

National park visitors' interest to use tourism services in rural communities

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Abstract — National park visitation can have a considerable economic impact in rural areas. It is valuable to understand the factors, which explain the interest and use of tourism services in rural communities in the vicinity of national parks. The aim of this study were to analyse if there were visitor groups whose intention to use the services differed and what kinds of services were the most interesting for these visitor groups. The study focused on the association between the visitor segments based on service use intention, and background factors such as attitudes towards country-side in general, and visitors' socioeconomic background. Furthermore, the relation between visitor segments and visit intentions and satisfaction were studied. We examined these topics in two regions in Finland, where tourism industry is not a strong economic actor at the present. The data was collected in two national parks, Seitsemien and Linnansaari, in Central and Eastern Finland. The number of responses was 554, and the response rate was 68. Preliminary results show that national park visitors can be divided into two main groups considering the interest in using tourism services. First part of park visitors were outdoor recreation oriented and interested to use non-motorized or motorized outdoor activities such as fishing tours, nature studying excursions and snowmobile safaris. The other part of the park visitors was 'general tourists' who were interested mainly in tourism services such as accommodation and restaurants, etc. The visitor groups differed with respect their intention to visit the park and the region, countryside attitudes and socioeconomic background variables. The results of this study may help tourism enterprises in surrounding rural communities to find the right clientele for their services and products. For the park managers this information is valuable when planning the future management policies and actions. The understanding and recognition of visitors' overall needs, when visiting the park and the surrounding countryside, is also needed by actors such as municipality decision makers and inhabitants of rural communities.

Index Terms — Nature-based tourism, visitor, visitor segmentation.

1 INTRODUCTION

In many rural communities, where agriculture and forestry have experienced a remarkable reduction, and can not provide the principal livelihood, nature tourism

is looked for as a new opportunity to offer economic alternatives for the community. The magnitude of the tourism impact on local economy depends on the number of visitors to the national park, their interest to use local tourism services, and their expenditure in local and regional services and products. In this study we focus visitors' intention to use services on the region of a national park in the future.

In Finland, half of the national parks are located in southern part of the country, where the majority of Finnish population lives. These parks are relatively small in area, and they locate in the most rural landscapes of their regions. For the majority of the popula-

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tion, the parks are tourism destinations rather than close-to-home recreation areas. Many of these parks are fairly young, established during the last two decades. At the time of establishment, there has been often strong local objection for the park. However, today parks are more and more often seen as an opportunity for tourism service entrepreneurs than as an obstacle for primary production.

According to Metsähallitus [1] there were about 1.6 million visits to 35 Finnish national parks in 2007. Around 20% of Finns visit national parks or other state owned recreation areas at least once a year [2]. High education and employment status, participation in cross-country skiing, downhill skiing and camping increases the probability of visit the state protected areas [3].

Studies of characteristics of tourism destinations, attractions of nature-based tourism and nature tourism management alternatives discuss the choice of destination and factors related to it [4], [5], [6], [7]. A destination is a package of the attraction itself (national park) and tourism facilities and services available at the destination. It is composed of a number of attributes that together determine the attractiveness of the travel destination to a particular tourist [8]. It is important to look the national park tourism from the point of view of the 'holistic tourism experience' including the park visit and the visit to the region. The holistic perspective may help tourism enterprises in surrounding rural communities to assess their services and products to fulfil the park visitors' needs. Understanding and recognition of visitors' overall needs when visiting the park and the countryside is essential for all actors around a park: municipality decision makers, entrepreneurs and inhabitants of rural communities, as well as park managers.

The objective of this study is to get a better understanding how visitors to a national park intend to use the services provided in the park region in the future. We are interested to see are there visitor groups whose intention to use the services differs and what kinds of services are the most inter-

esting for these visitor groups? The aim of this study was also to analyse if there is association between the visitor segments based on service use intention, and background factors such as attitudes towards country-side in general, and visitors' socioeconomic background. Furthermore, we were interested to see which visitor groups had highest intention to visit the park again, or the region again, and how satisfied they were to the visit in the park.

2 DATA AND METHODS

2.1 Study area

The study was conducted in two national parks in Southern Finland. The natural environment in Linnansaari is characterised by distinguished lake scenery [9] as the Linnansaari National Park is located in the middle of the large lake area in Eastern Finland. The natural landscape in Seitsemien National Park is forest dominated. Linnansaari was established in 1956, and Seitsemien in 1982. Linnansaari and Seitsemien parks provide a high standard of park services, e.g. visitor centres, trails and camping sites with fire rings. The communities close to Linnansaari national park are more urbanised and provide more tourism services for park visitors than municipalities close to Seitsemien [10]. In 2007 there were 44 000 visits to Seitsemien National Park, and 29 000 to Linnansaari National Park ([1]).

The empirical data used here was collected from Seitsemien and Linnansaari national parks in 2006. The sampling season was from the mid May to the beginning of October. Altogether 544 respondents returned the inquiry. Response rates were 72% in Seitsemien, and 63% in Linnansaari. Along the questionnaire the respondents were informed with a map about the boundaries of the park area and the boundaries of the surrounding countryside,

which was chosen to represent the local community in this study.

2.2. Variables

The key variables used were the interest to use different kinds of tourism services. The actual use and interest to use services were measured with a list of 37 items. The list of tourism services included guided excursions, equipment rentals, rentals for sauna, room for festivities, catering services, cafes and restaurants, renting different types of accommodation, possibilities to visit a farm and to participate in farm activities etc. Both the intentions to visit the park and the region again were measured. The satisfaction to services was measured using Likert-type scale (1-5). For the analysis we calculated an index variable where the single attribute of satisfaction were weighted with the importance of that service. From many other items concerning the visit to the park and the surrounding country-side we used here attitudes towards countryside and some socioeconomic background variables to profile the visitor groups.

2.3 Analyses

From statistical methods we first used factor analysis (Maximum likelihood extraction and Varimax rotation) to find service packages in which visitors' interests of using were mostly correlated. Based on these packages we used K-means clustering analysis to identify different visitor groups. To compare the visitor groups we used analysis of variance.

3 RESULTS

Almost half of the visitors did come to the region only because of the national park, and more than half of the visitors informed that their contact to local people occurs only when using local services. Many visitors to Linnansaari and Seitsemien national parks had some regular contact to

the region: relatives or friends lived in the region, or they had some other interest (a special outdoor or cultural activity, etc.), to visit the park, or they owned a recreation home close by.

The visitors were divided into six groups based on the results of factor and cluster analysis of the future interest of using the services provided in the region. The visitor groups were 1) visitors who were interested in guided excursions, labelled as 'guided'; 2) visitors how were interested mainly in services which support independent recreation in the park; labelled 'independent' ; 3) visitors who were interested in motorized safaris, labelled as 'safaris'; 4) visitors who were interested in activities and services related particularly to the rural life (farm life, farm products etc.), labelled as 'countryside'; 5) visitors who were interested in renting room for family festive events and catering services, labelled as 'fest services', and 6) visitors who were interested in renting accommodation and equipment, labelled as 'room and rentals'.

TABLE 1.

NATIONAL PARK VISITOR GROUPS BASED ON THEIR INTEREST TO USE SERVICES IN THE PARK VICINITY...

	Groups	%, of visitors
Outdoor recreation oriented	Guided	15
	Independent	14
	Safaris	27
Tourism oriented	Country-side	15
	Fest services	14
	Room & rentals	15

Respondents were fairly equally distributed in all these groups, only the group of "safaris" was bigger than others (Table 1). These groups could be titled as outdoor recreation oriented and tourism oriented based on the services they were interested.

The groups differed significantly with respect the background variables (table 2). Those visitors, who expressed the most positive attitude towards countryside, were

TABLE 2.

INTENTION TO VISIT THE PARK AGAIN, ATTITUDE TOWARDS COUNTRY SIDE, SATISFACTION TO PARK SERVICES AND SOCIOECONOMIC BACKGROUND VARIABLES IN DIFFERENT VISITOR GROUPS. VARIABLES IN BOLD ARE STATISTICALLY SIGNIFICANTLY DIFFERENT BETWEEN GROUPS.

Variables	Outdoor recreation oriented groups			Tourism oriented groups			F-statistic (p-value)
	Guided	Inde-pen- dent	Safaris	'Coun- try-side	Fest ser- vices	Room & rent- als	
	Mean						Chi-square (p-value)
ATTITUDE towards countryside, sum index	53	53	50	51	50	50	3.469 (0.004)
AGE, years	50	42	47	41	46	42	3.942 (0.002)
HOUSEHOLD INCOME group	6.6	6.3	6.7	5.1	6.3	6.4	3.306 (0.006)
	% of respondents						Chi-square (p-value)
SEX , female	52	39	42	61	48	50	8.140 (0.149)
Access to RECREATION HOME in region	19	20	27	30	27	6	13.644 (0.018)

TABLE 3.

GENERAL SATISFACTION AND INTENTION OF VISITOR GROUPS TO VISIT THE PARK AND REGION AGAIN.

Variables	Outdoor recreation oriented groups			Tourism oriented groups			F-statistic (p-value)
	Guided	Inde-pen- dent	Safaris	'Coun- try-side	Fest ser- vices	Room & rent- als	
	Mean						Chi-square (p-value)
Satisfaction to the quality of park services, sum index	49	49	47	51	50	50	0.747 (0.589)
Satisfaction to the quantity of park services, sum index	16	15	18	16	16	16	0.915 (0.472)
	% of respondents						Chi-square (p-value)
INTENTION to visit the PARK again	74	72	68	67	80	56	9.887 (0.079)
INTENTION to visit the REGION again	69	75	69	71	70	49	11.873 (0.037)

the two groups, who were interested in outdoor recreation services, either guided excursions or independently. The 'countryside' group had more often than others access to recreation home on the region. Guided excursions were in interest of older

people, and motorized safaris among visitors with the highest household income.

Variables that measured the overall satisfaction for the park visit itself did not show any differences between the visitor groups, when the classification was made accord-

ing to the interest to use countryside tourism services (Table 3).

Intention to visit the park again as well as intention to visit the region again, differed between groups (Table 3). The visitor group 'room & rentals', which was the most 'tourist' type of visitors, as they expressed the most needs for accommodation, expressed least interest to visit again either the park or the region. Those visitors who expressed interest to use services related to organizing family events or festivals in the region, were the most interested to visit the park, and also the region again. These visitors had often also other contacts to region such as a recreation home. The two groups, who were interested in outdoor recreation services, either guided excursions or independently had also fairly high interest to visit the park and the region again, particularly the independent group. The 'countryside' group, who seemed to have a continuous interest to visit the region (access to recreation home), were among the three least interested groups to visit the park again.

4 CONCLUSIONS

These preliminary results of national parks visitors and their interest towards local tourism services in the countryside around a park showed that the park visitors are rather heterogeneous in what type of services they are interested in, and also, how the interest relates to the intention to visit the park itself and the region again. Those visitors who are outdoor recreation oriented and interested in renting equipment or buying guided excursions, were among those who were the most interested to visit the park again. Particularly those who expressed their interest for independent recreation, were also most interested to take another visit to the region. This result suggests that there is potential for entrepreneurs to reach national park visitors to use tourism services in the vicinity of the park, but obviously there is need to develop the provision of

those services in order to appeal different types of visitors.

More research is needed to identify the multilevel interactions between the visit motivation to the national park and park communities, tourism service use and the intention to revisit the region.

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