

General Principles for Sustainable Nature Tourism in Protected Areas Administrated by Metsähallitus, Finland

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Abstract: Metsähallitus is a state owned enterprise which has the responsibility for about 27 % of the Finnish land areas. The Natural Heritage Services of Metsähallitus is the administrator of 34 national parks, 17 strict nature reserves, 12 wilderness areas and over 400 nature reserves. Totally, the area of the protected areas, wilderness areas and other areas with high values for nature conservation and recreation, administrated by the Metsähallitus, covers almost four million hectares. As a part of the work to contribute to sustainable tourism in protected areas, wilderness areas and the areas yet to be protected, administrated by Metsähallitus in Finland, nine principles have been developed.

Nine principles of sustainable nature tourism are to be implemented in 2004 and they have been prepared paying attention to the character of these areas and the roles of the various actors, i.e. Metsähallitus, private entrepreneurs having their business there and all the stakeholders which are active within or close to these areas. The nine principles for sustainable nature tourism are as follows: 1) Nature values are preserved and the activities promote nature protection, 2) Minimum loading of the environment is assured, 3) Local culture and heritage are respected, 4) Customers' appreciation and knowledge of nature are promoted, 5) Customers' opportunities to find recreation in nature are enhanced, 6) Customers' mental and physical wellbeing are reinforced, 7) Positive impacts are made on local economy and employment, 8) Communication and marketing are of high standard and carried out with a sense of responsibility and 9) Activities are planned and implemented in co-operation.

What is Metsähallitus?

Metsähallitus is a state enterprise with two main divisions: Natural Heritage Services and Forestry. The former one has the responsibility for 34 national parks, 17 strict nature reserves, 12 wilderness areas and over 400 nature reserves. Totally, the area of the protected areas, wilderness areas and other areas with high values for nature conservation and recreation, administrated by the Metsähallitus, covers almost four million hectares. There are annually over 1 million visitors in the national parks, 342 000 in the hiking areas and 673 000 in the visitor centres and other customer service points of Metsähallitus.

Responsible management and use of natural resources is one of the main values of the Metsähallitus. Guidelines for the good management of protected areas are defined and implemented in the whole organisation of Metsähallitus (Metsähallitus 2000). But how to implement these when developing tourism in the protected areas, which – at the same time – represent the most beautiful natural features of Finland? And what is sustainability?

During the last ten years, many organisations have made definitions of their own about sustainability, and for different purposes. For example, the WWF

drew up the Ten Commandments for ecotourism addressed mainly for western tourists visiting exotic countries (WWF 1995). The World Travel and Tourism Council has listed ten primary areas needing to be developed by the tourism industry in order to achieve sustainable development. The World Trade Organisation has core indicators for sustainable tourism (WTTC, WTO & Earth Council 1995). The European Charter for sustainable tourism in protected areas has been prepared by Europarc, the Federation of Nature and National Parks of Europe. Its purpose is to act as a standard and guideline helping each signatory to develop high quality sustainable tourism (Europarc 2003). A sustainable model for tourism in the arctic areas has also been prepared.

There are also many other examples of definitions aiming at describing guidelines for different activities in different parts of the globe. However, there are certain common features, which can be recognised in most cases (first defined by the WWF in 1995). Consequently, the following guidelines can be considered as a kind of basis for sustainability in tourism:

- Sustainable use of resources
- Reduction of over-consumption and pollution
- Protection of biodiversity

- Co-operation with local populations and stakeholders
- Marketing of tourism in a responsible way

Principles Applied by Metsähallitus

Interpretation and implementation of these depend on who is using them and for which purpose. Our point of view is that of the land administrator, who has the responsibility for protection of biodiversity and is interested in serving the visitors. Thus, the following nine principles and their interpretations have been drawn up for the protected areas administrated by the Metsähallitus.

1. Nature values are preserved and the tourism activities promote nature protection
 - Nature is an important reason for travel
 - Visitors are told about nature and nature conservation
 - Tourism does not disturb nature, all areas are not suitable for tourism
 - Visitor groups are small and trails are used whenever possible
 - Tourism is channelled with the help of information and by placing of facilities
 - Facilities are constructed without harm to the environment and areas of natural beauty are left in their natural state
 - Degradation of nature and other impacts are monitored and, if necessary, measures are undertaken
2. Minimum loading of the environment is assured
 - All forms of loading of the environment is avoided and nature's own terms are followed
 - The objective is rubbish-free hiking with minimum stress on environment
 - Firewood is used frugally
 - Emissions into water and air are minimised and renewable energy sources are favoured
 - Metsähallitus and entrepreneurs provide examples of how to act when in taking care of environment
3. Local culture and heritage are respected
 - Local culture is met open-mindedly
 - Whenever possible, cultural heritage is included in information and experiences are offered
 - Local guides familiar with culture are used
4. Customers' appreciation and knowledge of nature and culture are promoted
 - Information is acquired beforehand
 - Knowledge is easy to find in interesting form and content
 - Opportunities are given for participating in the management of the area
 - Guides are well-trained

5. Customers' opportunities to find recreation in nature are enhanced
 - All nature lovers are taken into account
 - Services are optimal in relation to demand and site
 - Peace of wilderness and guided excursions in nature are offered
 - Tourism products are developed in co-operation with entrepreneurs
6. Customers' mental and physical wellbeing are reinforced
 - Muscle-powered mobility is favoured
 - Appropriate hiking equipment is provided
 - Both easy and demanding hiking routes are available
 - Opportunities for nature experiences are offered
 - All routes, facilities and programmes are safe
7. Positive impacts are made on local economy and employment
 - Products and services of local entrepreneurs are always used when possible
 - Local people are employed when possible, but also people and ideas from outside the region are seen as a potential
8. Communication and marketing are of high standard and are carried out with a sense of responsibility
 - Information is reliable
 - Communication is open and interactive
 - Marketing is not in conflict with nature conservation
9. Activities are planned and implemented in co-operation
 - Opinions of the visitors are appreciated
 - Training is organised in co-operation with entrepreneurs
 - Planning procedure is open for anybody
 - Priority is given to those wanting to commit themselves to these nine principles of sustainable nature tourism

Implementation of the Principles

The nine principles are to be implemented in 2004 and they have been prepared paying attention to the character of these areas and the roles of the various actors, i.e. Metsähallitus, private entrepreneurs having their business there and all the stakeholders which are active within or close to these areas. The principles can be seen as a long term goal. The implementation and application of these principles is an ongoing process.

In the activities of the land administrator, Metsähallitus, better management is one of the goals. Management of the areas is improved by avoiding mass tourism, by taking protection of natural values as a

guideline when doing construction work in sensitive areas and by having an efficient system for supervision and interpretation.

The principles also steer the work with tourism. For example, they are clearly showing the need to know more about degradation of the areas, thriving of rare animals and flowers and the quality of waters in wells and waterways. This leads to developing a new system of monitoring the impacts of tourism in our areas. Some forms of recreation do perhaps not meet the demands set in the nine principles. Consistently, these activities will be excluded from the protected areas or from some parts of them.

Metsähallitus is not working alone in the protected areas. Private entrepreneurs are active in many areas. Their customers use the facilities of Metsähallitus and they are our customers, too.

Private entrepreneurs are involved in this through their agreements with Metsähallitus. At the moment, the Natural Heritage Services of Metsähallitus has an agreement with over 200 entrepreneurs working in tourism. A new system of agreements was recently introduced and the principles are applied in the terms written in the agreements. New agreements will concern hundreds of companies and entrepreneurs in the whole country.

There are four kind of agreements made with the entrepreneurs using the protected areas more than what the Finnish everyman's right (public access principle) allows. The four types of agreements are:

- Licence (usually a short-term limited permission)
- Agreement on the right of use (at least one year)
- Agreement on co-operation (mutual interest, different activities included)
- Agreement on partnership (development of products in common)

Experiences Gained

During the development period feedback of the nine principles was gathered from 135 entrepreneurs and stakeholders around the country. According to the feedback our principles of sustainable nature tourism are considered rather acceptable. The average grade of answers was 8,96 (on the scale of 4 to 10). They are considered clear and easy to understand (mean 8,24). Our entrepreneurs see the principles even more positive as compared to other groups of stakeholders. At the same time, slight criticism is given owing to the ambiguous character of the principles. It is easy to agree to the principles, if they are not too binding.

However, thanks to the feedback, we know that we are on a right track, hiking to the right direction.

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