

Management of national parks and tourism development – two cases from Norway

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Background

The establishment and operational running of national parks around the world is often a conflict ridden practice due to the fact that dissimilar values and goals are embedded in the protection and management of this type of natural resources. Broadly speaking, the planning and administering of national parks imply the handling of two goals that are both competing and overlapping at the same time, i.e. preserving the natural resource base and providing access for visitors that come to enjoy the same nature and landscape. According to McCool (2009) the resolving of these two basic values and their associated goals are especially challenging as regards to tourism development in protected natural heritage areas.

A series of problems arise not only due to more or less conflicting fundamental goals, but also as a result of dissimilar cultures and divergent social dependencies between on the one side, professionals representing the governmental protected area planning and administration agencies and, on the other side, those stakeholders that pursue local tourism industry interests associated with the national parks (McCool 2009). Tourism interests are as yet not involved in natural resource conservation and planning, which is the primary task and responsibility for the administrators and organisations in charge of managing national parks (Jamal and Stronza 2009). Nevertheless, the local tourism industry stakeholders are often totally dependent on the actual landscape and natural resources alike for their own economic benefit and social wellbeing; a reliance that may produce severe tensions unless embedded conflicting management issues are resolved in constructive ways and within reasonable time limits.

The present paper focuses on the underlying problems connected to the management obligations and the often contrasting local tourism interests in a Norwegian national park setting. The management regime in Norway has traditionally viewed tourism as a threat to the natural resources, despite the fact that there has been a shortage of research to support this - a state of affairs that Kaltenborn believes to be common in management establishments driven by natural researchers and operating in an worldview of bio-ecological science (Kaltenborn 1996). In a study of Norwegian nature managers' attitudes, Aasetre (1998) typically described the management strategies as 'classical nature protection', in which strong emphasis is placed on the safeguarding of natural elements, and far less concern is given to commercial interests and stakeholder involvement and collaboration in park management.

The empirical study

Two basic questions are asked in the present study:

- to which extent does local tourism stakeholders' involvement influence management processes in Norwegian national parks;
- how do local tourism stakeholders assess the resulting management plans and operations.

These core issues are scrutinized by means of qualitative interviews with 14 representatives of local tourism firms in two different national park settings in Norway: Rondane national park and Jotunheimen national park in the southern part of the country. The first mentioned national park is characterised by the presence of a sensitive species, i.e. the wild reindeer, whereas the second one is regarded as less susceptible to human impact.

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A series of disputed issues were identified throughout the empirical investigation, in spite of the general support among the local tourism industries for the national park status of the two mountain areas in question. The local tourism stakeholders experienced minor involvement in management planning and scant influence on the final planning arrangements. Further, they reported a lack of opportunities for healthy business operations due to management restrictions; they perceived a lack of competence among managers concerning business management and tourism development issues. In Rondane national park a sincere doubt regarding the legitimacy and scientific evidence for the rigid measures effectuated to protect the wild reindeer was observed, and in Jotunheimen national park partaking in co-management was called for. In both parks, the perceived incompetence among management staff regarding adequate measures for tourism developments in and around the park was raised as a concern. Our interpretation of the respondents' assessments indicates that the co-operation between the managers and the local tourism stakeholders is not sufficiently developed and a trustful relationship does not seem to exist between the two parties.

In line with these results some principal recommendations to improve the relationship between the two parties in the management system are proposed. Management authorities should preferably include sustainable tourism development in their visions and goals for the national parks, and also incorporate tourism business and management competence in their organizations. More emphasis on permanent management presence in local national parks would probably build stronger ties between the managers and local tourism interests. Such forms of structural alterations and adaptations are apparently viable ways forward in order to foster durable and trustworthy planning partnerships.

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