



## **Cooperation between Protected Areas and Local Societies: from Experiences to Recommendations**

### **ABSTRACT**

While the local population in the Baltic Sea region's coastal rural areas is decreasing, tourists, seasonal settlers, and investors are becoming more interested in them. To avoid the coastal nature being destroyed or local culture disappearing as a result of these changes, they need to be preserved. One solution to this problem is to invest resources in national parks and biosphere reserves. In addition to safeguarding nature, biodiversity and local culture, they can promote sustainable tourism. However, while national parks and biosphere reserves can help sustain livelihoods and maintain local population, this can only be achieved by the different stakeholders working in close cooperation with each other.

### **Study aim and method**

The aim of this study was to examine the cooperation between coastal protected areas and their stakeholders. Answers to several questions were needed: What form of cooperation is there today? What barriers bar the way for cooperation? Why is the cooperation as it is and how can it be improved? The data were gathered during April–June 2006 from four different areas: the Archipelago National Park (Finland), the West Estonian Archipelago Biosphere Reserve, the North Vidzeme Biosphere Reserve (Latvia), and the Curonian Spit National Park (Lithuania). The data were gathered through tailored questionnaires which were sent to the different target groups:

- authorities, institutes and organisations (e.g. state, regional and local level authorities, research institutes and universities, and NGOs)
- local inhabitants and entrepreneurs
- protected area personnel

The response rate was 46% (732 answers), a figure that was kept in mind while interpreting the results.



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### **Results and findings**

The study revealed that cooperation between the coastal protected areas and their stakeholders mainly concentrates on mandatory issues - usually dealing with managing and monitoring the area. Consequently, cooperation involves the protected areas' personnel, public authorities and, to some degree, educational and research institutes. Voluntary cooperation, such as cooperation between protected areas' personnel and local people (inhabitants, entrepreneurs and local NGOs), is limited. The main reasons cited for this lack of cooperation are financial and time. Lithuania also highlighted political problems. In general, the local inhabitants do not see the need for cooperation and there exists a major information gap between the areas and the local people.

With the exception of the Lithuanian respondents, the stakeholders feel that the cooperation with coastal protected areas has become more extensive and efficient over the last ten years. Also, the majority of authorities - NGOs, educational and research institutes, and local entrepreneurs - feel that the current cooperation 'is special' and brings additional value. During the last decade, Finnish stakeholders in particular have begun to discover that their cooperation with Archipelago National Park is becoming more and more valuable.

There are significant differences in responses between the countries. It was noticed that despite the conflict generated at the start of the Archipelago National Park, its stakeholders have now learned to accept the Park's restrictions and today have rather a positive attitude towards them. The situation in the Curonian Spit National Park, however, is quite the opposite. There is conflict in the area due to the stricter monitoring of restrictions and the preparation of a new management plan. For this reason, cooperation is at a low.



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The biosphere reserves in Estonia and Latvia face different problems in local cooperation. Both areas are large thus creating problems for extensive cooperation. For example, in the North Vidzeme Biosphere Reserve, there are 43 municipalities and some 80,000 inhabitants. In the West Estonian Archipelago Biosphere Reserve, long-term cooperation is practically impossible due to the absence of an administrative body (since 2002) and the fact that only one person is employed part time on a project basis.

The majority of the respondents state that there is either an extensive or very extensive need to improve cooperation. The main improvements are needed in communication and disseminating information. In addition, there is also a common need for financial improvement. In general, there is a will among the stakeholders to facilitate future cooperation and, more importantly, the majority of the local people have a positive attitude in working towards much improved cooperation practices.

One way to cooperate and affect the future activities in the areas is to try to influence the contents of the management plan and 'get heard'. However, only half of the locals are aware of the management plans with others feeling that they do not have the possibility to participate in their preparation.

### **Recommendations**

Recommendations on how to improve cooperation were made from two perspectives: from the researcher's viewpoint and from the protected areas' specialists. The researcher argued that in cooperation, the three pillars of sustainable development should be taken into consideration: environmental, social and economic progress. As cooperation related to ecological issues seemed to be working well, special focus should be on to the two latter pillars. These pillars demand cooperation between protected area personnel, local inhabitants, entrepreneurs and organisations. Local people should be considered as protected area customers whose opinions and well-being are important. This would



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increase acceptance, create a positive image, and bring social resources for the management work.

The protected area specialists admitted that there are problems with communication at the local level and criticise the lack of resources. They had, however, some concrete suggestions on how the situation could be improved, for example:

- Regarding park administration, more attention should be paid to grass-root level cooperation. Contact persons could be used.
- More should be invested in cooperation with entrepreneurs as they provide services that the protected areas can not offer.
- Information on management planning should be disseminated more effectively to all stakeholders. A participatory planning method is important. Also other relevant information and material should be effectively disseminated.
- A system for regularly monitoring the attitudes of local level stakeholders could be developed.
- Cooperation with schools should be developed. Children are an effective channel through which to reach local people.
- A system for round-table discussions between the protected area administration, municipalities, entrepreneurs and other stakeholder should be developed as a long-term channel for cooperation.