

179 Integrated visitor management. The Norwegian regional parks as integration actors

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Visitor management in Norway has primarily been focused inside protected areas. However, there is an urgent challenge to work in more integrated ways to create more connections with surrounding communities. After the Norwegian Environment Agency published its guide for visitor management in protected areas (2015), several of the Norwegian national parks have increased its focus on visitor management. Although many national parks have such plans, there is still a challenge in how the national parks respond to the needs and challenges of local communities outside its borders. In a recent study from 2021, Aasen Lundberg et al. pointed out that the national parks in Norway are weak at creating connections with communities outside the borders of the protected areas. Based on this, we would argue that there is a clear need in Norway for more integrated approaches for visitor management and park planning.

New dynamic and more integrated park models have emerged in continental Europe during the last few decades (Mose et al. 2007). However, Norway has been slow in adopting these models. Europe's Regional Nature Landscape Parks (NRL) (Europarc Federation 2020) exemplify the "integration approach" through more participatory park models present in 22 countries. The integrated park policies and the regional nature parks of Switzerland is a good example of a new park model promoting integrated and bottom-up approaches. They are legitimized through national laws and planning instruments, and perform well in facilitating sectoral interests by combining both vertical and horizontal integrations (Hammer and Siegrist 2016)

Inspired by the French and Swiss regional nature parks, the Norwegian regional parks have developed from the bottom-up. In contrast to Switzerland, the Norwegian regional parks are not yet anchored in national legislation. However, they do act as effective platforms for different local and regional actors in integrated ways (Stokke et al. 2016). The regional parks work across sectors and at different levels. They work in the "in between

areas" where sectoral authorities do not often reach. They establish broad partnerships with local authorities, community associations and commercial firms.

In this study, we have focused on the experiences of two Norwegian regional parks that have worked with visitor management in recent year. They are one of the first non-protected areas working with visitor management in Norway. It is the Nærøfjord World Heritage Park and the Okstindan nature and culture park. As regional parks they are not formally recognized as protected areas.

The Nærøfjord World Heritage Park is a combined regional park surrounding a UNESCO World Heritage Site with approx. 700,000 annual visitors. This leads to pressure on the local population and the conservation values in the area. After they started working systematically with visitor management in 2014, they have managed to put it on the agenda both politically and within the tourism industry. The experience of Nærøfjorden World Heritage Park shows that the regional park act as a common forum and as a collaborative platform. The park administration is working to find concrete solutions to the various challenges uncovered during the process.

By working wider than just within the protected limits, the park has succeeded in engaging more actors. They have thus helped to put visitor management on the agenda in a regional perspective that goes beyond just safeguarding the conservation values. By taking a role in between the public and the private sector as an integration actor, the park has succeeded in contributing to a management that takes greater account of the local population and thus also provides a better experience to the visitors.

The other regional park that has worked with visitor management is the Okstindan nature and culture park. They started their work with visitor management in 2015 as a response to the building of the Rabothytta, a tourist association cabin that saw a sharp rise in visitation leading to conflict among local residents. A visitor management project was

initiated and a visitor strategy was prepared with specific measures. The work that has been done during the last few years has led to better management of the area and more positive attitudes. The park has engaged landowners and other resource persons in the process and this have given them more co-ownership of how the area is managed.

Okstindan nature and culture park now encounter a lot of positive attitude in local communities related to the visitor management of Okstindan. The experience of the park is that they can take on a different role than the municipality and can in a good way lead to a constructive collaboration with teams and associations, volunteers, the business community and others.

Experience from both regional parks show that there is an important role for visitor management outside formally protected areas. Visitor management is something that could be actively pursued in all regions to facilitate visitors

and to meet the needs of local communities. By having a bottom-up approach, involving the local population, working across sectors and implementing concrete measures, the experience from these two regional parks is that there is an important function for, and a need for, regional parks as “integration actors”. Although not institutionalized or formally recognized as protected areas, the regional parks of Norway can perform important integrative functions in their regions. The experiences with more integrated models of parks from countries like Switzerland could potentially inspire reforms in Norwegian park policy and practice in the coming years.

Aasen Lundberg et al. (2021). Evaluering av forvaltningsordningen for nasjonalparker og andre store verneområder. NP rapport nr: 01/2021

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