

National perceptions on protected areas and local community involvement in the Swedish mountains

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Background

The establishment of protected areas, and how they should be managed, is often perceived differently by national conservation authorities and varied local interests respectively, and tension, mistrust and even conflict are not uncommon. The causes for this may vary between areas, due to context-dependent factors such as historical legacies, existing land use, and the degree of actual or perceived top-down approach (Adams & Jeanrenaud, 2008). The present study aims to relate interests and perceptions as formulated by local interests and government authorities to those expressed by the general public, with a focus on the latter.

The official rationale for establishing national parks includes statements about their national importance as tourist attractions and their iconic values as well as the importance to protect perceived wilderness from human interference – other than tourism and research. Most of the Swedish mountains are by many actors described as wilderness areas with pristine nature suitable for recreation and nature-based tourism. Protected areas in Sweden are generally designated and managed through centralized decision-making, and can be described as the result of outsiders' agendas and interests. Nowhere else in Sweden are official nature conservation and tourism interested such powerful stakeholders as in the mountain region (Wall-Reinius, 2012).

In the last decade new ideas concerning the role and management of protected areas have gained increased interest internationally (Adams & Jeanrenaud, 2008). Here local participation in the designation process and management, including respect for local interests and knowledge, are important components. In 2004, the Swedish EPA launched a program concerning protected areas which focused on local participation and management planning, outdoor recreation, tourism, visitor information, monitoring and evaluation (Naturvårdsverket, 2004). This indicates a potential shift from the traditional top-down perspective towards an engagement with local interests and regional development, where nature-based tourism is perceived as a key issue. In addition, at a global scale there is an increased recognition that management of natural and cultural resources should be approached from an integrated landscape perspective and in close collaboration between national and local authorities, private organizations and the public to improve planning and management (i.e. the European Landscape Convention). This could (or should) have important implications also for the management of protected areas. In addition, present trends could also entail a shift from areas managed solely for their natural and/or outdoor recreation values to areas managed for their working landscape values (Laven et al., 2014).

Findings

In this study, views and experiences held by the general public in relation to conservation, protected areas and local land use and interests are examined. In a national study conducted in 2013, 1000 respondents in a web-panel survey among the Swedish population were asked about their perceptions, associations and values in relation to the Swedish mountain landscapes. Other questions concerned their opinions regarding the establishment and management of protected areas, including the role of local communities.

This paper will present findings primarily from the national survey, which will tentatively be related to preliminary results from interviews with different stakeholders concerned specifically with the mountain landscapes in Jämtland County. Preliminary findings indicate that the general public are positive towards protected areas in the mountains. According to these respondents, it is important that protected areas are established for the preservation of nature, including protection of threatened species and ecosystems, and to preserve nature untouched by humans. Furthermore, for the respondents it is important that protected areas are accessible for visitors and enhance outdoor recreation opportunities. Respondents are also positive to the suggestion that the local population should have great influence on protected area establishment. According to the respondents, management decisions should be made locally and regionally. More than one third of the respondents have experienced conflicts of interests in relation to the use and management of protected areas.

Discussion

In Sweden, numerous examples of conflict still remain in relation to protected areas, despite new trends concerning their function and management. A central reason for conflict is the failure to acknowledge the importance of how socially constructed images of landscapes, i.e. perceptions of a particular landscape or particular types of landscapes, influence opinions and actions (Dahlberg, 2014). This may result in conflicts between different stakeholder groups whose perceptions and images of a specific landscape differ, for example in protected areas within multifunctional landscapes.

The results from the national survey illustrate how new trends in conservation only partly have become accessible and/or accepted, and thus how multiple ideologies simultaneously influence perceptions concerning the value and use of landscapes. The mountains are still seen as pristine and untouched, in spite of the evidence that they are cultural landscapes where multiple actors access and use various resources. On the other hand, survey-respondents were clearly in favour of increased local influence in the establishment and management of protected areas. Clearly these views are not compatible, and they indicate a risk for further conflicts between national and local/regional interests. Similar – and additional – ambiguities concerning the understanding, perception and valuation of the mountain landscapes were found also in the qualitative interviews with local, regional and national stakeholders.

The present study aims to shed light on the different and sometime conflicting views and ambitions held by different interest-groups as well as the partly contradictory perceptions maintained within groups. Conflicts, for example over landscape values, access, types of use, as well as practical management, can only be resolved in a sustainable manner if different interest groups are aware of the views and needs of others. We aim to contribute to the debate concerning conservation interests and landscape management, and hope that our results can constructively influence policy and planning concerning conservation and protected areas in relation to the potential emergence of more holistic landscape discourses in which informed local interests can be expected to have a more prominent role.

References

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