

Role of Oulanka PAN Park in Local Community Development in Northeastern Finland

Riikka Puhakka, Stuart P. Cottrell, and Pirkko Siikamäki

Abstract — As a result of the growth of nature-based tourism, national parks have become important tourist attractions in Finland, and they have an increasing role as tools for regional development especially in the northern peripheries of the country. Meanwhile, new international initiatives to develop sustainable nature-based tourism have been introduced in Finland. PAN (Protected Area Network) Parks Foundation is a non-profit organization aimed to balance the needs of wilderness protection and community development by facilitating sustainable tourism development in European parks. This study examines the socio-cultural sustainability of tourism in Oulanka National Park perceived by local stakeholders. The central question concerns the role of PAN Parks certification in community and tourism development. Does it benefit socio-cultural development in the region, and does it have some disadvantages from the perspective of local people? The study is based on a mixed methods approach including a questionnaire (n=314) and semi-structured interviews (n=40) conducted in Oulanka region in 2007 for representatives of NGOs, tourism and other businesses, municipalities and public sector, and local residents. Findings show that most of the stakeholders have a positive attitude towards tourism development in Oulanka. The economic benefits of PAN Parks status have not yet been realized, but locals expect the benefits will grow while tourists' familiarity with PAN Parks increases. Local residents' knowledge of PAN Parks is still weak. Although nature-based tourism benefits community in various ways, locals also perceive disadvantages caused by the park. The biggest problems identified in the study are related to participation possibilities and contradictions with traditional subsistence economies (e.g., fishing, hunting and reindeer herding). Thus, it is essential to pay attention to the distribution of benefits and burdens of the park development – also to those which are not related to monetary interests. Increasing co-operation with local stakeholders could improve the mutual relations.

Index Terms — certification, national parks, PAN Parks, sustainable tourism

1 INTRODUCTION

National parks have become important tourist attractions and tools for regional development in Europe, including northern peripheral areas of Finland [1], [2], [3]. Co-ordinating conserva-

tion and the utilization of nature is seen as advantageous for both conservation and regional development [4], [5]. As expectations of benefits are fulfilled, local support for park development is enhanced [6], [7]. Various international initiatives and certification programmes play an increasing role in encouraging synergy between conservation and tourism in protected areas [8]. In 1997, World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and the Dutch leisure company, Molecaten, founded PAN (Protected Area Network) Parks Foundation, which is a non-profit organization aimed to balance the needs of wilderness protection and community development by facilitating sustainable tourism develop-

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ment [9]. At present there are eleven certified PAN Parks in nine European countries, including Oulanka National Park (ONP) in northeastern Finland.

This paper examines the socio-cultural sustainability of tourism in ONP perceived by local stakeholders. The central question concerns the role of PAN Parks status in community and tourism development: does it benefit socio-cultural development in the region, and does it have some disadvantages from the perspective of local people? The paper is based on the main results of a questionnaire study with interviews corroborating and supplementing the survey findings [10], [11].

2 METHODS AND MATERIALS

Mixed methods were used to gain a holistic understanding of local stakeholders' ideas and perceptions of tourism and park development in ONP. The questionnaire study was conducted in 2007 with a total sample of 314 respondents. An initial survey was sent to a random sample of 908 households in Oulanka region with a return of 273 (30% response rate). In addition, 34 surveys were completed by stakeholders who participated in semi-structured interviews, and seven surveys were completed by others onsite. Based on a holistic approach to sustainable development [12], the questionnaire solicited responses about familiarity with PAN Parks, PAN Parks status of ONP, participation in tourism planning, tourism to ONP, satisfaction with tourism development, and socio-demographics.

Moreover, the research material includes 40 semi-structured interviews of local stakeholders conducted in the surrounding region of ONP, in Kuusamo and Salla municipalities. The interviews ranged from 15 minutes to 2 hours with 28 in Finnish and 12 in English. The questions were applied from *PAN Parks Methods and Techniques Manual* [13]. They were posed to determine feelings about tourism development and its sustainability in Oulanka region, the role

of ONP and businesses in promoting tourism, and the effects of the national park and PAN Parks on local businesses, communities and sustainable development.

3 STUDY AREA

Oulanka National Park is located in Oulu and Lapland provinces of Finland, adjacent to the Russian border and close by the Arctic Circle. This sparsely populated region has traditionally been dependent on forestry, reindeer herding, hunting and fishing. The park was established in 1956 after a multiphase and partly conflicting process. It is managed by Metsähallitus, which administers the land and water areas of the state, and it covers an area of approximately 28 000 hectares. ONP is one of the most popular parks in Finland. In 2007, there were 185 500 visits to the park [14], which tripled since 1992. Thirty partnership companies organize recreation services in the park, and around twenty accommodation companies are located close by; 13 companies are local partners of PAN Parks. ONP plays an important socio-economic development role in Kuusamo–Salla region which is, with its ski resort Ruka, one of the most attractive tourist destinations in Finland.

ONP was certified as a PAN Park in 2002. The minimum size of the parks is 20 000 hectares with a wilderness/core zone of at least 10 000 hectares in an essentially natural state and only slightly modified by humans. PAN Parks criteria aim to forbid extractive uses in the core zone [15].

4 RESULTS

In the questionnaire study, the sample of respondents represents a group of almost 50% working (of these 25% employed in tourism), 43% retired and 8% unemployed. There were more men (65%) than female (35%) respondents, and 66 % are over 50 years old with only 13% under 40. The sample shows a relatively low educated

population with 48% having finished primary school and 5% percent with university degree. Fifty-five percent have lived in the region for over 40 years. In the interview study, minimum of three representatives were selected from each target group: NGOs (fishing, hunting and conservation organizations), tourism companies familiar with PAN Parks (certified partners), other tourism companies, non-tourism companies, municipalities and public sector, and local people. Interviewees were 28–76 years old with 24 men and 16 women.

A slight majority (66%) of respondents knew ONP was a certified PAN Park, but 56% did not know at all or only very little about what it meant. Only 15% knew to a greater extent what the concept stood for. The interviews confirm that local residents are not yet familiar with PAN Parks and think open communication should be increased.

Stakeholders mostly have a positive perception of PAN Parks, yet critical aspects were also discussed in the interviews. Sixty-seven percent of respondents agreed that PAN Parks status increased the value of the tourist experience while 76% believed it would attract more tourists to the area. Although the economic benefits have not yet been widely realized, interviewees expected the benefits would grow while tourists' familiarity with PAN Parks increased. A majority (75%) of respondents agreed the status contributes to nature conservation; meanwhile, 47% did not feel that tourism is a threat to conservation. Stakeholders responded neutral to the statement that the status increased the quality of life in the area while 24% disagreed and 28% agreed. In the interviews, particularly local residents, representatives of NGOs and entrepreneurs who do not work in the tourism sector and are not very familiar with PAN Parks perceived disadvantages caused by the national park and PAN Parks. The park has restricted traditional use of nature (e.g. fishing, hunting and reindeer herding); these stakeholders aim to maintain local

rights to the region for subsistence and recreational use.

Of 36 aspects of sustainable tourism, respondents ranked the economic and environmental dimensions as the most important. They were not, however, totally satisfied with the current situation in ONP since they rated the performance of the statements lower than the importance. Overall, respondents were most satisfied with the environmental and economic situation. The lowest scores were found among statements related to the institutional (regarding communication and involvement) and social (regarding information and educational opportunities) statements. Although all aspects got acceptable performance scores, none of the economic and institutional received high scores (above 4) and the social and environmental aspects only once. Special attention needs to be paid to the statements rated high in importance with low satisfaction; they were related to communication, benefits to local people and negative impacts on nature. In the interviews, stakeholders criticized, for example, the lack of trust and cooperation, minor consideration of local culture and continual growth of tourism in the park.

Moreover, local participation in tourism planning is considered important; respondents rated residents' opportunity to be involved in tourism decision making high in importance. Nevertheless, the perception of actually being able to enter the decision making process is limited with only 9% stating they could access this process. On the other hand, respondents did not find it important for themselves to be involved. The communication about the decision making process was perceived satisfactorily by only 21%; the majority had no opinion and 18% rated it negatively. Some interviewed stakeholders stressed the importance of participation opportunities where as those not having strong interests towards the park might even say that the decision making of the park was not part of residents' business.

5 CONCLUSION

The study indicates that local stakeholders mostly have a positive perception of tourism development and PAN Parks in Oulanka region, and tourism benefits community in several ways, but it cannot be concluded whether the park facilitates development in a sustainable manner or not. While monitoring socio-cultural sustainability, it is important to cover a wide range of opinions from the local level; four discourses can be identified from interviewees' speech [11]. It is essential to pay attention to the distribution of the benefits and burdens of park development, also to those which are not related to monetary interests. In this study, the interviews supplemented the results of the quantitative analysis by discussing issues not asked in the survey. The main problems identified are contradictions with traditional subsistence economies and the lack of participation opportunities, which have been noticed in other PAN Parks as well and need further research [9], [12].

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