

Ecotourism in Russian Karelia: Emergence, development, opportunities

Alexander Osipov, University of Eastern Finland, Department of Geographical and Historical Studies

Abstract

This review article examines the development of ecotourism in national parks in the Republic of Karelia over the last 30 years. In Russia, the term “ecotourism” has appeared in newspapers and scholarly articles since the 1990s and its popularity is still increasing. The authorities in the Republic of Karelia have argued that tourism and especially ecotourism have the potential to become a major sector of the Republic’s economy. This article focuses on the meaning of this term internationally, and especially in the context of Russia and Karelia, and considers this definition through the lens of conventional historiography. The key issue of this research is the triangular relationship between ecotourists, local communities and wildlife conservation areas or national parks, where ecotourism functions as a major tool, connecting all these points. This paper applies comparative historical research methods as part of a qualitative approach, analysing a variety of primary sources including archive materials, interviews and forum discussions. The article concludes that the slow growth of ecotourism, despite the attempts of regional authorities and the assistance of the European Union, is due to several reasons including remote locations, poor infrastructure and the lack of symbolic meaning for national parks.¹

Keywords: ecotourism, Republic of Karelia, national park, space, landscape

Introduction

In February 1997, the central newspaper of the Republic of Karelia *Severnõi kur’er* published an article on the Vodlozero National Park (Kiryasov, 1997). This article contained what appears to be the first mention of ecotourism in the local press and also focused on issues of wildlife protection and the sustainable development of natural resources in the Vodlozero National Park with

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the assistance of TACIS (Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States). Does this mean that ecotourism in the Republic of Karelia did not exist before 1997 and was introduced artificially? Vodlozero National Park was founded in 1991 and was the first national park in the region, so it appears that the prerequisites for ecotourism development already existed. Tourism development in wildlife conservation areas was also actively discussed in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The more important question may therefore be: what is ecotourism?

This article presents the first attempt to shed light on the history of the development of ecological tourism in the Republic of Karelia and to demonstrate its features. This is particularly important in the context of the high expectations of the tourism industry in the Republic. Former heads of the Republic Andrej Nelidov and Aleksandr Hudilainen, as well as the current head Artur Parfenchikov, have continued to focus on developing tourism potential and opportunities, prioritising the economic aspect. In other words, they have been focusing on what the tourism industry can become (Bolmat, 2017; Golovanov, 2017; Klepikov, 2010). This article examines the history of ecotourism in Karelia, including what was planned, what was implemented or stayed on paper only, what were the main stages of ecotourism development and what key difficulties existed in this area?

Wildlife conservation areas, primarily national parks, are an integral part of ecotourism. Thus, the national parks of Paanajärvi, Ladoga Skerries and Vodlozero will be considered in this study. The first two parks are located close to the Finnish-Russian border and are part of the Green Belt of Fennoscandia, while Vodlozero National Park is situated to the east of Lake Onega. National parks are closely linked with local communities (Buckley, 2009; Hall & Boyd, 2005), so an examination of relationships between parks, citizens and tourists is an important part of this research. This article analyses the development of ecotourism in Karelia from the late 1980s to 2018, which allows us to trace the continuities and breaks in nature tourism development in both Soviet Russia and the Russian Federation. Another important factor to be taken into account is the link between the Republic of Karelia and Finland. The regions of Paanajärvi and Ladoga Skerries are not only national parks and former Finnish territories, but also former Finnish national landscapes and symbolic places for Finnish history and culture.

Methods and data

The history of Paanajärvi and Ladoga as tourist destinations in the second half of the 19th century until the Second World War has been mentioned in numerous papers (Lintunen, Aukee, Malkova, & Tolonen, 1998; Meriläinen, 1993; Siiskonen, 1994; Vartiainen, 1932). However, the modern history of tourism development in these and other protected areas in the Republic of Karelia remains to be written. The majority of papers examine tourism potential rather than the history of the tourism industry (Stepanova, 2014, 2016). The only monograph devoted to tourism history was published in 2018 and is, unfortunately, seriously flawed (Glushanok, 2018; Osipov, 2018).

This review article has been conducted within the framework of conventional historical research using various sources: first, archival documents from the National Archive of the Re-

public of Karelia (hereafter NARK). These materials include meeting transcripts, directives, reports, proposals and correspondence. Andrey Gromcev, Head of the Laboratory for Landscape Ecology and Forest Ecosystems Protection of Forest Research Institute of Karelian Research Centre (KarRC), kindly provided unpublished documents concerning the Paanajärvi National Park and ecotourism development.

Another body of sources consists of local press materials, including the perspectives of journalists, scientists, entrepreneurs and local communities. These articles were gathered from the following republican and regional newspapers from 1989: *Komsomolets*, *Komsomol'skaya pravda*, *Ladoga-Sortavala* and *Leninskaya pravda* (later renamed *Severnyj Kur'er*).

This review article also uses interviews with local citizens, authorities and scholars recorded in Sortavala, Paanajärvi and Petrozavodsk in 2013 and 2018–2019. Due to the narrow scope of this paper, it has been impossible to use all of the collected data; only seven interviews were selected for analysis. Two of these were collected in 2013 and concerned the Ladoga Skerries National Park from the point of view of local authorities. Another three were recorded in 2018 with inhabitants of Pyaozerskij, which is the closest settlement to the Paanajärvi National Park. The final interviews were recorded in 2019 with scholars from KarRC.

This research examines a peculiar new historical source – data from online forums and social network discussions, all of which express different opinions. For example, a public discussion group “Sortavala City” on the most popular and widespread Russian social network Vkontakte has become a forum for heated debate concerning the destiny of North Ladoga. The forum consists of 10,500 posts (as of June 2019) from both opponents and supporters of the Ladoga Skerries National Park. An analysis of this forum provided an explanation as to why the local population does not support the idea of a national park close to Sortavala.

Based on a variety of sources, this study applies comparative historical research methods as part of a qualitative approach. This review article will examine ecotourism in Russian Karelia step by step, including features of ecotourism development in different national parks and its significance from both economic and social points of view. In other words, using a comparative historical method and following political sociologist Lange, this review article analyses particular phenomena in particular places at particular times (Lange, 2013). It should be noted that this paper is not intended to be a comprehensive study of ecotourism development in Russian Karelia, but rather focuses on determining milestones and features based on primary sources.

The first steps of ecotourism development

Mexican tourism researcher Hector Ceballos-Laskurain proposed the term “ecotourism” in 1983. Professor David Fennell, a tourism researcher from Canada, has argued that ecotours around the Trans-Canada Highway were developed on the basis of different ecological zones starting from 1976, and in his book *Ecotourism* (first edition: 1999), he provides other examples of ecotourism activities in other countries, which, however, in practice, did not have this name (Fennell, 2008). It therefore appears that the practice of ecotourism existed before the advent of the term.

The main question is not, however, when the term first appeared (this issue is more pertinent in the regional aspect), but what it really meant. Ceballos-Laskurain, who proposed the term, defined it as “tourism that involves travelling to relatively undisturbed natural areas with the specific goal of studying, admiring and enjoying the scenery and its wild plants and animals, as well as any existing cultural aspects (both past and present) found in these areas” (Ecoclub, 2006). Ten years later, the author revised the term, which became popular and added to the definition the concepts of “responsible travel”, “low negative visitor impact” and “beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local populations”. This definition was officially adopted by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) in 1996 (Ecoclub, 2006).

According to Fennell (2008), by 2008 the term ecotourism had approximately 85 definitions in the scholarly literature. Most of scholars have argued that the principal features of ecotourism are its nature-based character, minimal impact on the environment and socio-economic benefits for local communities (Buckley, 2009; Fennell, 2008; Orams, 2001).

Ecotourism is not a new phenomenon for Russia, having existed for more than 20 years. Authors of the monograph *Ecotourism on the way to Russia*, published in 2002, argued that the term appeared around 1995–1996 (Ledovskih, Drozdov, & Moraleva, 2002). At the time, a plan for the development of ecotourism in the Vodlozero National Park was elaborated with the help of TACIS. The local press confirms the date of this reference to ecotourism (Kiryasov, 1997).

Compared to Canada, where the term ecotourism and ecotours existed before the 1980s, the emergence of de facto ecotours in the USSR had actually occurred earlier. According to Natal'ya Emel'yanova, the Bureau of International Youth Tourism “Sputnik” in the Irkutsk region created the first ecotours in the middle of the 1980s. Ecotours consisted not only of leisure but promoted awareness of Lake Baikal's ecological situation, and tourists themselves participated in resolving local ecological issues. Emel'yanova (2013) proposed that, during this period, ecotourism was more of a moral than an economic category.

It is important to note that certain ecotours had been actively discussed in the Republic of Karelia. Towards the end of the 1980s, the Karelian Regional Council for Tourism and Excursions elaborated excursions focused on the study of nature that was the closest activity possible to the contemporary definition of ecotourism. Three routes were planned near the tourist camps of Petrozavodsk and Sortavala: “Lososinnoe – on the ecological trail”, “Kosalma – on the ecological trail” and “Sortavalskaya – nature and man”. Another two routes were planned in the Kizhi and Valaam museum preserves (NARK. f. 6467, op. 1, d. 274, l. 52; d. 255, l. 46). It therefore appears that the first attempts at ecological education had already been implemented in the Soviet Era, although they cannot be considered ecotourism in its current sense.

The exact definition of ecotourism envisages its implementation in the territory of wildlife conservation areas, especially national parks. It should be stressed that the term “national park” is relatively young in the context of Russia, despite the fact that the first such park was established in the USSR in 1973. Widespread establishment of national parks in Russia started in the 1990s, during which time the national parks of Vodlozero (1991), Paanajärvi (1992) and Kalevala (1995) appeared in the Republic of Karelia (note that the Federal Act on Protected Areas was adopted only in 1995 and before that time, parks were operating under the old Soviet

law). Nevertheless, the concept of a national park, its functions and objectives were not clear to most of the population of the republic. The system of protected areas in the USSR consisted of nature reserves and strict nature reserves, with numerous restrictions; local residents therefore perceived the first national parks as more of a hindrance than an opportunity (Interviews 3, 4). This has led to the publication of articles by scholars in the central republican newspapers to shed light on the term “national park”. Scientists from the KarRC clarified that the concept of a national park reflects the idea of the recreational management of nature, which combines conservation, research and tourism development. In contrast with the Soviet system of nature protection, which focused on conservation or preservation of certain species of animals or plants, the concept of a national park also includes the development of nature tourism (Kuchko, 1990; Systra, 1991; Vampilova, 1990).

Before 1997, scientists discussed nature, sport, educational and international tourism on the territories of national parks. The term ecotourism began to become popular only in the early 2000s. Some researchers equated nature tourism and ecotourism, but the majority of researchers have held a different opinion. According to Buckley (2009), Fennell (2008) and Orams (2001), ecotourism is a part of nature tourism that focuses primarily on watching, whereas nature tourism provides for more activity. This difference reflects the situation in the USSR, where nature tourism was especially popular but had little resemblance to ecotourism. Indeed, it was precisely the element of activity or adventure that brought together nature tourism and sport in the USSR. This included a large variety of routes with different degrees of difficulty (including climbing, rafting and Arctic expeditions) that transformed nature tourism into sport. Looking at the system of tourism ranks, levels and standards, the organisation of all-union tourism conventions confirmed this feature of Soviet tourism. The analysis of archive sources demonstrates that at the end of the 1980s more than one third of all organised tourist groups in the Republic of Karelia consisted of nature tourists (Calculated by: NARK. f. 6467, op. 1, d. 274, l. 35, 01.01.1988). The key differences between Soviet nature tourism and modern ecotourism were the element of risk, the overcoming of natural barriers and the conquest and development of natural habitats, which were typical during the Soviet period in contrast with non-interference and observation as key features of modern ecotourism.

Local communities, ecotourism and economic impact

The building of relationships with local communities and the integration of parks into the local economy are crucial in establishing national parks in the Republic of Karelia. This is especially the case as the appearance of Vodlozero National Park and the discussion of Ladoga Skerries National Park have caused social-ecological and economic conflicts (Forum discussions; Interviews 1, 2). The establishment of Vodlozero National Park in 1991 led to a reduction in logging areas, as well as restrictions on fishing and other uses of natural resources. Despite the unresolved issues, the park was created, and the economic crisis in the country in the middle of 1990s only aggravated the effects of the economic crisis in the region.

From the point of view of local communities, as shown in numerous publications in republican newspapers, Vodlozero National Park was a new and vague concept funded by the Federal Government. The park restricted people's access rights to the forest and, at the same time, became the most important part of the local economy, as the park took over the moribund local fish factory. Management and park service employees were concentrated in Kuganavolok village, which is located in the park, and this somewhat resolved the issue of unemployment: in 1994, 133 out of 170 able-bodied local residents worked in the park (Dobrynina, 1994; Vodlozer'e..., 1995). Nonetheless, due to lack of financing, the park could not resolve all of the socioeconomic issues in the Pudozh district. In the words of local residents, the park was the root of the trouble and "a rope around their neck" (Sohnova, 1999). Locals accused the park of being responsible for the collapse in farming, cattle breeding, fishing and logging, despite the fact that these phenomena were widespread throughout Russia in the 1990s.

The first national parks in Russian Karelia faced considerable difficulties in the 1990s, and lack of financing was critical (Interviews 6, 7). Because of vague conceptualisation and a lack of professional management, development of tourism in protected areas stalled. High expectations were raised concerning TACIS projects, which had started in the Republic in 1996. Approximately 15 projects devoted to development of ecotourism and national parks had been implemented up to 2006. With the assistance of TACIS, the national parks of Paanajärvi, Kalevala and Vodlozero – as well as some nature reserves in the Republic – obtained new infrastructure and plans for economic development (Rouge-Oikarinen, 2009). All of their ambitious goals have not been fully achieved, however: planned national parks in Tulos and Koitajoki remained on paper only, and the establishment of the Ladoga Skerries National Park in 2001 failed. How, therefore, should we measure the economic impact of ecotourism and what assessment methods should be used?

Development of tourism is often evaluated based on the number of tourists, although this approach conflicts somewhat with the definition of ecotourism itself, which implies a minimal impact on nature. In the latter half of the 1990s and in the first half of the next decade, high expectations were placed on ecotourism by the local government. However, the reality was sluggish growth in tourism and expectations that never materialised. Only about 6,000 tourists visit Vodlozero and Paanajärvi national parks annually, rather than the estimated 35,000 according to the management plan elaborated by TACIS (Ahokumpu, Högmänder, Määttä & Ollikainen, 2001; Archive of Andrey Gromcev). The State Tourism Committee of the Republic of Karelia estimates the number of ecotourists at 4% (NARK. f. R-3750, op. 1, d. 1/20, l. 45). In comparison with other Russian regions, the share of ecotourists ranges from 1% (Makarova, 2015) to 5% (Nikolaeva, Bogolyubova & Shirin, 2015) according to different assessments. The number of ecotourists in the Republic of Karelia, as well as in Russia as a whole, is growing – albeit at a slow pace.

It must be noted, however, that official ecotourism statistics are not accurate: they only take into consideration visitors to a few national parks and do not include so-called unregulated tourism in other wildlife conservation areas (Interview 6). For instance, the Paanajärvi National Park has only one access road as it is located in a remote area and due to the proximity of the Finnish-Russian border. The park's visitor centre coordinates all tourism activity and ap-

proves all visitor passes and permissions. In the case of Paanajärvi National Park, the statistics are therefore correct. How, though, can we estimate the number of visitors to the Tolvojärvi (Finnish: Tolvajärvi) Nature Reserve located close to the Finnish-Russian border in the Suojärvi district? This place is famous for its combination of a unique natural habitat and its historical significance during the Second World War (many bloody battles occurred there). It is difficult to assess the number of tourists to the reserve, however, due to free admission and lack of control from the park's authorities.

All Russian national parks are managed and financed by the state; even so, the management of these parks tries to earn income through the development of tourism. The case of Paanajärvi demonstrates that park income from tourism services equal nearly 30%–35% of the State's financing (Bogdanov, 2016). The Russian experience in the field of ecotourism demonstrates the low commercial usage of wildlife conservation areas, while alternative financing is poor (Makarova, 2015; Zvyagina, 2015). The majority of researchers have emphasised that tourism should not be considered a panacea for longstanding economic problems, although initial expectations are often high (Fennell, 2008; Hall & Boyd, 2005). These expectations are particularly prevalent in regions with high ecotourism potential, or where economies are in transition and traditional industries (such as logging or mining) are in crisis. Likewise, ecotourism is not a panacea for ecosystems, because conservation and sustainability alone have not solved the planet's environmental problems (Orams, 2001). Ecotourism and national parks could also entail social-environmental conflicts, as shown below by the case of the Ladoga Skerries National Park.

The Ladoga Skerries National Park is indicative of the relationships between wildlife conservation areas, tourists and local communities. The park emerged in 2017 after a 30-year discussion, although republican and local authorities approved the first proposal for the foundation of the park at the end of the 1980s. The project stalled, however, for many reasons. The difficult point was deciding on a location for the planned park, because the area of Northern Ladoga was already widely used. Numerous factors, such as the close proximity of the city of Sortavala and other settlements, busy roads crossing the park, the large number of country houses, camps and outdoor recreational activities hindered the creation of the park. Scientists involved in the planning process for the park noted that the rights of thousands of property owners could be violated (Systra, 1997). The authors of the Ladoga Skerries project (2001) also observed that “the attitude of the local community toward the park is one of the thorniest questions” (Morozova, Gurova, Kozyreva, Kulakova, & Haapala, 2001). Other republican national parks created earlier – such as Vodlozero, Paanajärvi and Kalevala – did not face such issues due to their remote locations. Resistance from the logging industry and lack of financing became additional factors that hindered the foundation of the park.

Ecotourism development prospects approved by the republican authorities were not met with enthusiasm in local communities. The analysis of local Internet forums demonstrates a generally negative attitude from local residents towards tourists, who exploit the area around Sortavala. Although tourism plays an important role in the economy of the city, local residents are unwilling to share their space with visitors. Local forums reveal a particularly negative attitude towards tourists from Moscow and Saint Petersburg, whom they call “moneybags” (Inter-

views 1, 2; Forum discussions). Citizens of Sortavala use the national park territory for mushroom gathering, berry picking, fishing and hunting; they spend their holidays in their own country houses (some of which were built illegally) and ask “why should we leave this place?” (Forum discussions). By appropriating territory around their communities and using it for their own needs, the locals did not accept or support the development of the national park and ecotourism, which in their opinion violated their rights.

It should be emphasised that the local residents were disgruntled about the question of the park's borders. During the discussion stage, the project and its borders changed several times, and when the park shrank and retreated from private property, local communities changed their attitude to the park: “we're fine with it, today we received the information that the national park will not include our district” or “don't panic, they can't bother us” (Forum discussions). At the same time, residents of Sortavala did not have negative attitudes towards the tourists who visited Valaam, which is located close to the city. The Valaam Monastery is part of the Russian Orthodox Church, and Sortavala does not receive any income from the approximately 200,000 tourists. Residents of Sortavala do not perceive Valaam to be a part of their housing community, but rather as a regional shrine, symbol and brand that contributes to the visibility of the Republic of Karelia.

National parks as national landscapes

As noted earlier, national parks can act as wildlife conservation areas and ecotourism destinations. They also represent a lived space for the local community that could cause conflicts. Another way in which national parks could be considered is as areas that exist directly through associated images and symbols (Lefebvre, 1991). However, this could lead to idealisation and a romanticised image of the wilderness – and, indeed, this has occurred in Finland (Saarinen, 2005). “The very name ‘national park’ conjures up a full spectrum of images: an unsullied wilderness, an attractive tourist destination, a vast playground, an economic engine, an ancestral homeland, a natural laboratory, a wildlife reserve, a vital ecosystem core” argues Keiter (2013, p. 10). He also adds that “national parks and wilderness are practically synonymous, at least in the minds of most visitors” (Keiter, 2013, p. 13).

Ideally, this rule functions as follows: by visiting a national park – which is a national symbol – a person identifies him- or herself with the region or its people. This kind of identification may also occur at the regional level, if a national park or other environmental landmark is a symbol of the region (Ilmolahti, Lähteenmäki, Karhu, & Osipov, 2018). In both cases, ecotourism becomes a tool for self-identification. Discussions of national identity and tourism have mainly considered museums and cultural heritage, but it is worth noting that natural attractions, including national parks and ecomuseums, often function as symbols of national or regional identity and are beginning to receive greater attention from researchers (Hall & Frost, 2009). Does this apply to the Karelian cases?

We have to recognise that this situation is not yet generally common in Russia. For instance, the most visited national park in the country – Elk Island, located within the bounda-

ries of Moscow – is not a symbol or trademark of the capital, and visiting it is not a reflection of its self-identity. The case of the Karelian national parks – including Paanajärvi and Ladoga Skerries – is more complicated. Both territories had long belonged to Finland and, after the Second World War, found themselves on the Russian side of the border. Despite lacking explicit environmental conservation status (although a proposal for foundation of a conservation area or national park in the Kuusamo region had already been in 1920s according to Lähteenmäki, 2017), both areas were popular among tourists during the post-war period. The area of Paanajärvi called the “Karelian Switzerland” received much praise from Finnish scientists, travellers, painters and writers (Nuutinen, 1932). Northern Ladoga was also particularly popular in the 1930s, and the view from the island of Riekkalansaari was depicted on the 500-mark banknote (Vartiainen, 1932). In the 1920s and 1930s, both territories were considered part of the Finnish national landscape and visiting was mandatory for self-identity.

After the war, the village of Paanajärvi ceased to exist and all of its inhabitants resettled in Finland. During the Soviet Era, the area of Paanajärvi was closed and access was restricted. The closest settlement was located 60 km to the south and was only founded in the 1970s. Residents could not imagine that Nuorunen, the highest peak in the Republic of Karelia and currently part of the national park, was in close proximity to their community (Interview 3; Smirnov, 1988). The park did not attract a large number of ecotourists. After the war, the Paanajärvi region lost its meaning as a Finnish national landscape, and the national park was unable to play the same role for Russian tourists. In the 1990s, the park was popular among Finnish tourists due to the wave of nostalgia tourism in Finland: the percentage of foreign tourists fluctuated between 28% and 48% (Ahokumpu et al., 2001). Only over time has the Paanajärvi National Park been able to become a “regional symbol”, “the pride of the district” and a “brand of Loukhi” (Interviews 3–5).

The case of Ladoga Skerries demonstrates another characteristic of symbolic meaning. The Finnish population of Sortavala was forced to leave their place of residence after the Second World War, and emigrants resettled the city. These new inhabitants perceived the surrounding nature as an area for living and not as a national landscape. Currently, the local community – recognising the meaning of environment – does not perceive the national park as a national or regional identifier. Rather, the struggle against the park became a unifying factor for local residents (Interviews 1, 2; Forum discussion) over the last 10 years. The park therefore still exists as a conceptualised space for scientists, as well as a living space for the numerous owners of country houses, but the Ladoga Skerries National Park is not a regional symbol or landscape despite its popularity among wilderness tourists (that is, self-organised independent travel not dependent on tourism, e.g. camping or backpacking).

An analysis of visitors to the most popular tourism landmarks in the Republic of Karelia confirms the fact that nature (i.e. wilderness) destinations are not symbols of the region. The top three tourist landmarks in the region are Ruskeala Mountain Park, Kizhi Museum and Valaam Monastery, all three human-made objects. About 300,000 tourists visited Ruskeala Mountain Park annually, a number wildlife conservation areas can only dream of (Interv’yu..., 2017). Karelian regional identity therefore appears to be linked with human-made objects such as historical and architectural sites, and not with national parks. There is no denying that the

tourist interest in the Karelian environment is growing: a variety of camps and guesthouses confirm high demand and offer different leisure options centred on nature. Adventure tourism, fishing and hunting are not, however, related to ecotourism.

Nature in general, presumably, could act as a regional identifier for the Republic of Karelia, while national parks are still searching for their place in the tourism sector. The reason for such low visiting rates at national parks is not only their remote locations, but also a lack of public awareness of the parks. In contrast with Kizhi, which has become a symbol of the republic and acts as a compulsory landmark for tourists as well as local residents, national parks do not have the same status. Increasing interest in national parks can be achieved in many ways; for instance, Vodlozero and Paanajärvi National Parks focus on the ecological education of children. Since 1993 these parks have organised ecological camps and lectures, and since the late 1990s they have participated in the international “March of Parks” movement, whose goal is to promote wildlife conservation areas, to find sponsors and to get people interested in nature – in 2017, for example, 2,446 participants took part in this action (Archive of Andrey Gromcev). Environmental education is definitely a long-term process, but it sets a basis of interest in nature and eventually a basis for sustainable development.

Another way to increase the attractiveness of national parks in Russian Karelia was suggested in the regional concept for tourism development, where there is an obvious trend of combining different forms of tourism. A clear example is the “Programme of tourism development of the Republic of Karelia from 2014–2020”, which envisaged a cluster approach – that is, forming a group of tourism organisations and enterprises on a geographical basis. The preliminary project suggested the creation of four clusters – Lake Onega, Lake Ladoga, the White Sea and a special economic zone along the Finnish-Russian border (NARK. f. R-3750, op. 1, d. 1/14, l. 5, 22.07.2013). Later, this idea was transformed, and during the last few years the “South Cluster” (centred on Lake Onega and Lake Ladoga) has begun to emerge. This cluster includes the most popular tourism destinations in the republic: Ruskeala Mountain Park (a flooded marble quarry), White Bridges Waterfall, Ladoga Skerries National Park and more than 200 objects of infrastructure (Interv’yu ..., 2016). Thus, the South Cluster is not only based on different tourism types – cultural, nature, active and agricultural – but also attempts to include ecotourism and wildlife conservation into the tourism industry.

The cluster approach to tourism development in the region as created by scientists and local government. It is not clear whether the local communities identify themselves with a certain cluster or whether tourists use that definition. As Steven Boyd rightly notes, “definitions and labels have been placed within tourism by the tourism industry and academics and not by tourists themselves. Tourists rarely classify themselves as a certain type of visitor, yet destination marketing organizations identify certain types of visitor based upon the opportunities the regions provide” (Boyd, 2004, pp. 19, 20).

Conclusions

An analysis of the transition from the Soviet to the Russian system of nature protection reveals that the prerequisites for ecotourism development were poor for at least two reasons. First, nature-based tourism in the USSR included the overcoming of natural barriers and conquest of nature, in contrast with the principles of ecotourism, which consist of minimal impact on nature and prioritisation of observing and learning. Strict nature reserves and other types of protected areas in the USSR also incorporated numerous restrictions, including on tourism. The establishment of the first national parks in the Republic of Karelia occurred in the first half of the 1990s, although the conceptualisation of these protected areas was vague. Financial difficulties, lack of legislation and lack of professional management, as well as the remoteness of the parks, hindered tourism development.

A new stage for national park and ecotourism development began in 1996: with the assistance of TACIS, about 15 projects were implemented in the national parks of Russian Karelia. Despite the ambitious plans created by the republican authorities, scientists and specialists of TACIS, the European Union and Finland, ecotourism development in the Republic of Karelia has been slow for several reasons. First, official statistics estimate the percentage of ecotourists in the Republic of Karelia to be 4%. This share is not entirely correct and includes only data from the national parks, without taking into consideration other protected areas and wilderness tourists. Second, the terms “ecotourism” and “national park” are relatively recent in the Karelian and Russian context, in contrast with global trends. The significance of a national park and its functions are therefore vague for local communities, which often consider national parks as more of a hindrance than an opportunity. Moreover, locals perceive wildlife areas to be part of their own living area. There is thus a collision of conceptualised space between the scientific perspective and the interests of local communities, and this has led to conflicts, as this article demonstrated using the example of Ladoga Skerries, where the park infringed on the borders of inhabited areas formed by local communities. At the same time, when the park retreated from private property, the negative attitude of the local people towards the park changed.

Another reason for the slow development of ecotourism remains crucial (in addition to the vague conceptualisation of national parks, material difficulties, remote location and social-environmental conflicts). National parks in the Republic of Karelia, as well as in Russia, are not national symbols and visiting a national park does not lead to tourist self-identification. Paanajärvi and Ladoga Skerries, the former Finnish national landmarks, do not currently play the same role in Russia, and the flow of nostalgia tourism from the Finnish side has dried up. Thus, picturesque places with well-developed infrastructure and additional services do not attract huge number of tourists, who prefer to avoid protected areas, which have rules, permissions and restrictions. One of the interviewed experts stressed that the reason for the unpopularity of national parks is the necessity of paying for services – including fishing and accommodation – whereas the Republic of Karelia could offer free opportunities of nature-based tourism. The development of protected areas without meaning-making in terms of a national or regional landscape has therefore been slow.

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National Archive of the Republic of Karelia.

Informaciya k ezhegodnomu gosudrastvennomu dokladu o sostoyanii okruzhayuschei prirodnoj sredy Respubliki Kareliya 2017 g. Archive of Andrey Gromcev.

Interviews

- Interview 1. 2013. A former Deputy of the Karelian Parliament. Interviewer: Gleb Yarovoj.
- Interview 2. 2013. A representative of local authority. Interviewer: Gleb Yarovoj.
- Interview 3. 01.04.2018. Former inhabitants of Pyaozerskij. Interviewer: Author.
- Interview 4. 11.05.2018. A former employee of Pyaozerskij local timber industry. Interviewer: Author.
- Interview 5. 11.05.2018. A former teacher in school of Pyaozerskij. Interviewer: Author.
- Interview 6. 18.04.2019. A representative of the KarRC. Interviewer: Author.
- Interview 7. 19.04.2019. A representative of the KarRC. Interviewer: Author.

Forum discussion

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