

Integrated planning of national parks and adjacent areas – possibilities and limits in cooperation for nature-based tourism and place making

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Abstract

In Norway, there have traditionally been a segregated approach to management of national parks, focusing on protecting nature from human activities. However, in recent years, we have seen tendencies toward a more integrative approach, focusing on integration of nature based tourism, place making and nature conservation. The aim for this paper is to highlight some preliminary results, based on an ongoing research from the Varanger Peninsula National Park and its adjacent areas in the far north of the Norwegian mainland.

Key words

National park management, local planning, network arrangements, nature-based tourism, place making

Introduction

Nature conservation are taking new directions in several countries, where protected areas are increasingly being viewed in a wider regional context (MOSE 2007; HAMMER et al. 2012), i.e. as a tool for tourism development and place-making. HAMMER et al. (2016:19) emphasize that the majority of European parks today 'are no longer nature reserves but have the character of living or working landscapes'. To a certain extent, the Norwegian nature protection policy has also been undergoing similar changes in recent years (HAUKELAND et al. 2013). In Norway, the management responsibility for a number of national parks and other large protected areas has since 2010 been delegated from the County Governor (the state representative in the Norwegian counties) to inter-municipal boards. The boards consist of local politicians from the concerned municipalities, primarily local mayors, as well as County Council politicians. A locally based national park manager, appointed by the County Governor, acts as secretary to the board. Another trend is to develop visitor strategies for national parks and other large protected areas. Our case study area, Varanger Peninsula National Park (Fig. 1) was one of the Norwegian pilot parks. A third trend is establishment of regional parks, inspired by other European parks. A major objective for regional parks is to develop comprehensive strategies for tourism and place making (GAMBINO & PEANO 2015). In our case area, the park 'Varanger Arctic Norway', is now in progress.

Most of the infrastructure projects related to tourism activities in protected areas take place in the adjacent areas outside the national parks' borders (EAGLES & MCCOOL 2001). This implies an obvious challenge in coordinating the management of the areas inside and outside of the protected border in a consistent manner, due to different legal frameworks of land use planning within and outside the border (ibid.). This is particularly true for Norway, where protected areas are basically wilderness areas excluding permanent settlements and cultivated land.

Our first research questions is: What are the experiences with the management of Varanger Peninsula National Park and its visitor strategy? Our preliminary impression is that the municipal land use planning have none or limited focus on the adjacent areas to the National Park, and therefore limited integration capacity with the park management. Thus, our second research question is: What are the possibilities and constraints in order to improve the level of integration, and what role can the regional park, Varanger Arctic Norway, take?

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Varanger Peninsula and its National Park

Varanger is a region in the east part of Finnmark County in Northern Norway, with the Barents Sea as neighbor and close to the Russian border. The region consists of the municipalities Berlevåg, Båtsfjord, Vardø, Vadsø, Nesseby and Sør-Varanger (Fig. 1). The road along the Varanger fjord from Varangerbotn to Hamningberg (appr. 160 km) is established as a National Scenic Route. The region is multicultural with Norwegian, Saami and Finnish settlements. The total population in the region is appr. 15.000.



Figure 1: The Varanger region and Varanger Peninsula National Park (Varangerhalvøya nasjonalpark)

Fishing, small-scale agriculture and reindeer husbandry are the main traditional livelihoods. The Barents Sea have one of the world richest fish resources, and many communities and small towns as Vardø have traditionally been depending on fishing and fish processing industry. The Saami population is active in traditional reindeer husbandry in the area, together with small-scale fishing. The last years, nature-based tourism, particularly related to bird watching, is increasing. Salmon and sea trout fishing in the rivers and fishing along the coast is also important tourist activities.

The inner part of the Varanger Peninsula was designated National Park in 2006 (Fig. 1). The Park is relatively difficult to access, with a large-scale landscape, changing weather conditions and with limited facilitation. The management responsibility was delegated from the state (the County Governor) to an inter-municipal Board with local and regional politicians in 2009. A locally based national park manager, appointed by the County Governor, act as secretary to the Board. A visitor strategy for the Park was made in 2015, as on the pilot project among three selected National parks in Norway.

Methods

The study includes qualitative semi-structured interviews with key actors in the region, conducted in the beginning of May 2017. The following informant were interviewed; the National Park Manager, the administrative head of Vadsø municipality, the leader of Varanger Business Centre and the Regional Park (Varanger Arctic Norway), the leader of Varanger Saami Museum and the tourism division of the County municipality of Finnmark (located in Vadsø). We also interviewed local small-scale tourist operators in two selected communities; Nesseby and Vestre Jakobselv (see Fig. 1). In addition, a workshop with representatives from these two communities were conducted. The interviews and summary of the workshop were audiotaped and transcribed.

Preliminary results and discussion

A main impression from the interviews is that there is a very limited integration between the National Park management and municipal land use planning for the adjacent areas, despite the fact that these areas are considered to have much of the same qualities as the National Park. The visitor strategy identifies four gateways into the Park. In these areas, there are some cooperation between the Park management, the municipalities and voluntary organizations. However, this cooperation is largely based on the National park regulations. Proactive land use planning for these areas is lacking due to lack of capacity in the municipalities and a tradition to focus mainly on the built up areas (towns and larger villages). In order to integrate conservation, nature-based tourism and place making, we find it necessary to include the adjacent areas and nearby communities in a much more consistent way.

Up to now, the regional park plan for Varanger Arctic Norway has a very limited focus on the National Park, which hampers synergies between conservation, nature-based tourism and community development. At the same time, the manager for the National Park have only limited contact and knowledge about the regional park. Applying a stronger link to European regional park models may have the potential to bridge nature and culture, conservation and nature-based tourism and place making across the National Park border (GAMBINO & PEANO 2015). An active landscape perspective based on the European Landscape Convention, where landscape is 'an area as perceived by people', can provide a common arena across legal and administrative boundaries on Varanger peninsula, and include a broad spectrum of actors from the municipalities, local inhabitants, industries and nature-based tourism entrepreneurs.

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