

Local Participation in the Development of Tourist Centres in the Peripheral Regions of Finnish Lapland

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Introduction

Tourism is regarded extremely important and often the only growing industry in peripheral regions. The municipalities that are engaged in tourism development and that have tourist centres in their areas have been winners in regional development in many ways (Hall & Boyd 2005). Thus, it is natural that the local and regional authorities are eager to enhance tourism development. For the local population, however, the growth of tourism is not only a positive circumstance. People in such areas as Finnish Lapland are bound to move from traditional natural resource based occupations at least in some extent to the field of tourism. Double occupation is often required: for example in Finnish Lapland such career combinations as reindeer herding and car testing are possible. Tourism also drastically changes the physical environment as well as the ways of using it. For example local inhabitants' traditional ways of using nature (berry picking, hunting, fishing) and areas available for them may be reduced or harmed due to growing demand of land use for tourism.

The ideal of socially sustainable tourism focuses on ensuring that the benefits of tourism are spread as widely as possible throughout the host community. Also, the local communities should be heard and taken into account when altering the places into tourist resorts (e.g. Swarbrooke 2002). However, the real growth of tourism centres has not followed the ideal. In Finnish Lapland, for example, the tourist centres have often been allowed to grow on the terms of the market demand and the planning has come far behind. In some cases, growth

expectations in tourism have been a dominating factor also in planning, and other needs and interests of the locals may have been forgotten. As a result, local economies may be too dependent on only one field of business, tourism. However, the other strong field of business is forestry, which mainly has controversial land-use interests with tourism. This can also sometimes cause problems.

Methods

This presentation evaluates the planning processes from the viewpoint of local participation in two ski tourism centres in Finnish Lapland. The research has been done in the project "Tourist Destinations as Landscape Laboratories – Tools for Sustainable Tourism" (2004-2007) which is financed by EU Life Environment programme and coordinated by the Arctic Centre of the University of Lapland. The geographical objects of the project, tourist centres of Levi and Ylläs, are situated in areas with remarkable amenity values, and Ylläs is located beside the most visited national park in Finland. Both of the centres can accommodate around 20 000 tourists and both have a variety of tourist services from dog sledges and snow mobile safaris to ski slopes and cross-country-skiing facilities. The centres also have extensive plans for further growth in terms of customers, seasons, and areas required. A general problem is balancing the aims to promote economical and regional development through excessive tourism investments and the fragility of both the northern European nature and local communities (Hakkarainen 2005).

In this research the data has been collected by focus group interviews both among the local population and among authorities and such in-between groups as second home owners and recurrent seasonal workers. The total amount of the interviewees is about 70. The discussions have dealt especially with the possibilities of the local inhabitants and other actors to affect the development of the tourist resort in its different stages.

Results and Discussion

There has been a major change in possibilities to participate in and affect the local development and land-use, as participative planning was implemented to Finnish legislation in 2000 partly due to the European Union. The new legislation demands that the “people involved” should be heard in every land-use situation that affects their environment (Leino 2006). This legislation has given more hope that the local opinions will be truly taken into account. Before, in the past decades, local inhabitants’ points of view were often neglected and left unheard in planning, as legislation did not require wide hearing of local inhabitants, but only of land owners. In both Levi and Ylläs tourist resorts, the first large planning process since the new legislation are going on as general plans are being made for both tourist centres. Local inhabitants have great expectations towards the projects. Among the biggest problems until now have been that local actors are still somewhat unfamiliar with the new kind of planning processes, which can lead to participating too late regarding the planning process, for example. The results also show that in addition to participating in official planning processes, local inhabitants have several ways of affecting their environment, such as pleas and initiatives, municipal democracy and cooperation in local associations.

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