

## **CARRYING CAPACITIES OF NATURE PARKS**

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Nature parks in Europe are in a period of transition where the protection-function is being supplemented with a clear usability-function: nature parks should attract people and the attraction value of the nature park is more and more expected not only to add substantially to the economy of the park administration but also to the economic development of the region where the park is situated.

These trends also change the way the concept of carrying capacity is devoted to nature parks. Having the protection function in focus, carrying capacity is mainly a question of localizing the protection hotspots of the park, and relates the presence of (often threatened) species to the local environmental conditions that should be sustained by different protective measures.

The upcoming agenda for the parks shunt the focus of carrying capacity towards the capacity for active users of the park, mainly visitors.

The general use of carrying capacity in form of ecological sustainability is in fact nothing new for European park areas. Probably the vast majority of European nature parks have in previous times been marginal parts of agricultural systems where the carrying capacity for grazing animal was known through practice and registered for taxation purposes. This cultural history of European Nature parks should be brought the cultural origin of the parks more into the light, but it would also have value from an ecological point of view, permitting the collection of practice-based information on the historical sustainability of different parts of the park systems.

The integration of knowledge on ecological sustainability and visitor pressure has been a focus point for the American nature park system especially since the World War II, due to the increase in visitors (from 10 million to 300 million per year). This has forced through a reformulation of the concept of carrying capacity based on an integrated approach of resource protection and visitor experience considerations that are relevant also for European nature parks, although the general conditions on parks of European cultural landscapes are often more complicated, concerning population density, land use intensity and ownership relations.

The core of the integrated analysis and management of carrying capacity are 1) the establishment of management objectives/ desired conditions and associated indicators and standards, 2) the systematic and continuing monitoring of indicator variables, and 3) the application of management practises to ensure that standards are maintained.

This methodology is being tested on the analysis and management of hotspots in 8 nature parks of the Baltic region, all going through an implementation of the Europarc charter for sustainable tourism, as a part of a Baltic Sea Region Program, Parks & Benefits, part-financed by the European Regional Development Fund.