

Sustainable tourism development strategy: case of Soomaa National Park, Estonia

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Sustainable Tourism in Estonia. The idea of sustainable use of resources in the travel and tourism industry is not new in Estonia. In order to address these issues, the Institute of Nature Preservation and Tourism under the Ministry of Social Affairs was set up in 1938. Since regaining independence in 1991, Estonia has been developing rapidly. An integral part of the transition of our country to a market economy has been the harmonisation of Estonia's legislation with the requirements of EU legislation. Estonia was one of the first countries to adopt a Sustainable Development Act in 1995. Legislations relating to sustainable tourism include the Act on Sustainable Development, the Planning and Building Act, the Republic of Estonia Land Reform Act, the Water Act, the Act on the Protection of Marine and Freshwater Coast, Shores, and Banks, the Act on Protected Natural Objects, and the Law of Property.

Soomaa National Park, with an area of 390 km², it was founded in 1993. Soomaa ("the land of bogs") is one of five national parks in Estonia, and has as its main goal the protection of large raised bogs, floodplain grasslands, forests and meandering rivers. Much of the Park consists of large mires, criss-crossed by the rivers of the Pärnu River basin.

Sustainable Tourism Development Strategy for Soomaa National Park was initiated when Soomaa NP applied for membership in the PAN Parks network of best-managed wilderness protected areas in Europe. At present, the PAN Parks network covers 11 national parks all over Europe; the principles of PAN Parks combine conservation with sustainable tourism. Sustainable Tourism Development Strategy of Soomaa National Park is the first regional tourism strategy that was developed in cooperation with different tourism stakeholders related to Soomaa NP. However, the strategy had its predecessors; Soomaa NP management plan (1999) covers visitor management in the national park. The following documents regulate tourism in the region on a wider scale: Pärnu County recreation and tourism management development plan, Viljandi County strategy, the development plans of local municipalities, State Forest Management Service Sakala recreation area management plan, and Green Riverland tourism and recreation development plan and strategy. All the previously mentioned documents cover tourism and its development in and around Soomaa NP. However, none of the documents are comprehensive enough to cover the whole area of Soomaa NP region and most do not concentrate on Soomaa NP. The strategy was born in cooperation with the regional nature conservation office (State Nature Conservation Centre / Environmental Board), county governments (of Viljandi and Pärnu), local municipalities, several NGOs and tourism entrepreneurs. In the present document the tourism stakeholders have agreed on a shared vision and development goals and have planned joint steps to achieve the aforementioned goals.

The aim of the strategy is to support the development of sustainable tourism in the Soomaa NP area and to support the nature conservation goals of the national park. The strategy:

- sets the principles for sustainable tourism in the area and provides operational guidelines for the next 5 years;
- sets priorities with regard to funding decisions and implementation of the action plan;
- provides guidelines to tourism stakeholders on how to develop future tourism products;
- creates a base document to fund sustainable tourism development in the area.

To achieve this aim, the present strategy establishes zoning of the Soomaa area, lays down the principles for sustainable tourism, analyses the tourism potential of the area and prerequisites for

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the development of tourism. Also, the strategy suggests actions to develop sustainable tourism in the area. During the development of the tourism strategy (summer 2008 – spring 2009) the main focus was on the involvement of different stakeholders. Along with the compilation of the strategy, the tourism environment in the area witnessed several significant changes:

- Nature conservation reform (a new agency was established in February 2009);
- Maintenance and recreation management in protected areas has become a responsibility of the State Forest Management Service;
- Soomaa Tourism NGO has been established;
- The first tourism catalogue covering most tourism service providers in Soomaa NP area was published;
- The Soomaa Cooperation Panel decided to guarantee the PAN Parks process in Soomaa NP.

The Sustainable Tourism Development Strategy of the Soomaa National Park is a progressive tool aimed at achieving the goal of nature conservation while encouraging the engagement of local communities in small-scale responsible tourism activities. The Park was a winning destination in the European Union EDEN (European Destination of Excellence) award in 2009. Award winners are selected on the basis of a set of award criteria established at both European and national levels and Soomaa's strengths lie in the pursuit of sustainable tourism activities and the promotion and hosting of both domestic and international tourism.

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