

Nature conservation and tourism can coexist despite conflicts

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The concept of sustainable nature tourism has played a key role in mediating conflicts between tourism and nature conservation in Koli National Park, Finland. Credit: UEF / Varpu Heiskanen

The concept of sustainable nature tourism plays a key role in mediating conflicts between tourism and nature conservation, a new study from the University of Eastern Finland shows.

The study takes a geo-historical approach to analyzing the environmental conflict surrounding the founding of Koli National Park in Finland, where the idea of sustainable nature [tourism](#) was used as a way out of the

conflict. In Koli National Park, sustainable nature tourism has proven to be useful concept for conflict resolution.

"Adopting the principles of sustainable nature tourism helped the [national park](#)'s management to reach nature conservation goals. Moreover, the hopes and wishes of local residents and companies on how to develop tourism and the economy were also taken into consideration as part of sustainability, and this fostered a positive attitude towards the national [park](#) among locals," says researcher Jani Karhu from the University of Eastern Finland.

The study was published in *Tourism Geographies*. The researchers interviewed managers and designers of Koli National Park, and they also analyzed local newspaper articles.

National parks are a key instrument of [nature conservation](#), and one of the most recognized institutions in nature tourism worldwide. Koli National Park was founded in 1991. The founding of the park was preceded by heated debate over whether the area should be developed into a modern resort for mass tourism, or whether its unique national landscape and nature should be protected. In Koli, the approach to solving the [conflict](#) was through sustainable nature tourism.

"Creating more jobs, preventing environmental harm, guaranteeing the satisfaction of tourists, and operating within the local cultural and social frameworks all constitute part of sustainable tourism. All of these aspects should be developed equally."

Emphasis on economy fuels new conflicts

In the early 2000s, the concept of sustainable nature tourism was largely accepted as a principle that guided the planning and management of Finnish national parks. Nowadays, this principle is widely accepted also

among tourism developers. However, there are also indications that the concept of sustainable nature tourism is used for green washing extensive tourism projects. In Koli, too, the past few years have witnessed the revival of large projects that have failed in the past.

"These economy-driven ideas of sustainability push the idea of sustainable nature tourism away from nature itself, and serve as fuel for new conflicts," Karhu says.

History awareness and cultural heritage are becoming part of nature tourism

Funded by Kone Foundation, the study constitutes part of the geo-historical research project Lively Border: The Nature Tourism and History Politics in the Finnish-Russian-Norwegian Border Region, focused on the historical sites and conservation areas within the Finnish-Russian-Norwegian border region. In the Fennoscandian Green Belt, history awareness and [cultural heritage](#) are only now becoming part of an eco-friendly tourism concept that is based on [natural](#) heritage.

"In the future, we may have large Green Parks, a new type of conservation area, which doesn't push people away but rather highlights coexistence with nature, interaction with other people, and well-being," says Professor Maria Lähteenmäki, the project's principal investigator.

More information: Jani Karhu et al. From threat to opportunity: sustainability and tourism in Koli National Park, *Tourism Geographies* (2020). [DOI: 10.1080/14616688.2020.1812112](https://doi.org/10.1080/14616688.2020.1812112)

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