

Introduction

In Latvia, with 53% of forest cover, many forest areas are favoured destinations for outdoor recreation.

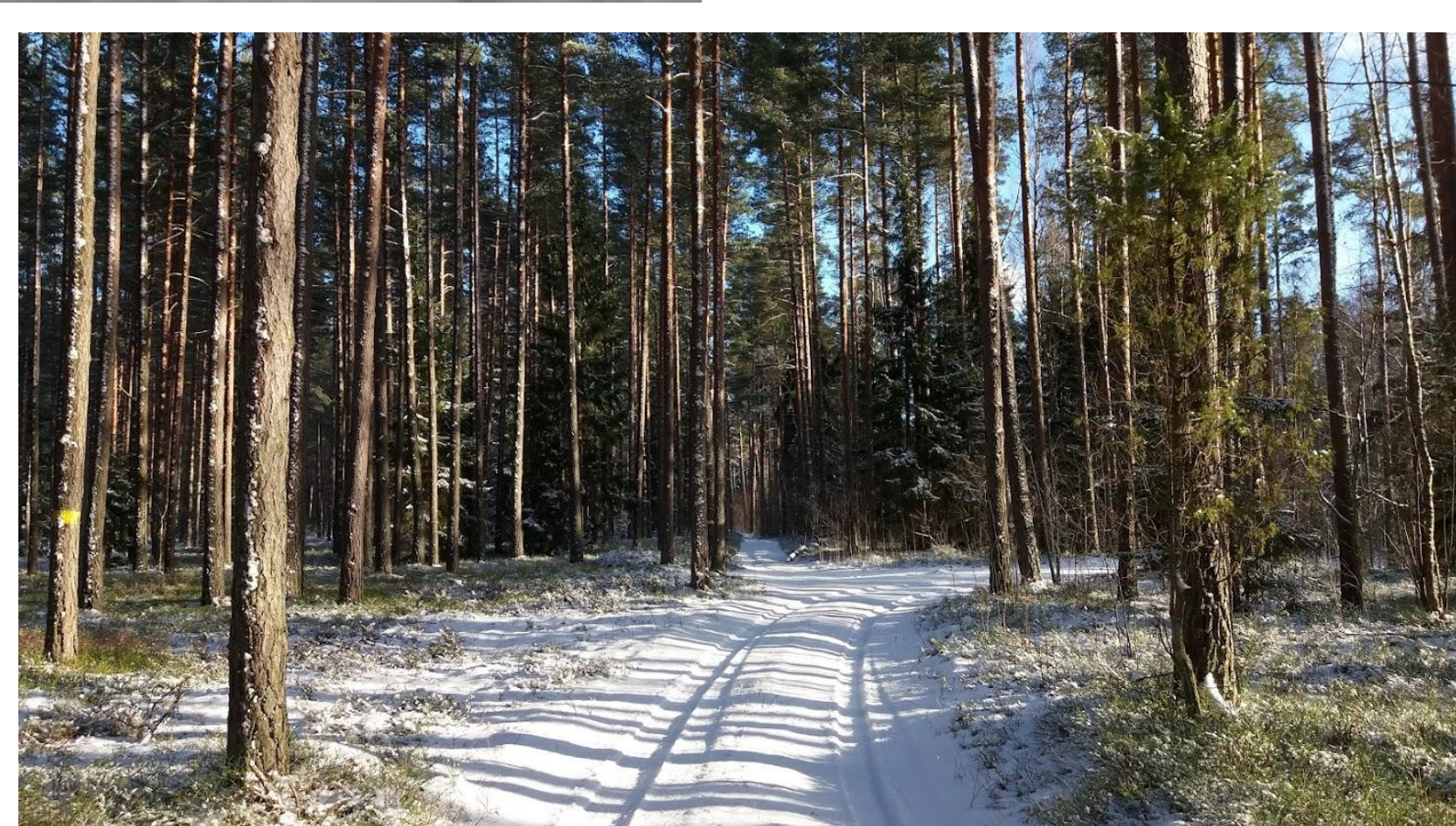
During winter holiday season, several types of traditional forest-related activities (e.g., the collecting of Christmas trees, feeding wild animals and gathering other decorative materials) take place in Latvia. These activities are often pursued together with friends and family, thus providing also socialization opportunities, an important aspect during lockdowns. COVID-19 pandemic has changed outdoor recreation patterns of people, in scale, frequency and temporal distribution.

Christmas holiday season of 2020/2021 in Latvia coincided with strict lockdowns when normal everyday routines of most people were significantly disrupted.

Our study sought to investigate the pattern of the use of outdoor forest areas (OFAs) for recreation during the winter holiday season 2020/2021 in comparison to the previous holiday season, and to find out whether any changes in some traditional activities carried out around Christmas and New Year had taken place.



Visits to forest areas with recreational infrastructure during early 2021 (left) and a typical forest area with no recreational infrastructure (below).



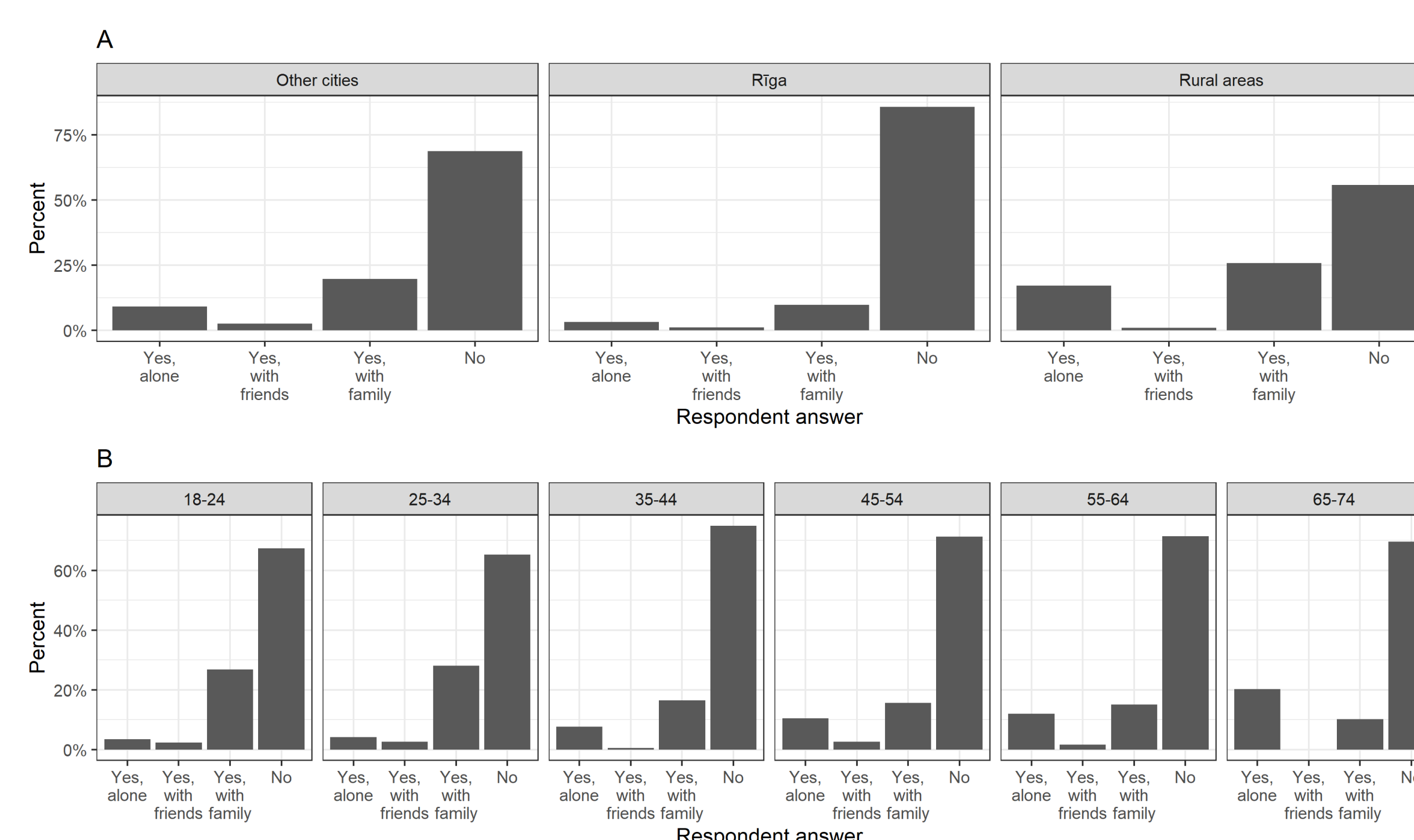
Methodology

Between 26 January and 28 January, 2021, we conducted an online survey in Latvian and Russian languages among a representative set of 18-74 years old respondents in Latvia, and received 1000 valid responses.

The questions included 1) inquiries about visits to outdoor forest areas (OFAs) with and without specific recreational amenities, 2) inquiries about engagement in traditional winter holiday season-related activities, such as collecting of Christmas trees, gathering decorative materials and bringing treats to forest animals, and 3) inquiries about changes observed in the visited OFAs (with request to elaborate if observed). Usual sociodemographic factors (age, gender, nationality, colloquial language in the family, residence, education, employment etc.) were also recorded.

All questions were asked concerning the time period of winter holiday season of 2020/2021 (December 2020/January 2021), and respondents were asked to compare the situation of this winter holiday season to the previous one. The collected survey data were analysed with descriptive statistics, by comparing responses across response variants and demographic categories.

Results



Collection of Christmas trees by respondent's type of residence (A) and age group (B)

More than **one half of respondents** had visited **outdoor forest areas** (OFAs) either with or without recreational infrastructure for recreational purposes during December 2020/January 2021. 30% indicated that on this holiday season they have done it **more frequently** than on the previous one. The decrease of the frequency of visits was indicated by a lower proportion of respondents.

Collection of Christmas trees was the most popular forest-related activity typically pursued in winter holiday season: it was done nearly by one third of respondents, being more popular among those residing in rural areas. This activity, as both others we inquired about, was most often pursued together with family, even though age group had a marked influence.

Of all respondents, **15%** indicated that they **had observed changes** in the outdoor forest areas they had visited during 2020/2021 winter holiday season. 18% of the comments indicated positive changes, mainly related to improved recreational infrastructure and cleanliness. Most comments (37%) were neutral and indicated mainly increased number of visitors to the area.

Explicitly **negative comments** constituted **21%** of all observations, and approximately half of them were related to forest felling. Observations of **increased littering** and unacceptable behaviour of forest visitors also formed rather significant part of the negative comments.

Main conclusions

- Outdoor recreation in forest was popular also in wintertime, and areas without specific recreational amenities seemed to be visited by slightly higher number of people. Outdoor forest areas were most often visited together with family, even though repeated individual visits to areas without recreational infrastructure were also quite common.
- There is some evidence on the increased importance of visiting OFAs during the time of strict social distancing measures of COVID-19 pandemic. OFAs in this case serve not only as "green spaces" but also as "social spaces", providing opportunities to meet people and to socialize during lockdown.