

168 Exploring trends of visitation: 20 years of visitor monitoring in Finnish national parks

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The demand of nature-based tourism and recreation has increased due to changes in society, leisure, urbanization, and increased awareness of the health benefits of nature, and during the COVID-19 pandemic destinations such as national parks and protected areas have become even more popular (e.g. Haukeland et al. 2021; Rikkonen et al. 2020). The steady growth during the last decade can be identified also from the increased number of national park visits in Finland (see Figure 1). The growing numbers of visitation, combined with the increase in park hectares, place pressures for management, especially as customer needs and preferences have become increasingly diversified. Gaining visitor insight – identifying growth trends and changes in visitor profiles – is essential for the quality of management in national parks. The purpose of this study is to gain a broader view on the development and trends of visitor motivations, activities, and demographics during the last 20 years. More detailed examination is also made in four park categories.

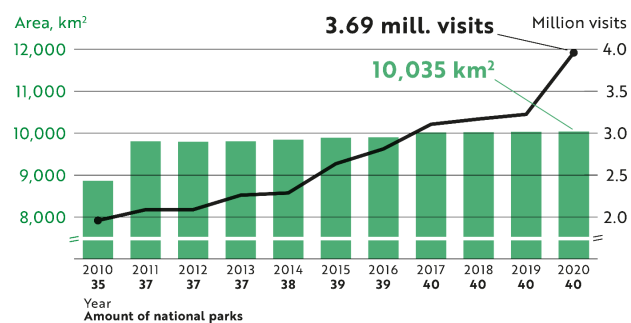


Figure 1. Development of the Finnish national park network and numbers of visits during 2010–2020 (<https://www.metsa.fi/en/outdoors/visitor-monitoring-and-impacts/visitation-numbers-and-visitor-profiles/>).

Past twenty years Parks and Wildlife Finland has conducted visitor monitoring in a systematic way in Finnish national parks to provide quantitative figures and information on visitation. The data is collected for management and monitoring purposes and it is

applied to manage natural resources as well as to better understand visitors' perceptions and needs for services, and to determine whether separate visitor groups can be identified that differ according to their motivations and interest in using various tourism services (e.g. Konu & Kajala, 2012). The data also provides a knowledge-base and understanding of the full range of benefits, such as health benefits in protected area context and local economic impacts of the recreation and tourism.

The data is gathered in a uniform manner across the country. The standardized methodology was originally developed during 1998–2000 (e.g. Erkkonen & Sievänen 2001; Kajala 2006) and later on the methodology has been updated and developed. The data of this study consists of 47,647 visitor survey responses of 40 national parks in Finland from years 2000–2019. The number of surveys conducted is 101. The dataset includes a wide range of variables, e.g. motives for visiting the national parks, visitor satisfaction, experiences of the visit (positive or negative), trip characteristics (length of stay, group size etc.) and outdoor activities during the park visitation, measured systematically during the 20 years' time. For more in-depth analysis, the parks are classified into four categories based on the population density of the surrounding area of each national park (Metsähallitus & Metsäntutkimuslaitos, 2009) to examine the possible differences in visitor profiles, and to study the temporal change in visitors and their motives.

The tentative results illustrate demographic changes in national park visitors' profile during the examination period. For instance, the share of female visitors has increased from the early years of the analysis period from 47 to 56 percent, and the mean age has slightly increased. Changes are also identified e.g. in visitor motivations, visitor satisfaction, and regarding the issues that are seen disturbing for the national park experience. When the motivations are looked in more detail, the results show that the main and most important motives to

visit national parks have been throughout the 20-year period nature experiences, scenery, relaxation and getting away from noise and pollution. The importance of these motives has grown rather steady during the years. After these top four motivations the next most important motives were mental well-being, being together with own group, keeping fit and getting to know the area. The least important motivations were meeting new people and experiencing excitement. There are also identifiable changes with the order of importance among the motivations. Additionally, the results show increase in the importance of motivations like mental well-being and excitement.

The activities most often conducted in the park were: hiking (incl. picnicking), walking (incl. Nordic walking), observing nature, nature photographing, enjoying nature, and watching the views, cross-country skiing, and visiting nature centers. The preliminary results indicate also increasing trend in participation in activities like walking and jogging, hiking (incl. picnicking), observing the nature, visiting nature centers, cultural heritage or geopark, nature photographing, enjoying the views, swimming, cycling, kayaking, and walking with the dog in the park. There has been also a slight increase in staying overnight in the park such as

camping. The diversity of activities that visitors have participated has increased, e.g. increase snowshoeing, geocaching and participation in guided tours.

The tentative examinations also indicate differences in demographic factors such as gender and age, and motivations of people visiting different types of national parks. For example, the visitors in national parks close to big cities are somewhat younger than in national parks located in densely populated and rural areas or near tourist centres.

The longitudinal data collection with a systematic monitoring method allows managers both focus on the park level, but also to capture development in time and enable knowledge-based management in the park system. The results help to guide management, and for instance, the information is utilized in monitoring the impact of visitation and to set up the limits of acceptable change. The customer insight supports service and experience design at the destination level, and also in collaboration with local service providers. The national park trends can be compared to the changes in outdoor recreation trends at national level.

References

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