

# Community perspectives to tourism impacts in conservation areas: case studies from Finland, Latvia and Lithuania

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## *Introduction*

The main aim of protected areas is protection of natural heritage. Yet, sustainability of nature conservation is based on the quality of awareness-raising and involvement of society on all levels. Tourism, if developed sustainably, provides a number of means to achieve this goal. However, growing use of protected areas for tourism requires increased engagement for the communities living in and around these areas in the trade-off between the benefits they receive from tourism and the negative consequences they feel tourism development may cause (Sharpley 2014).

Aiming to successfully manage protected areas in collaboration with local communities, management agencies have sometimes made use of management tools such as European Charter for Sustainable Tourism (ECST). However, there is limited information available on their effectiveness. Thus, systematically collected information is often required. Information is especially needed to identify residents' perspectives, since from planning perspective, understanding residents' perceptions of tourism impacts is argued to be even more important than understanding the factual impacts (McGehee and Andereck 2004).

Although successful and effective protected area management requires stakeholder involvement (Eagles et al. 2002), time and financial resources may limit collaboration with local communities. Grönholm and Berghäll (2007) have stated that lacking information on protected areas management issues and local needs can cause mismatch, mistrust and conflicting views between authorities and communities. This has resulted in challenges for the sustainability of protected areas' management and community participation.

Based on these challenges the project "Community Programme for Sustainable Tourism" aims to increase the managerial knowledge of residents' perceptions towards tourism and nature conservation and to enhance local involvement in natural resource management. This paper aims to present perceived impacts of tourism based on surveys conducted in Koillismaa region in Northeastern Finland, Kemer National Park in Latvia and Grazute Regional Park in Lithuania.

## *Study Areas, Methods and Materials*

Koillismaa region comprises Kuusamo and Taivalkoski municipalities and Oulanka and Syöte National Parks, among several other protected areas. Tourism in the Koillismaa region, especially in Kuusamo area, has a tradition of over a century. Nature tourism has started to develop only in recent decades in Kemer and Grazute, following the establishment of the protected areas. In Koillismaa region, the local communities are positioned outside the protected areas whereas in Kemer and Grazute several of those are located inside the parks. The surveyed local communities have contrasting histories of land use, land ownership, conservation, and tourism development.

The research was conducted simultaneously in the case areas in late 2013. In Koillismaa region the survey was implemented as a postal survey repeating partly the study arrangement of 2002-2003 (Rämet et al. 2005). The sample included 397 respondents from Kuusamo and 195 from

Taivalkoski. In Kemeru and Grazute the survey was carried out as a door-to-door survey, resulting in a sample of 321 respondents in Kemeru and 233 respondents in Grazute. Stratified sampling design was applied in all case areas to ensure spatial representativeness of the samples. Survey datasets were analysed using statistical methods: presenting key figures and relative frequencies of findings.

### Findings and Conclusions

The results show that most of the respondents among the populations in Koillismaa region consider that tourism has positive impact on employment, international appreciation of the area and service availability (Figure 1). Respectively, respondents among the populations in Kemeru and Grazute reported significantly lower positive impacts. Despite the relatively low perceived positive impacts of tourism in Kemeru and Grazute, the results indicated that majority of the respondents consider tourism development important for the future. More than half of the respondents among the surveyed populations in Kemeru and Grazute considered that tourism has negative impacts on littering or pollution. Perceived environmental impacts were slightly less critical among the populations in Koillismaa region, although respondents in Kuusamo perceived somewhat higher negative impacts than those in Taivalkoski.

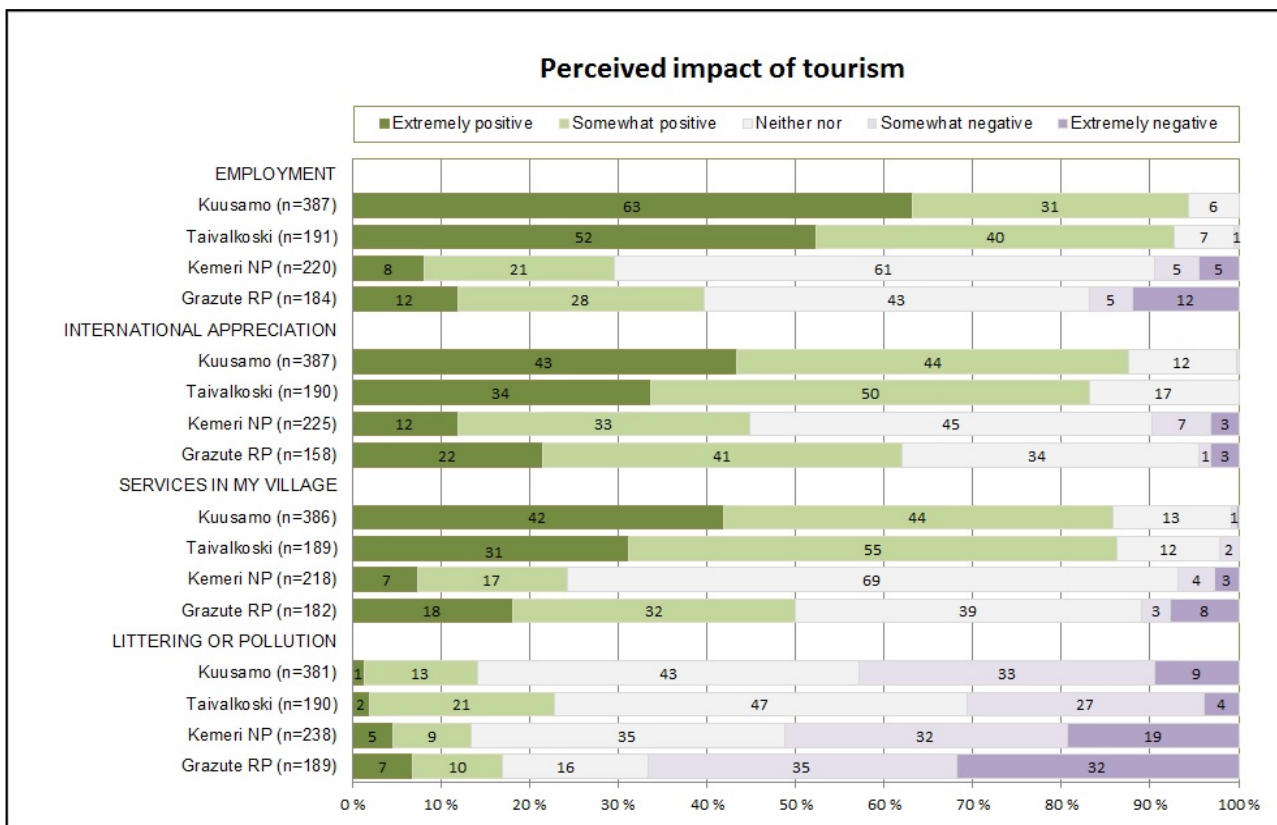


Figure 1. Impacts of tourism reported by the local communities of Koillismaa region (Kuusamo, Taivalkoski), Kemeru National Park and Grazute Regional Park.

The results reflect that due to the tourism history in Koillismaa region, there is relatively strong involvement of local communities in tourism on economic and political level, especially in Kuusamo. Overall in Finland, the importance of producing key statistical figures of tourism has been realized several decades ago. This has catalysed research and communication on economic influence of tourism in Koillismaa region, enhancing recognition of tourism as an important livelihood. Similarly, Metsähallitus Natural Heritage Services has actively monitored visitation on protected areas and has communicated resulting impacts of visitor spending on regional economies. Thus, a careful conclusion can be drawn that in Koillismaa region there is relatively good recognition of tourism impacts compared to the Kemeru and Grazute study areas. Furthermore, the

results underline the significance of quality impact monitoring and efforts on communications and discussions with the local communities. This study revealed regional differences in how the impact of tourism is perceived. Therefore it gives valuable information where the focus of future development actions should be positioned in each protected area. However, differences in the characteristics of the study areas between Finland and Baltics are important to keep in mind when observing the outcomes of the study. The findings of the surveys encourage protected area management to further interact with local communities to promote sustainability in nature conservation and tourism development.

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