

# Dilemma of rural diversification via tourism and nature conservation in peripheral Estonia

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## *Introduction*

The study interfaces rural peripherisation, tourism development and nature conservation in Estonia in the framework of current rural depopulation, environmental policies and revitalisation of rural communities. The key question rests on the role of environmental policies and conservation, such as NATURE 2000, enlarging protected areas and implementing stricter nature protection laws for peripheral rural areas. The study combines a statistical analysis of socioeconomic trends and a questionnaire answered by local people. The statistical survey is based on key demographic, socio-economic and environmental indicators, summarizing mainly trends since the 1990s. The questionnaire, conducted in spring 2014, explores the attitude of local people towards nature protection: how satisfied they are with nature protection activities in their neighbourhood, if they understand the limitations and benefits of nature conservation, how those limitations and benefits impact their daily social practices. The recent results of the questionnaire are compared with reference datasets from 1997 and 2004. Five national parks (Karula, Lahemaa, Matsalu, Soomaa and Vilsandi) and two nature parks (Otepää and Haanja) were explored comprehensively.

## *Socio-economic trends of protected areas and peripheries*

Socio-economic revitalisation in protected areas is an issue of growing interest in Estonia as protected areas cover one fifth of the Estonian territory. This is an issue of national importance. Several studies of protected areas in Estonia start from the viewpoint of nature conservation (Caddell, 2009) and on cultural heritage and representation (Printsmann et al., 2011). Reimann et al. (2011) studied the impacts of tourism on nature values and local communities in Estonian national parks. The implications of tourism development in remote protected areas in Estonia need further conceptualisation.

The overwhelming majority of protected areas are located in remote areas. Remote areas with excessive population decline and low population density cover roughly half of Estonia's territory, while accounting for only 10% of the total population and less than 5% of the national GDP. The most geographically remote areas show a steady downward trajectory over decades according to demographic and socioeconomic indicators. The major structural change as well as long-term rural exodus caused the negative cumulative causation cycles (Drudy 1989). Not all shocks have been entirely negative; several restructuring, modernization and diversification initiatives have brought

positive development trajectories. The post-productivist approach is associated with strong localism and with empowering communities, the local cultural identity and a renewed sense of confidence. The post-productivist approach also includes less intensive forms of agriculture and the emergence of the countryside as a place of consumption, amenity-rich living and recreational environment (Marsden 1999). Primarily, tourist areas, areas of special interest and seasonal living appear in the category of dynamic remote rural areas. As the number of seasonal rural inhabitants increases by third during summer, second housing and holiday-making in rural locations means extensive weekly commuting off season and has a number of preconditions and restrictions. As depopulation was marginally higher in protected remote areas (-24.1%) than in other remote areas (-22.6%), the employment rate declined there much slower (-3.9%) than in other remote areas (-7.2%). This correlates to the data on new accommodation facilities built in 2004–2013 – the relative increase of units is the highest in protected remote areas or nearby which is 1.5 times higher by totals than in other remote areas (fig 1).

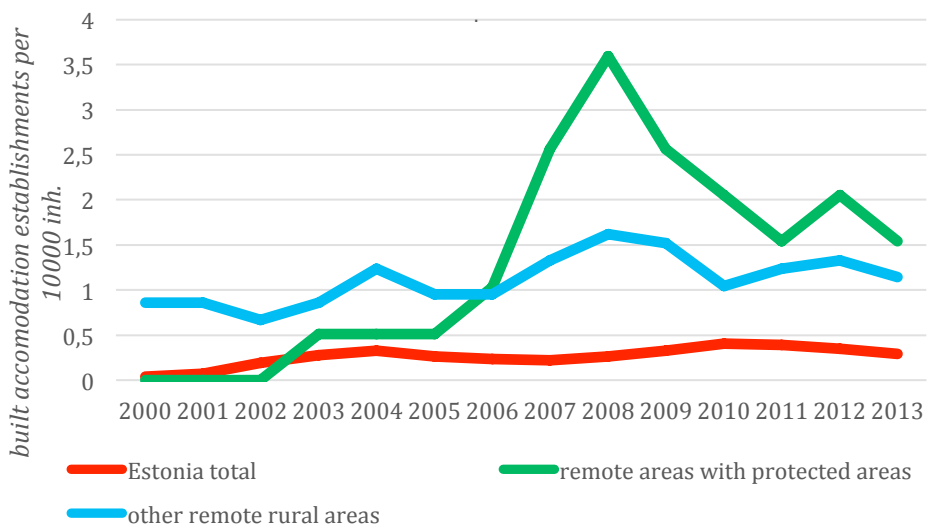


Figure 1. New tourist accommodation facilities per 10000 inhabitants.

Emerging recreational services and tourism have been considered a smooth restructuring platform, although their socioeconomic impact was somewhat over-emphasized. The number of tourist accommodation facilities has increased to a noticeable extent although the occupancy is lagging far

behind. Growing interest in tourism entrepreneurship and other streams of rural diversification have not gained momentum for turning negative trends in peripheries. Nevertheless this is not a feature solely of protected areas but remote rural areas in general.

The interests of nature conservation, residents and entrepreneurs are potentially in conflict in protected areas, the latter group having grown alongside societal development, emerging economy, overlapping allocation interests and targeted demand for specific locations. The survey among permanent inhabitants in the Lahemaa National Park (the average age of respondents being 50 years) demonstrated that the attitude towards summer and temporary living varies. Direct beneficiaries such as village shop-keepers take business advantage, while not substantial. On the contrary, a number of issues such as garbage, noise, seasonal supply shortages are listed. Local landlords expect some profit from establishing limited number of seasonal homes in the park. The rapid growth of visitor facilities and visitor volume is opposed, a view, which is dominated by moderate and conservative segment of local community.

### *Joint-up policy-making and the controversial implications of EU funding*

The substantial overlapping of remote areas and protected areas should direct to joint-up solutions for the tourism diversification and protection management. Both municipal governments and protected area authorities tend to set agenda and specific plans for protected areas, aimed at providing jobs and services for local people and trying to avoid marginalisation of the areas, the issues of the possible development models arise.

Unfavourable trends in land use, demography, social welfare, entrepreneurship and education have paradoxically been accelerated after Estonia's EU accession, despite the application of common agricultural, cohesion and regional policies. These policies, having increased productivity in primary sector, have not been able to generate enough new jobs in secondary and tertiary industries, neither the environmental and forestry administration nor EU-co-funded tourism development have substantial measures against deepening peripherisation. The operationalization of current rural diversification and conservation management remains the challenging imperative for EU Common Agricultural Policy. Different development paths could be forecasted for different (types of) protected areas, depending on the demographic and other existing factors, such as distances from larger cities, tourism potential etc.

Theories increasingly account for the diversity found in rural areas (Copus and Hörnström 2011). Endogenous post-structural theories argue that externalities can be complemented by internal territorial capital such as on the one side natural capital and wildlife, on the other side innovation and entrepreneurialism which may attract companies from outside and generate internal returns. Although Estonian landscape protection has had a notable history, the changing volatile and sensitive socioeconomic scene in remote countryside requires urgently a rethink of the basic principles of nature conservation.

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