

Matkailututkimus 8: 1, 5-6 (2012)

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Pääkirjoitus

Sustainable tourism in nature areas

It can be argued that the term sustainability has been used in excess so that it has become a buzz-word. On the other hand, from the practical point of view a term is useful as long as it “gets the work done” and sustainability serves as an umbrella concept, under which many actions contributing to a better world can be addressed. Another question is, whether the umbrella of sustainability focuses coherently enough our actions towards improving the state of our globe.

Sustainable tourism means economic, social and cultural responsibility, tourists bringing benefits to the local communities and respecting their way of life. From the resource perspective, the goal of sustainable tourism in nature areas is to provide the desired quality experiences without hampering the resource itself that attracts the visitors to the destination at the first place. And the resource includes not only the ecological resource, but also the socio-cultural one.

Sustainable tourism is a broad concept, and therefore principles, criteria and indicators have been developed in many levels from global to local in order to define what is sustainable in practice. One concrete way of defining sustainability is through acceptability. Earlier, the focus was on the negative impacts of tourism and how to eliminate those, whereas these days the benefits are taken into account and sustainability is estimated also through what kinds of benefits the tourism activities produce and to whom. In the end, sustainability is all about decision making, setting minimum requirements, and balancing between the benefits and negative impacts. At the same time, relationships, cooperation and partnerships have become not only a competitive advantage but a necessity in all business, and consequently so also in achieving the goals of sustainable tourism. Doing alone is just not an option anymore; collaboration is an essential part of sustainability.

In this theme issue, there is one article and two reviews based on presentations given in the Sustainable Tourism Conference in Savonlinna, October 19-21, 2011. In addition, there is a review of a recent dissertation focusing on tourism and development, and a summary of another dissertation focusing on one specialised perspective of nature tourism, i.e. use of forests for nature education. All these five contributions address the theme of sustainable tourism in nature areas, yet from quite different perspectives.

Protected nature areas – including national parks as one of the most well known brand among them – are some of the most attractive destinations for tourists inter-

ested in nature vacations. Usually the protected nature areas have been established originally for their particular natural and/or cultural values and those values are to be preserved through management of these areas. In the article of Ferrari and Pratesi, challenges of protected area management are studied through a case of marketing the Italian national parks. As a conclusion, the study of Ferrari and Pratesi suggests that not only is sustainable tourism a prerequisite for the management of the national parks, but also an important conservation strategy. In other words, nature conservation can better achieve its goals through sustainable tourism, and even more: nature conservation can be based on sustainable tourism. This requires that the key actors realise sustainability as a must for good business, not only bringing benefits but ensuring the livelihood of the business.

Pitkämäki and Honkanen take a look at sustainability in nature areas from the tourists' point of view. According to their study, protected area visitors were ready to participate in those sustainability activities that are part of some other necessary activity and not only done for sustainability. Smolčić Jurdana and Soldić Frleta study an issue of developing tourism in a sustainable manner in Croatian rural areas. This is a timely issue, because rural tourism in Croatia seems to have a big growth potential. The essential question is: how to increase the volume of rural tourism in a sustainable manner? The authors approach this question from the perspective of tourist experiences as well as economic and social benefits, emphasizing the need for sustainable development through protection of the natural and cultural resources that primarily attract the visitors to these areas.

Related to the theme of sustainable tourism in nature areas, Jänis found out in her dissertation related to tourism development in Namibia that even though in principle nature protection increases biodiversity, which can mean economic benefits e.g. through tourism, and thereby increased commitment by local communities to nature conservation, there are many practical matters that can hinder this mechanism from not working properly. In the case of Namibia, nature is the most important tourism attraction and almost 40 % of the country's surface area consists of protected areas of one type or another.

In the dissertation of Rantala, the focus is on the special features of commercial nature tourism and on the practices of guides leading groups of foreign tourists in nature. Her study shows that a forest's suitability as an environment for commercial nature tourism is not only dependent on the restrictions and opportunities provided by the resource, on which the focus has traditionally been, but depends also on the dynamics between the forest, the actions of the nature guides and the motivations of the tourists.

This theme issue from its part illustrates the economic and social benefits that sustainable tourism can produce to communities as well as to the nature areas themselves. Combining these benefits with the knowledge and information available on the nature areas builds up a positive development setting, encouraging researchers and managers to strive for excellence in the management of nature areas.