

Changes in local community perceptions towards tourism impact. A case from Matsalu National Park, Estonia

Mart Reimann, Tallinn University, Estonia, mart@tlu.ee

Tanel Tiivel, Tallinn University, Estonia

Differently from most other national parks in the world, the Estonian ones (5) have local population living within the boundaries of the national park. This situation has historical reasons, as the parks are designed not only to conserve nature, but also to protect the cultural landscape where the locals have a significant role to play in maintaining these landscapes. In case of tourism development in protected areas local community involvement and benefits are often an important issue. An income from tourism is a possibility to raise locals' satisfaction about national park, at the same time, however, crowds and traffic can cause negative impacts on local community (Andereck, et al 2005, Tosun 2006). Matsalu National Park is situated in the western part of Estonia. It was first founded as a nature reserve in 1957 mainly to protect nesting, moulting and migratory birds. The area became a national park in 2004 to protect also the unique landscapes and semi natural habitats as floodplains, reedbeds, coastal meadows, wooded meadows and islets. Matsalu National Park's territory covers 486 km² and its population is 760. In the current paper the results of two studies are compared. Studies took place in 2006 and 2014 using the same methods and sample with the same main research question: Whether and how the local community can benefit from tourism development in a national park?

Methods

The purpose of compiling the sample was to involve people with community attachment. Sometimes not all the residents identify themselves as community members. There are people who live temporarily in the area or they just live in the area without communicating with other people in the neighbourhood and they are not active to express their opinions. Community attachment is a complex, integrating, multi-faceted concept that incorporates the relationship between people and their communities. Community attachment encompasses several interrelated and mutually defining components and can play a key role in influencing the perceptions and attitudes of residents towards changes or developments in their community (Nicholas, et al. 2009, Crowe 2010). The most appropriate method for this purpose was a snowball sampling (Reimann et al 2011). In Matsalu, the first list of respondents was compiled following the advice of the park management and it included "local leaders" – village elders, entrepreneurs, land owners, NGO leaders etc. 79 respondents were interviewed in 2006 and 56 in 2014.

Results and discussions

Visitor crowds can be a threat for national park values and also for local communities. 20% of respondents in 2006 and 31% in 2014 expressed that natural and cultural values of the national park have been damaged by tourists. The main problems, which was pointed out, were littering and damaging the information boards in nature trails. Also off-road driving was mentioned. 38% in 2006 and 56% in 2014 were more or less disturbed by the visitors. Residents' proximity to main natural attractions and disturbance matched quite well; those people who lived closer to the main attractions felt more disturbed by visitors. The tourism season in Estonia is relatively short and in the low season some locals even missed to see people around and many of them did not get bored by visitors during the short summer. The main problem was connected to the disturbance of lost tourists who permanently appeared to some residents' homes and asked the way. Better signage and infrastructure will solve this problem. Despite the growing disturbance the majority of respondents were still positively minded of tourists and said that they would like to see more tourists if they behave decently. The majority of respondents said that despite a little growth in tourism and numbers of entrepreneurs there is still a too small number of tourism services and tourists.

In 2014 respondents were not as optimistic of tourism development as they were in 2006. Local's interest in tourism development has decreased from 57% in 2006 to 31% in 2014 (Table 1). Estonia entered into the EU in 2004 which made many new funds available for rural tourism, village movement and local development. As in 2006 tourism was increasing also in Estonia, respondents brought out the lack of finances as the main obstacle.

Table 1. Are the locals interested in developing tourism?

	2006 %	2014 %
Yes	57	31
No	9	13
Cannot say	34	56

By today there have been several projects for supporting local networking and entrepreneurship. But respondents' opinions were that it was hard to survive with so short season in tourism and the amount of the tourists has not grown as much as expected. In 2014 they pointed out seasonality as their biggest problem. Matsalus main tourism segment is bird watching tourism, but the season in spring and autumn is too short to be economically sustainable. There is a need for some added value and extra services to increase revenues.

When interest in tourism development had decreased, then understanding of tourism as an improver of the life quality of the local community has increased from 73% in 2006 to 90%. Respondents had a clear opinion that tourism improves the life quality, but they were not too sure anymore if it was

the best way for local economy and maybe there was some better and more efficient way to improve the life quality.

Conclusions

Local community's enthusiasm in tourism development has decreased between 2006 and 2014. The main obstacle in the development of tourism activities is considered to be the seasonality of tourism and the lack of the coordination between tourism-operators. However, in the opinion of the residents, the development of tourism would significantly improve the quality of their life in Matsalu if it is possible to create some services and activities for the low season.

References

- Andereck, K.L., Valentine, K.M., Knopf, R. C., Vogt, C.A. 2005. Residents perceptions of community tourism impacts. *Annals of Tourism Research*. 32:1056-1076.
- Crowe, J.,2010. Community attachment and satisfaction: The role of a community's social network structure. *Journal on Community Psychology*
- Nicholas, L.N., Thapa, B., Ko, Y.J., 2009. Resident's perspectives of a world heritage site The Pitons Management Area, St.Lucia. *Annals of Tourism Research*, lk 390-412.
- Reimann, M., Lamp, M-L., Palang, H., 2011. Tourism impacts and local communities in Estonian National Parks. *Scandinavian Journal of Hospitality and Tourism*,
- Tosun, C. 2006. Expected nature of community participation in tourism development. *Tourism Management*. 27:493-504