

160 Old fortification islands opened for visitors in Finland

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Introduction

In 1999 the Finnish government decided to concentrate the management of all state-owned land and water areas to Metsähallitus, which is an unincorporated state enterprise responsible of the management and protection of the state-owned land and water areas in Finland. For example, areas from the Finnish Defence Forces were moved to Metsähallitus. Many of these sites were islands that had been closed to the public for several decades. These sites contain a very rich biodiversity and a strong cultural heritage.

This presentation on how Metsähallitus opened two old military islands to the visitors is a practical example on what kind of management issues can rise when opening new marine protected areas to coastal-marine recreation.

The Örö fortress island (200 ha)

Örö is an island situated in Southwestern Finland and it is part of the Archipelago National Park. Landing was prohibited on the island from 1915 until the end of 2014, and the island was opened for boaters and tourists in June 2015.

The fortress on Örö was built by the Russians in the beginning of the 20th century. After Finland's declaration of independence in 1917 Örö was handed over to the Finnish Defence Forces. In 2015, Örö island was transferred to Metsähallitus and added to the Archipelago National Park.

Metsähallitus' goal was and is to develop the island into a functioning, safe and attractive nature and cultural travel destination.

The island is one of Finland's most important areas of endangered habitats and more than 200 endangered or threatened species have been found. The island also has a fine cultural history with barracks areas, cannons, casemates, cobblestone roads, etc.

A masterplan of the island was made up as a consultant work. Recreation and tourism were organized so that they do not jeopardize the island's conservation values. The central development measures where: renovation

and continuous maintenance of the buildings, modernization of municipal technology and organization of property management, construction of a guest harbour and marking of boat routes, initiation of connecting boat traffic, construction of a hiking trail network, arranging of the guide and waste management. The strategic masterplan built a frame for investment funding and allowed to open the island for recreation and tourism.

Today Örö has some 20 000 visits yearly. Most of the visitors during the summer are Finnish people on vacation. Örö has rapidly grown to be one of the most important guest harbours in the Archipelago. An entrepreneur is serving as the host of Örö. To follow up the sustainability of recreation and tourism the Limit of Acceptable Change method will be taken into use in Örö and in the whole Archipelago National Park this year.

The opening of Örö has so far been a success story. Of course, there has been challenges as well, but the problems have been resolved. Good contacts and co-operation with local municipalities and the entrepreneurs in the area is a key to success.

The Vallisaari Island (76 ha)

The Vallisaari Island is situated in capital region of Finland. It only takes 20 minutes to reach Vallisaari by waterbus from the Helsinki city centre.

In the 19th century the fortification of the Island begun. During the Crimean war intensive fights took place on the sea off Vallisaari. After Finland became independent in 1917 the island continued as a military area. The Finnish Defence Forces gave up the islands in 2008. There were many different opinions of what to do with the island. The location close to Helsinki city centre made the island very attractive, but slowly it became clear that the island would be opened to the public.

Metsähallitus started to prepare the opening of the island to visitors. A master plan of the island was made. The central development measures where more or less the same as in Örö. In addition, restoration work had to be done to save the

fortifications. The unique nature tourism destination was opened in 2016.

Vallisaari is the most diverse nature destination in the metropolitan area. For the past decades, Vallisaari has remained in a natural state and is today home for many endangered species.

Recreation and tourism on the islands are based on responsible development. Visitor management is based on zoning, where activities are concentrated to parts of the island as other parts remain untouched. Same as in Örö, an entrepreneur is serving as the host on the island.

Cultural activities will form an important part of the activities on the island. There has already been theatre and dance performances, art exhibitions and concerts and in the summer of 2021 the Helsinki Biennale will be organized on the island.

Past and present challenges

One big issue in the change of the use of the areas was the visitor safety. The Finnish defence forces made the areas safe for visitors before they handed the management over to Metsähallitus. This included removing old military equipment, locking of doors to bunkers and old storage caves. But there remained still a lot to be done to prepare the islands for the visitors.

Expectations among the public were high when people had the possibility to visit the islands again.

Now the buildings and caves on all these islands have been open for users for a couple of years, and the services and safety are being constantly improved. The opening of the islands has brought joy and we get a lot of positive feedback from the visitors.