Challenges for sustainable nature-based tourism: Vilsandi National Park, Saaremaa Island, Estonia

Drs. Stuart Cottrell
Human Dimensions of Natural Resources

Jana Raadik-Cottrell, HDNR & Kuressaare College of Tallinn University of Technology
Changing Landscapes
Estonian Green Belt
Estonian Green Belt
Changing landscapes
Tourism Development Issues for Saaremaa
Challenges for Saaremaa

- Challenge between desired nature based tourism destination image and wish to develop larger scale tourism (golf courses, resorts, etc.)
- Spa Tourism
- Beer festivals and car races
Challenges

- Rapid development of coastal areas – with external / private interests (e.g., international ownership) - Island Destination .......
- Possible bridge link to the mainland, Deep Port development- from cruise ships to cargo
Dimensions of Sustainability

- Economic
- Social
- Nature Based Tourism
- Institutional
- Environmental
Purpose of the Fellowship

- to enhance Vilsandi NP and stakeholder capacity to manage nature conservation collaboratively, enhance sustainable livelihoods among tour operators via tourism to the park and to enhance the visitor experience.
Partners

- CSU – Cottrell and CSU CCC Intern (Matt Burnam)
- Heritage Tours
- RMK - Estonian State Forest Service that manages visitor flows at Vilsandi National Park
- Kuressaare College of Tallinn University of Technology - Dr. Raadik-Cottrell and two interns
- Estonian Ministry of Environment
- Tourism Stakeholders
Vilsandi National Park

- Oldest nature protection area (bird sanctuary) in Baltics (since 1910)
- Appr. 150 islands and islets
- Total area 58,811 acres w/ 40,105 acres marine area
- Ramsar, Natura 2000, Europarc, Man and Biosphere
- 250 bird species (incl. IUCN VU Steller’s Eider), one of the most important gray seal ’nurseries’ in Europe
- 500 specimens of mosses and lichens
- More than 200 endangered plant species
Vilsandi National Park

- Has outstanding quality nature
- Has a variety opportunities for nature based tourism
- Has high visitor satisfaction
- Has a lot of visitors & that will continue to increase

More visitors means there is a need for visitor management / Experience zones
Challenges for VNP

- a decentralized management structure, disjointed conservation plan, nor a visitor management plan

- local stakeholders not actively involved – (in process, new requirement by Ministry of Environment)
Challenges for VNP

- A restructuring of the Estonian National Park system in 2009 abandoned the existing administration system.
- VNP management is split between a newly created Environmental Board who is responsible for nature protection and The State Forest Management Centre who oversees management of visitor services.
- Information and tourism services to the park was leased under a five year contract to Heritage Tours, a private tour operator. [http://www.parimusmatkad.ee/eng](http://www.parimusmatkad.ee/eng)
- These organizations manage different aspects of VNP, however with serious lack of cooperation.
- Numerous tourism operators utilize VNP for their nature based tours, yet without specific guidelines for use of the park.
Hello,

I'm writing to you from Estonia, from Saaremaa's daily newspaper Saarte Hääl. I heard that you are working with Vilsandi National Park and other protected-area stakeholders on Saaremaa Island, to facilitate development of a collaborative conservation plan coupled with visitor management and sustainable tourism development strategies for Vilsandi National Park to meet criteria to become a European Protected Area Network Park. We would like to write about it. Can you please tell us, what exactly is your assignment concerning to Vilsandi and other protected areas in Saaremaa? Have you been here in Saaremaa already or are you going to come in the nearest future? Who are you going to work with in here and what are you actually doing?

Looking forward to hear from you soon!

Best regards,
Kertu Kalmus
Saarte Hääl
reporter
Colorado professor asub tegelema Vilsandi kaitsealaga

Professor from Colorado will manage Vilsandi protected areas

Colorado University assigned its’ professor of natural resources to manage the stakeholder groups involved with Vilsandi National Park and other nature protected areas.

The aim is to jointly develop the plan for visitor management and sustainable tourism development strategies. The management plan is according to the university needed to meet the requirements of European protected areas.

Dr. Cottrell expressed to Saarte Hääl, that he is coming to Saaremaa already this summer to work on this project. “At this moment we are in the planning stage, thus it is too early to give more specific details.”

According to Cottrell the details of the management plan will be revealed to possible partners during project seminar, which will possibly take part either at the end of July or in the beginning of August. Until the meeting with potential stakeholders has not taken place, the focus will be just on Vilsandi National park and on different stakeholder groups and not so much on European protected areas network system.

Cottrelli sõnul tehakse kaitsekava detailid avalikuks võimalikele partneritele korraldataval projektiseminaril, mis peaks toimuma kas juuli lõpul või augusti algul. Kuniks potentsiaalsete koostööpartneritega kohtutud on püsib projekti fokus Cottrelli sõnul lihtsalt Vilsandi rahvuspargil ja erinevates sidusgruppides.
Process

- Two meetings – July 4\textsuperscript{th} and August 11\textsuperscript{th}
- Onsite visitor survey
- 2\textsuperscript{nd} Homeowner study
4th of July meeting

- Representatives from The Environmental Board and The State Forest Management Centre (RMK) met first time in person.
- New VNP nature protection management plan in process (includes visitor management issues)
- Stakeholder involvement in management plan development required by the Ministry of Environment
- RMK Visitor survey 2010
4th of July meeting

More than 15,000 visitors in 3 summer months
2\textsuperscript{nd} Meeting, August 11\textsuperscript{th}
Loona Manor
VNP Visitor Center
August 11th meeting
Visitor Survey

Nature Use Research

Responsibilities of State Forest Management Centre

Natural Objects Monitoring

Resource Monitoring

Visitor Flow Monitoring

Recreation Environmental Impacts Research
International Visitor Survey

- July 9th to July 30th (12 survey days)
- Onsite survey – 72 Total
  - 25 Estonian
  - 47 International
- Interviews in June and early July
- Parking lot counts (vehicles)
Length of Stay & First Time Visits

- **Length of stay**
  - On Saaremaa 2-5 days – majority (70%)
  - In Vilsandi 1-2 days (43% 2 days in park)

- **First visits**
  - First visit = 83%
  - Those not visiting for first time often bringing others who have not seen the park before – 37% been to park at least once
 Reasons for Visit

- Reasons for visiting
  - Nature (40%)
  - Bird watching (9%)
  - Wildlife (7%)
- Touring
  - Includes car, RV, and bike
  - Bike touring becoming more popular, Saaremaa is a good location
- Wish for more signs and information in English
- Visitor like the park but don’t know where to go
Second workshop August 11th

- Comments from RMK manager about area becoming a much larger area
  - Protected areas must offer local benefits – or will lose funding
- Little community or tourism operator representatives
- Agenda – too much information and no time for discussion
- No one came to the PAN Parks meeting in September
- Limited contact since… but things happening – November announcement (Jana highlight)
- Key aspects of meeting about 2nd home owners in Lumanda group concerning for stewardship
Second Home owner study

- In parallel to the CCC project
- Illustrates the important role of 2nd home owners for nature conservation
## SECOND HOME OWNER STUDY

### Reasons to Have Second Home in Saare County

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Safe environment</td>
<td>211</td>
<td>4.47</td>
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<tr>
<td>Proximity to the sea</td>
<td>209</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pristine nature</td>
<td>211</td>
<td>4.61</td>
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<tr>
<td>Insularity</td>
<td>206</td>
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<td>1.04</td>
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<td>Privacy</td>
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<td>Social environment</td>
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<tr>
<td>Roots</td>
<td>212</td>
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<td>1.42</td>
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<tr>
<td>Recreational opportunities</td>
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<td>3.81</td>
<td>1.11</td>
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<tr>
<td>Good investment</td>
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<td>2.84</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other</td>
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<td>4.07</td>
<td>1.37</td>
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</table>

*Flex Saare County Second Homes 2011*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Level of Interest</th>
<th>Current Engagement</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>No %</td>
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<tr>
<td>Assisting with grant writing to aid local development</td>
<td>205</td>
<td>67.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Participating in village initiatives</td>
<td>205</td>
<td>41.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Participating in local nature conservation initiatives</td>
<td>205</td>
<td>29.3</td>
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<td>Providing financial support</td>
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<td>Involving in local businesses</td>
<td>204</td>
<td>68.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>21.4</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Second home owner study

- Strong opposition to inappropriate development and management of natural resources
- Interest in collaboration with local municipalities on nature protection and planning initiatives
- Lack of information and communication
- Local municipalities not interested in cooperation
What we hope(d) for

- A set of principles for sustainable tourism and nature conservation in the area with operational guidelines for the next 5 years;
- A set of priorities with regard to funding decisions and implementation of any action plans;
- The provision of guidelines for tourism stakeholders on how to develop future tourism products to Vilsandi NP that aids park conservation efforts while enhancing existing tourism stakeholder livelihoods;
- Potential tourism businesses whom could expand programs and services in nature based tourism to VNP will be identified to enhance tourism business livelihoods; and
- Application for PAN Parks certification of VNP along with conservation and visitor management plans, and a sustainable tourism development strategy.
Proposed link with PAN Parks

Initiative to improve nature protection via sustainable tourism development

- European network of wilderness protected areas - *ecological network*
- Widely recognised as Europe’s elite nature sites (*branding / marketing context – linked to standards of quality*)
- Reliable trademark for conservation and sustainable tourism based on independent verification – *principles for development*
PAN Parks Principles, Criteria and Indicators

Two phase verification process

Phase 1 Verification

• Principle 1: Rich Natural Heritage
• Principle 2: Nature Management
• Principle 3: Visitor Management

Phase 2 Verification

• Principle 4: (STDS) Sustainable Tourism Development Strategy
• Principle 5: Partnerships
What makes PAN Parks unique?

Principle 4
Sustainable Tourism Development Strategy
&
Principle 5 Business Partners

*External perspective – NO Park is an island*
The goal

To ensure guaranteed protection of 1 million hectares of wilderness in Europe by 2015
Wilderness partners

• can join ‘The Million Project’
• sign a commitment to preserve their wilderness area
• identify the major risk of the long term preservation of their wilderness area and possible ways of cooperation with PAN Parks in protecting it
Benefits of becoming a Wilderness Partner

• international recognition
• technical support in wilderness management
• support in lobbying at decision makers
• opportunity for expertise exchange
Certified PAN Parks

Our wilderness partners can become certified parks if they

- have min. 10,000 ha of wilderness
- go through third party verification
  (also sustainable tourism development strategy)
Extra benefits for certified PAN Parks

• use of the brand (also in the field)

• marketing benefits, promotion (PAN Parks communications tools)

• enhanced cooperation with local businesses (can also be certified)

• tourism model (cooperation with international tour operators)
Vilsandi National Park

- Can become a PAN Park Wilderness Member – ONLY if locals want this
- Can use visitor management, sustainable tourism and business partner principles from PAN Parks
- Sustainable tourism networks – partnerships to be strengthened
- Enhance visitor satisfaction = benefits to locals
What next

- Research needs (*Mariliis Leitud*) – *Nature trails – all on Saaremaa*
- Visitor management needs
- Zoning needs
- Facilities needs
- Information provision needs
- Stakeholder group – to link conservation with sustainable nature tourism development
- Communication and collaboration!!!
Follow up work

- Meetings this summer
- Interviews with municipalities, tourism stakeholders, and 2nd homeowners in Lumanda parish
Thank you! (Tänan!)
Questions???