

## Saarte Geopark project, Estonia

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A couple of years ago the local conditions for founding the Saarte Geopark were very good. Since the Saarte Geopark embraces entirely local nature and includes also heritage sites by not merely focusing on geological natural resources, the impact of the geopark to the economic and social development of Saare County is much broader than only focusing on its geological resources. Saarte Geopark was founded by the local municipalities.

Saare County is the most western county in Estonia – its area is 2922 km<sup>2</sup>, representing 6.5% of Estonia's territory. In addition to the island of Saaremaa, there are smaller islands such as Muhu, Ruhnu, Abruca and Vilsandi, and many small islands in the county. All are well-known destinations among tourists. Saaremaa is unique because of its location and its isolation – a unique atmosphere and architecture have been conserved (reed roof buildings, stone fences), the inhabitants of island have its own style of speaking and beautiful traditional costumes.

The Saare County is rich in natural monuments. The most important aspect for the creation of the geopark is an internationally well-known geological monument – the Kaali meteorite crater. The main pillar of Saarte Geopark is based on the presentation of the Silurian era. The outcrops of Silurian that are located all over the island of Saaremaa allow presentation of almost ¾ of the Silurian Period. Most of them are located on the seashore and form high or low cliffs. Due to thin subsoil there are a lot of old limestone fields and several limestone quarries are currently in use. To have an overview of the Silurian bedding over the time, visitors have to travel through the island of Saaremaa from north towards south. The outcrop on the north coast is older, or in other words, of Lower Silurian rocks. Towards the south there are gradually younger rocks, up to the Upper Silurian, under the surface by ending at the latest horizon in Sõrve peninsula.

The plan for the Saarte Geopark in terms of international Geopark status is to apply for admission to the European Geoparks Network and Global Geoparks Network in 2013 and hopefully in 2014 be acknowledged as a European Geopark.

Presented in Theme 4