

Conflict between motorized and non-motorized: recreation in Soomaa National Park, Estonia

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Recreation conflict between non-motorized and motorized groups has been the focus of many conflict studies and results have indicated that conflict tends to be asymmetrical. In previous studies cross-country skiers were more likely to experience conflict with snowmobilers (Jackson & Wong 1982, Jackson et al. 2002, Vaske et al. 2007); backcountry canoeists were more likely to experience conflict with motor-boaters (Ivy et al. 1992).

All-terrain vehicle (ATV) activities are one of the fastest growing recreational activities in Europe and North America. In Estonia the number of ATV's is growing rapidly, this has caused many responses and complaints by land owners and protected area visitors. The biggest problems appear close to the largest cities like Tallinn and Tartu, but even the remote wilderness areas in Estonia experience conflicts with ATV's. There have been many stories and complaints about ATV's, but there have been no studies in Estonia of ATV's' and hikers' conflicts.

This research took place in Soomaa (area 396 km²) – one of the five Estonian national parks. Soomaa lies quite far from bigger settlements in a very sparsely populated part of Estonia. Even here have been complaints to police and to park officials about ATV traffic. The purpose of this study was to investigate if the conflict between hikers and ATV drivers really exists and how it influences visitors' decisions. ATV's are allowed to drive on the forest roads of national parks. In Estonian national parks cultural heritage is protected and in Soomaa you can find old abandoned villages and old village roads, which grow into forest. ATV's have been seen in Estonia as potential vehicles for management of old forest roads, because those are not appropriate for regular cars.

The research was carried out in April and May 2009 as this is the period when ATV drivers are most active (forest roads and trails are muddy and more challenging) and the national park has mainly experienced visitors. 27 visitors were interviewed on 4 nature trails in different parts of national park. 32 ATV drivers were interviewed on the roads and trails (14) and at home (18). Hikers were asked about visual and sound contacts with ATV's and if they consider it as negative, neutral, or positive; and how it influences hikers' future decisions. The same was asked from ATV drivers about hikers. Each interview took 10-15 minutes.

24 hikers have had contacts with ATV's (14 visual and 19 sound contacts) and they all considered contacts as negative and disturbing. All hikers have visited national parks several times and they were asked to point out places where they have experienced conflicts with ATV's. Respondents pointed out that contact with ATV's has caused later avoidance of these trails.

ATV drivers were from surrounding villages of the national park (24) and from other parts of Estonia (8). 17 ATV drivers considered meeting hikers in nature as negative experience, mainly because of denouncement and preaching of trekkers and also because of risk management. Also ATV drivers mentioned that they try to avoid forest roads and trails where they can meet hikers. ATV drivers' main problem was that there was only one designated ATV trail nearby national park and Estonian laws and regulations about ATV traffic were not sufficient.

Previous studies have shown that none of the motorized visitors considered contacts with non-motorized visitors as negative (Jackson & Wong 1982, Jackson et al. 2002) or few of motorized visitors considered non-motorized visitors as a problem (Ivy et al. 1992, Vaske et al. 2007). The

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investigation in Soomaa showed that more than half (53%) of ATV drivers considered contact with hiker as a negative. It does not really show symmetrical conflict, because 89% hikers considered contact with ATV as negative, but it showed that conflict really exists from both sides. ATV disturbance has caused displacement of hikers and ATV drivers avoidance of popular hiking regions. This kind of investigations are important for future management in the national park. It is obvious that guidelines of management by the national park are necessary. But this investigation shows that even without regulations there is potential for naturally emerging popular ATV areas and hiking regions.

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