

Challenges of visitor monitoring and management in protected areas

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Metsähallitus Natural Heritage Services (NHS) manages all the national parks and the other state-owned protected areas, wilderness areas, national hiking areas and public waters in Finland. NHS works to improve public well-being and the viability of tourism, as well as the state of biodiversity in Finland.

The aim is to provide services enabling people to get outdoors and enjoy activities that benefit their physical and mental health and well-being, without harming the natural environment. Well-planned services can get more people outdoors, promote nature tourism, and safeguard valuable natural features in the areas. To meet these objectives, NHS searches constantly for best practices. For example, setting up trails on beds made of stones and sand has proven to be cost-effective and user-friendly. Such methods can also be used to replace duckboard trails. The work of NHS in promoting outdoor recreation was recently granted a sports design award at the National Sports Gala to acknowledge the role and high quality of the services provided, including trails, picnic sites and signs, as well as visitor centres and wide-ranging internet services.

National parks are among Finland's main attractions for international visitors. In addition to promoting biodiversity conservation and public health, national parks bring visitors, income and employment to rural areas. Since 2000, NHS has been using a standardized method to gather visitor survey data from those state-owned protected and recreational areas where recreation and tourism play a significant role (Kajala et al., 2007). The data are gathered primarily for management and monitoring purposes and reports are produced by NHS at local, regional and national levels. However, the large data set gathered in a uniform manner across the country for eleven years, and saved in one database (ASTA), provides opportunities for further analyses, such as those on the local economic impacts of visitors' spending (Huhtala et al., 2010) and on customer segmentation (Konu & Kajala, 2012).

Investments made by the government for the provision of facilities for recreation in national parks and hiking areas are paid back to society through the opportunities they create for private enterprises and employment. In 2011, Finland's national parks alone welcomed 2.09 million visitors, whose spending brought income worth 108.3 million Euros and 1394 person-years in employment to the surrounding areas. Considering the costs of running their facilities, it corresponds to an overall 10-fold payback. These economic impacts are calculated using methodology devised by NHS and the Finnish Forest Research Institute on the basis of the data on visitor numbers compiled by NHS, the findings of NHS regular surveys on visitors' spending levels, and factoring figures that account for the cumulative impacts of visitors' spending in local economies.

To meet the new challenges of the constantly changing

world, NHS is in a process of revising its strategy and action plan with the aim of being an innovative, effective, flexible and well-networked organization also in the future.

The actions in the near future will include further strengthening of partnerships for sustainable nature tourism. In collaboration with the tourism sector, NHS will use the research findings on the customer segmentation of visitors in improving nature tourism services.

NHS will develop volunteer programs both to improve facilities and to maintain and restore the natural values of protected areas. NHS aims to be socially responsible through collaboration with many sectors. For example, it works together with the prison authorities providing them opportunities to use convict labour in protected areas in meaningful ways that help convicts to get back their self-esteem and ability to cope with ordinary working life.

The network communication has become an important source of information for national park visitors. Recently awarded NHS website Luontoon.fi (Outdoors.fi) has become well established and popular. It was expanded to include a web community. Users can share their experiences and photos of visits to national parks, take part in competitions, watch videos, and read the latest news from the Finnish parks, including stories on the everyday work of NHS rangers and other staff.

The ways in which the visitor centres serve customers, nature tourism service providers and local communities are constantly analysed and developed. So far Finland has lacked a single visitor centre attractively exhibiting the whole protected area system and connecting all the visitor centres together. To meet this need, NHS is currently building the Finnish Nature Centre Haltia in Espoo, on the fringes of both the Helsinki metropolitan area and Nuuksio National Park, together with various partners. In 2012, NHS opened the nature and culture centre of Pyhä-Luosto National Park and an expanded visitor centre at Liminka Bay, which features the area's birdlife and the wetland network of Ramsar sites.

The intangible values of nature, such as beautiful landscapes and opportunities to experience nature, are invariably the most important motives for the recreational use of protected areas in Finland. The recognition of cultural and spiritual values of protected areas increases and deepens the relevance of parks and nature to people (Mallarach et al., 2012).

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