

SUCCESS STORY: COMBINING TOURISM AND WILDERNESS IN SOOMAA THROUGH PAN PARKS

Murel Merivee¹, Zoltán Kun², Agu Leivits¹, Aivar Ruukel³, Tõnis Korts⁴

¹Environmental Board, ²PAN Parks Foundation, ³Estonian University of Life Sciences, ⁴Viljandi County Government

PAN Parks, the only European-wide organisation focusing on the protection of wilderness areas, occupies a unique position from a conservation perspective in its attempt to redefine and develop a concept of wilderness conservation in Europe, one of the most highly developed areas in the world. PAN Parks applies a truly integrated approach combining wilderness protection and sustainable tourism development aiming at turning tourism from a threat to an opportunity for conservation.

PAN Parks provides effective third-party verification system under WCPA (World Commission on Protected Areas) Framework for Management Effectiveness. PAN Parks sets an important benchmark for high standards in protected area management. The certification is based on verification carried out by independent experts, in accord with PAN Parks quality standards. There are five PAN Parks principles, covering relevant wilderness protection from social, economic and cultural aspects. Principles allow for objective verification and transparency. The verification procedure includes three main elements: verification of the protected area, its Sustainable Tourism Strategy and the local business partners.

The sustainable tourism development process helps to ensure that tourism provides real benefits for the rural communities in and around the protected areas, and at the same time reduces the pressure caused by tourism on the park. However, without the genuine support of local communities, the task of nature conservation is pointless. The sustainable tourism development strategy of PAN Parks is developed through a collaborative process between park managers and all relevant local stakeholders. The sustainable tourism development strategy is a cornerstone, ensuring that tourism supports nature conservation, and guaranteeing that tourism is not introduced in sensitive areas. Local tourism related businesses can also undergo a certification process ensuring that the business is working in harmony with the park management; this helps those involved in making real improvements and gives them a business advantage. This also helps to involve local communities and businesses, raising their awareness of the real value wilderness has. This integrated approach is the key to effective management of protected areas and is becoming rapidly recognised as being the model of best practice. In Romania, as a result of the success of verification process in Retezat NP, the national management authority has adopted the PAN Parks Sustainable Tourism Development model as the standard for all national parks.

Soomaa NP of Estonia followed the PAN Parks process for 3 years. The basis of the interest was twofold: a) the belief of the nature conservation agency in the possibility to combine tourism with the effective conservation measure and b) the interest of a few local businesses which saw the potential in the marketing of PAN Parks. Environmental Board, as the protected area administrator, applied to the PAN Parks Certificate in 2009. Soomaa was the first park where the certification of the 5 principles happened through the same verification mission. The successful process was made possible both by the good cooperation between local community as well as by the original establishment of Soomaa NP, which already in 1993 had provided a regime and management approach for the protected values that were suitable for the network.

References

http://www.panparks.org/learn/pan_parks_concept/concept

http://www.panparks.org/learn/pan_parks_concept/integrated_approach

<http://www.soomaa.ee>