

Visitor management for nature-based tourism and community development: Participation across protected area borders

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Introduction

This paper addresses participation and cooperation in developing visitor strategies across protected borders in order to achieve synergies between nature-based tourism and local community development. Whereas the conservation authority is responsible for planning and land-use decisions within the protected area border, the municipalities are responsible for the adjacent areas. We present two case areas from Norway: Nærøyfjorden in the west and Varanger in the high north. The two areas consist of large protected areas: the Nærøyfjorden landscape protected area (and part of Norwegian West Fjords, a UNESCO World Heritage Area) and Varanger Peninsula National Park. In both places, there are several small rural communities nearby. In addition, regional nature and culture parks (regional parks) have been established in the two regions. Nærøyfjorden World Heritage Park was established in 2008, and Varanger Arctic Norway was established in 2016. In this paper, we discuss the role of the regional parks as a bridge-builder among the environmental conservation authority, municipalities and other actors in order to create sustainable synergies between tourism and community development.

Conservation policy in change

There are two ongoing trends for decentralised and integrated protection and community development in Norway (Skjeggedal & Clemetsen 2017). The first is related to changes in conservation policy due to the decentralisation of management responsibility from the state to inter-municipal boards with political representation beginning in 2009 and from the introduction of visitor strategies for larger protected areas launched in 2015. The second trend is the emergence of regional parks in voluntary cooperation and partnerships between public bodies and private organisations to promote sustainable community development, which may include protected areas (as in our two case study areas). Unlike regional parks in many other European countries, Norwegian parks have no formal status in any legislation.

Methods and data

This paper is based on case studies, including qualitative interviews, funded by two research projects. The study of Nærøyfjorden was funded by the Norwegian Research Council's regional body, and Varanger is part of the ongoing research project BIOTOUR (From place-based natural resources to value-added experiences: Tourism in the new bio-economy; funded by the Norwegian Research Council). In Nærøyfjorden, 12 semi-structured interviews with 13 persons representing public agencies and businesses were conducted in 2015 and 2016. So far, in Varanger, five representatives from different public bodies and two local small-scale tourism providers were interviewed in May 2017.

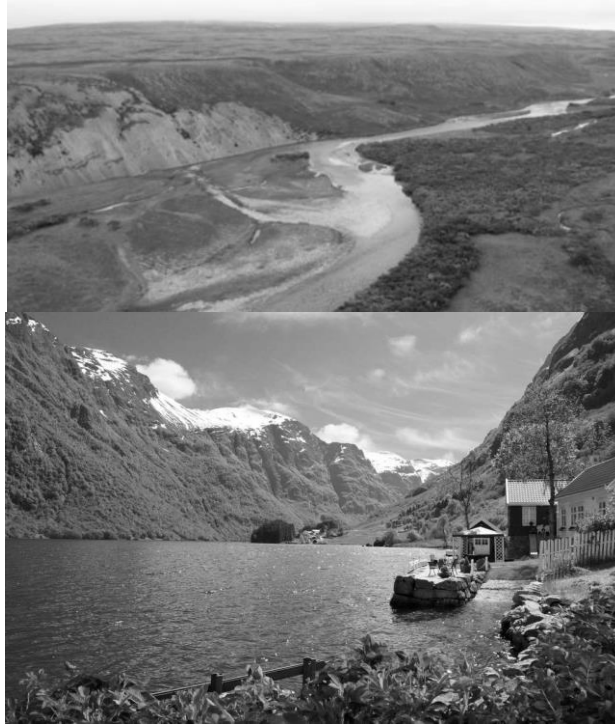


Figure 1: The *Varanger arctic landscape at the top and the fjord landscape at Nærøyfjorden below.*

The two case areas (see Figure 1) represent two different contexts related to tourism; whereas Nærøyfjorden is one of the most popular destinations in Norway, receiving about 700,000 tourists per year, Varanger has a much smaller number of visitors. However, the region experiences a seasonal increase in tourism, particularly related to bird watching (mainly arctic sea birds, such as eiders). The landscape characteristics are also quite different: Varanger represents an open and arctic landscape, whereas Nærøyfjorden represents a dramatic fjord landscape (see Figure 1). The Varanger region is multicultural, with Sami, Finnish and Norwegian inhabitants.

Results and discussion

A visitor strategy was developed for Varanger Peninsula National Park in 2015, as one of three pilots initiated by the national conservation authority. The goals of the strategy are: 1) strengthen the conservation values and increase understanding of protection, 2) local community development and 3) valuable experiences for visitors. An important aim is to limit the number of tourists visiting the inner part of the national park, while emphasising the outer parts and four selected gateways in order to welcome more tourists. A general impression from the interviews is that there is limited integration between national park management and municipal land use planning for the adjacent areas in visitor management, despite the fact that these areas are considered to have much of the same qualities as the national park. Proactive land use planning for adjacent areas is lacking due to limited capacity in the municipalities and a traditional focus on the built-up areas (towns and larger villages). Participation from other actors in the process has also been limited.

In the other case study area, Nærøyfjorden World Heritage Park took the initiative to develop a first generation visitor strategy in 2016 for the World Heritage Area, including the protected areas. In this area, participation and cooperation between the regional park and other actors have been rather intensive (Stokke, Haukeland & Clemetsen 2016). Because regional parks have no formal status, they depend on voluntary participation and involvement in the process of developing the visitor strategy. This approach has been successful when it comes to local

organisations, small-scale businesses and management of protected areas, but this approach has greater limitations when dealing with larger, more authoritative actors, such as the harbour authority and cruise ship actors.

Despite ongoing trends of changing conservation policy and the emergence of regional parks, Norway still takes a rather segregated approach to nature conservation. Applying a stronger link to European regional park models may have the potential to bridge nature and culture, as well as conservation, nature-based tourism and place making, across the national park border (Gambino & Peano 2015). A landscape perspective based on the European Landscape Convention may provide a common arena across legal boundaries and include a broad spectrum of actors from municipalities, local inhabitants, industries and nature-based tourism entrepreneurs. In this presentation, we will explore opportunities and constraints associated with these potentials.

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