



**Sustainability and shrinkage in the rural community of Ristijärvi:
recommendations for future development**

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Executive Summary

In Northern Finland in the region of Kainuu lies a small town of approximately 1,160 inhabitants called Ristijärvi, which has seen a population decline as well as ageing demographic in the last 60 years, going from almost 4,000 inhabitants to the current level. The town once filled multiple grocery stores, banks, schools for all ages and booming forestry industry (Turpeinen et al., 2004).

The purpose of this paper is to explore common trends and opinions of local community members regarding the challenges the community faces as well as the potential areas for growth. We aim to explore various sectors and industries in the region on the development of the municipality of Ristijärvi through a mixed methods approach including a Facebook survey, in-situ interviews with local community members and our own observations.

Throughout the four days of on-site data collection a total of 58 survey respondents and 31 interviews were collected and conducted. Discussions and findings varied from job opportunities, forestry, recreational activities, community engagement and education. Our findings covered the challenges and future of Ristijärvi if declining and ageing population trend would continue.

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Statement of positionality

We were in Ristijärvi for only four days, and the report and observations are based on our time there. Due to the short period of field research, our understanding of the town is not as deep as it would have been with a longer time spent there.

1 Introduction

Many cities and towns in Europe are dealing with the issue of depopulation and an ageing society. Therefore, there has already been much research done about these depopulation territories and how to “fix” or “save” them. There has also been research on this topic for a small town Puolanka, Finland, whose population is constantly decreasing (Schmidt-Thomé & Lilius, 2023). In Finland it is predicted that there would be only three growing urban regions by 2040, which raises the question of what can be done with the decreasing regions. Our researched town, Ristijärvi, is in a similar situation to Puolanka in the sense of decrease and ageing in its population.

Most strategies for these shrinking places are focusing on the question of how to increase the number of (working-age) citizens, simultaneously trying to fight the problem of an ageing society. However, this strategy rarely works, which calls for new, different strategies, like smart shrinkage (Schmidt-Thomé & Lilius, 2023). These new strategies focus not on the number of citizens, but on the possibilities of development in different areas (e.g., ecotourism, increasing the interest for potential multilocal citizens, etc.). While of course, prioritising the needs and wants of the people who are planning on staying in the town in question is as important, if not even more. In this paper we researched the smallest town by population in the Kainuu region, Ristijärvi, applying smart shrinking strategy and the possibilities on how to improve the town without hopes for sudden increase of population.

Our research question is formulated as: *What are the current challenges and potentials for growth in the small rural community of Ristijärvi?* To answer this question, we conducted a mixed methods approach consisting of in-situ interviews, online survey, and observational analysis of Ristijärvi. We chose this approach as a best practice to gathering qualitative (interviews, observational) and quantitative (survey) data, engaging the opinions of the local community members and our own perception of Ristijärvi (Taherdoost, 2022). The aims for our research question are as follows;

1. To understand the role local community engagement can play in Ristijärvi sustainable development (and potential ecotourism) through observation and participation in local events.
2. To determine the extent to which policy frameworks support sustainable development in depopulating rural communities such as Ristijärvi through analysis of relevant frameworks, namely,
 - a. HINKU Network

- b. Energy Efficiency Agreement (KETS)
 - c. The Forest Act
- 3. To investigate the challenges and opportunities perceived by community members in Ristijärvi through conducting a series of semi-formal interviews, a survey, and direct observation.

1.1 Depopulation in rural areas

In Europe, depopulation in rural areas is becoming a usual, ongoing practice, that for now has no foolproof solution. The ‘business as usual’ strategy in these areas is of little use, as it plans for growth, and does not accept shrinkage (Schmidt-Thomé & Lilius, 2023). One of the main issues of these shrinking areas is also the percentage of retired citizens that results in shortage of workers, which, also shrinks the options of social services, education, and healthcare services in the area. This is also the main issue of Ristijärvi, like in many other municipalities of Finland, most of the population is of retirement age, and the number of citizens is continuously decreasing.

These issues of decreasing and ageing populations cannot be dealt with by the usual strategy that is planned for growth, therefore we must look at other solutions, one of which is smart shrinkage or shrinking smartly. Smart shrinkage refers to the concept of positive and developmental attitude towards potential population decline. With this concept small municipalities concentrate on the quality of life while growing smaller and spending less resources on pursuing growth (Li et al., 2024; Herman, 2016). To ensure the growth in citizen quality-of-life, creative solutions must be made, through communicating with the locals about what they already enjoy in the municipality and what can be improved or is missing (Schmidt-Thomé & Lilius, 2023).

In Ristijärvi’s case smart shrinkage could mean smart public space usage so that Ristijärvi could offer all the most important services to its citizens with already existing spaces. The focus should not be primarily on attracting new potential citizens of Ristijärvi. The municipality should concentrate on improving the economy of the town, as well as attracting and gathering the citizens to local events and businesses, and interest them by letting them choose the future of Ristijärvi. It has been studied (Dax & Fischer, 2018) that in shrinking rural spaces short-term and linear programme solutions are not an option if a positive change is wanted. This “first wave” of change should be focused on the well-being of the citizens of Ristijärvi, and only after that has been successful can the newcomer aspect be considered.

Therefore, while it is undeniable that attracting new residents is important for a shrinking community like Ristijärvi, the primary focus should be on the people who already live there – including multilocal residents who spend only part of the year in the municipality, like summer or winter season (Schmidt-Thomé & Lilius, 2023). Enhancing the well-being and engagement of current citizens lays the foundation for sustainable development also in the future.

Tourism can also play a role in supporting local economy of a shrinking area (Schmidt-Thomé & Lilius, 2023). However, rather than relying on the hope that these visitors could eventually become permanent residents, the municipality should view tourism as a strategic source of income that can improve financial stability for both the municipality and the community. The key priorities should be strengthening the local economy and stabilizing a sense of belonging amongst the local citizens; only once these goals are reached, can new goals including attracting new residents be pursued.

1.2 Ecotourism

In scientific literature ecotourism is a more sustainable alternative to mass tourism. It contains three principles: Ecotourism should be nature based, environmentally educated, and sustainably managed (Blamey, 2022). Ristijärvi had an ecotourism museum in the early 2010s. The museum operated on an old family house in Karppala and presented visitors traditional lifestyle in Kainuu area (Karppinen, 2013). The museum has already closed its doors but during the interviews it became apparent that the museum has affected greatly to locals' understanding about ecotourism.

Ecotourism is a growing sector of tourism, but it has been a small part of tourism in Finland for couple of decades already. Especially in Lapland ecotourism has been a big part of the tourism sector even though the concept has not always been familiar to tourists and communities alike. Tourists in Lapland have travelled ecologically by bus and other environmentally friendly means and engaged in ecological activities, such as hiking. It is of the assumption that ecotourists want to experience local life as well as experience nature and sustainable living (Tuukkanen, 2019).

Ecotourism in marketing has been challenging for enterprises because ecology and the concept of being ecological can be understood in different ways. Ecotourism is seen to be about giving the traveler feeling about being ecological (Tuukkanen, 2019), because of this ecotourism is under threat of being used for greenwashing and tourists need to be aware of these ramifications.

2 Background

Ristijärvi is the smallest municipality in the Kainuu region and shares borders with the neighboring municipalities of Puolanka to the west, Hyrynsalmi to the north, Kuhmo and Sotkamo to the east and Paltamo to the south (Figure 1). The municipality of Ristijärvi was founded in 1867. Ristijärvi has an area of 898 km², of which 62 km² are bodies of water.

Ristijärvi is renowned for its natural landscapes, featuring numerous lakes, rivers, rapids, and bogs that can be explored through hiking, canoeing, and cycling routes. The area also gains national recognition for hosting cross-country skiing competitions at Saukkovaara. During the winter months, the ski slope and the wide network of cross-country trails offer excellent opportunities for winter sports. The surrounding water bodies in the Ristijärvi region, including Lake Laahtanen and nearby rapids, provide favorable conditions for both recreational and sport fishing (Ristijärven kunta, n.d.).

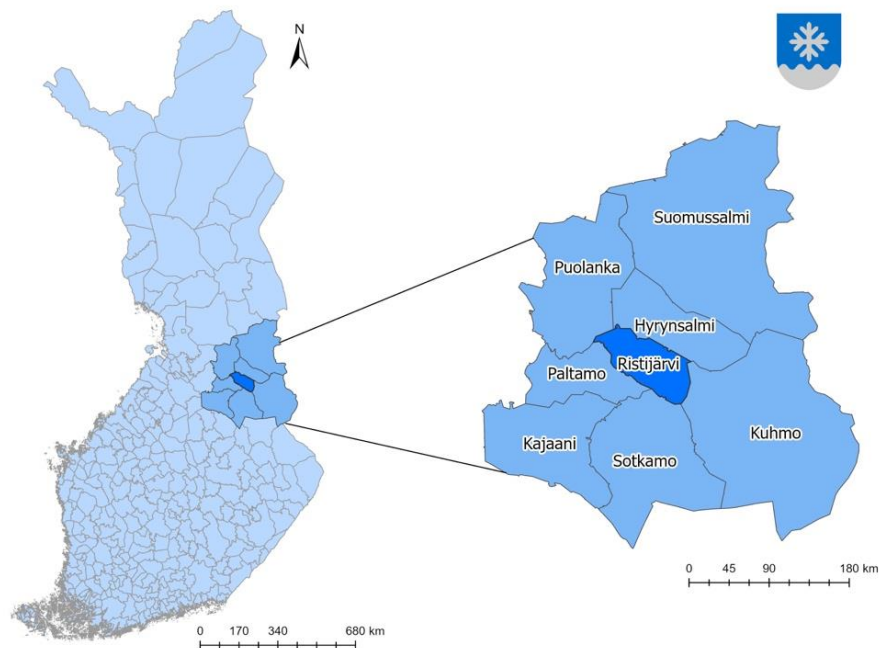


Figure 1. Map of the location of Ristijärvi (Esri 2025).

Population data for Ristijärvi from 1990 to 2024 show a long-term and gradual demographic decline. In 1990, the municipality had 2150 registered residents (Figure 2). Over the next thirty years, the population gradually declined, reaching 1163 in 2024. Of these, 10.4% are children

and young people, 46.9% are aged 15-64, and 42.7% are older people aged 65 and over (Ristijärvi Keskellä Kainuuta, n.d.).

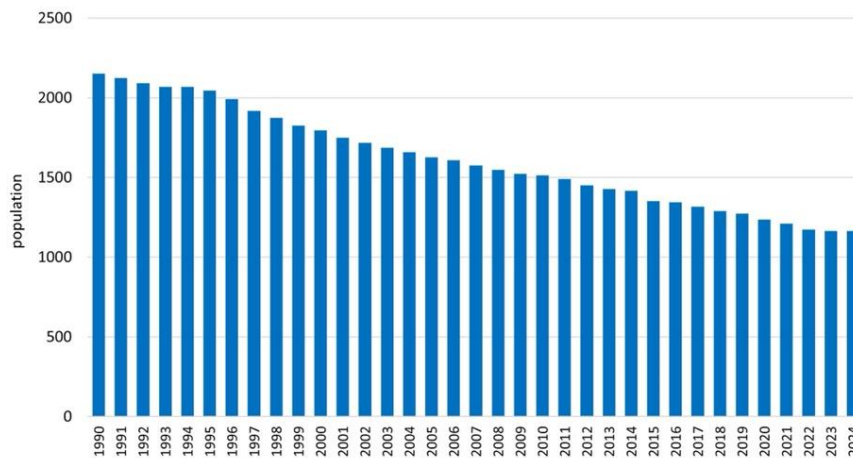


Figure 2. Ristijärvi population 1990-2024 (Statistic Finland 2025).

The Population Pyramid in Figure 3 indicates the composition change in population between 1972 and 2024 in the Ristijärvi. In 1972, the population pyramid was broadest at the base, indicating a relatively high number of children and young people, particularly in the 0–19 age group. By 2024, the population of the young age group has declined significantly, and a similar trend has been observed for the other age groups up to 64 years. The aging of the population is evident, as the number of people aged 65 and over has increased during this period. The average age of the population during this period has reached 54.9 years.

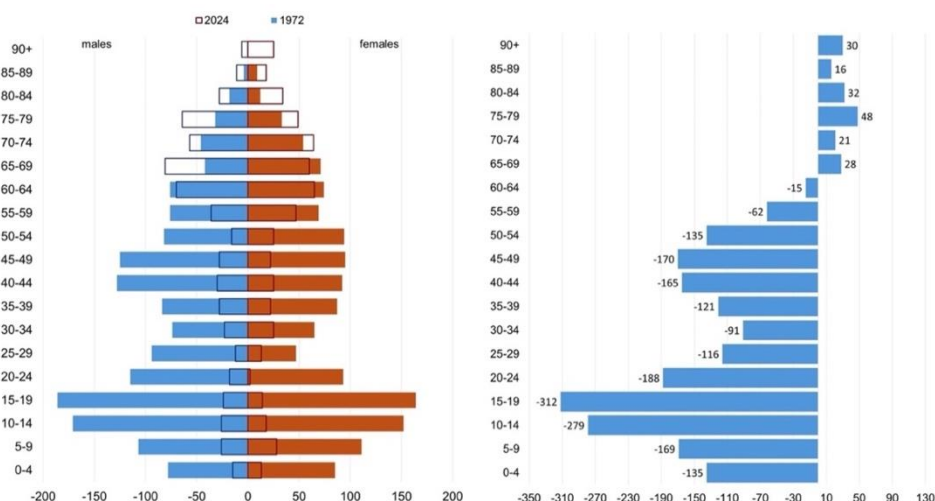


Figure 3. Population structure and change in Ristijärvi 1972-2024 (Statistics Finland 2025).

According to statistical data, pensioners constitute the largest demographic segment, accounting for 46.6 % of the total population (Figure 4). This indicates a significantly ageing population structure, which is characteristic of rural and remote regions with a long-term decline in population.

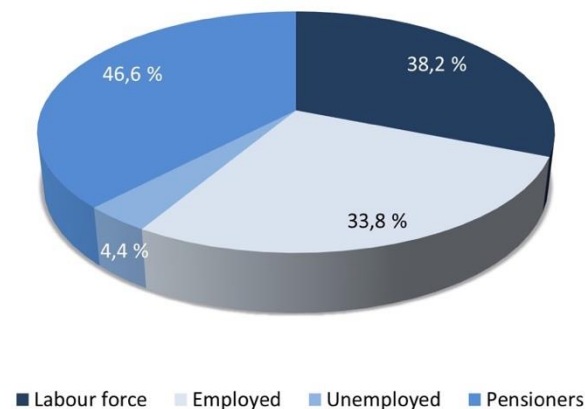


Figure 4. Employment of the population (Statistics Finland 2024).

The labor force accounts for 38.8% of those employed and 4.4% are classified as unemployed. The relatively low unemployment rate, when viewed alongside the dominant share of pensioners, suggests limited labor market participation, potentially driven by out-migration of the working-age population and low birth rates.

Birth rate in Ristijärvi has been declining since 1960s with a small rising around year 1983 (Figure 5). In the year 2001 the birth rate was at the lowest level with below five births that year. Mortality rate had its highest peaks during the war years 1939-1944 but otherwise mortality rate has continued to be between 20 and 30 per year. With decreasing birth rate and mortality rate staying at the same level the population in Ristijärvi has had to lean towards migration.

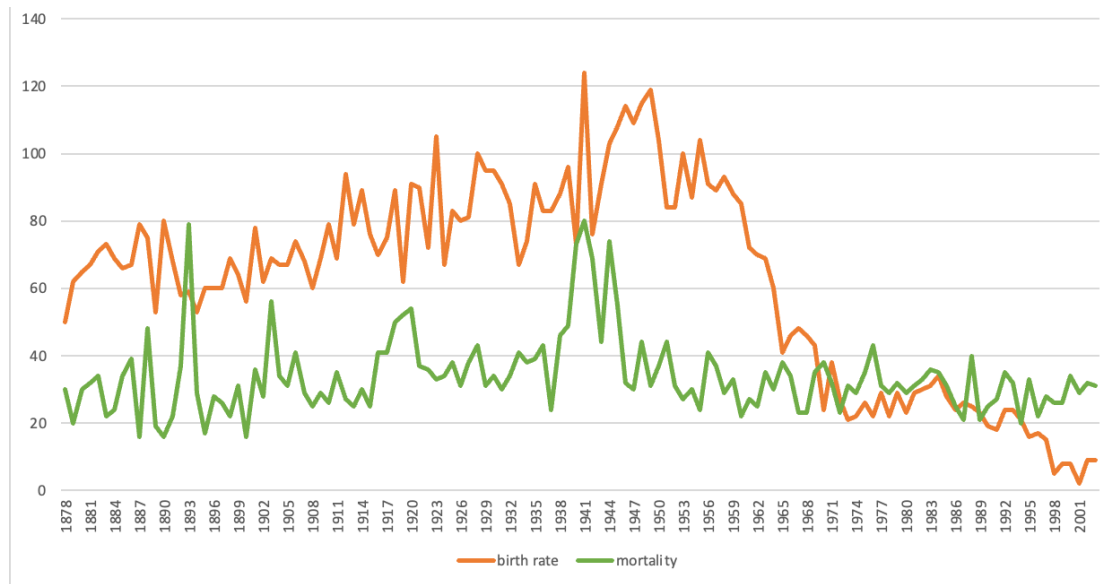


Figure 5. Birth rate and mortality in Ristijärvi 1887-2003 (Turpeinen et al., 2004).

Positive migration in Ristijärvi has developed to its current level in the beginning of the 20th century and is approximately 75 new residents per year. Positive migration has had a slight decrease in the 1990s, but it has showed an upturn in the early 2000s (Figure 6). Negative migration in Ristijärvi has followed the same path as positive migration. It has developed to its current state in the beginning of the 20th century.

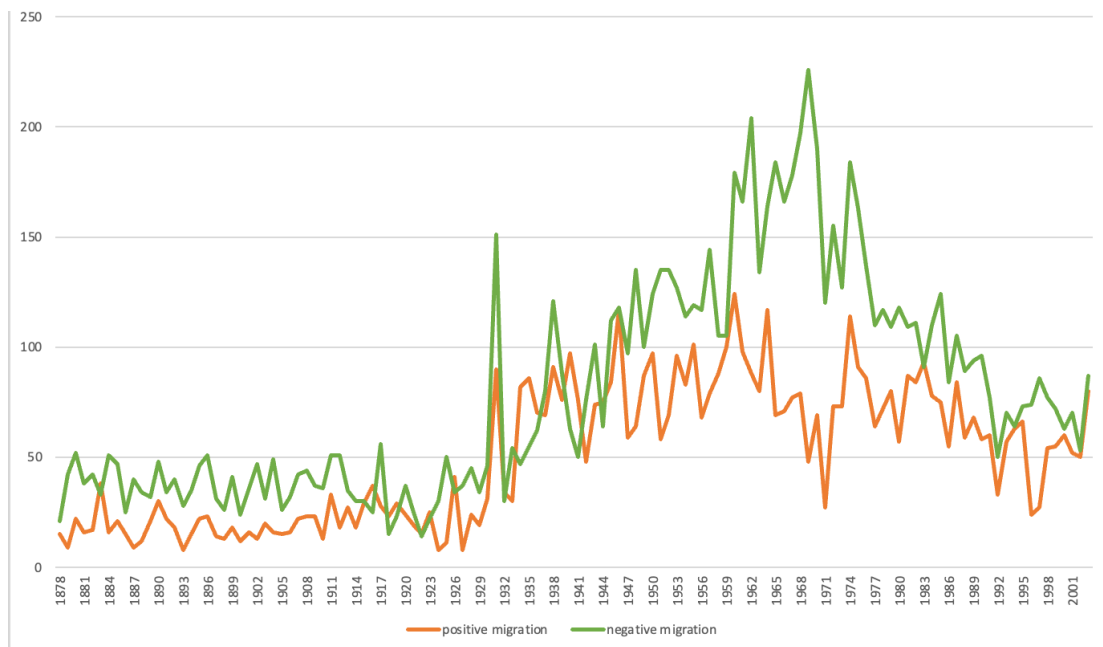


Figure 6. Migration in Ristijärvi area 1878-2004 (Turpeinen et al. 2004).

2.1 A Brief History of Ristijärvi

Ristijärvi area has had permanent settlement since 1550s, in 1569 the area had already 20 houses, the municipality of Ristijärvi town was officially founded in 1867 (Rikkinen et al., 1986; Kainuun seutukaavaliitto, 1983), with a peak in population upwards of 4,000 inhabitants during the 1960s and 1970s.

Historically Ristijärvi's main industries have been agriculture and forestry. In 1980 44.8% of the employed population of Ristijärvi worked in agriculture or forestry. Manufacturing employed 3,9% and the building industry accounted for 14,3% of the working population. In the 1980s it was common to commute to Ristijärvi from nearby cities, mostly from Hyrynsalmi and Paltamo but also from Kajaani, Sotkamo, Kuhmo and Puolanka. From Ristijärvi it was common to commute to Kajaani and Paltamo (Kainuun seutukaavaliitto, 1983).

In the 1980s Ristijärvi's most important places in tourism industry were Hotel Saukko at Saukkovaara skiing center, Hiisijärvi lake, Ristijärven Pirtti – camping site, Hiisijärvi ridge, UKK hiking trail and Kivijärvi-Saarijärvi wilderness hiking trail (Kainuun seutukaavaliitto, 1983). All of these except for the hotel are still in operation. In interviews with local people who had lived their whole life in Ristijärvi or who were born in Ristijärvi and moved back there later in their lives it became apparent that services to attract tourists had been cut and especially Saukkovaara's case was a discussed issue among the locals.

In the 1980s there were significantly more services in Ristijärvi compared to the current state of the municipality. Ristijärvi's health center had a bedded ward, two health center doctors, a dentist, maternity clinic, and an outpatient health care point. There was a retirement home, a day care, senior rent houses, special worker for disabled, 7 primary schools (Grades 1-6), 1 secondary school (Grades 7-9), 8 shops, 2 shop cars, a restaurant at Saukkovaara, 3 different banks, pharmacy, bookstore and two gas stations. There were also plans to make Saukkovaara's services wider to attract tourists to the area. (Kainuun seutukaavaliitto, 1983)

2.2 Challenges and Risks in Ristijärvi

The challenges in Ristijärvi are mostly related to the low number of entrepreneurs, lack of young families, job opportunities and limited funding. It is necessary to find support providers, for example, through the LEADER programme or other sources. Entrepreneurs who can offer services in the tourism industry can help ensure the development of the municipality. For

instance, there is one project related to fishing tourism; therefore, having more entrepreneurs in this sector could boost the local economy, provide job opportunities and attract more visitors.

However, the biggest risk in Ristijärvi is related to the population, which has been steadily decreasing (Figure 2). In the long term, there is a challenge, which is attracting new people to the municipality and maintaining or even increasing the number of residents. Ristijärvi's depopulating and ageing community in the past 6 decades poses risks to the future of the town's survivability, one issue being its ability to attract young families and entrepreneurs. A lack of opportunities for education, the town currently has one daycare center and one elementary/middle school (grades 1 – 9) at which point teenagers are forced to finish their high school in nearby Kajaani (45-minute bus ride away), displacing much of the potential future workforce of Ristijärvi, as they opt to stay where there are more job opportunities.



Picture 1. The elementary school in Ristijärvi (Source: Authors)

There are no vocational schools available in Ristijärvi for further education in a specific trade such as carpentry, masonry, plumbing or electricians. This is leading to a lack of local professional tradesmen maintaining the town's infrastructure and public spaces. Job opportunities are also scarce within Ristijärvi, forestry being the main employer accounting for almost 50% of the local companies (Ristijärvi Keskellä Kainuuta, n.d.). Many community members are forced to commute to nearby municipalities and towns to find work in other sectors, for example, in healthcare and service industries.

2.3 Main industries in Ristijärvi area

There are 47 companies in Ristijärvi. Most of them are in the forestry sector (23), as well as in the construction industry, property services, metal industry, agriculture, and traffic services. Ristijärvi's municipality is the biggest employer. There are 40 people working in teaching, technical sites and in other kinds of positions. Also, there are loads of companies where only 1 or 2 people work (Ristijärvi Keskellä Kainuuta, n.d.).

Companies and other operators	Industry	Companies and other operators with most employees	Employees	Companies generating the most revenue and other service providers	Revenue (euros)	Operators with the highest growth based on revenue	Growth percentage
Kyösti Tolonen	Tree felling	1	10	1	2,317		
Kuljetusliike MJ	Transport						
Huusko Oy	services	2	9	2	1609	4	11,60 %
Erkki							
Kemppainen Oy	Tree felling	3	8	3	753		
FS-Team Oy		4	5	5	387	3	30,30 %
Terosa Oy							
Konepalaja	Metal industry	5	1				
Ristijärven							
Vuokratalot Oy	House renting	6	1	6	361	7	1,60 %
Tapani Juntikka	metal products	7	1				
Cafe 5 Stop	Cafe	8	1	9	136		
Keijo	Transport						
Mäkäraainen Oy	industry	9	1	4	519	2	35,20 %
Suunnittelutoimisto Rak Oy	Structural desing			7	164	6	7,00 %
Ristijärven vesihuolto							
osuuskunta	Water services			8	163		
Osuuskunta	Company services and well						
Seniorisilta	being					1	44,80 %
Ollivilla Oy	Isolation movement					5	10,50 %

Figure 7. Companies operating out of Ristijärvi (Ristijärvi keskellä Kainuuta, n.d.).

2.3.1 Forestry

Finland's forests covered approximately 70% of the land mass, 61% of which is privately owned and 13% of the forest area is under protection (Metsähallitus, n.d.). In Ristijärvi the municipality owns approximately 1050 hectares of forest, approximately 4000 hectares belongs to church, while 10 hectares are a designated Natura 2000 site, with the remaining forest areas privately owned (approximately 60% of forest area). Of municipality/state owned forests the annual income accumulates to 2-3% of the annual budget (estimated 300,000 EUR). In the last 10 years the privately owned international company, United Paper Mills (UPM) has procured more land area in Ristijärvi (Ristijärvi Keskellä Kainuuta, n.d.).

2.3.2 Agriculture

Agriculture makes up 4% of the companies in Ristijärvi their main produce is dairy farms, namely, Maitovirta being the largest with 120 dairy cows with a focus on modern farming solutions and minimizing their carbon footprint through sustainable farming practices (Ristijärvi Keskellä Kainuuta, n.d., Loukasmäki, 2024). Furthermore, crop farming is also practiced in Ristijärvi with traditional rye production. The main crop being cultivated utilizing ancient farming methods from one single farm (Ahokas, 2020).

2.3.3 Tourism and services

There is a wide range of services in Ristijärvi. It was mentioned that the services are high-quality and comprehensive. Residents are encouraged to give feedback and participate in the development of services to help improve and adapt to them.

Ristijärvi's potential services for tourists are pizzeria, café, two grocery stores, Ristijärvi Pirtti camping, Saukkovaara ski hill, shooting range (potentially open for tourists), hiking trails (that need to be improved and mapped if planned as a potential tourist attraction point), etc. For tourists, there is certainly a lot to see and do in the small town of Ristijärvi, however, it must be considered that most of these services are barely or not at all advertised, and the locals, presumably, like the quietness of the town and would not feel the peacefulness if Ristijärvi overflowed with tourists.

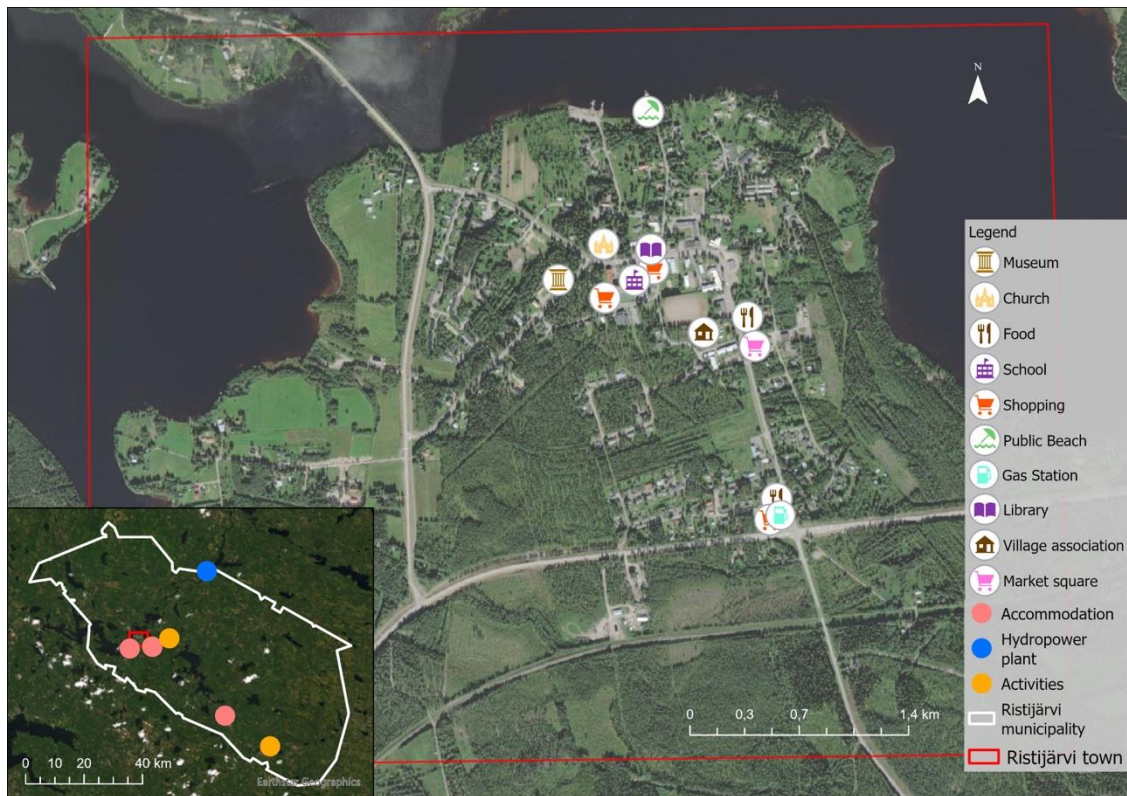


Figure 8. Tourist attraction in Ristijärvi area (Esri 2025).

Regarding services for the locals: in Ristijärvi services for almost every basic need can be found, like healthcare, beauty salon, flea market, grocery store, elementary school (grade 1-9), library, eateries and more. Most locals expressed sadness at the fact that the number of services has decreased throughout time, however, almost all were mostly satisfied with the services offered, pointing out that all everyday needs were accessible for them in Ristijärvi. Only a few of the inhabitants – mostly those who had moved (or returned) to Ristijärvi relatively recently – said that the town greatly lacks basic healthcare needs and were very dissatisfied with the fact that the town does not offer high school education.

2.4 Volunteer work

If residents want, they can become volunteers in Ristijärvi or be a part of the community. They can receive support with opportunities for hobbies, access to services, and other things. As mentioned, people are interested in volunteering somewhere. Currently, there are about 60–70 volunteers in Ristijärvi. Most of them volunteer at the Saukkovaara downhill skiing center and at RIHLA – the Ristijärvi shooting range. This area was renovated through volunteer work.

Most of the volunteers are pensioners, who expressed the desire for more working age people in their community. There are already few volunteers who are working age, mainly because

through participating in this volunteer work in Saukkovaara they gain benefit for Ristijärvi school fund that their children are in. However, it is intelligible that Ristijärvi working age locals do not have as much free time to participate in these volunteer communities. Therefore, volunteers of Saukkovaara skiing center association and municipality workers are planning that in a few years' time, if the income grows, they could possibly start switching this volunteer organization to (at least partially) paid jobs.

2.4.1 Associations and Organizations

Ristijärvi municipality has 57 volunteer run associations and organizations covering upwards of nine different sectors including: Sports clubs (2), village associations (8), hunting clubs (15), agriculture (5), professional businesses (3), political (7), young people association (1), national defence (5), other (11). They are active associations that function as a way for the local community to become engaged in the growth of Ristijärvi across all sectors.

3 Methods

The site visits to Ristijärvi, meetings, interviews and observations were carried out on 14th to 18th of May 2025 (Table 1). The focus of the interviews and observations was to map out the strategies envisioned and implemented by the municipality regarding sustainable development within the three main aspects: Ecological, Economic and Social. Site-visit interviews with stakeholders in decision-making, forestry, education, and tourism were also aimed at getting a better understanding of the local situation as well as being our guides as to what challenges and possible responses to these could be.

3.1 Timetable

Day	Activities
14.5.	9:00-10:30 meeting with the Ristijärvi municipality representatives 10:30 trip to Saukkovaara (volunteer run skiing center) with municipal representatives (interview and photo documentation). 12:00-13:00 Bingo with village association 14:00-15:00 Visit at the local youth center 21:00 Survey upload on a Facebook group

15.5.	<p>9:00-10:00 Chair yoga with village association (afterwards, group interview with the participants of chair yoga)</p> <p>10:00-11:00 (online) presentation + Q&A session with <i>Family friendly Kainuu</i> project</p> <p>11:30-13:00 Visit to hydropower plant (photo documentation)</p> <p>13:00-14:00 Visit to local pizzeria (personal observations)</p> <p>14:15-14:45 Visit to the school – group interview with the school workers and the principle</p> <p>14:45-15:00 Short visit to the library (photo documentation)</p> <p>15:30-16:30 Photo documentation walk around town</p> <p>16:30 Interview with recreation centre worker</p> <p>18:00-20:30 Visit to Ristijärvi shooting range</p> <p>18:00-19:00 Short teams meeting</p>
16.5.	<p>9:00-10:30 Visit to forest logging area with former forest manager</p> <p>10:30-11:00 Visit to municipality</p> <p>12:00-14:30 Visit to K-monimarket to speak with owners and passersby. (Check-in meeting with Matthias.)</p> <p>Informal interview with a traveling food truck worker.</p> <p>14:30-15:30 Visit to Lahtanen campground to talk with workers.</p> <p>15:30-16:30 Visit to Hiisijärvi</p> <p>18:00-20:30 BBQ party with Village Association and informal interviews</p>
17.5.	<p>11:00- 12:00 Visit to flea market, interview with workers of the market</p> <p>12:00-13:00 Interview with a former municipality council worker</p> <p>13:00-14:00 Goodbye party with the head of the Village Association.</p> <p>14:00 Lunch at Ristijärvi pizzeria, interview with the owners of pizzeria</p> <p>15:30-16:30 Visit to Saukkovaara – personal observations of windmills, spatial analysis of the landscape</p> <p>17:00 BBQ party with a recreation centre worker</p>
18.5.	<p>10:00 visit to church for a memorial ceremony for the fallen soldiers in wars.</p>
19.5.	<p>10.00 Repost of the survey on Facebook</p> <p>12.00 Phone interview with local fishing entrepreneur</p>

Table 1. Timetable summary of our activities during the research trip to Ristijärvi form May 14th to 18th.

3.2 Research Approach

Following our meeting with the municipality and at the Saukkovaara ski hill we decided to focus our research on perspectives of ecotourism in the area and its potential for growth. This decision, to focus on a more specific aspect of sustainable development strategy, influenced some of the questions we included in our survey and posed in several of our interviews. However, after several interviews we slightly adapted our approach in favour of a broader, exploratory interview method where we asked participants more general questions about their experiences living in the area, current challenges, and future visions. We believed that an exploratory approach would open our research to more ideas and perspectives and help eliminate confirmation bias. Based on our limited experience with Ristijärvi prior to our field research there we thought it best to avoid overemphasizing certain themes and instead code and analyse recurring themes as they emerged.

3.3 Survey

Our method of data collection has primarily been through a web-based survey distributed through a local Facebook group to reach potential respondents. The purpose of the survey questions was to gauge opinions on ecotourism, sustainable development, renewable energy, ageing population, and local food sources. We began by asking demographic information including participants' age, source of employment, where they live in proximity to Ristijärvi, and in what field they work. We then included a block of Likert scale questions relating to which topics have been most prevalent in the past year and then asked which of these topics were most important to them and why. The topics ranged from environmental topics such as forestry, biodiversity, and renewable energy to themes about social issues such as ecotourism, public transportation, social services, and migration to the area. We then asked about survey respondents' relationship to the term's "ecotourism" and "sustainable development" and provided space for respondents to elaborate on topics if they wished. Additionally, we asked respondents what they wished to see in Ristijärvi in ten years.

The survey was written in Finnish and posted on the municipality's Facebook page with relevant information about the project and data protection. Municipality's Facebook page 'Ristijärvi' was chosen because it had the highest number of members (approximately 3000), and it was the most active group for the area. We gave respondents a six-day window in which they could respond to the survey. On day five after posting the survey we sent a reminder

message to the Facebook group about filling out the survey, which drew in several more respondents. We were limited in our time with which to build, trial, and roll-out the survey due to general time constraints of the project.

3.4 In-situ interviews

We gathered qualitative data from all the interactions with the inhabitants of Ristijärvi (individual and group interviews, as well as observations from other informal interactions with the workers or former workers of the town). Our semi structured interview questions were formed to understand daily life, challenges, and potentials for growth in Ristijärvi from its citizens. In total we were able to interview upwards of 31 local community members of Ristijärvi through either personal or group interviews. In these interviews we were focusing mainly on the topics of how the town had changed, how citizens see the future in Ristijärvi, and their thoughts on sustainability and ecotourism (their benefits and losses, as well as improvements that should be made in these projects). At least one group member took notes during each interview and, when able, we recorded audio during the interview. Most of the interviews were conducted in the presence of the whole group, with about half of the interviews taking place in Finnish with our group's native Finnish speaker translating between the group and the interview participants (hereinafter referred to as the "correspondents") during the interview. Many correspondents responded in a mix of Finnish and English.

Our first two group interviews were prearranged by the program, and many subsequent interviews developed out of these initial interactions through employing convenience and snowball sampling techniques (Golzar et al., 2022; Parker et al., 2019). When given the opportunity, we asked correspondents who else they thought that we should speak with, which led to more interview contacts and sometimes led directly to another arranged interview (Parker et al., 2019). We intentionally left our schedule flexible so that we could accept event invitations that would allow us to meet more people with whom we could speak (Golzar et al., 2022). Several interviews were more impromptu and were gathered through our exploratory walks through town when visiting various establishments. Most of our interviews were initiated by asking guiding questions, although several arose through being approached by curious passers-by about our research and one was arranged through a survey respondent who reached out to us personally for an interview. Our impromptu interviews were an important aspect of our methodology to gather a wider range of correspondents from different circles. We let correspondents set the location of the interviews to allow for the comfortability of the

correspondent and so that we might be introduced to different places within the town (Keegan, 2024).

3.5 Ethical considerations

The topic of our research focuses primarily on the social sciences pertaining to the opinions and perceptions of local community members of Ristijärvi, this requires ethical considerations where we follow the ethical principles as described in the Belmont Report 1978 (U.S. Department of Health, 1979). The universal principles that apply to all areas of research are as such that researchers must foremost be guided by ethical norms, avoiding conflicts of interest, making it clear over whom has data ownership and authorship of a project. As for research involving humans the ethical principles are: anonymity, confidentiality, prioritisation of correspondents/communities involved to provide input and feedback once their results are analysed, respect and consideration of the communities/correspondents recognising their values, capacity and rights, and finally informed consent of human subjects in a just and equitable manner, meaning that subjects are undeniably understanding of their involvement in an experiment (U.S. Department of Health, 1979). In line with these principles prior to every interview with community members we clearly communicated our research aims, their anonymity and how we intended to use collected data. To preserve the anonymity of correspondents, when we refer to a specific interaction we had with an individual correspondent, we numbered them in order of appearance in the report (e.g. “Correspondent A”, “Correspondent B” et cetera). However, while we did our best in this area, it is important to note that because of the close-knit community connections in Ristijärvi it would be impossible to promise complete anonymity for all correspondents. For the survey we attached the data protection form provided by the University of Eastern Finland, in Finnish, on our Facebook post readily available for participants.

4 Data Analysis and Results

This section details our interpretations of the data collected from the survey, in-situ interviews, and observations during our stay in Ristijärvi. It includes key statistics and comments acquired through our mixed methods approach and interactions with community members.

4.1 Survey Results

In total we received 58 survey responses and conducted upwards of 31 impromptu individual and group interviews. Having 58 respondents means that we reached 5% of the total population in the Ristijärvi area. From survey respondents 71% were women (n=41) and 29% men (n=17). Respondents represented all the age groups given. Age group 16-25 had 3% of respondents (n=2), age group 26-40 had 12% (n=7), group 41-66 69% (n=40) and above 67 years old were 16% of all respondents (n=9). Almost all of the respondents were Finnish (n=57). Most of the respondents had completed undergraduate program 41% (n=24), postgraduates were 28% (n=16), vocational school graduates were 19% (n=11), high school graduates 9% (n=5), and elementary school graduates were 3% (n=2) of respondents. 69% of the respondents were currently employed (n=40), 26% were retired (n=15) and 5% were unemployed (n=3). None of the respondents were students. Areas of work varied between respondents. Common job titles were nurse (n=5), entrepreneur (n=3) and teacher (n=4).

4.1.1 Ecotourism

When asked about ecotourism and its potential for growth in Ristijärvi, 55% of survey respondents answered that ecotourism is a familiar concept for them (n=32), from which 44% (n=14) saw potentiality for development ecotourism in Ristijärvi area (Figure 9). When surveyed about the prevalence of ecotourism (Figure 11) most responses show that it was a topic not often discussed or mentioned in the past year.

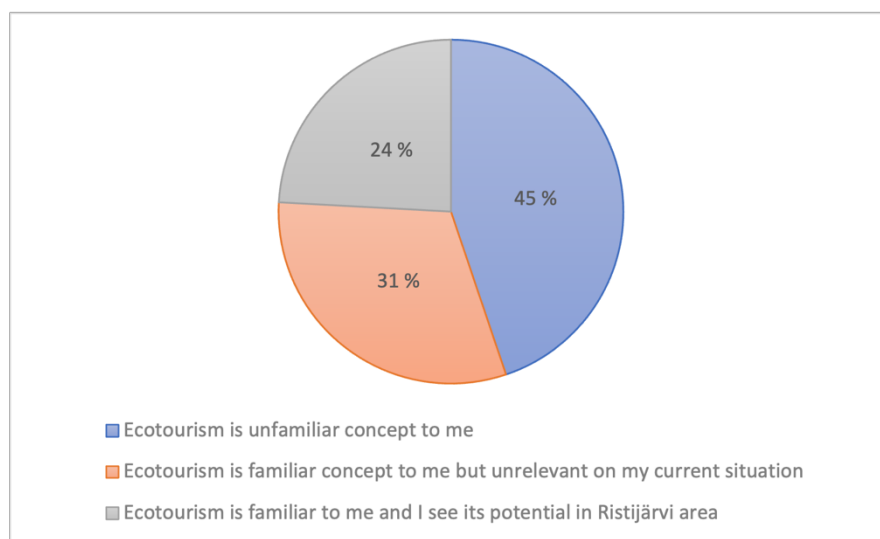


Figure 9. *Understanding ecotourism in Ristijärvi area.*

4.1.2 Sustainable development

Based on the survey results sustainable development was very important for 20,7% (n=12) of the respondents, quite important for 41,4% (n=24) and slightly important for 13,8% (n=8). Neutral mindset to sustainable development had 15,5% (n=9) and sustainable development was not important for 8,6% (n=5) of the respondents (Figure 10).

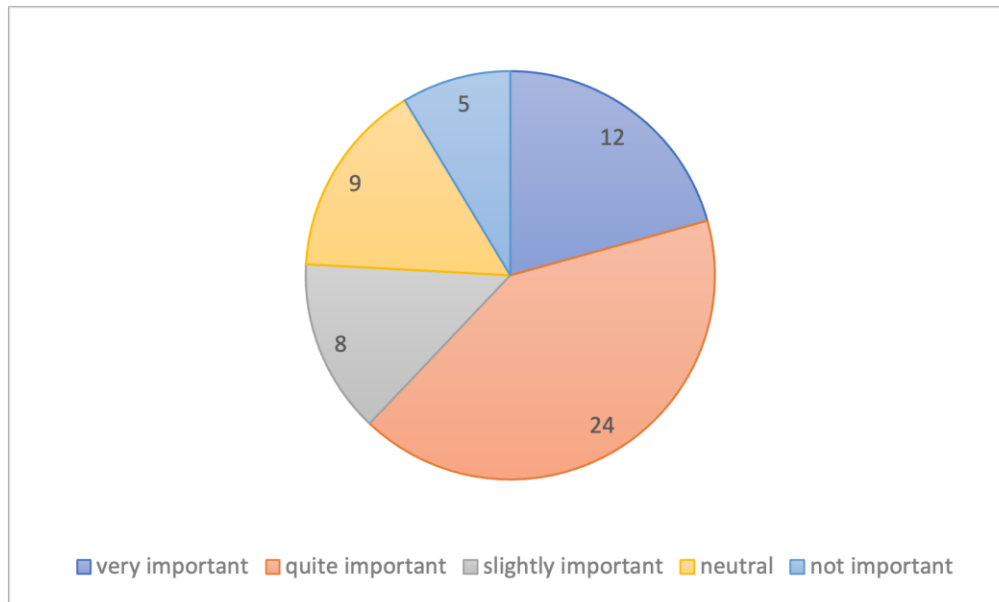


Figure 10. Importance of sustainable development for survey respondents.

When asked about prevalence of different sustainability topics in the past year (n=58), renewable energy was most prevalent (Figure 11). 13,8% (n=8) of survey respondents responded that it had been very prevalent, 34,5% (n=20) quite prevalent and 29,3% (n=17) somewhat prevalent. Population decline had been very prevalent for 8,6% (n=5) of respondents, quite prevalent for 19% (n=11) and somewhat prevalent for 46,6% (n=27). Least prevalent topics among survey respondents were ecotourism and public transportation. Ecotourism had been quite prevalent for 3,5% (n=2), somewhat prevalent for 17,5% (n=10), slightly prevalent for 31,6% (n=18) and not at all prevalent for 47,6% (n=27). Public transportation was very prevalent for 1,7% (n=1), quite prevalent for 1,7% (n=1), somewhat prevalent for 27,6% (n=16), slightly prevalent for 46,6% (n=27) and not at all prevalent for 22,4% (n=13).

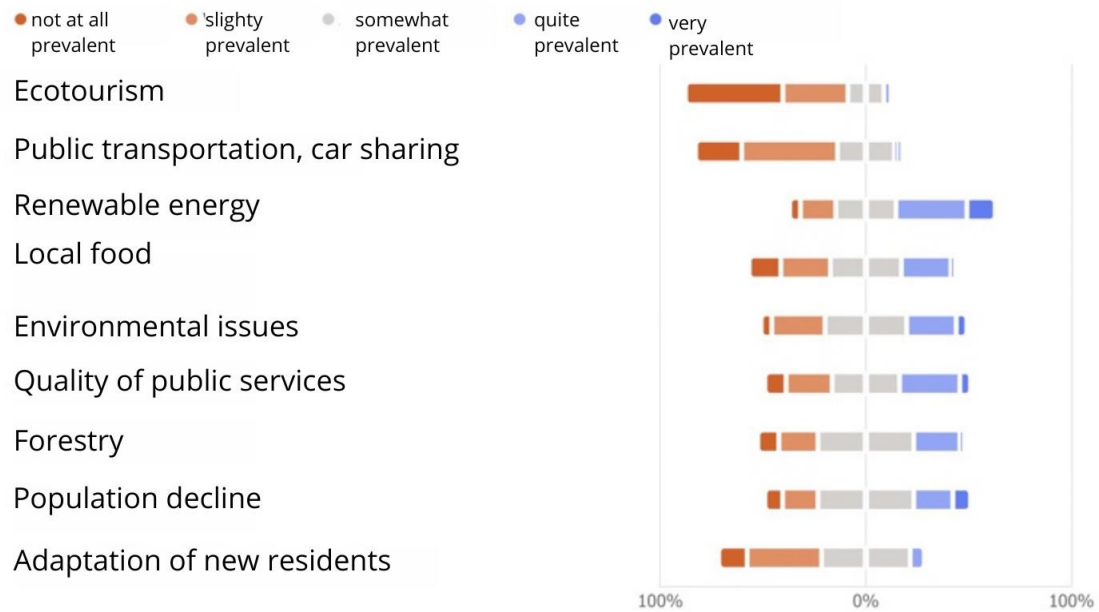


Figure 11. Prevalence of sustainability topical discussion during past year, 2024-2025.

When asked which of the topics out of the options listed in Figure 12 was most important to the respondents, most answered population decline ($n=14$) as being the most important, second important was public services ($n=10$), then environmental issues ($n=5$), integration of new residents ($n=4$), local food ($n=3$), renewable energy ($n=2$) and finally, ecotourism ($n=1$).

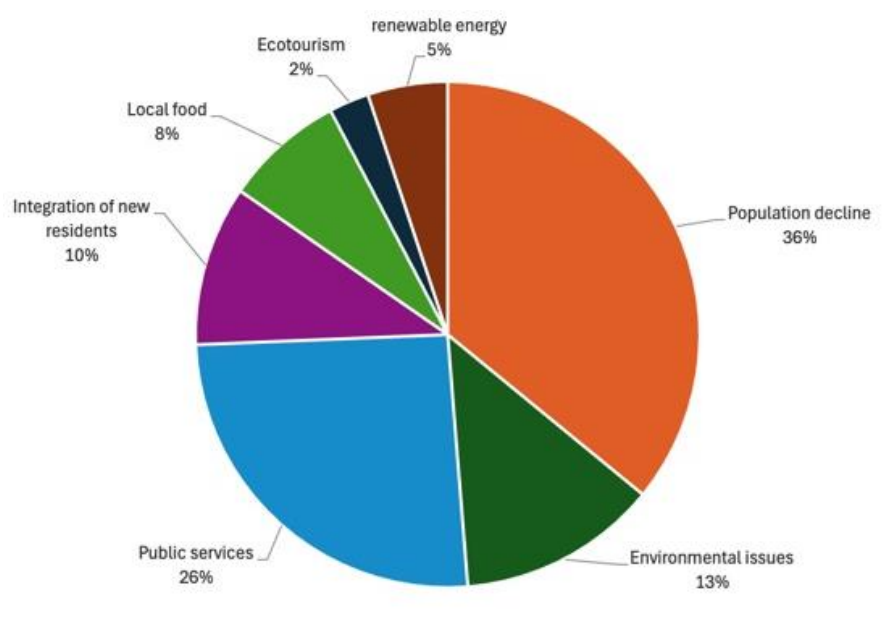


Figure 12. Most important sustainability topics for survey respondents.

Most respondents (38%, $n=22$) said that recycling is the most visible aspect of sustainability in their lives (Figure 13). Additionally, 21% ($n=12$) mentioned daily choices and 15% ($n=9$) of

residents referred to consumer behaviour. There were also open-ended responses written by attendees, which were merged into one category. For instance, in the ‘changing habits’ section, we included lifestyle, values, solar panels, biking, and electric cars. Domestic practices i.e. such as gardening, local food, and hunting accounted for 10% (n=6). Lastly, there was one response related to nature protection.

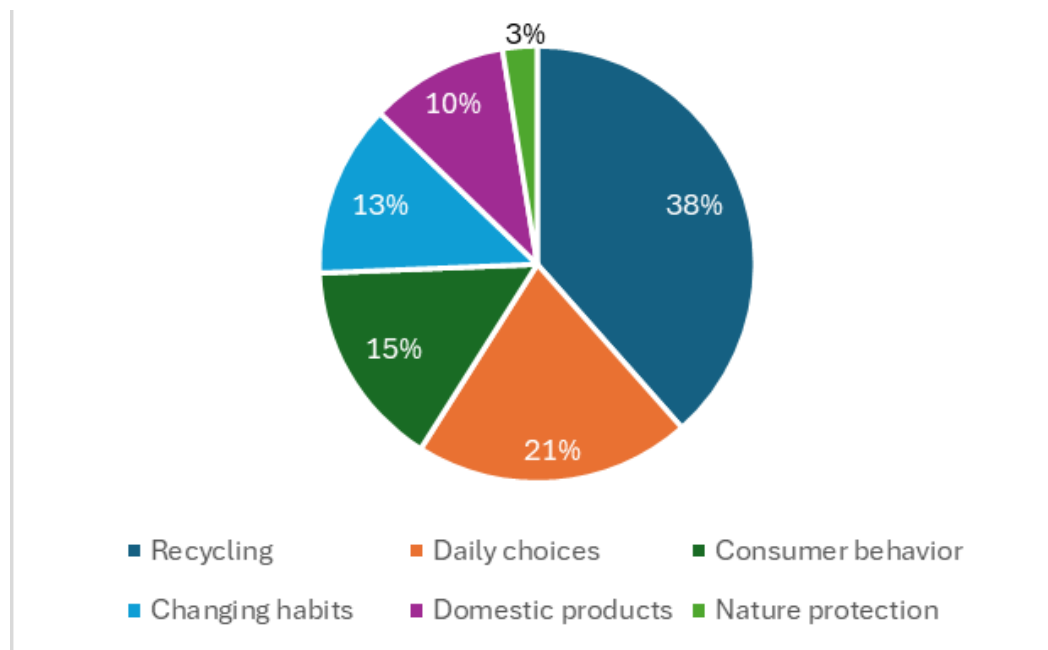


Figure 13. Sustainable development in respondents' everyday life.

4.1.2 Ristijärvi in 10 years

To understand the ideal future of Ristijärvi we asked correspondents and survey respondents an open-ended question about what topics the community members wish to see being the future of Ristijärvi from their perspective.

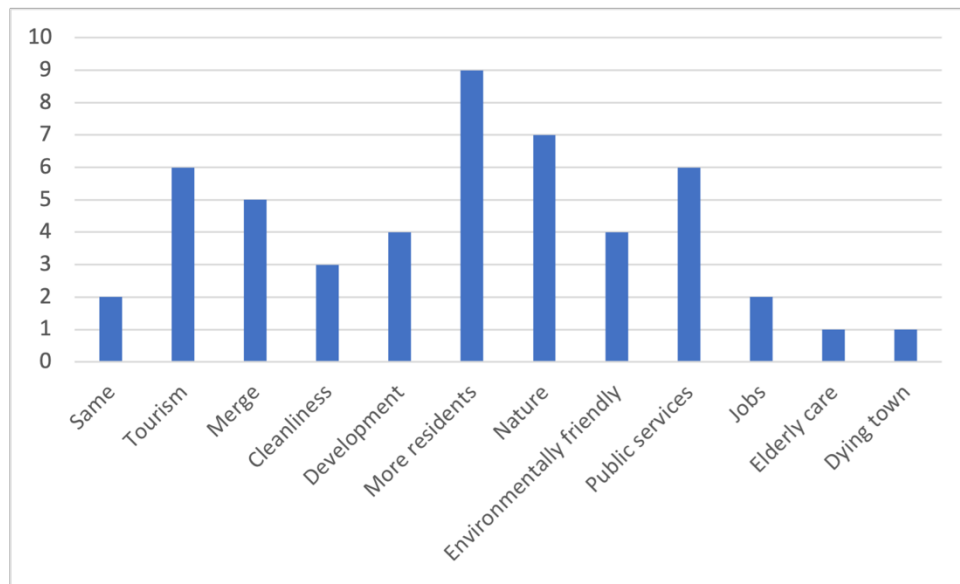


Figure 14. Number of mentions on survey responses when asked what respondents would like to Ristijärvi look like in 10 years.

The above graph (Figure 14) illustrates a common trend that survey respondents want to attract more residents ($n=9$) to Ristijärvi. This was calculated through our interpretation of survey responses to the open question of “*How you wish to see Ristijärvi in 10 years' time?*” Responses mentioned; “*more families*”, “*more residents*”, “*younger people*” and “*more children*”. Nature ($n=7$), Public services ($n=6$) and Tourism ($n=6$) were also mentioned multiple times as important areas of growth for Ristijärvi in the next 10 years. Surprisingly, mentions of a merger with nearby municipalities ($n=5$) such as Paltamo or even Kajaani was positively mentioned by some respondents, a topic we had not considered during the interview process or through our survey.

4.2 Results from interviews

In total, we conducted upwards of 31 semi-formal individual and group interviews. During the interviews several common themes emerged. When correspondents described challenges facing Ristijärvi the two themes that came up in nearly all interviews were (a.) declining, ageing population, and (b.) lack of jobs available in the area. Most correspondents addressed the need to bring more families to the area and many also mentioned the importance of keeping the local school running and offering good quality of education and teachers to attract these families. Maintaining public services (school, grocery store, health centre) was frequently mentioned as an important part of keeping Ristijärvi independent from larger Kajaani. Correspondents frequently mentioned fears of public services closing in Ristijärvi and becoming a “suburb” of Kajaani. While Correspondent A said that were this to occur, they would not mind driving to

Kajaani to access services, Ristijärvi's proximity nature would be worth living farther away, most correspondents were concerned about increasing dependence on Kajaani.

When asked to expand on demographic trends in Ristijärvi's population, we were told by many that young people from the area all needed to leave to attend high school elsewhere, because Ristijärvi did not have one. We were informed that people generally attended high school in Kajaani or in Paltamo and found work afterwards in Kajaani or other nearby cities. While people mentioned several times that those who move away often find their way back to Ristijärvi eventually, several correspondents, as well as based on our observations, explained that the working age group from around high school until nearing retirement is noticeably small compared to the amount of retired people living in the area.

A big part of our interviews with the working age locals was discussing the shortage of job opportunities in Ristijärvi. Many locals pointed out that just a few decades ago there were way more service offers and opportunities inside of Ristijärvi, which also means that there were a lot more job opportunities. Now, with only one grocery store, pizzeria, cafe, school that offers education only till 9th grade (including), and basic health care services, there are not many job opportunities for working age citizens of Ristijärvi. This is also one of the main reasons why young people, after moving away from Ristijärvi for high school education, also rarely move back, and if so, it mostly happens when they have reached their pension age.

As for sustainability and renewable energy, the locals pointed out their importance not so much in the sustainability aspect, but more so in an economical aspect. Most correspondents had positive views on windfarms while many expressed their dislike on hydropower plants. Though most of these hydropower plants in question are outside Ristijärvi territory, several correspondents cited that the nearby hydropower plants have affected fish health in these streams and locals' subsequent ability to fish in these areas. Talking about already existing and potential windmill farms, in several interviews the locals with the positive look on windfarms informed us about the strong divide in the opinions that they have seen in town meetings where these windfarm projects had been discussed. None of our correspondents had a strongly pessimistic look on windmills – they mostly supported these projects because of their economic benefit that's expected–, but it seems that there are citizens (that we did not get an opportunity to talk to) that are strongly against these projects, this is backed by comments made in our survey. We were told anecdotally that most people who felt negatively about the wind farm projects were those living farther outside of the town centre and closer to the site of the project. Many people we spoke with saw the wind farm projects as a necessary venture that could bring much needed money into the municipality. Two survey respondents expressed concern

regarding windmill expansion with one saying, *“If windmills are coming, I will move away”*, while another commented, *“Nature must not be damaged with windmills and mines”*. Most citizens that we talked to said that the windmills’ affect (Wylie, 2005) on the landscape and its aesthetical value were less important factors than the potential profitability they posed for the town. Still, some pointed out that, if the windfarms are built, the fall of aesthetical value is inevitable.

Forest management was also discussed when inquiring about the town’s economic development. Based on our interviews, the general public’s involvement in forest management was minimal. In fact, most of our correspondents did not provide many opinions on forest management. We were told by Correspondent B that at a semi-recent town meeting on forest management only a small number of locals showed up. Correspondent B told us that many citizens of Ristijärvi trusted the forest management in the area as essentially a fact of life and that many were not involved in forest management plans. However, Correspondent A had an opinion about the forest management that differed from all our other interviews: he expressed his dislike on the forest management as, in his opinion, current forest management dialogues often centre around the idea ‘the more we take, the better’. Correspondent A thought that because of forests’ profitability for municipalities a mindset shift could have occurred in Finnish forest management that borders on extractive practices.

It is evident that Ristijärvi's nature is important to most of the locals we spoke to. Many correspondents spoke about proximity to nature being a draw to live in Ristijärvi. Several correspondents touched on the importance of old growth trees within the forest and hoped that Ristijärvi could maintain their stands of old growth forest. Forest biodiversity was also touched on, with one or two correspondents mentioning berry picking of native berries as a frequent seasonal activity for residents. Correspondent B cited the importance of old growth stands for local bird populations and that leaving some dead wood in the forest is beneficial for biodiversity. Correspondent B discussed how planning has changed in recent years with the enactment of the Forest Act ((1093/1996) amended in 2014) that promotes solutions for sustainable forestry and biodiversity. They told us that this is done through economic valuations of the forest areas; that if an area is deemed economically unprofitable the area would be left alone and dying trees would be felled and left on the ground to invite deadwood biodiversity.

Ecotourism was also a topic which the majority of correspondents generally did not bring up themselves. However, when asked about it, most correspondents reacted positively to

ecotourism's potential in the community. The places that correspondents mentioned as sites to develop ecotourism in the area were Saukkovaara ski hill and Hiisijärvi lakeside area. Correspondent C emphasized the importance of accessible paths to access Hiisijärvi. Correspondent A said that while ecotourism was largely a good thing and could develop in the area, he worried about how ecotourism's attracting more tourists to the area could affect its pristine nature. Correspondent D spoke encouragingly about how fishing tourism on some of the area's water bodies could expand, saying that the area's clean water and healthy fish stocks could sustain more anglers. No other correspondents commented on whether more fishing tourism should be introduced in the area.

4.3 Policy Framework

Ristijärvi municipality operates in collaboration with various national policies focussing on the sustainable practices of carbon neutrality, energy efficiency and forestry, these are;

- a. HINKU Network
- b. Energy Efficiency Agreement (KETS)
- c. The Forest Act

The following policies can help guide Ristijärvi in terms of planning and executing solutions pertaining to the promotion of sustainable development and reaching national carbon neutrality goals.

HINKU Network

The HINKU network focuses on bringing together municipalities, businesses, and citizens together to create and carry out solutions for reducing greenhouse gas emissions (GHG). The network aims to expand the protocols set forth in EU directives by providing more extensive and rapid initiatives that is required within the EU. This is implemented through the creation of solutions that have social, economic, and environmental advantages (Finnish Environment Institute (SYKE), n.d.).

The end goals for the HINKU network are to help reduce GHG by 80% from 2007 levels by 2030. In Ristijärvi they joined the HINKU network in 2023 with a focus on the renewable energy sector, mainly through the installation of more wind turbines and improving energy efficiency. Ristijärvi is currently working on 3 windmill projects at 2 different locations, in

total installing 7 wind turbines, which would accumulate between 20,000 and 30,000 MW of renewable energy to the municipality (Ristijärvi Keskellä Kainuuta, n.d.).

Energy Efficiency Agreement (KETS)

The Energy Efficiency Agreement (KETS) was a nationwide collaborative initiative running from 2017-2025 for municipalities to focus on transitioning and implementing solutions that will improve energy efficiency (Motiva Oy, n.d.). In Ristijärvi solutions included implementing geothermal heating, solar panels, air-water heat pumps, and small wind turbines. Further initiatives include reducing temperatures in municipal buildings, converting lighting to LEDs and adjustment of street lighting times (Ristijärvi Keskellä Kainuuta, n.d.). Moving forward the KETS agreement will transition to the Public Sector Energy Efficiency Agreement (JETS) for 2026-2030.

The Forest Act

The Forest Act (1093/1996) amended in 2014 was created to promote the economical, ecological, and socially sustainable management and use of Finland's forests (Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, n.d.). The aim of the Forest Act is to improve forest profitability, make a positive impact on forest biodiversity and promote good forest management through extensive planning.

5 Discussion

Concluding all the qualitative data we gathered from these interviews, we noticed that, even though the local citizen outlook on the future of Ristijärvi is mostly positive, the opinions on how sustainability strategies and ecotourism growth plans should be carried out noticeably differs. When first arriving in the town, from the municipality of Ristijärvi, we got the impression that the town wants to develop their ecotourism industry. However, talking to the locals, it was noticeable that not everyone expressed interest in this idea. It appeared that the municipality had not talked to the locals about some of their town development plans in this direction, or that the citizens did not see them as potentially successful.

When asked about what they like about Ristijärvi, the locals highlighted the importance of nature and quietness, which could be a good reason for some to visit Ristijärvi for vacation. As mentioned previously, most people did not express concerns with the forest management and

planning, some said that they would like to have some hiking options near Saukkovaara as well. Saukkovaara is already suitable for skiing and bike riding, but not as much specifically for hiking through the forest. This was also expressed as a plan by the municipality of Ristijärvi and Saukkovaara ski hill volunteer group as it could potentially be a great way to attract tourists throughout the whole year. However, when asked about such plans as ski hill development a few correspondents said that the hill is not “interesting” enough for people that are passionate about skiing and snowboarding. Nevertheless, correspondents expressed it as a positive for attracting young children and families, one volunteer expressing pride with witnessing over 200 visitors to Saukkovaara in one day during the 2025 winter season. As was understood from the meeting with the municipality, Ristijärvi has plans for development in these areas, starting with tourism that, hopefully, would result in more people considering moving to/back to the town permanently.

Hiisijärvi (Picture 2) is a site that Ristijärvi's municipality has developed as a lakeside recreation area. The area has beach volleyball courts and several structures with firepits and seating areas. They are currently constructing several flat, gravel paths so that the area could be more easily accessed by someone using a wheelchair. Hiisijärvi is an example of the community of Ristijärvi drawing upon the scenic natural environment to develop more recreation areas for residents and visitors alike. Correspondent E told us that they hoped Hiisijärvi could become a place to develop the area's tourism market while also being a community gathering spot.



Picture 2. A view towards the lake in Hiisijärvi

From our personal observations during our stay, and through interviews with working age citizens, we noticed that the municipality of Ristijärvi has not really started working on the marketing aspect that should be the starting point for the potential growth. This can be explained by the fact that the new mayor has only got this position recently and has not yet had time to make a marketing plan. Furthermore, as we gathered from our interviews, people who would be eligible for these marketing positions have had no opportunities to work on this aspect – it seems as if the municipality wants to work “on their own”. This is an observation we concluded after multiple interviews with the residents who have claimed that their recommendations directed to the municipality have largely been “ignored” or not been prioritised. However, the degree to how transparent the municipality is with its residents and how much influence the municipality has in terms of meeting the specific recommendations brought forth by the residents is difficult to assess.

While observing the everyday life and usual actions of Ristijärvi locals, it was observed that the kids are largely moving through the town by bicycles. However, as it is possible in Finland to get a driver's license for moped or a light quadricycle (Traficom, 2025), there were also many teenagers who had reached the age of 15, moving through and around the town centre by mopeds or light quadricycles. This, of course, could not be considered as sustainable mobility, comparing to, for example, public transport or carpool options. However, as many pupils of Ristijärvi school do not live in the town, it certainly is more convenient for them to move around by a personal, automatized vehicle.

Considering the young age when teenagers can get their light automatized vehicle licenses, those who are able to get the vehicles while still learning in their well-known school in Ristijärvi, want to “show off” their vehicles to their peers. On our four-day visit we noticed few instances where the teenagers are showing off their mopeds in group setting by revving or driving around the town in circles with their light quadricycles. Even though under the Euro 5 standard that has come into practice as of 1st of January 2020 the emissions of mopeds, motorcycles, tricycles, and quadricycles have been limited (ACEM, 2019), these observed driving activities amongst young drivers in Ristijärvi still cause a lot of emissions.

There is an option to rent out electrical bicycles and, so called, “Fat Bikes” that are suitable for biking not only through the town, but also in Saukkovaara hills and other “offroad” trails either independently or with an organized group (Ristijärvi 4H Association, n.d.). This option to rent out seven e-bikes is supported by a 4H association that operates in the municipalities of Ristijärvi and Hyrynsalmi. Through this business idea the association spreads awareness also

about their gardening services, informs people about other eco-friendly and sustainable activities (from which some are intended specifically for the youth centre). During our stay in Ristijärvi we interviewed one of the working-age citizens of the Ristijärvi town, who has been working on these electric bicycles and has been fixing them in cooperation with this association. By also getting the great opportunity to try these bikes out, we can confidently assert that this could be considered as a great option for eco-tourism and even sustainable mobility for the locals. However, it seems as this rental bike project is only at the starting point and still needs a lot to develop and improve in the sense of marketing and rulemaking to be considered as a successful business plan.

It was also observed that some young age citizens of Ristijärvi either do not care or do not know about the actions that can affect the environment, as it was noticed that some teenagers throw their trash on the street. In the group interview that our research group held with the workers of the elementary school of Ristijärvi, we were informed that the pupils have been taught about recycling and the importance of responsible waste management. However, the fact that there were a few young-age citizens of Ristijärvi that did not care about the eyes of others in the small town of Ristijärvi (including our quite observant research group) while throwing their waste on the street, encourages the assumption that they do not care about or do not fully understand their effect on the environment. This is a popular issue amongst the new generation, and Ristijärvi schoolteachers are clearly trying to work on it, but it seems like new practises need to be explored and developed to foster sustainability and resilience.

6 Limitations

A lack of relevant and reliable primary data on Ristijärvi municipality and the causes for declining population trends led to a certain degree of assumptions made on the potential causes based on observational data perceived by the authors of this report. We were also somewhat limited in the amount of people we were able to speak with, and information we were able to gather, in the four days of field research we had. We do not pretend to understand all the dynamics at play or the dimensions to each trend or challenges we discuss. However, this could delimit the legitimacy of our assumptions which can be incorrect when not backed by enough data.

Correspondents' knowledge of ecotourism and sustainable development definitions posed a delimiting factor when collecting primary data (survey and interviews). We often observed correspondents had limited knowledge regarding certain definitions and concepts such as “*ecotourism*” and “*sustainability*”. To many, it appeared that these words perhaps did not have

much context within Ristijärvi. This changed our approach and framing of questions; although the definitions were not commonly known to the residents often, they would describe practises of sustainability or the promotion of ecotourism without inherently knowing so.

7 Recommendations

Based on personal communications and observations these recommendations aim to enhance Ristijärvi's appeal as a family-friendly, recreation-focused destination while addressing local challenges such as limited marketing, cuts in governmental funding and volunteer dependency.

1. Revitalise the market square

Ristijärvi is lacking a clear focal point for the community. Our proposal as a top priority for the future development of Ristijärvi is to use the market square as the foundation for a town square. This will not only reduce the several stops needed when people visit the services of Ristijärvi but will also create a foundation of more social interaction and economic spill over through spontaneous visits to nearby services by concentrating them into a town square area, thus creating a more vibrant community centre leading to a higher quality of life (Mehan, 2016). With the town square also being in direct connection to one of the bus stops, it opens possibilities for visitors to travel sustainably to and from the town square.

Recommendation for implementation:

- Develop the town square to create a positive snowball effect. By creating this new space, opening the community up to more possibilities to sustain or expand their growth. The flea market is currently occupying space in one of the school buildings, which Correspondent E commented is lacking space. The flea market could house one of these storefronts at the market square. The flea market, which also rents out e-bikes suitable for all terrains, would then be able to act as one of the main tourist attractions, in the local community centre, or at Saukkovaara ski hill. By freeing up the space from the flea market in the school building, more space is given to the school for more afterschool activities, something expressed as needed. The pizzeria which is attracting visitors from nearby towns would also be one of the main stays in this local town square, possibly expanding the customer base for the flea market and bike rental, and other entrepreneurial businesses. Another prime candidate for

a storefront at this town square could be the Cafe 5 stop which is now located next to the local S-Market.

Knowing this being a substantial proposal, nonetheless, we see this a pivotal point of development for Ristijärvi to create a more cohesive community structure which will increase social cohesion by creating a focal meeting place as well as economic development sustainable car usage by concentrating services.



Picture 3. Market square's current state to the top left, and our proposal of its future in top right, bottom left & right.

Picture 3 shows our proposal for the market square. Up left is a picture of market square's current state. The square is empty for a great part of the year and is often used as pizzeria's parking lot. On the other pictures are buildings that can be used all year around and that would make the square Ristijärvi's focal point.

2. Enhance marketing efforts to highlight recreational opportunities

Several interviews highlight insufficient marketing as a barrier to attract residents and tourists. Having been successful in their prior marketing campaign around 20 years ago aiming to attract pensioners, effective promotion of Ristijärvi's natural and recreational assets can position it as a desirable destination for tourism and new residents alike, including its proximity to the nearby city of Kajaani.

Recommendations for implementation:

- Develop a targeted marketing campaign to create a cohesive brand identity emphasizing Ristijärvi's recreational offerings, including good fishing opportunities, trail-biking, cross-country skiing, and hiking. Also, the close-knit community and family-friendly environment with close connections to urban environments when needed. Use social media platforms and partnerships with regional tourism boards to reach broader audiences. This implementation process could involve appointing a marketing and social media manager.

3. Develop and promote Saukkovaara as a recreational hub (Pictures 3.-6.)

Saukkovaara's natural resources and existing infrastructure such as FIS ski trails make it a prime asset for year-round tourism and community engagement, which can attract families and visitors. While the ski hill's size and location allow for limited downhill skiing options for more experienced skiers, emphasizing the hill's downhill biking and trail biking opportunities could be potential areas of improvement and attractiveness for the area. Correspondent A voiced that because Saukkovaara could typically open for only two months of the year it could be seen as a drain on the town's resources. However, promoting the area as a hiking and biking spot could allow for more year-round visitors.

Recommendations for implementation:

- Showcase Saukkovaara: Promote Saukkovaara's FIS-certified cross-country skiing trails and its potential as a year-round destination for biking and hiking. Highlight events like FIS skiing competitions to draw attention and lean into the fact that two former world champions have come from Ristijärvi, training at Saukkovaara as a part of the marketing strategy.
- Expand cross-country skiing trails: Invest in additional cross-country skiing trails in Saukkovaara, which could also be used as bike trails during snow free periods, designed for both beginners and advanced riders to capitalize in the snow free seasons. Ensure trails are well-marked and maintained. There are also possibilities of creating downhill trails as well as jumps at Saukkovaara. These jumps can be

used during the winter by freestyle skiers, adding additional pull factors for tourists to visit Saukkovaara.

- Introduce automated bike rentals: Implement an automated e-bike rental system using Ristijärvi's existing seven e-bikes. Use e-ID authentication to allow self-service access to a secure rental lodge, reducing reliance on volunteer labour. Increase rental bike fleet overtime through money raised in rental program and through seasonal events at the ski hill. Profits from the e-bike rental system can initially go into reinvestment of more e-bikes, depending on future needs.
- Host seasonal events: Organize biking, hiking, and skiing events in Saukkovaara to attract visitors. Examples include summer bike races or winter ski festivals.



Picture 44. Skiing trails in Saukkovaara



Picture 55. Cottages on top of Saukkovaara ski hill.



Picture 66. Saukkovaara hill (in winter cross-country skiing, in summer trail for e-bikes)



Picture 77. Landscape from Saukkovaara hill with a trail direction sign.

4. Promoting community engagement

By redesigning the market square to be connected to, and an extension together with the local pizzeria which draws locals from nearby towns (for example Hyrynsalmi, Paltamo and Sotkamo), it could create an inviting space in which community engagement could be enhanced and nurtured. Correspondent F expressed the need for a playground and an outdoor stage by the market square, to bridge the gap between the market square and the pizzeria the playground could be placed in between.

Recommendations for implementation:

- Introduce family-friendly activities by hosting regular events like crafts markets and children's workshops to draw families to the square. Include bike rental or pop-up stalls for local products.

5. Repurposing uninhabited buildings for office and housing

During our stay in Ristijärvi, many interview participants expressed the need for entrepreneurs. During our stay in Ristijärvi, we observed multiple uninhabited buildings suitable for repurposing into affordable, multi-use office and housing spaces for start-ups and small businesses. With a similar structure as the 1€ houses in Italy, or

Malta's Housing Benefit Scheme, Ristijärvi could attract entrepreneurs, start-ups and/or already established companies, to move to Ristijärvi for a cheap acquisition fee and gain from long term taxation (Camilleri, 2025). Prioritize centrally located or structurally sound building to minimize renovation costs. Ideally, set a contract length of minimum stay if the acquisition is 1€ to secure reimbursement.

6. Vocational Programs

Throughout our observations and interviews with the local community a common topic of discussion was the decline of educational institutions, with many community members mentioning the lack of a high school and further educational facilities. Based on this feedback as well as discussions regarding attracting a more youthful demographic, recommending a vocational training facility does not come across as far-fetched. A report by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the International Labour Organization (ILO) in 2014 suggests the promotion of vocational training and education can combat negative trends in youth labor markets (Bolli et al., 2021). Further, promoting Ristijärvi as an opportunity for young skilled workers to potentially find relevant occupations in Ristijärvi.

In conclusion there are a multitude of possibilities for Ristijärvi to enhance their attractiveness for visitors and new residents alike. Many of the services and infrastructure already exist and could be utilized through marketing and investment. During the data collection and conversations with the community members we learned that there are planned cuts in government funding to the municipality, especially in the education sector which poses a barrier to the development of our recommendations. However, our perception is that there are other ways to receive funding such as through EU funding programs, private investment from local businesses and focused marketing campaigns.

8 Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to answer the research question “*What are the current challenges and potentials for growth in the small rural community of Ristijärvi?*” through our observations and findings from interviews and survey data the main talking points discussed are as follows: At first glance Ristijärvi came across as an ageing town shown by the population demographic of largely elderly inhabitants. However, based on our observations it is a far cry from a dying

town. Community engagement is highly active ranging from the many activities we experienced during our short 4-day stay with our participation in events such as chair yoga (Picture 8), Bingo (Picture 9), flea market, church seminar, barbeque evening and nature walks. Correspondent G described Ristijärvi as "all action", a sentiment that struck us as surprising when we first arrived but then quickly made more sense once we observed all the activities one could take part in there.



Picture 8. Chair yoga at village association house



Picture 99. Bingo event in the village association house.

The public services available such as public parks, playgrounds, sports facilities, hiking and biking trails, ski area and numerous campsites were well kept and run by the local community. The infrastructure in this place is attractive for tourists and new residents to build a life. The challenges for Ristijärvi were clearly, attracting new younger residents, the lack of available jobs and funds available to rejuvenate the town. These conclusions are based on our survey, interview, and observational findings. There was hope in the conversations we had with residents regarding the expansion of wind turbines providing a source of income. However, we express caution on prioritizing economic growth solely on the development of wind turbines, as we believe a growing community requires growth across multiple areas. Providing healthcare and further education has the potential to provide future job opportunities as well as attracting a younger demographic to the town.

Our proposal regarding developing a town square is a big proposal which would need quite a substantial investment. However, a town square would serve the community well in terms of creating a focal point for tourism, services, accessibility as well as social cohesion and economic viability for the community. Overall, we see Ristijärvi's potential to develop in a sustainable, community-oriented way that could allow them to continue thriving in years to come.

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