

New challenges for managing sustainable tourism in protected areas: an exploratory study from a landscape perspective in Sweden

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Introduction

Over the last decades, the notion of sustainable tourism has emerged as the dominant paradigm for managing visitor use in parks and protected areas (e.g., Eagles and others 2002; Frost and Hall, 2009). At the same time, efforts have emerged that emphasize landscape-based approaches to environmental management in order to achieve sustainable landscape planning, protection, and development. The European Landscape Convention (ELC) is one example of such a growing trend worldwide (Amend and others 2008; Brown and others 2005; Phillips 2003; Jones and Stenseke 2011). The convention provides a policy framework for European landscapes and calls for close collaboration between national and local authorities, private organizations and the public (Jones and Stenseke 2011). The ELC also calls for substantial levels of public engagement in defining landscape values and boundaries while also invoking the 'subsidiary' principle, whereby landscape issues must be addressed in concert with the population most impacted. Jones and Stenseke (2011) summarize some of the challenges with the convention:

“, the ELC contains a number of innovative features... [by providing] a new definition of landscape. It applies to all landscapes, not just selected ones, and underlines the diversity of landscapes as a value. It emphasizes that landscape is not an exclusive field for scientific and technical specialists but the concern of everybody, and advocates an enhanced role for public participation in landscape issues.” (p. 5).

The development of landscape-based approaches like the ELC will have important implications for management of outdoor recreation at destinations like parks and protected areas. What happens when, in the same geographic space, values from a protected area visitor perspective differ from values from a landscape perspective? What forms of governance will be used to integrate a landscape perspective into protected area management?

This study explores issues that result from the intersection of a landscape perspective, as articulated in the ELC, with contemporary approaches to managing sustainable tourism in protected areas in Sweden. It also considers how a landscape perspective may affect destination development in a protected areas context, and how it may affect key actors responsible for implementing the ELC with respect to protected areas.

Although the notion of landscape has been defined and understood in different ways, contemporary landscape researchers tend to agree that landscape is “*not just the land itself, but the land as seen from a particular point of view or perspective. Landscape is both the phenomenon itself and our perception of it.*” (Wylie, 2007: 7). The intersection and synthesis between culture and nature lies at the very heart of landscape studies, especially in research about resource management and development policies (Benediktsson, 2007; Mels, 1999; Wall-Reinius, 2011; Whatmore, 2002). Western approaches to resource management tend to divide nature and culture into separate and sometimes mutually exclusive administrative categories such as wilderness, nature, culture and society (Mels, 1999; 2002; Wall-Reinius, 2011), and natural and cultural resource management is consequently rarely integrated even when these resources share the same geographic space. The ELC contains several provisions that seek to promote sustainable landscape development in new and innovative ways. For example, the ELC is the first international treaty that deals with landscape as an integrated entity or whole system (Jones and Stenseke 2011). At the present time, Sweden has no policy to guide management of landscape as an integrated, multi-sectoral phenomenon. In this paper, we discuss that policies which aim to maintain specific landscape values are primarily built on an understanding of nature, culture and history, which separates them from each other through conceptualizations and institutional structures.

Data were collected using qualitative semi-structured interviews and snowball sampling techniques. Interview data were analyzed for themes and patterns that emerged from the data, including stakeholder perceptions of implementation conflicts along with the strengths and challenges of integrating a landscape perspective into management of sustainable tourism. The sample included representatives from government ministries, national governmental agencies, regional authorities, protected area managers, non-profit organizations and university professors. Data analysis is currently underway however, since the ELC was ratified in Sweden as recent as 2011, we anticipate that this study will help establish an empirical foundation to inform the ELC implementation as well as future research looking at landscape and tourism issues from a protected area context. Since the ELC was ratified in Sweden relatively recently, it is unlikely that all study participants fully grasp the intent of the convention or its implications for sustainable tourism management in Swedish protected areas.

Preliminary findings

Study participants interpret the concept of landscape and the ELC's notion of landscape differently. Early results from the interviews show that some of the key actors are skeptical about the viability of managing something which is so vaguely defined. Several participants expressed concern over what exactly is to be managed if the concept of landscape applies to all landscapes and can be defined in infinitely different ways. Study participants also appear to define or operationalize landscape largely in ways that reflect or support the interests of their organization.

A related theme from the interviews has to do with conflicts of different land use interests. Land use and landscape management in Sweden occurs primarily through the specific interests of specific actors (e.g., Environmental Protection Agency; National Heritage Board, National Forestry Board, Transportation Authority, Agricultural Authority) pursuing specific objectives. Consequently, several study participants from regional and national governmental agencies noted the fragmented and discontinuous approach landscape management in Sweden, which, ultimately, leads to difficulties in identifying, minimizing or preventing conflicts.

Despite the challenges of implementing a landscape-oriented approach, several study participants identified a strong sense of opportunity with such an approach. For example, one manager of an internationally recognized protected area commented on how the ELC will help amplify their existing approach to sustainable development. According to this study participant, it is precisely because of the ELC's holistic approach to managing landscape that creates new and previously un-envisioned opportunities.

Finally, study participants acknowledged the simultaneous need and challenge for undertaking a landscape oriented approach. A common barrier discussed by several interviewees was the lack of staff capacity for conducting the kind of community engagement envisioned in the ELC. Nearly every study participant emphasized the linkage between "real" community engagement and the long-term viability of landscape-oriented approaches.

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