

# **Sustainable tourism development strategy as a tool to improve destination management: case Oulanka National Park, Finland**

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## **Introduction**

National Parks in Finland are often located next to holiday resorts. Previously, unspoiled nature was recognised as an important element around Finnish holiday resorts but National Parks as a brand did not play such an important role. Today, our National Parks are viewed as primary attraction, especially by international tourists. Destination management approach is often obligatory for securing the sustainability of tourism.

Tourism development in Finnish National Parks and other protected areas rely on nine sustainability principles (Högmander & Leivo 2004, Kajala et al. 2004):

1. Natural values are preserved and all activities promote nature conservation
2. The environment is subjected to as little pressure as possible
3. Local traditions and cultures are respected
4. Visitors increase their understanding and appreciation of nature and cultures
5. Improved recreational facilities are provided for visitors
6. Visitors are encouraged to enjoy both mental and physical recreation
7. Local economies and employment are promoted
8. Publicity materials are produced responsibly and carefully
9. Activities are planned and organised co-operatively.

Principles include many specified objectives and targets and are also the basis of measuring sustainability with Limits of Acceptable Change (LAC) –method (Stankey et al. 1985). Two key challenges for success are: (1) how are these principles implemented in tourism products profiled to National Parks and (2) how do principles influence the decision making process and individual actions in travel destinations?

## **Case Oulanka National Park**

Oulanka National Park covers approximately 30,000 hectares and is located in the Kuusamo-Salla highlands in North-East Finland. Natural and cultural values are very rich and diverse. Natural historical attributes have led to a unique combination of species and biotopes (Tapaninen 2003, Tapaninen 2004). Oulanka NP is also of great recreational and touristic importance. According to the research by Finnish Forest Research Institute and Metsähallitus 162,000 visits to the Park at 2009 generated the revenue of 14 million euros providing 183 jobs.

Sustainable Tourism Development Strategy has evolved to be an obligatory tool for the management of National Park. Main components of the Strategy are situation analysis, goals and vision, impact assessment, monitoring method and development plan with financial blueprint. The Strategy was prepared by the Oulanka Cooperation Group, which has representatives from Metsähallitus (National Park management), local municipalities, villagers, tourism industry and NGOs. This group is also responsible for governance and follow-up of the Strategy.

The framework of Strategy is the Principles of Sustainable Tourism and the Limits of Acceptable Change. The Strategy has 20 key indicators measuring ecological, economical and socio-cultural sustainability of nature-based tourism and recreation. In 2008-2009 the University of Oulu made an assessment of LAC used in the Oulanka National Park (Siikamäki & Kangas 2009). The main conclusion was that LAC modification seems to form a sound basis for the management

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of sustainable tourism. However, the study found some recommendations for future management and made a note that the challenge of the method is the incorporation of different dimensions and elements of LAC to form an integrated analysis.

Sustainable Tourism Development Strategy has taught to the management of Oulanka National Park:

- If uncontrolled tourism development is a threat to values of National Park, it is worthwhile to take a pro-active role in tourism development of the wider region.
- The National Park shares with surrounding communities a need to enhance economic sustainability. Models for sustainable regional development should be based on establishing economic and social links between Park and its surroundings.
- Realistic and binding development plan with financial blueprint is an essential part of the Strategy. Without such a plan tourism will have little chance to become a sustainable economic activity that generates the expected economic, social and ecological benefits.
- Measuring sustainability is important when recreational pressure is high. Sustainable Tourism Development Strategy is a good tool to secure the quality of indicator-based management. It is important to define how the results of monitoring will be used and how they could lead to readjustments in the Strategy.
- Sustainable Tourism Development Strategy needs co-operative governance with shared vision. The protected area, even if it had the resources to do so, should not aim to formulate and implement a Strategy by itself. This would probably have adverse effects on the support of the community and other stakeholders.

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