, articles and posts, promising an easy-to-access, experiential excursion, thus their popularity has peaked in 2020 (figure 1.).

We examined the trend of visitor numbers during the Covid epidemic waves, moreover, we also studied how the trend changed after the epidemic waves.

### Material and method

By analyzing the data of the automatic visitor counters placed on the lookout towers, we can get an insight of the number and distribution of hikers in each period. The data are valuable because they register visitor movements directly created in the forest area, which are difficult to measure by other means, and which really fall within the scope of forest tourism.

In the operation area of Bakonyerdő Ltd., a visitor counting device has been installed in six lookout towers. The tools of three of the six were in continuous operation during and after the Covid epidemic (Órtorony – Tihany, Batsányi – Balatonyörök and Óvár – Szigliget lookout towers), so their data are suitable for comparison. It is important to mention that the accessibility of the examined lookout towers was ensured even during the epidemiological emergency periods, no physical closure was introduced.

We collected spring, summer and year-round visitor data of the years 2020, 2021, 2022, and compared them (figure 1-3.). Emergency periods and the measures put in place during them, of course, have an impact on visitor numbers. The first emergency period being the most significant in this respect, since a lockdown was in place for a certain time.

Figure 1.: Yearly visitor numbers

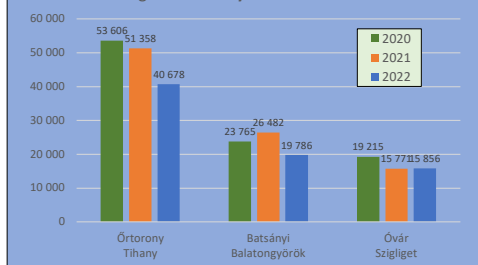


Figure 2.: Visitor numbers of the spring months

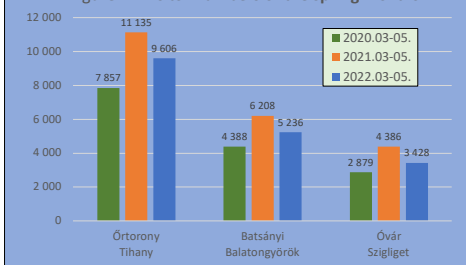
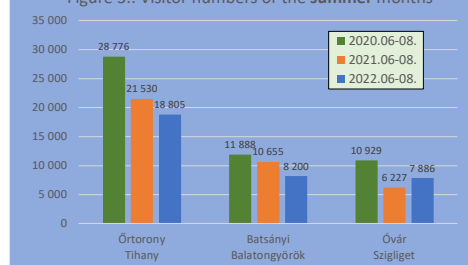


Figure 3.: Visitor numbers of the summer months



### Outcomes

Looking at the year 2020, it can be said that during the Covid epidemic waves, due to the lack of foreign guests and domestic guests arriving only for one day, the number of participants in tourism in general has decreased by about half. However, in the area of forest tourism, which is part of active tourism, we have experienced something completely different. In 2020, based on visitor data from the lookout towers, there was also a decline in the spring months (figure 2.) during the first epidemiological emergency period: this was when there were the fewest visitors compared to other years. However, the total number of visitors in summer months and the annual total number of visitors was the highest in 2020 (figure 3., 1.), with one exception (Batsányi lookout tower, year round data). Subsequently, the cumulated visitor numbers of the three lookout towers in 2021 are barely noticeably less (- 3.1%), while in 2022 they are significantly (- 21%) below the figures of 2020.

### Conclusions

Summing up the data, we conclude that In 2020, there was a surprising dichotomy. Of the three years studied, the most visited summer months and the overall year 2020 had the highest number of visitors, while the spring months (i.e. the part of the year that fell on the Covid emergency period) had the fewest visitors. This was clearly due to the temporary introduction of lockdown. The upward trend in visitor numbers during the first year of Covid (2020) stopped as early as the following year. In 2021, the numbers decreased barely noticeably, but in 2022 they fell sharply (figure 1.). Possible explanations may include:

1. New entrants to active tourism did not remain regular forest hikers after 2020.
2. For the greater part of 2022, it was already possible to travel to most countries with less restrictions or without restrictions, so foreign trips postponed for two years due to Covid took place at this time, at the expense of domestic holidays and day trips to the forest.
3. The weather extremes of 2022 (warmth, drought) scared away forest visitors.

The reasons are complex, finding the concrete answers requires further research which we plan to carry out in 2023. in the Bakony area (visitor counting and questionnaire).