

**Ms NATAŠA POTOČNIK, Slovenian Institute for Adult Education,
director**

Dear participants, dear colleagues,

Allow me to open today's meeting with a question that adults rarely ask themselves, even though it concerns us deeply: When was the last time we truly learned from nature—not merely about it, but from it? Not as experts or analysts, but simply as people who, in a world of constant change, must learn how to live anew, again and again.

In recent years, adult education has focused intensely on the digital transition, future skills, demographic change, and the transformation of the labour market. Yet all these processes ultimately return us to a common starting point: How do we preserve human curiosity, adaptability, and openness when the world around us is becoming increasingly unpredictable?

Nature offers us a special kind of wisdom in this regard. In nature, change is rarely linear. For long periods, it unfolds quietly, almost imperceptibly—until, suddenly, something new emerges. The same is true in adult education: the breakthroughs we celebrate today are often the result of the patient, hidden, almost invisible work of teachers, mentors, counsellors, and researchers.

This parallel between nature and learning is one of the reasons why today's conference carries such a powerful message. When we speak of participatory environmental education, we are not simply discussing methods or contemporary pedagogical trends. We are talking about returning to adults something they have too often lost: the opportunity to experience learning as an experience, not merely as a requirement.

Experience-based learning demands courage —

- the courage to invite adults out of established patterns,
- the courage to create learning environments without walls and rigid structures,
- the courage to trust processes that cannot be immediately measured,
- and the courage to let nature itself guide learning, with all its unpredictability, honesty, and surprise.

We need this same courage as we address the green transition, which asks adults to embrace new practices, new knowledge, and new responsibilities.

The Discovering the Power of Nature conference is a unique space where experts from 14 disciplines—among them andragogy, pedagogy, agronomy, history, geography, forestry, geodesy, anthropology, psychology, journalism, and economics—come together. Each discipline sees and understands nature differently, asks different questions, and brings its own lens.

When these perspectives meet in dialogue, we gain a view broader than any single discipline could offer—a view essential for co-creating a sustainable society.

Education for sustainability will succeed only if we understand nature as a partner in learning—not as a resource, not as a backdrop, but as a conversation companion. When we observe, explore, and listen to nature, we learn something fundamental: change is possible when we shape it together. This insight calls on us to place adult learning at the heart of the green transition and to cultivate responsibility in all whom we teach—not through abstract concepts, but through shared experiences in nature.

I am proud that at the Slovenian Institute for Adult Education, as the central national institution in this field, we have brought together diverse disciplines to develop green competences as essential life skills for the green transition. My sincere thanks go to the organising committee, the experts, the moderators, and to all of you joining us today—both in person and online.

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May this conference be a space for new questions, open discussions, and, above all, a renewed sense that we are part of something larger—part of a community that is transforming the culture of adult learning with responsibility toward nature and future generations.

I wish you two inspiring days, stimulating conversations, and, above all, a great deal of curiosity.

**Ms NEVENKA BOGATAJ, Slovenian Institute for Adult Education,
senior researcher**

Dear all, welcome to Ljubljana.

Thank you for the remarkable response to our invitation. Allow me to highlight a few key messages as we begin:

1. Nature's unpredictability is both its beauty and its power. It challenges us, inspires us, and invites us to rethink our place within it. Nature is not merely a backdrop to our activities, nor simply a resource enabling our comfort and survival. Too many past decisions have overlooked this reality, and in doing so, have created challenges we now face. It is therefore both sensible and necessary that we correct and improve these decisions, aligning them more closely with the laws and rhythms of nature.
2. My institution and I are deeply honored by your presence.
 1. A special welcome goes to the highly cited researchers and to all of you who have traveled from abroad. You enrich this gathering with original, unique, and forward-looking ideas drawn from more than 14 disciplines, all upheld by the highest standards of excellence.
 2. Thank you for dedicating your time, energy, insight, and patience to life as it truly is—not virtual, artificial, media-filtered, or simplified. The dynamism and complexity of nature demand such commitment, especially when we think in the long term.
- This meeting is different from many others because young people take center stage and one section of the program highlights a "new layer" in adult education: the life that unfolds between the state and the individual—community life. It is not built on money or statistics, nor shaped by right- or left-wing ideologies. Instead, it grows from relationships among people and with the places they inhabit. This is true in Slovenia, in Europe, and around the world. The life energy rooted in these connections endures pressures and indifference; it carries the past into the future and stands as a noble marker of sustainability.

May this conference strengthen our shared commitment to building and caring for world we live in.

**Ms TEJA DOLGAN, Ministry of Education, Directorate for Sec. and Higher Educ. and Adult Education,
Head of Adult Education Sector**

Ladies and gentlemen,

Welcome to this conference, which brings us together in a shared mission: to discover the power of nature and to integrate it into adult education as a foundation for a sustainable future. We live in a time

of profound and unprecedented challenges. Climate change, biodiversity loss, social pressures, and rising inequalities all remind us that change is not optional—it is urgent.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development gives us a clear framework for responding to these challenges. Its 17 goals are not only political commitments; they are also a moral compass for humanity.

When we speak of the power of nature, we speak of the power of life itself. Nature teaches us balance, interconnectedness, and responsibility. It offers answers to essential questions about how to live in harmony with our environment and with one another. This is why participatory environmental education is vital: it moves beyond simply transmitting knowledge and instead emphasizes co-creation, dialogue, and the inclusion of all generations and communities.

Let me highlight Goal 4 – Quality Education. It calls for equal access to knowledge and lifelong learning opportunities for all. Adult education plays an indispensable role here—not only by providing information, but by cultivating the skills and attitudes needed for sustainable living, from understanding climate change to making choices that protect our natural resources.

In talking about nature, we must also consider Goal 13 – Climate Action. Climate change is no longer a distant possibility; it is happening now. Every step we take, every decision we make, influences our ability to limit its impacts. Education is central to this effort: raising awareness, strengthening knowledge, and building adaptive capacity form the foundation of resilient communities. A participatory approach ensures that people are not passive recipients, but active creators of change.

Our connection with nature naturally leads us to Goal 15 – Life on Land. Protecting ecosystems, managing forests sustainably, and preventing soil degradation all require understanding and respect for natural processes. In adult education, we have the opportunity to present nature not as something external, but as part of our everyday reality—a shared space we shape and for which we bear responsibility.

We must also remember Goal 12 – Responsible Consumption and Production. Our habits, lifestyles, and consumption patterns have a profound impact on the environment. Adult education is a powerful space for transforming mindsets, promoting circular economy principles, reducing waste, and encouraging responsible use of resources. This is not abstract theory—it is practical action that can be implemented in local communities, in workplaces, and in daily life.

And finally, Goal 17 – Partnerships for the Goals. Without cooperation, there can be no lasting change. This conference itself demonstrates the strength of partnership—showing that by combining knowledge, experience, and innovation, we can create solutions greater than any individual effort. Collaboration among educational institutions, civil society, local communities, and the economy is essential for success.

Dear participants,

The power of nature is the power of life. Let this conference be a space of inspiration—a space where we learn from one another and from nature itself. Let it be a place where new ideas emerge, ideas that will transform adult education from theory into practice, from words into meaningful action. Each of us holds both responsibility and the ability to contribute to a world where development respects both people and the planet.

I would like to conclude with a principle at the heart of the 2030 Agenda: “We will leave no one behind.”

May this guide our work—in education, in our communities, and in our relationship with nature.

Thank you for being part of this journey.

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Ms JASMINA POLIČNIK, Slovenian Institute for Adult Education,

Head of the project Strengthening Lifelong Learning

Dear participants, dear guests,

Welcome to the conference Discovering the Power of Nature. I am truly pleased that we are gathered here today, because real change begins in spaces like this—where knowledge meets community, and where ideas become action.

When we speak about the power of nature, we are not referring only to its beauty. We are talking about the way nature teaches us: to observe, to think, to adapt, and to understand the connections between our decisions and their consequences. Learning for sustainability is one of the key tasks of our time.

This is why I am proud that this conference is organized within the Strengthening Lifelong Learning operation, co-financed by the Republic of Slovenia and the European Union through the ESF+. In this project, we have approached the green transition consciously and intentionally, because analyses clearly show that adults lack programs, tools, and support for developing green competences. There are too few opportunities that help people understand environmental processes and motivate them to change everyday habits. Programs like Foundations of Sustainable Living and tools like the Opazujmo.si app seek to fill this gap and bring learning closer to the real world.

Opazujmo.si perfectly illustrates what we aim to achieve: engaging people in participatory learning and citizen science. When people observe changes in their environment, collect data, and join collective actions, their understanding deepens and their sense of responsibility grows. Participatory learning is not an incidental method—it is one of the most effective ways to reconnect nature with learning and with everyday life.

It is equally important that our work is aligned with broader European frameworks. Documents such as the Recommendation on Learning for the Green Transition and the GreenComp competence framework underscore the need to equip adults with the knowledge and skills required for a sustainable future. We need educators who can guide participatory processes, and learners who can recognize their role within the community. Our task is to create the conditions in which this becomes possible—and today's conference is part of that effort.

The visual identity of our project—based on four symbols: literacy, digitalization, counselling, and green competencies—also carries a message. These elements represent different dimensions of lifelong learning which, when interconnected, form a complete whole. Sustainability, too, is more than environmental protection; it is the integration of knowledge, attitudes, social justice, and community action. Our visual narrative reminds us that learning is holistic, and that sustainability thrives through connections, not in isolation.

Today's conference is therefore more than a professional gathering. It is an invitation to reflect together on how we can bring nature back to the center of learning. How can we create learning experiences for adults that go beyond explanation and encourage observation, action, and participation? And how can adult education contribute to a just green transition—one that Europe and the world urgently need?

Thank you for being here. Thank you for believing in the power of learning, the power of nature, and the power of community.

I wish you an inspiring and courageous conference day.