

Monitoring National Park Visitors – Short and Long Term Changes

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Tourism and recreation in protected areas receive an increased recognition among both managers and researchers worldwide. A recent study of protected area visitation globally shows that eight billion visits per year generate approximately US \$600 billion per year in direct expenditure (Balmford et al., 2015). In order to ensure high quality experiences and long-term sustainable tourism operations, protected area managers have to pay attention to the different types of visitors, their attitudes and behaviors (Eagles, 2014). This can be achieved through different visitor monitoring schemes designed and applied in accordance with site characteristics and visitation patterns (Kajala, 2007). The current study compares results from visitor studies at Fulufjället National Park (FNP) in 2001 (the year before the park was established), 2003 (the year after the park was established), and 2014 (12 years after the park was established). In doing so, short and long term national park designation effects can be analyzed. The establishment of FNP marks an important trend in Swedish environmental policy as it is the first national park where planning and implementation explicitly builds on visitor data in order to promote recreation and tourism opportunities.

Visitor monitoring at Fulufjället National Park

FNP is a cross-boundary national park between Sweden and Norway, located in the southern mountain region of Sweden (Figure 1). The Swedish part was established in 2002 and ten years later, in 2012, the park was extended as the Norwegian part of Fulufjället also received national park status. The main purpose of FNP is to preserve an area in an essentially unspoiled condition. Since the Fulufjället is not utilized for reindeer grazing, it has large areas covered by lichen unique for the Swedish mountain region. The area is also known for its wildlife populations, including bear, moose and nesting birds of prey. Fulufjället exhibits extensive outdoor recreation facilities, with 140 kilometers of marked trails, and several cabins for overnight stay. Njupesgården, Sweden's highest waterfall, is a popular tourist attraction in the northern part of the area.

Visitor surveys were done in the summer seasons of 2001, 2003 and 2014 by means of automatic trail counters, self-registration cards and follow-up visitor surveys (Fredman & Wikström, 2015). Visitor data was gathered with the help of self-registration boxes at eight different locations (Fredman et al., 2009). The number of on-site registration cards collected were 6,151 in 2001, 4,107 in 2003 and 3,419 in 2014, and the number of responses to the follow-up surveys were 1,497, 1,245 and 1,425 for each year respectively. In 2001 and 2003, respondents to the on-site registration cards received a follow-up postal survey, while in 2014 the postal survey was replaced by an online electronic questionnaire.

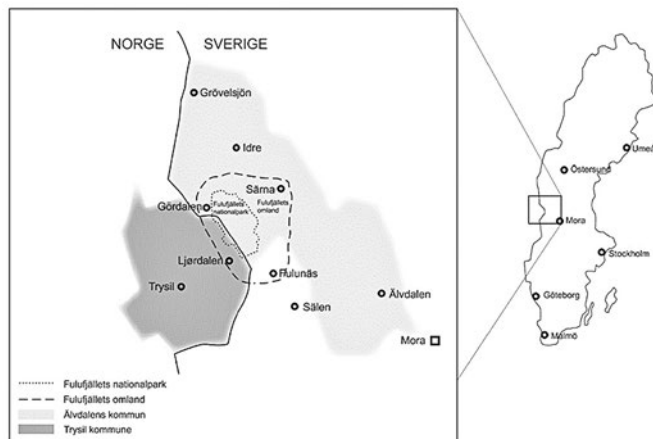


Figure 1. Fulufället National Park

Short and long term changes

Following the Swedish national park designation in 2002 the area received a 40 per cent increase in visitation, from 38,000 visits in 2001 to 53,000 visits in 2003 (Fredman, et al., 2007). Data from the visitor survey in 2014 show that visitation has dropped since 2003 to levels only slightly higher than the year before the park was established (Fredman & Wikström, 2015). This change is confirmed by counts at the entrance of the FNP visitor center.

Based on data from the three follow-up surveys, the following observations are made regarding changes among visitors at FNP;

- More visitors know FNP in a National Park in 2014 compared with 2003, but fewer visitors consider the National Park status a motive to visit the area.
- The average length of stay decreased between 2001 and 2003, but increased significantly again for 2014.
- The proportion of visitors doing short hikes has decreased, and the proportion doing longer hikes has increased, in 2014 compared with both 2001 and 2003.
- The proportion of visitors that visited the remote part of the park (zone 1 – wilderness zone) increased from 5% in 2003 to 11% in 2014.
- Lack of marked trails is much more of an issue in 2013 compared with both 2001 and 2003. So is also concerns regarding littering and lack of trash cans in 2014 compared with 2003.
- Attitudes toward tourism development in the gateway area are more positive in 2014 compared with 2003. In particular, a higher supply of activities is demanded.

Conclusions

Fulufället National Park was the first Swedish National Park where recreation and tourism had a considerable emphasis in both planning processes and implementation. Analyses of the three visitor surveys reported here show that visitation in 2014

has decreased to levels just slightly higher than the year before the national park was established. Visitors do, however, stay longer and they visit the more remote parts of the park to a larger extent. The collected data will provide a valuable source of information for further development of the visitor based management and tourism strategies in the gateway area.



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