

Attitudes of the Local Population Towards Tourism and Nature Conservation

Anne Törn¹, Anne Tolvanen² and Pirkko Siikamäki³

¹ Department of Biology, University of Oulu, Oulu, Finland

e-mail: anne.torn@oulu.fi

² Finnish Forest Research Institute, Muhos, Finland

³ Oulanka Biological Station, University of Oulu, Kuusamo, Finland

The use of northern areas for recreational purposes has grown dramatically in recent decades, which increases the general concern about nature. All decisions in relation to the use of natural resources should involve ecological, sociological and economic aspects. This research examines attitudes of local residents towards tourism and nature conservation in order to indicate the social sustainability of those actions in the areas. The study also investigates residents' opinions of interrelationship between the conservation and ecotourism. The research was conducted in NE Finland, on regions of contrasting history in land use and ownership. Also the history of conservation and the importance of recreational use of forests varies regionally. The case study areas are Oulanka national park, Ruka ski resort, Kuusamo town center, southern Kuusamo and Iso-Syöte ski resort area. Oulanka represents an old established conservation area while southern Kuusamo is an example of a new conservation area.

The study focuses on the opinions of 300 residents on their respective areas. The data was gathered by an inquiry, which was sent by mail during the winter 2002 and summer 2003. Random sampling was based on regional postcodes. A total of 1183 questionnaires were sent to the households. The overall respond rate was less than 30 percent. The highest respond rates were in Kuusamo town center and in Oulanka national park (36 percent). The lowest rate was in Southern Kuusamo (26 percent).

It is evident that the residents' attitudes towards tourism and nature conservation development is a complex and dynamic phenomenon where a variety of factors exert a differential influence on local residents. Residents' opinions on nature conservation and tourism were fairly conflicting and direct conclusions were difficult to make. Respondents agreed that the tourism and conservation affect positively the economic life, appreciation of the area and employment. In general residents strongly support tourism in their own areas. Nevertheless, the majority of the respondents near conservation areas and town center regarded that there are too many conservation areas in their neighbourhood. The results show that there is a strong agreement among the residents that conservation areas' most important purpose in general is the protection of original environment. There is also partial support (Kuusamo town center and ski resort areas being most positive) for the establishment of conservation areas on the region. Occupants indicate that tourism and nature conservation do not diminish the area's habitability and they also agree on the positive effects of nature conservation to tourism development.