

## Fully accessible Eifel National Park

### Presentation abstract

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At the beginning of 2004, an area of around 11,000 hectares between Aachen, Cologne and Koblenz was designated as the first national park in the west of Germany. Following the motto 'Let nature be nature', in Eifel National Park the main aim is for the native mixed beech forests to reclaim their habitat completely and develop undisturbed. However, national parks in Germany also have the purpose of contributing to research, natural history education and nature experiences for the population.

When Eifel National Park was founded, the Park Administration considered the question of who should be able to experience the large protected area. The right answer could only be: Everyone, that is, people with or without disabilities. The National Park Administration established this as a principle, anchored full accessibility in its management plan and mission statement, and organised full accessibility as a cross-functional objective.

As a rule, programmes are not developed for the exclusive use of particular visitor groups. Instead, the National Park Administration has the goal of inclusion: Numerous environmental education programmes, guided tours and exhibitions are offered for the shared use of people with or without disabilities. This approach is based on two main strategies.

The first strategy involves the comprehensive reduction of communication barriers. Park employees and partners are provided with training and awareness raising for interacting with people with disabilities. In the area of marketing, guidelines for full accessibility are observed in print media and on the website. Moreover, all fully accessible programmes are certified with the German unified 'Travel for all' system ('Reisen für Alle').

The second strategy is concerned with eliminating structural barriers and creating specific nature experience programmes. For the development of new programmes and the training of employees, a large network of partners has been established including many affected persons and volunteers, representatives of institutions and associations for the disabled, and consultants specialising in fully accessible tourism.

Many fully accessible programmes have been created since the founding of Eifel National Park. Five National Park Gates combine tourist information with exhibitions on various topics related to the National Park. All of the Gate buildings are fully accessible for persons with limited mobility. Two of the Gates also have a tactile guidance system for the blind. The exhibitions always appeal to several senses simultaneously. The discovery exhibition 'Dreams of the wilderness' ('Wildnis(t)räume'), covering over 2,000 m<sup>2</sup>, opened in the National Park Centre in September 2016 and considers every possible disability. Visitors in wheelchairs, or those who are blind, deaf, or cognitively impaired can all experience the content of the exhibition. Visitors discovering the exhibition on their own can use multimedia guides with audio descriptions, videos in German sign language, and texts written in simple language.

A similar approach is used for the 'Wilder Weg' nature discovery path. On the path and wooden walkway, approximately 1.5 km in length, there are ten stations focusing on topics such as animals and plants, the developing wilderness or the power of the wind. The Wilder Weg is part of the fully accessible Wild Kermeter area for experiencing nature. The fully accessible trail network, extending more than 6 km, lies in the midst of the National Park. Despite the forest location, in addition to

panoramic views, persons with disabilities can also find a tactile guidance system and fully accessible facilities including a bus connection, parking area and toilets.

National Park rangers, who are also well-trained concerning full accessibility, provide tours throughout the year to which people with or without disabilities are invited. Several times a year there are also ranger tours with commentary in sign language. In Eifel National Park, animal observation stations and rides in a horse-drawn carriage are also accessible to persons using wheelchairs. The establishment of fully accessible programmes is always integrated with the tourism service chain. Fully accessible nature experience programmes are useful and attractive only if fully accessible infrastructure, such as restaurants and accommodation, is available locally for guests. For this reason, interested providers are trained and qualified by the National Park Administration to become certified National Park hosts. Some of them are also advised concerning full accessibility, with awareness raising for interacting with people with disabilities.

Numerous partners pursue the goal of full accessibility for the Eifel National Park region, including the tourism service chain. For this purpose, partners such as Nordeifel Nature Park, tourism organisations, and local municipalities work closely with the National Park Administration.

**Lead speaker :** Tobias Wiesen

**Organisation :** Eifel National Park

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**Biography :** Tobias Wiesen studied Geography at the University of Bonn, Germany. As the coordinator for accessible tourism he works in the Eifel National Park. Developing new and improving existing accessible attractions like paths or exhibitions are counted among his job. Furthermore he coordinates several co-operations with institutions, associations and further partners or gives advice to other divisions in terms of accessibility.

**2nd speaker :**

**Organisation :**

**City (Country) :** ( )

**Biography :**