

# National Park Characteristics, Regional Setting and Visitor Flows

Jenni Puustinen<sup>1</sup>, Eija Pouta<sup>2</sup>, Marjo Neuvonen<sup>1</sup> & Tuija Sievänen<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Finnish Forest Research Institute, Finland  
jenni.puustinen@metla.fi  
marjo.neuvonen@metla.fi  
tuija.sievanen@metla.fi

<sup>2</sup>MTT Agrifood Research Finland, Finland  
eija.pouta@mtt.fi

*Keywords: Recreation, national parks, visitor flows, regression analysis, classification.*

## Introduction

The importance of national parks as national icons and tourist destinations is widely recognized. The visitor flows to national parks are increasing all over the world, which affirms their significance for tourism and recreation. Nature-tourists choose their destinations on the basis of natural environment, location and man-made facilities provided for tourists. The travel experiences of park visitors also include their experiences of tourist services in area surrounding the national park. Understanding the relationship between visitor flows and park characteristics, as well as between visitation and the attractions that are provided outside the park, is crucial in planning and management of existing national parks. This information is also needed in assessing impacts of establishment of new parks as the visitor flows and related tourism income can have a significant affect on local economies.

## Methods

The objective of this study is to examine the factors which contribute to national parks popularity. The study focused on factors such as the natural characteristics of a park, its recreation facilities and services, tourism services in the surrounding communities, and park's location related to potential users. Two distinct methods, classification and regression modelling were used to analyze the visitor flows to all thirty-five national parks in Fin-

land. The park data was received from Finnish Forest and Park Service, and the community data was gathered from various statistical sources.

## Results

National parks were first classified in categories which reflected their features in natural conditions, provision of recreational facilities, and tourism services in the surrounding communities (table 1). The results of the classification approach show the accumulation of natural values and services. National parks having a high level of natural values typically had a good provision of recreation facilities and both were related to a high number of visits. If the level of natural values were lower a high level of services did not increase the visitor flow. Furthermore, the high level of natural values and recreation facilities inside a park were typically associated with a good provision of services in the surrounding communities, which tended to further increase visitation levels.

Next a multiple regression analysis was used to examine the coexistent impact of several independent variables to park visitation (table 2). The results showed the relative importance of supply factors on visitation. Recreation opportunities, number of biotopes, provision of trails and park's age increased the number of visits. The results revealed the minor effect of the demand factors on park visitation. Only in more

Table 1: National park classification according to natural and man-made features of the parks, and the average number of annual visits per park group.

Inside park facilities	Outside park tourism services	Increasing natural values → Dominating feature of nature			
		Mire	Forest	Water & valuable landscape	Field & valuable landscape
		number of parks (average number of visits / year)			
Low	Low Medium High	2 (13 000) 2 (10 000) 1 (20 000)	4 (13 600) 2 (6 800)	1 (7 200)	
Medium	Low Medium High		4 (14 300) 2 (19 500)	1 (6000) 5 (37 600)	
High	Low Medium High	1 (15 000)	2 (32 000) 1 (100 000)	3 (104 300)	1 (95 000) 3 (129 000)

Table 2: Multiple regression models for visitor flows.

	Model 1		Model 2	
	$\beta$	p-value	$\beta$	p-value
Distance to the nearest city of more than 100 000 inhabitants in southern and western Finland	-.003	.062	-.004	.021
Recreation activities	.273	.000	.328	.000
Number of biotopes	.037	.039	.037	.037
Trails (km)	.004	.073		
Park age			.013	.053
R <sup>2</sup>	.676		.682	
N	35		35	

densely populated southern Finland the close location of a park to a bigger city had significance in explaining visitation.

## Conclusion

The classification enabled a generalised picture to be gained concerning the properties of national park and the association between park visitor flows and adjacent regions. The regression model enabled a more detailed examination of the relative importance of park and regional characteristics in relation to visitor flows. Being at the national level, the analysis offers park administrators the opportunity to identify strengths and weaknesses in the whole national park network. In the future, it

would be useful to expand the analysis to other types of recreation and protection areas in order to obtain a more comprehensive picture of the factors that attract visitors those areas.