

Trail use and willingness to participate in trail management by local community of the Neeruti protected area, Estonia

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Introduction

Beside the visitor studies in protected areas local community studies are becoming more and more relevant in the perspective of locals' participation in trail use as well as in involvement in the management (Hughey et al 2015, Buta et al 2014, Reimann et al 2014). Neeruti Landscape Conservation area is established in 1957 with some restructuring in 1999 its area is 1313 hectares. The protected area is established to conserve unique postglacial landforms as well as forests, lakes and mires in the area. Neeruti is also included in the list of Natura 2000 areas. The area is also known as an action place of Estonian national epic, there Estonian national hero Kalevipoeg used to plow with a horse and formed the current landforms. Neeruti used to be a popular recreational area already 100 years ago when it had weekend recreation from Tallinn because of the good railway connection. In 1960s the first official nature trail in Soviet Estonia was established here. Today more marketed national parks and other protected areas have stronger popularity in Estonia and Neeruti has mainly regional importance for Lääne-Viru county inhabitants. The purpose of the current study was to find out the usage and importance of the hiking trails for the local community and their willingness to contribute to the trail and visitor management processes.

Material and methods

As in most of the rural regions many people who call themselves as locals are actually just summer residents, many of them used to live in the area permanently some 20-30 years ago, but as the job opportunities in rural Estonia are getting more and more limited many people find a job in cities and are able to visit their former homes only for summer and weekends. The aim of the study was to interview the real locals, it means who live permanently within the borders of the protected area. Authors communicated with the village elder to find out the permanent residents of the area. 15 households were selected for research. Structured interviews were conducted with 11 persons. As the demographic situation in Neeruti is typical for the outlying area in Estonia local community is ageing and 9 respondents out of the 11 were 45+.

Results and discussion

Local residents are active in their everyday life and the majority (7) of them visit hiking trails at least once a week, two once a month and two of them did not visit hiking trails because they thought that trails are not enough attractive and they have much nicer nature closer to their homes than on the trailside, one respondent (92 years) mentioned also health problems. Locals who visited trails frequently said that trails are pleasant places for enjoying nature and for exercising, often they also enjoy trails together with their families. They like walking and skiing in the winter-time, also berry and mushroom picking were mentioned. Locals have very strong emotional and place attachment with the protected area and they are very proud of the beautiful nature of their neighborhood and they said that visitors who love nature are always welcome. Most of the respondents are delivering the information to visitors with pleasure and allow the visitors even camp on their private land (for free).

The majority of respondents (9) have not been disturbed by the visitors, two respondents mentioned that visitors are disturbing them sometimes. Those locals live close to the recreational facilities and to the main access road to the trails. They said that they do not have anything against nature lovers, but the problematic ones are the visitors who do not care about the nature and just come to have noisy parties. Another problem besides the noise was littering, but this problem is relevant to small amount of visitors.

The majority of respondents (9) were ready to participate in trail maintenance work on voluntary bases. They said that they have done it years ago and they would like the trails to be more attractive, because beautiful sceneries which existed are closed by the bushes and scrubs and if they cut and remove even fallen tree from the trailside they are perform illegal activities, because the nature conservation laws and bureaucrats are very strict. Locals are aware that maintenance work of hiking trails and increased attractiveness can cause the growth of visitation, but they are ready for that, because attractive trails should attract more nature lovers. Only two respondents got some economic benefits from the recreation performing sometimes as guides to the groups. The rest of the locals would do it just for their own emotional benefits and they are happy to share their beautiful neighbourhood with all the visitors.

Conclusions

Working with visitors the park managers often forget local residents as a key stakeholder group because of their constant interaction with the setting through their daily and recreational activities, their place attachment and memories of the surroundings which can date back even centuries. The current study proved that locals can be very active in usage of recreational facilities and are ready for discussion and sharing their knowledge. Landscape conservation areas like Neeruti are established to maintain landscape diversity and scenery according to the Estonian Nature Conservation Law. Some management and forest cutting is allowed and more interaction and discussion is needed between nature conservation officials and local community, because their main goals are the same to conserve attractive landscapes and together it is possible to implement the beneficial knowledge of the both sides.



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