

## 39 Balancing values of accessible nature-based tourism, nature conservation and the visitor experience

Kristin Godtman Kling, Mid Sweden University, Sweden

Spending time in nature and participating in outdoor activities has positive effects on the health and well-being of individuals, and nature-based tourism and outdoor recreation have the potential to provide an appropriate setting to engage in such activities (Farkić et al., 2020; Lackey et al., 2019). Even though our understanding of the benefits of nature experiences is well established, there remains unequal access to nature and nature-based activities among different groups in society. People with disabilities are often excluded from being able to fully participate in nature-based tourism and recreation due to physical and social barriers. There is therefore a need for natural areas to become more inclusive and cater to the needs of diverse groups of visitors (Menzies et al., 2020).

The accommodation and adjustment of natural areas so that they become more inclusive for people with disabilities nevertheless entails some contradiction of values, especially between accessible nature-based tourism, nature conservation and the visitor experience (Corazon et al., 2019; Donlon, 2000). Increased accessibility in, as well as to, natural areas often means expanding infrastructure and improving facilities; actions which can have an impact on visitors' perceptions of 'untouched' nature and raise questions as to whether they are compatible with the objectives of nature conservation (Tverijonaite et al., 2018). However, political objectives of 'accessible nature for all' are highly important in the context of social sustainability and social inclusion, and managers and planners of natural areas therefore have to balance these differing values in order to ensure that different interests and expectations are met. This balancing creates a moral dilemma concerning access to nature: who has access and who is excluded, and how should values be prioritised?

This qualitative study interviewed tourism entrepreneurs, disability rights activists, and managers and planners of natural areas in order to examine how different actors view and handle this perceived clash of values. Results show that this

issue primarily concerns those working with nature conservation, as they have to make decisions about the level of accessibility in natural areas. Respondents from this category viewed accessibility from a practical standpoint, and argued that the main barrier to developing accessibility in natural areas is strained financial resources, given that such efforts are costly to initiate and to maintain. Therefore, given the constraints on their budget, managers and planners need to select carefully which areas are most suitable for the necessary adjustments needed for increased access for people with disabilities. For those working with nature conservation, their objective of conserving the natural environment appeared to take precedence over increased accessibility. Results from the interviews with this category of respondents suggested that it is not desirable to accommodate the preferences of accessibility of all groups in all natural areas, as too much infrastructure to enable people with disabilities access is argued to ruin the experience of 'untouched' nature and may harm sensitive flora and fauna. Although they recognise the issue as complex, they see it as inevitable that people with disabilities will not have the opportunity to experience all types of nature environments due to lack of accessible infrastructure. However, respondents acknowledge that all human presence in nature is a form of intrusion, be that a narrow path or a wheelchair ramp. This makes the issue of accessibility in nature more complex, and raises the question of whether current levels of accessibility are already "too much". The idea that 'untouched' nature equals high quality nature experiences makes being in nature an exclusive activity, only possible for the able-bodied. This raises the question of why intrusion in nature is only reserved for a certain strata of society. One disability rights activist argued rhetorically that if some nature environments are so sensitive that they risk becoming damaged by visitors, perhaps they should be closed off entirely. This suggests that there are incentives to re-think measures of accessibility as ruining the nature

experience, so that more people will be able to take part in the benefits of outdoor activities.

This study raises concerns regarding sustainability, equality, and justice, which are issues that need to be given greater attention if nature-based tourism and outdoor recreation are to become fully inclusive. Collaboration between different stakeholders is needed in order to offer up more insights into how to handle the differing values of nature-based recreation. Moreover, there is a need to include people with disabilities in the planning process of accessible natural areas from start to end. This research suggests that in order for natural areas

to become accessible for all, there is a need for increased knowledge about the connection between accessible nature experiences and social inclusion. The study also argues for enhanced collaboration between planners and managers of natural areas, the nature-based tourism and outdoor industry, the academia and disability rights activists to challenge the assumption that accessibility, nature conservation and the visitor experience are incompatible interests.

## References

Donlon JG. 2000. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13032917.2000.9686988>. Corazon SS et al. 2019. <https://doi.org/10.16993/sjdr.50>. Farkić J et al. 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2020.1789156>. Lackey NQ et al. 2019. <https://doi.org/10.1080/11745398.2019.1655459>. Menzies A et al. 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17483107.2019.1710772>. Tverijonaite E et al. 2018. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jort.2018.09.001>.