

Visitor influx and sustainable tourism development - paradoxes and dilemmas in the Nordic countries

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Introduction

Visitors' experiences of nature attractions are at the core of the tourism industry of the Nordic countries (Fredman & Tyrväinen, 2010). Recently, these countries have experienced rapid increases in visitation from international tourists. Within a relatively short time period some nature attractions that used to represent goals for outdoor recreation trips have been transformed into international destinations for tourists, who via social media want to document their visits to attractions with iconic statuses. The motives for the visits, as well as the experiences people seek, have hence become more diverse and complex to understand. Many popular nature attractions of the Nordic countries are situated within alpine, boreal forest or polar ecosystems, which are all particularly vulnerable to the effects of tourism. Moreover, the attractions are often located in regions and communities which in terms of management policies and infrastructures are not sufficiently prepared to handle large scale visitation.

Unprecedented growth in the numbers of visitors has in several places resulted in environmental damage, costly rescue operations and overload on common goods and public infrastructures. Responding to these challenges, implementation of economic instruments, such as entrance fees and concessions, have been suggested by some policy makers, managers and tourism businesses. The purpose is primarily to limit or structure the visitation streams and to secure sufficient funding for the management of the influx of visitors causes. These kinds of policy instruments are particularly challenging in the Nordic countries where the traditions of freedom to roam have been transformed into public rights (Kaltenborn et al., 2001). The main aim with this presentation is to discuss some dilemmas and paradoxes arising from the efforts of finding sustainable solutions to urgent problems caused by the rather sudden influx of tourist and the increasing variety of demands that follows from this

Global trends and sustainable tourism development

The increase in tourism the Nordic countries have experienced recently should be seen in the context of the global trends of differentiation, specialisation and individualisation of tourism practices, which amongst other things involve the information flows made possible by the social media and the increased mobility the networks of inexpensive airline routes have contributed to. While this development represents huge economic and social benefits for the tourists and the tourism industry, it also generates some major sustainability concerns associated with traffic congestion and noise, accidents, air pollution, greenhouse gas emissions, resource depletion etc. As tourist attractions have become more available to more people, an increasing number of travel destinations are transformed from regional or national

recreation sites to international tourism destinations. Having limited capacities, many of these destinations are not prepared to handle the influx of new visitors and struggle to meet an increasing of variety of behaviours and demands in a sustainable manner. Sustainable tourism development requires policies and planning processes that take environmental, social, and economic dimensions into consideration in a long-term perspective. This is more difficult to achieve as trends become less predictable and tourism more difficult to manage through marketing and planning strategies.

Policy instruments and the public rights of access in the Nordic countries

The rights of public access of the Nordic countries represents some challenges regarding sustainable development tourism. On the one hand, these rights indirectly facilitate for a large-scale influx of tourists to natural areas. Firstly, the rights of public access make unimpeded visits to nature attractions and destination possible. Secondly, in some of the countries, such as Sweden and to a certain extent Norway, they even enable nature-based tourism enterprises to operate on land areas regardless of ownership. On the other hand, resource-based management strategies, which typically involve direct regulations of traffic using prohibitions, fencing, entrance fees etc., will in many instances contradict the principles of the rights of public access. While measures like these are likely to encounter some legal hindrances, they can even be contested on political and moral grounds since the public rights of access are closely associated with both social equality and individual freedom. Being assigned to individuals, the public rights of access were originally designed on the basis of historically and culturally grounded outdoor recreation practices that did not entail large scale and commercial organized visitation (Sandell, 2006). In part due to this, legislation and management practices are not sufficiently adapted to the challenges large volumes of visitors may cause.

As long as the opportunities for direct regulations and use of economic instruments are limited, the development of infrastructures appears to be the immediate solution to the acute problems caused by rapid increase in visitation to nature attractions. Improving transport solutions, facilitating hiking trails, extending on-site services etc. may contribute to reducing congestion, improve the safety of visitors and enhance their experiences. However, these measures also have the propensity of making attractions even more available to a greater variety of visitors, causing further negative impacts on both local communities and nature environments (Sæþórsdóttir & Ólafsdóttir, 2017). This may result in conflicts between diverse groups of visitors, as well as between various stakeholders related to the tourism industry. Furthermore, as visitors' demands and expectations become more varied, the question of what kinds concerns and whose interests should to be considered in the management of natural areas becomes more complex (Saarinen, 2016; Sæþórsdóttir & Ólafsdóttir, 2017).

Activity-based strategies that are based on stakeholder involvement in planning and monitoring have in some regions already become important instruments for regulating the influx of tourist in time and space, with the aims of reducing risk of conflicts and minimizing negative impacts on ecological systems (Kaltenborn et al., 2017). In view of the above-mentioned dilemmas and paradoxes, we will discuss to what extent adaptive management approaches, informed by preferences, motivations, attitudes and opinions of visitors, represent more sustainable solutions when it comes to regulative measures.

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