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Nature-based tourism in private forests: Stakeholder management balancing the interests of entrepreneurs and forest owners?



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ABSTRACT

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Nature-based tourism is currently one of tourism's fastest-growing sectors. It is also the form of tourism that often benefits the economy of rural areas. In addition to publicly owned forests, nature tourism is in many countries situated in private forests that are not owned by the tourism entrepreneurs. Typically the forest owners gain only minimal benefits from hosting nature tourism on their land. However, access to private land can be essential to tourism entrepreneurs. Therefore, maintaining good relationships between entrepreneurs and private forest owners, as well as combining their interests, is vital for sustaining nature tourism activities. Despite this, the co-operation is usually very informal. Furthermore, some activities are implemented by utilizing traditional free public access, which further complicates the operational framework. To develop a high-quality nature tourism sector in rural areas, it is important to understand better the sustainable co-operation strategies between entrepreneurs and private forest owners. This explorative study seeks to learn how nature-based tourism entrepreneurs perceive the private forest owners as stakeholders of their business and what kind of stakeholder management strategies they have developed in order to maintain their activities. As a result, four stakeholder management strategies are presented in which the perception of the forest owner as a stakeholder varies according to the risk level for sustaining the business in the future.

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1. Introduction

Nature-based tourism can be broadly defined as tourism whose main activities are related to nature (e.g. Fredman et al., 2012; Andreck, 2009; Saarinen, 2001). It is currently one of the fastest-growing tourism sectors worldwide, and the growth is projected to continue, as consumers' respect for unspoiled and authentic nature grows (Dodds et al., 2010; O'Neill and Alonso, 2009; Ryymin, 2008). Especially in northern Europe, the share of nature tourists of all international travel is high, i.e. in Finland it has been estimated that a third of all foreign tourists participate in nature activities (Fredman and Tyrväinen, 2010). It has reportedly provided new sources of livelihood to rural areas to diversify the economy from the traditional agriculture and forestry (e.g. Fredman and Tyrväinen, 2010; Wilson et al., 2001). Indeed, tourism has found to an important means to revitalize farms that otherwise might have been abandoned (Brandth and Haugen, 2011).

As typical rural enterprises, apart from skiing resorts and theme parks, nature tourism enterprises are usually microenterprises (Vail

and Hultkrantz, 2000; Ryymin, 2008). Finland has an estimated 3000 nature tourism enterprises (Petäjistö and Shelby, 2011). Also the multiplier economic effects of nature tourism are significant. Estimates are that about two-thirds of the income generated from nature tourism ends up in businesses other than nature tourism enterprises (Ministry of Environment, 2002, Matilainen et al., 2010). In addition, the income generated from nature tourism typically remains in the rural regions; the sector is labor-intensive and usually requires knowledge of local conditions (e.g., Iorio and Corsale, 2010; Courtney et al., 2006; Saarinen, 2003; Honkala, 2001). These characteristics make it especially interesting concerning rural development (cf. Hakkarainen and Tuulentie, 2008).

Approximately 80 percent of nature-based tourism entrepreneurs¹ in Finland use land areas they do not own (Nousiainen and

¹ In this study, the terms "small business owner-manager" and "entrepreneur" are used synonymously, although there is a conceptual difference between these two terms; see for example, the study of Carland et al. (1984). The main reason for this is the fact that in the Finnish language, the term "entrepreneur" (yrittäjä) is not exclusively reserved for those business persons with certain entrepreneurial characteristics or who are aiming for growth or innovativeness. Accordingly, in Finnish the term "entrepreneur" usually includes, but is not restricted to, small business owner-managers.

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Tyrväinen, 2002). Due to Finland's landscape (76 percent of the land area is covered by forests) (MetINFO, 2012), nature tourism is often concentrated in forest areas. In addition to state-owned forests, nature-based tourism is concentrated also on privately owned forest lands. In Finland approximately 60 percent of the forests are privately owned. Especially in southern Finland, there is considerable pressure to use private forest areas for nature tourism activities (e.g., Tyrväinen and Sievänen, 2007). Furthermore, 60 percent of all private forest holdings are under 20 ha (Hänninen and Peltola, 2010), which typically calls for co-operation with several private forest owners concerning nature tourism activities. The forest owners thus possess a critical factor of production for nature-based tourism; in many cases the business activities could not continue smoothly without it. Forest owners can be considered a very influential primary stakeholder group for nature-tourism enterprises. Therefore, maintaining good relationships between private forest owners and entrepreneurs, as well as combining their interests, is vital to nature-based tourism (Weiss et al., 2007).

Nevertheless, the co-operation between the entrepreneurs and private forest owners is typically very informal, and entrepreneurs often have only a vague understanding of the forest owners' role as a stakeholder (Matilainen et al., 2011). Accordingly, half of Finnish nature-tourism entrepreneurs have reported facing property-rights-related problems vis-a-vis private forest owners (Nousiainen and Tyrväinen, 2002). One explanation for the oversight and problems in stakeholder relationships may originate from the traditions of use of nature in Finland. Although the land might be privately owned, traditionally there have been wide opportunities for others to use it. Even today Everyman's Rights grant a free public access to forests for recreational purposes. Still, for intensive nature-tourism activities, the forest owner's permission is always required, also according to the law. However, currently it is not very common to pay the forest owner for nature-tourism activities. When such payment is specified in the agreements, the economic benefits to the forest owner are very marginal compared to other income gained from the forest resource, like from timber production or even from the voluntary conservation schemes. Sometimes it does not necessarily even cover all of the forest owner's economic costs of co-operation, such as damage to the forest paths or vegetation. The co-operative relationships are therefore very asymmetrical. The entrepreneurs' survival depends on access to the private forests, while the economic benefits to the forest owners are essentially nonexistent. Aside from the economic benefits, the forests have many other complex values and purposes, like recreation or preserving family tradition, for their owners (e.g., Ni'Dhubhain et al., 2007; Karppinen et al., 2002; Bliss and Martin, 1988). Nature tourism activities can also reduce these values from the forest owner's point of view. Therefore, co-operation also depends on several issues other than economic compensation, due to the complex values that owners set on their forests.

We argue that in order to develop high-quality nature-tourism products and enhance the growth of the sector as a relevant livelihood in rural areas, it is important to understand better the co-operation between private forest owners and nature-based entrepreneurs. Because of the marginal role of nature tourism in the forest owner's income, various ownership values, and traditions of wide opportunities for all to freely utilize forests in Finland (Sairinen, 2001), the co-operative relationships cannot be directly compared to a typical business relationship. That might be one reason why the existing compensation schemes to distribute the economic benefits to the forest owners have not been used in rural areas as widely as expected (cf. Ahtikoski et al., 2011).

This study will evaluate 1) nature-based tourism entrepreneurs' perceptions of private forest owners as stakeholders, and 2) the strategies they have developed to manage this vital stakeholder

group. In other words, this study examines how a successful relationship can be developed in the co-operation between the nature-based entrepreneurs and private non-industrial forest owners. The phenomenon is examined using the explorative approach. Ten nature-based tourism entrepreneurs were interviewed in depth in order to understand how they perceive using private forests in their business and how they have built and maintained their co-operative relationships with forest owners. The stakeholder status of forest owners is described here by using the classification by Mitchell et al. (1997). In addition, the entrepreneurs' stakeholder management strategies are analyzed and compared to previous stakeholder management strategy classifications. At the end the practical implications of developing the co-operation, as well as the tools for improving it, are presented.

2. Everyman's rights setting the cultural context for nature-based tourism in Finland

The current way of using nature in Finland, as in many Nordic countries, is rooted in an ancient custom allowing free travel in roadless country, including the right to stay overnight and gather nourishment. This custom also forms a large part of the current spirit of land and natural resource utilization culture in Finland, even though it has since been reformed. Today, Everyman's Rights guarantee free public access to both private and public forests. These rights are a commonly agreed-upon way of using nature, not an actual subjective right, and can be called the "right of public use" (Laaksonen, 1999).

Free public access has been found to have both negative and positive influence on the development potential of nature tourism in general (e.g. Fredman and Tyrväinen, 2010). Firstly, it has been found challenging to balance nature-tourism and recreational activities in forests (e.g. Sandell and Fredman, 2010; Vail and Hultkrantz, 2000). The nature-tourism companies can rarely exclude the areas from free access, especially, if the areas are not owned by themselves. Therefore, recreational activities can disturb the business activities, or vice versa. For instance, local berry pickers may disturb commercially organized bird watching tour. Thus, the nature experience can be reduced by factors like noise or crowding (Kaltenborn et al., 2009). In addition it may be difficult to keep the demand pressure within capacity limits of the environment at prime sites and peak times (Vail and Hultkrantz, 2000), in which may cause damages to the natural environments. On the other hand, the free access can also contribute positively to the development of nature-based tourism as it provides nature-tourism companies possibilities to utilize forest areas not owned by them in business activities. It has, in fact, been reported that in Sweden the nature tourism entrepreneurs consider free public access more as a success factor than an obstacle (Sandell and Fredman, 2010).

In Finland the interpretation of Everyman's Rights sets a regulative framework for the professional use of forests for nature tourism, though at the moment it is still very much open to various interpretations. According to Everyman's Rights, for example, hiking, biking, or skiing in the nature, angling, and picking natural flowers, berries, and mushrooms are allowed, without a permit from the land owner. However, Everyman's Rights do not permit damage or disturbance to nature nor unreasonable disadvantages to the forest owner. In addition, Everyman's Rights are based on occasional use of forests (Kuusiniemi et al., 2000). Nevertheless, Everyman's Rights provide some opportunities to pursue business activities in the private forests (Lehtonen et al., 2007). The concepts of unreasonable disadvantages and occasional use of forests are always highly disputable. If the use of nature is not intensive (leaving significant visible traces on the forests) or is random in

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