

THE PRACTICE OF NORDIC WALKING IN THE CONTEXT OF TOURISM AND ACTIVE LEISURE

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Annotation

The purpose of this article is to determine what forms of active leisure and tourism activities are being chosen by representatives of various groups of society in Lithuania and to find out the importance of Nordic walking in the context of active tourism and leisure. The pandemic, which lasted for several years, limited the opportunities of Lithuanians to travel abroad, but encouraged the search for new forms of leisure in Lithuania. A wider offer of local excursions appeared, more and more Lithuanians became interested in Nordic walking and other forms of active leisure. The research showed that a majority of respondents take part in hiking, water sports and cycling. All these activities are extremely popular during the warmer seasons. Meanwhile, Nordic walking is just beginning to establish itself as a popular form of active leisure.

Key words: *tourism, leisure, Nordic walking, excursion, activity.*

Introduction

In 2020 the outbreak of the pandemic altered the plans of most Lithuanians (as well as people all over the world) and led to a partial change in the way of life that had been established until then (Panareze & Azzarita, 2021). As the research shows, the pandemic had a significant (negative) impact at a psychological level (Mauricio et al., 2022). For reasons of safety, some Lithuanians swapped trips to distant lands for trips to Lithuania or to neighbouring Latvia and Poland (see Figure 1). In the same year, the so-called "Baltic Travel Bubble" was created between the three Baltic States, which encouraged the safe movement of tourists between the three Baltic States due to the relatively low percentage¹ of coronavirus infections. As a result, some losses² in the tourism business were alleviated and the development of tourism in the Baltic States region was stimulated.

According to the tourism sector development study³, in 2020 from July to September, tourism grew by 12%. Compared to the pre-pandemic years, such an increase is not large, but it shows how people's thinking and behaviour have changed, as well as their attitude to travel and leisure.

Nordic walking is one of the activities that can be implemented in tourism, with special emphasis on a healthy lifestyle. Nordic walking researchers (Soroka et al. (2022), Kunysz-Rozborska & Rejman (2019), Piech et al. (2014) etc.) consider health and emotional well-being to be a distinctive feature of Nordic walking. However, there is currently a need for deeper scientific analysis of the position of Nordic walking in the context of active tourism. In addition, the level of popularity of this activity in Lithuania has not been determined.

The main question of the article: where is Nordic walking placed in the context of active tourism and leisure?

The purpose of the article: to analyse the most common forms of leisure and tourism activities in Lithuania and to determine how widespread the practice of Nordic walking is.

Tasks of the article:

- 1) Determine the impact of the pandemic on the tourism sector and the formation of tourist habits.
- 2) Find out which forms of active leisure and tourism activities are most often chosen by Lithuanians.
- 3) Reveal the importance of Nordic walking in the context of active tourism and leisure.

According to the research results, some recommendations on how to turn the practice of Nordic walking into a more prominent part of active tourism will be provided.

¹ According to Lithuanian statistics, in 2020 In Lithuania the number of coronavirus cases was the lowest in the summer months. Source: Lithuanian Government Activity Report, 2020.

² In 2020, compared to 2019, Lithuania lost 39.4 percent. foreign tourists. Source: Official Statistics Portal

³ Tourism research and data. Source: <https://www.lithuania.travel/lt/kategorija/turizmo-tyrimai-ir-duomenys>

The impact of the pandemic on leisure and tourism

Although the world is currently facing geopolitical challenges and suffering from the consequences of the war in Ukraine, it should not be forgotten that it is the pandemic of 2020 that altered the travellers' behaviour and their attitudes towards leisure. According to A. Maslow's theory of the hierarchy of needs, the pyramid of the hierarchy of personal needs consists of the physiological and security needs at the first level and the needs of sociality, self-esteem, and self-expression at the second level. The need for security becomes more active and dominant only in an extraordinary situation: in the event of a war, the appearance of a disease, during natural cataclysms, the collapse of the government or the flood of a crime wave, etc. (Žuromskaitė et al., 2016). The events of recent years show that the deadly disease that has gripped the whole world has especially increased the need for security and has changed individual behaviour, attitudes towards lifestyle, leisure, and travel. It has especially affected the behaviour of young people (Lazcano et al., 2022). Moreover, the mandatory self-isolation has affected people's physical and mental health and has had a strong negative impact on healthy lifestyle behaviors. For example, prolonged home stay could have increased sedentary behaviors due to a decrease on the amount of daily physical activity performed (Martínez de Quel et al., 2021).

According to Momen Menhaaz (2022), the attitude towards leisure and the concept of leisure itself has changed fundamentally. It is no longer a time of privacy, but a pre-agreed plan of activities. And although free time is decreasing, leisure activities in the world are increasing. Leisure expenses are increasing in all corners of the world as more and more people enter the middle class. Leisure is no longer an individual time that can be enjoyed without a particular agenda. The modern approach to leisure is particularly associated with the concept of productivity.

Here are the factors that determined the growth rate of tourism in the pre-pandemic period,

and globally changed the tourist market and travel options (Labanauskaitė, 2020):

- rising standard of living and economic growth,
- increase in fuel prices,
- manifestations of terrorism,
- personal safety during the trip,
- growing concern for environmental protection,
- globalization, which provides the opportunity to change one's place of residence in another country,
- emergence of new technologies,
- changing attitudes towards free time and its value,
- offer of cheap flights.

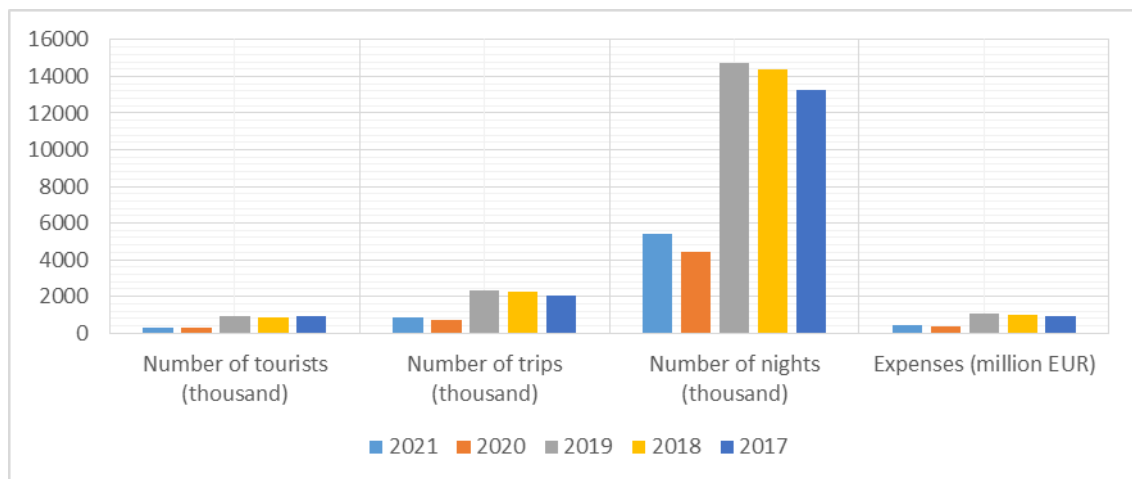


Figure 1. Number of outbound tourists in Lithuania. Source: Portal of Official Statistics

Compared to the Statistics of 2019 related to Lithuanian trips abroad (Figure 1), in 2020 the number of these trips have more than doubled. So, some fundamental changes in the attitude of Lithuanians towards rest and free time can be clearly seen since health and safety has become the determining factor for most of the trips. The table below shows which natural

cataclysms and catastrophes occurred in the past which led to changes in the habits of travellers and influenced their travel destinations.

Table 1

Impact of disasters on people's travel habits and leisure time. Source: Compiled by authors from: Stephen et al, 2020

127 floods	3.6 billion people were affected by natural disasters between 2008 and 2017			
97 storms	20 earthquakes	In 2018 the damage caused by natural disasters amounted to 132 billion dollars and affected 68.5 million people		
26 cases of extreme heat	16 droughts 13 landslides	10 large fires	7 cases of volcanic activity	1 case of massive earthquake

On average, 348 natural disasters occurred between 2008-2017. In addition, according to the source, a total of 315 natural disasters and catastrophes occurred in 2018 (Stephen et al., 2020).

It can be assumed that in the near future the traveller's behaviour and expectations will be mainly influenced by a guarantee of safety during the trip, and economic opportunities⁴. Therefore, it is likely that local tourism opportunities will continue to remain relevant. A recent study of the development of the tourism sector shows that it remains an important task to reduce the dependence of seasonal jobs in Lithuanian cities (especially in those places affected by Covid) and to encourage visitors to choose trips with overnight stays⁵.

The statistical data and other information reviewed in the article show that the attitude of Lithuanians towards travel, local tourism and leisure may have changed substantially over the past year. According to the data in the Universal Lithuanian Encyclopaedia, free time is the amount of time spent relaxing after working hours, entertainment, hobbies, self-discovery, etc. The duration and variety of leisure time is influenced by objective factors of the environment (e.g. the country's economy and leisure infrastructure, etc.) and by objective and subjective factors specific to the individual or group (e.g. education, work, etc.) (Universal Lithuanian Encyclopaedia, n.d.). The restrictions introduced during the pandemic have affected many people's approach to leisure time, which has become more active due to daily routines filled with new experiences and activities, such as an increased interest in the practice of Nordic walking.

Nordic walking in the context of leisure

Walking is the simplest form of movement, as its rhythm and cyclicity show the essence of human nature. It is the most basic way of moving that is accessible to everyone: both those who want to do sports and those who are not ready to do sports seriously. Various ways of walking, depending on the place, distance, speed of movement, strengthen the body and the organism and improve the activity of the nervous system, blood vessels, heart, muscles and various internal organs (Ivaškienė & Čepelionienė, 2005). Nordic Walking is linked to basic forms of human physical activity such as walking, marching and running (Soroka et al, 2022).

Nordic walking refers to Scandinavian walking with poles or, in other words, physical activity based on walking and its special technique, i.e. walking with specially matched poles. The characteristics of Nordic walking are: prolonged steps, alternating movement of arms and legs (Piech et al., 2014). The technique is a combination of traditional marching and pushing back from the ground by using sticks, which is inspired by cross-country skiing. The safety and simplicity of this activity allows people at different ages and in different physical condition participate in walking. Another positive feature is that it can be practiced in any area on different surfaces, throughout the year and by everyone (Kunysz-Rozborska & Rejman, 2019).

In the last 15 years, Nordic walking has become extremely popular among people of different ages. Its health effects have been proven even in people with mobility problems (<https://www.inwa-nordicwalking.com/about-us/what-is-nordic-walking/>). Walking is a sport for everyone. It can be a family sport (Ivaškienė & Čepelionienė, 2005). In addition, it is an activity that does not require a large financial investment. Nordic walking poles can be purchased at an

⁴ Due to the suspension of businesses during the pandemic, especially in the tourism sector, economic growth in many countries around the world has slowed down somewhat. In Lithuania, this indicator changed by 0.8 percent. Source: Portal of Official Statistics.

⁵ Tourism research and data. Source: <https://www.lithuania.travel/lt/kategorija/turizmo-tyrimai-ir-duomenys>.

affordable price for most and motivate you to regularly engage in a healthy activity and maintain good physical shape. In addition, Nordic walking training and proper nutrition help to deal with weight problems. The growing popularity of this type of physical activity is linked to effortless way of movement that occurs during walking and also the possibility of spending time in a green environment. The Nordic Walking has become a comfortable form of physical activity and overcomes many widely perceived barriers such as lack of time, lack of physical fitness or technical skills ((Soroka et al, 2022).

Thus, due to many restrictions during the period of the pandemic, the decrease in physical activity may have influenced the increase in popularity of Nordic walking in Lithuania (especially due to the possibility of spending more time in the fresh air and feeling better).

Walking improves the general state of health, promotes more efficient work performance, prevents bad mood and depression (which was especially felt during the pandemic period). The influence of walking on the human psyche (Ivaškienė & Čepelionienė, 2005):

- 1) Feeling better,
- 2) Reduced risk of depression and bad mood,
- 3) Greater self-confidence,
- 4) Increased self-awareness,
- 5) Overcoming stress,
- 6) Ability to focus.

Unfortunately, there is currently a lack of official statistics on the practice of Nordic walking in Lithuania. It is possible that this is influenced by the relatively late arrival of Nordic walking as a sport or leisure activity to Lithuania (cf., Nordic walking appeared in Lithuania in 2007, while in Finland it has been practiced since 1997). The portal is dedicated to the practice of Nordic walking in the Lithuanian states, that, let's say, our Latvian and Estonian neighbours practice Nordic walking by the thousands (www.siaurietiskasejimas.lt).

In order to determine the popularity of Nordic walking in Lithuania and to review other favourite leisure and active tourism activities of Lithuanians, a study was conducted. The results are presented below.

Research methodology

The target population of the study consisted of adult citizens of the Republic of Lithuania. To achieve 95% reliability and 5% margin of error, 384 respondents were targeted. The research method is quantitative. The questionnaire was prepared using Google Form survey administration software. The survey was published on the 3rd January 2022 and was active until 4th April 2022. Distribution took place via e-mail and social networks. During this period, 233 respondents filled out the questionnaire. The 95% confidence level of the data has a margin of error of 6-7%. Data were processed using Microsoft Excel.

The questionnaire consists of two blocks. The first is divided into 2 smaller blocks: questions 1-6 are about active tourism. These questions aim to clarify how the respondents understand active tourism and how often they engage in active tourism activities. Questions 7-10 are about Nordic walking. The purpose of these questions is to determine how respondents perceive the concept of Nordic walking and to investigate its popularity in Lithuania. The second block is general information about the respondents.

Research results and analysis

The majority of participants in the survey were women at 78%, with men accounting for 21% and the remaining 1% did not indicate their gender. By age group, the most active were the 31–40-year-olds representing 39% of the total. The least represented were 61–71-year-olds at 4% of the total. One fifth of the respondents were 21–30-year-olds and another fifth were the 41-50-year-olds. Respondents from the following age groups also participated: 51-60-year-olds at 10% and up to 20-year-olds at 8%.

In terms of education, 59% of respondents had a university degree and 15% had a college degree. 12% of all respondents were students and 9% had secondary education. Respondents with professional education - 3%. To summarise, it is obvious that the results of the survey reflect different age groups with a higher education.

In the context of active tourism, hiking (61%), kayaking or paddle boarding (41%), and cycling (41%) are the most interesting activities to people. Diving received the fewest votes (2%). The results suggest that the most popular activities in Lithuania are those that are readily accessible. For instance, individuals who enjoy hiking may also enjoy hiking with Nordic poles.

Respondents were also asked how often they engage in the specified activities. Respondents were presented with the activities mentioned in the first question and a frequency scale was presented (Figure 2). The most common activity is hiking. The activity is undertaken

at least once a week (24%), monthly (25%) or semi-annually (24%). Nordic walking with poles is rarely practiced.

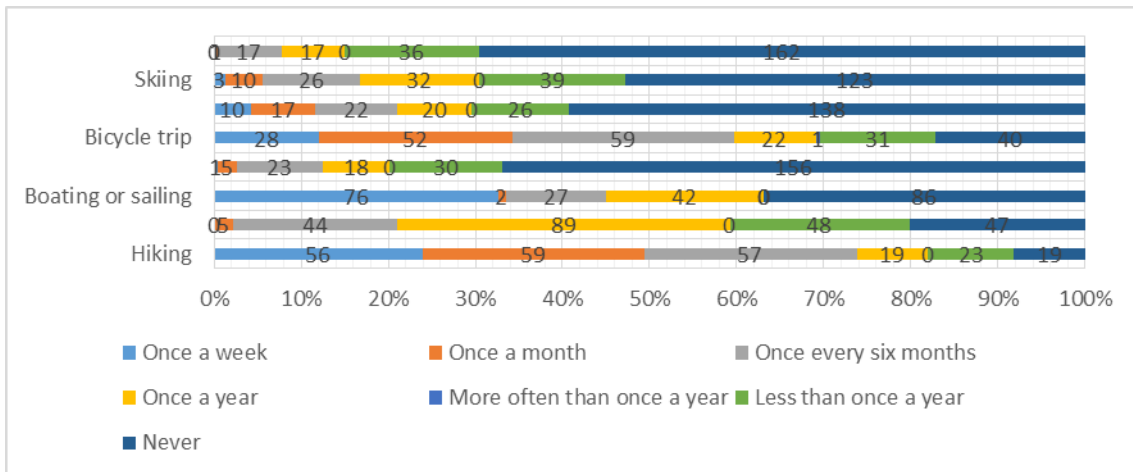


Figure 2. How often do you participate in the specified activities (N=233)

In summary, the most common activities are hiking, boating or sailing. Kayaking or paddle boarding and skiing are the least common activities. Activities that are not yet practiced: hot air ballooning, paragliding and Nordic walking with poles.

The survey also included questions about active tourism. One of the questions aimed to find out whether the respondents understood the term. 90% of the respondents answered that they like active tourism, and 6% expressed a negative opinion. 3% said they didn't know what it was and 1% gave other reasons. So, it can be said that this concept is familiar in Lithuania and according to the answers in the previous questionnaire it can be said that active tourism is practiced in Lithuania.

The respondents were also asked to evaluate the best mode of organization of different types of tours. According to their opinion, the most suitable form is on foot (Figure 3): hiking (71%), museum (64%), architecture (52%) and art (50%) tours. By transport - technological tours (17%). In a mixed way (by foot and by transport) - sightseeing (62%) and historical (53%) tours.

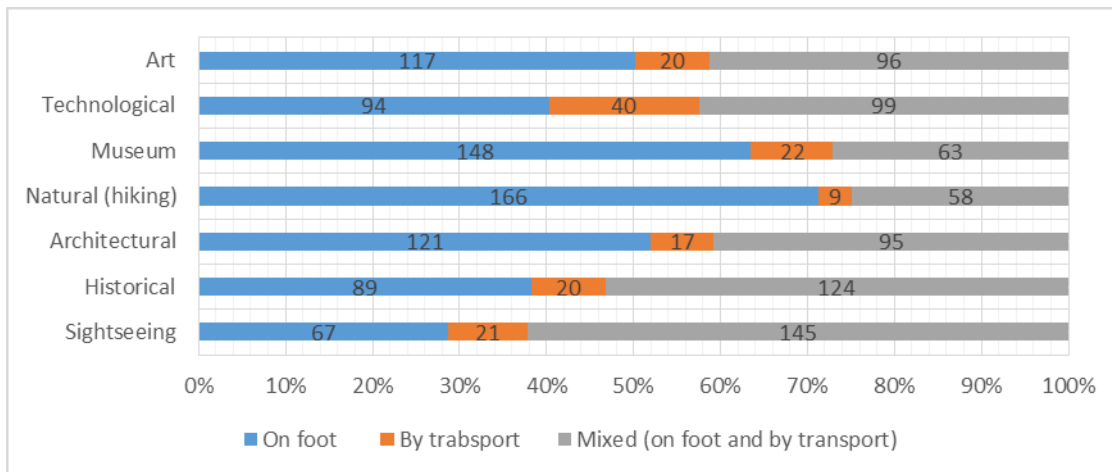


Figure 3. Type of tour and form of organization (N=233)

It can be seen that the most suitable form of organizing a tour is by foot, the least recommended is by transport. Based on this data, it can be concluded that it is possible to use Nordic walking poles when organizing certain types of tours.

Respondents were presented with statements about active tours and asked to rate them on a five-point scale, where 1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest rating. All presented statements were evaluated with the highest score. The following statements received the most positive ratings: health benefits (69%) and active leisure time (68%). New acquaintances were evaluated with lower scores. So, based on M. Menhaaz's (2022) statement that free time is

decreasing, the research results show that time can be used more productively. And active excursions are a great way to maintain a good mood.

The purpose of the survey was to find out whether there is a lack of active tours in Lithuania. This question was not mandatory and open-ended, even so 229 respondents answered it. 25% answered that they feel a shortage, 54% - do not feel a shortage, 6% - had no opinion, 12% - indicated other types of answers, in which the opinion that there is no supply in small towns prevailed; not enough free time or too little interest in the field. Considering the results, it can be said that 55% of respondents do not feel a shortage of active excursions in Lithuania.

Another purpose was to know if Nordic walking with poles is being practiced. 56% of the respondents answered that they have not tried it yet. 16% tried only once and 17% practice but rarely. 5% of all respondents practice often, and 6% answered that they tried and didn't like it, so they don't practice. The response results show that the practice of Nordic walking is not widely known.

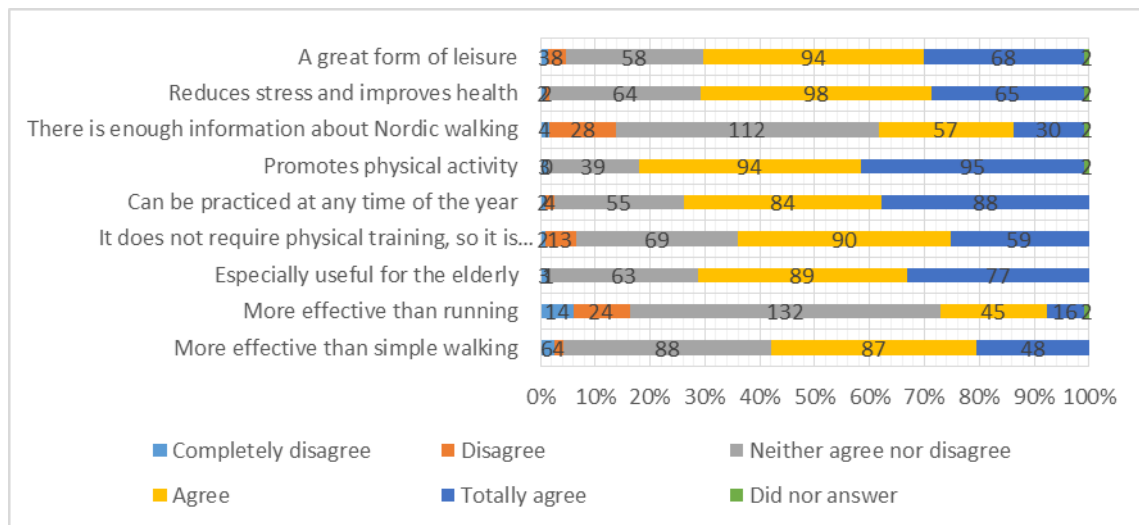


Figure 4. Statements about Nordic walking and results (N=233)

9 statements about Nordic walking were presented. The respondents asked to rate on the presented scale (Figure 4). Respondents agree with the following statements: especially useful for older people (38%), does not require physical training and is therefore suitable for everyone (39%), reduces stress and improves health (42%) and is a great form of leisure (40%). Strongly agree with the statements: can be practiced at any time of the year (38%) and promotes physical activity (41%). We neither agree nor disagree with the remaining statements: more effective than running (57%), there is enough information about Nordic walking (48%) and more effective than simple walking (38%).

We tried to find out what are the best places to practice Nordic walking. The best rated areas are forest (66%), riverside or seaside (54%) and park spaces (53%). City streets received the fewest votes (46%).

The last question asks, "Should the practice of Nordic walking be more popular in Lithuania?" Justify your answer." This question was optional, but 86% of respondents answered it. The answers were classified by groups:

- yes - 136 respondents
- no - 18 respondents
- have no opinion - 47 respondents
- other - 30 respondents

The results show that the practice of Nordic walking should be more popularized in Lithuania. Respondents note that there is a lack of advertising, it is difficult to find suitable information. This activity should be encouraged in the regions.

Respondents who gave a negative answer argued that there is enough information about this activity (3). This activity is more widely used by older age groups, and other great activities can be found in Lithuania. Those who did not have a clear opinion argued that they had heard that walking with poles could have negative effects on health. Others said it was a matter of personal preference (2).

Conclusions

The review of statistical data and the analysis of the research results showed that:

1. The pandemic and greater attention to health have led to a change in the attitude of Lithuanians to leisure and travel. Local tourism has become more active and new forms of active tourism and leisure have emerged, for example Nordic walking has become more popular.

2. It was established that the majority of Lithuanians choose the following activities in their free time: 1) hiking 2) kayaking or paddle-boarding 3) bicycle trips. It should be emphasized that all activities are loosely related to seasonality and are mainly practiced during the warm season.

3. Nordic walking is not yet among the most practiced leisure and active tourism activities by Lithuanians, but its popularity is gaining momentum and gradually increasing. Currently, there is a lack of information about Nordic walking, its importance for an active lifestyle and health benefits. So, it is necessary to find means to popularize this activity in Lithuania.

Recommendations

The results of the conducted survey showed that among representatives of various age groups who like active leisure and tourism in Lithuania, there are still those who hear the term "Nordic walking" for the first time. In order to encourage the popularization of this active and healthy activity in Lithuania, it is suggested to take measures:

1. Publish information about organized Nordic walking training.

2. Encourage the practice of Nordic walking in educational and training institutions and higher schools.

3. Organize public lectures about the health benefits of Nordic walking and the way to use free time wisely.

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