

MATSALU NATIONAL PARK EXPLORING PEOPLE'S VIEWS AND CHANGE OF PERCEPTIONS THROUGH TIME

2024



FULL REPORT

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INTRODUCTION



Matsalu National Park, a renowned nature reserve in Estonia, serves as a significant site for biodiversity conservation and eco-tourism. To understand the evolving social dynamics and public perceptions of this protected area, two rounds of social surveys and personal interviews were conducted in 2021 and 2024. These surveys and personal interviews aimed to explore the social outcomes of the park on local communities and gauge the level of public support for the national park.

The 2021 survey provided a baseline understanding of the community's relationship with Matsalu National Park. It highlighted key areas of social impact, such as economic benefits from tourism, changes in land use, and community involvement in conservation efforts. This initial survey also revealed the public's perceptions regarding the park's significance, accessibility, and overall management. By establishing these benchmarks, the survey set the stage for a longitudinal study to monitor changes over time. The full report of the 2021 surveys is available at: www.warwick.ac.uk/fidelio.

In 2024, a follow-up survey and a small number of personal interviews were conducted to compare the findings with those from 2021 and identify any significant trends or shifts in public opinion. This subsequent survey aimed to capture the effects of any new policies or developments implemented in the intervening years. Both the 2021 and 2024 survey were subcontracted to the Estonian University of Life Sciences for the distribution of the questionnaires and conducting the personal interviews.

By analyzing the data from both surveys, this report provides a comprehensive overview of how Matsalu National Park's social impacts and public perceptions have evolved, offering valuable insights for policymakers, park management, and stakeholders interested in the sustainable development of protected areas.

METHODS



To explore people's views on Matsalu National Park, we initially used the **Social Impact Assessment Tool for Protected Areas (SOCIAT)**. The questionnaire was initially distributed during Spring 2021 to local communities living near or inside the national park. Participants were asked if they would be willing to fill in another questionnaire in a few years as part of the project. If they replied in a positive way then they were asked to fill in their details. In Spring 2024 we approached all participants who had provided their contact details. These were in total 90 respondents. The invitation included a link to the questionnaire and participants were also provided with a code so that their responses could be matched in an anonymous way with answers to the first survey. In total, 27 responses were received in the second survey with only 2 participants having moved away from the area since 2021. In this report we compare the responses from the questionnaires in 2021 and 2024 with a key aim to identify potential changes in perceptions and also the main reasons for any changes observed.

Four short interviews were also undertaken in 2024 with local residents in Matsalu National Park designated area regarding the topic of change in the landscape over time. All four had been interviewed previously in the first round of interviews. Interviewees were asked a small number questions regarding:

- What they felt had changed in the local area in the last few years, against the background of the COVID pandemic
- What had changed in the longer past term, irrespective of the pandemic
- How they felt that the Matsalu NP area had changed over the lifetime of the protected area, and whether they thought the existence of the protected area was responsible for this change, or would it have happened anyway
- How they felt the Matsalu NP protected area would change into the future, and whether they thought the existence of the protected area would be responsible for this change, or would happen anyway

RESULTS

SOCIAL OUTCOMES: COMPARISON BETWEEN 2021 AND 2024

Respondents were asked how they perceive the impact of the national park on five topics: personal income, quality of life, social relations, recreation and connectedness to nature. All impacts were measures on a 5 point scale ranging from 1-very negative impact to 5-very positive impact. The figure below presents the average score for each impact. Higher scores represent a more positive impact.

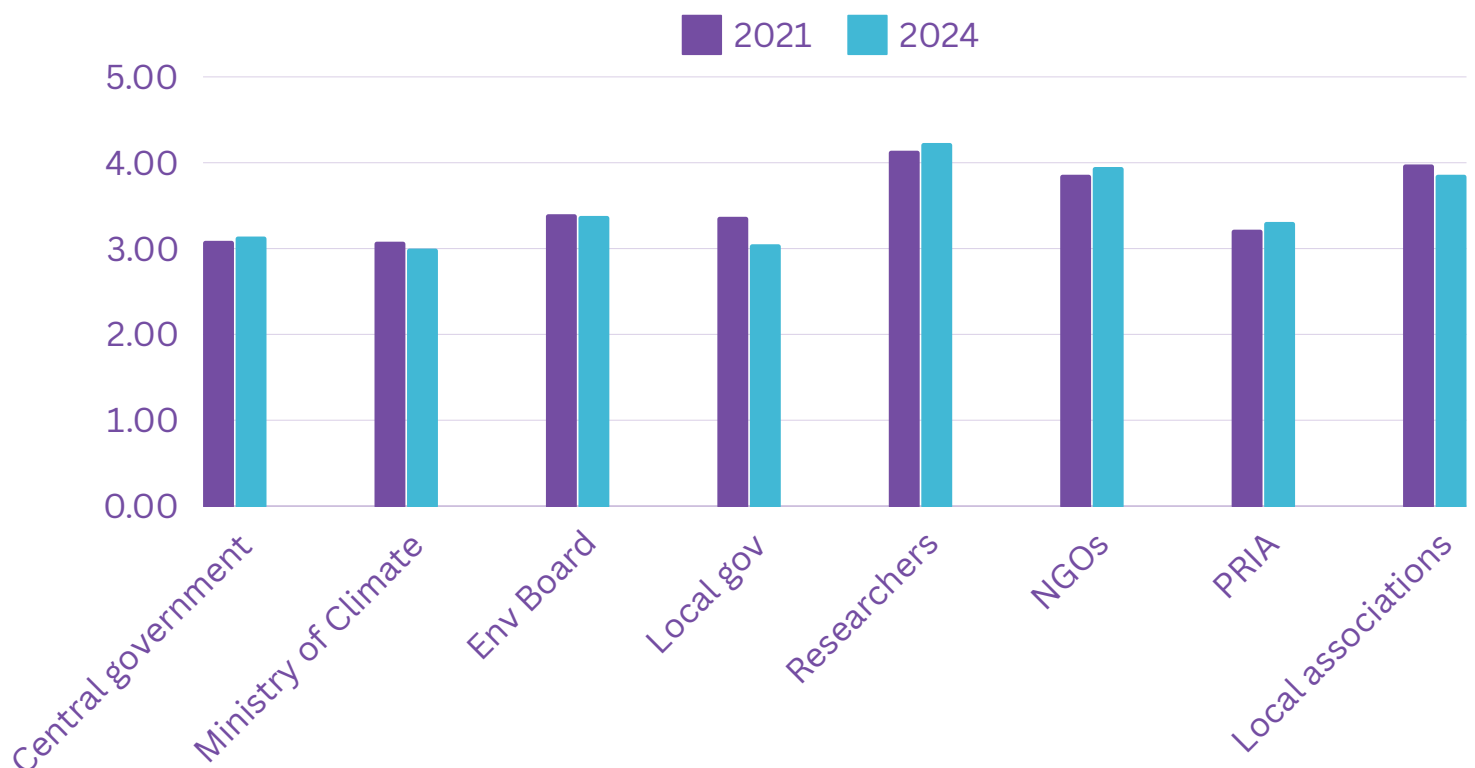
When comparing the responses of all participants between 2021 and 2024 there is a slight tendency to consider the impacts in a more negative way in 2024 compared to 2021 (this is though statistically significant only for impact on income). Impact on personal income is consistently the outcome with the least benefits for locals in both surveys. Connectedness to nature was the most beneficial social outcome in 2021 whereas in 2024 the most beneficial outcomes was impact on recreation.



TRUST IN INSTITUTIONS

In both surveys, respondents were asked to rate their trust in various institutions involved in the management of Matsalu National Park, using a 5-point Likert scale where 1 indicated the lowest and 5 the highest level of trust. Researchers and academic institutions garnered the highest levels of trust from the public. Among the institutions more directly involved with the park's management, local associations, communities, and NGOs were highly trusted. In contrast, the central government and the Ministry of Environment received lower trust ratings. Notably, the 2024 survey results indicated an overall increase in trust towards most institutions compared to the 2021 survey.

The level of trust was high for local associations, NGOs and academic institutions. More neutral perceptions were recorded for governmental institutions.



PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT & VOLUNTEERING



Respondents were asked in 2021 if they have been participating in environmental protection related activities (e.g., public participatory meetings, decision making processes) in Matsalu National Park. Almost 60% of respondents stated that they have been involved with such activities. Most frequently stated activities in 2021 were participation in public participatory meetings and involvement in the Matsalu NP Cooperation Council. Such a big response rate for involvement in public participatory meetings was probably related to the fact that when the survey took place, new protection regulations for Matsalu national park were being drafted and discussions with local communities and other stakeholders were ongoing. In 2024 40% of respondents mentioned that they have been involved in such activities. Example of activities mentioned were birdwatching, bird ringing, maintenance of heritage meadows and contributing via research activities. Both percentages are considered high.

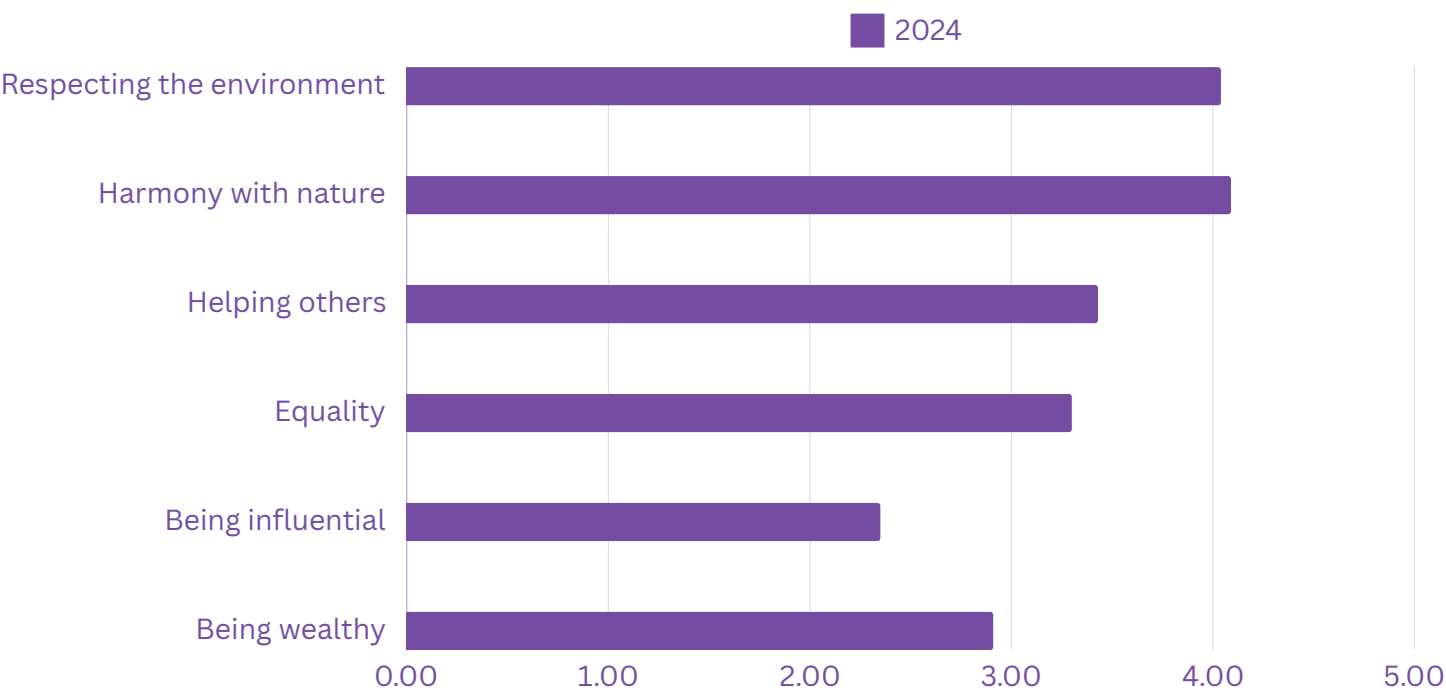
These results indicate a strong sense of community engagement and environmental stewardship among the respondents, reflecting their commitment to preserving the ecological integrity of Matsalu National Park. The slight decrease in participation from 2021 to 2024, from 60% to 40%, may be attributed to the smaller sample in the second survey and also with the timing of the first survey which was done while changes had been introduced in the park and there was a high level of engagement from locals. The continued high level of engagement demonstrates an ongoing dedication to environmental activities and the importance of the national park to the local population. The high engagement rates observed in both 2021 and 2024 illustrate a resilient and proactive community dedicated to the preservation of Matsalu National Park. This ongoing participation is crucial for the park's future, ensuring that environmental protection efforts are sustained and that the park remains a cherished and well-maintained natural sanctuary for generations to come.

ENVIRONMENTAL & PLACE VALUES

Approximately 90% of respondents stated a strong place attachment with the area of Matsalu National Park

A strong place value was also noted with a large percentage of respondents stating that the area of Matsalu means a lot to them. In both surveys approximately 90% of respondents stated that they are strongly attached to the area (choosing 6 or 7 from a 7 point Likert scale where 7 represented the highest level of importance).

A small set of questions explored environmental and place values of local communities in Matsalu National Park. These questions were measured on a Likert Scale with highest values representing highest agreement. Strong environmental values were recorded with the mean score for the importance of respecting earth being over 4 out of 5 (in 2024) and the mean score for living in harmony with nature being also over 4 out of 5. Both of these values are slightly lower compared to 2021 but these differences are considered insignificant.

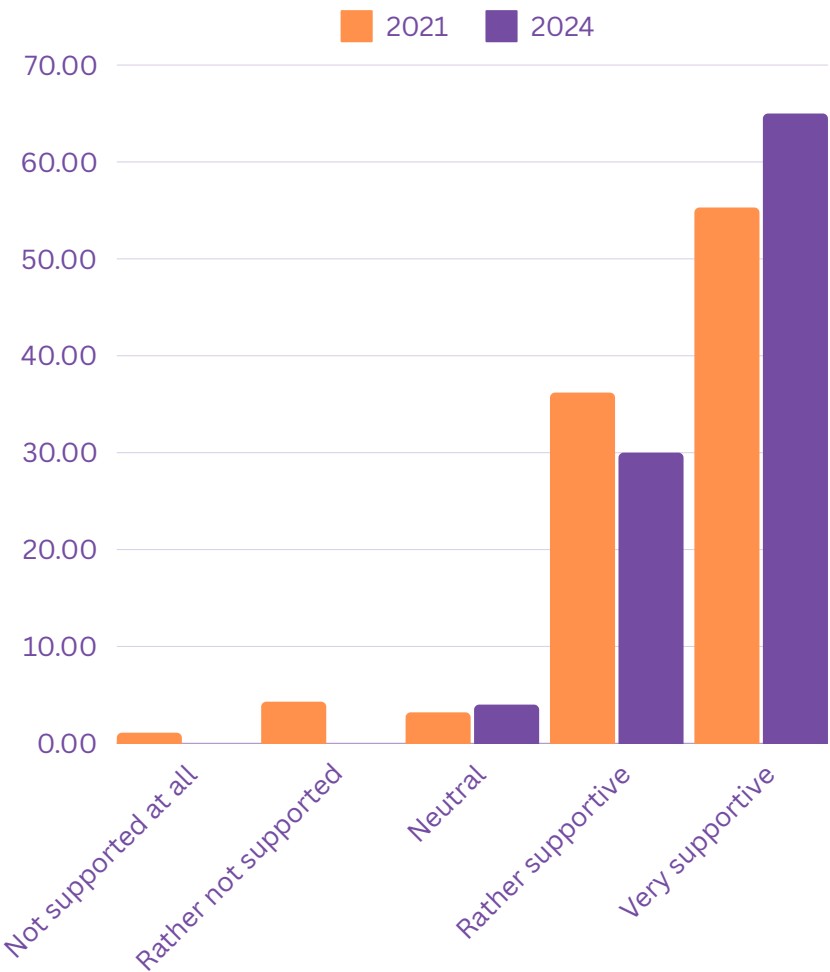


PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR THE NATIONAL PARK

A series of questions were aimed at capturing how important the Matsalu National Park is for locals. The level of support for the park remained high in both surveys with over 50% of participants stating (both in 2021 and 2024) that they strongly support the existence of the national park.

Respondents were also asked on a 5-point Likert scale (1 representing strongly disagree and 5 strongly agree) whether it was easy for them to support Matsalu National Park and if they had enough time, money and opportunity to support the Park. Overall, people felt that it was easy for them to support the park (mean score 4.35) but that they had less time, money and opportunities to engage with supporting activities (mean score 3.22).

How do participants rated the existence of the national park in 2021 and 2024?



PERSONAL INTERVIEWS

Personal interviews conducted in 2024 revealed a number of aspects in terms of changes in the area in the past 3 years

Physical change in the landscape

The interviewees made very few comments regarding their impressions of physical change in the landscape, such as its land cover, management, habitats or appearance. However, one interviewee noted in the future, whilst the NP is here to stay the landscape may change, because if people withdraw from landscape management for economic or social reasons, the socio-ecological systems will alter. Having said this, one interviewee noted that a possible impact of COVID was that there appeared to be more active landscape management post-COVID. This may have arisen as more people were spending more time at home (or at second homes) and this caused an increasing interest in, or more time available, for land management work.

Demographic change

A range of population and demographic shifts were mentioned by interviewees in the NP area in past years, both short term, impacted by COVID and longer term resulting from the socio-economic nature of the area and of Estonia, but possibly accentuated by the presence of the National Park, and recently by COVID. Interviewees mentioned a number population turnover effects in the area that have influenced the demographic balance. It was noted that young people tended to move away, possibly as the area is remote with limited opportunities, but also as part of a tendency in Estonia to move abroad and often not return. One interviewee noted that some young people do return, and indeed most incomers, second home owners and part-time residents have tended to have historic family links to the area. However, they questioned whether this trend would continue.

Concern was noted over the progressive withdrawal of facilities such as schools, libraries and community centres by the State. In the past, the national nature reserve (NNR) had extensive administration and research. They too have gone. Over time this may make it harder, especially for young families to live in the NP area and they may have to move away. There is a reasonable age range in the population now, but if the school goes the young families will leave and the population will age. As the population ages, social networks beyond the family and cultural life also appear to be declining. Another interviewee agreed that with COVID, people did start moving back from urban areas, but that part of the problem was the difficulty in retaining the younger generation. If part of the problem is the difficulty in retaining the younger generation, it was also noted that the younger generation is interested in the beautiful environment but not in farming it, which is where many of the work opportunities are locally, especially as other infrastructure is withdrawn. In the future, if the population does age, it was thought that the population may become more economically inactive, and the economically active population will become more marginal to the NP, as people can't develop anything as a result of restrictions that limit their ability to develop new businesses.

Counter to this, the area was noted as having a significant population of second home owners, and with COVID, people did start moving back from urban areas. Initially, 2nd home owners were said to be more absent during COVID but are now spending more time in Matsalu, partly as a result of the opportunity to work from home. One interviewee, although not clear on the impact of COVID, thought that 2nd home owners moved here more permanently and commuters stayed at home. So there appear to be more people in the area.

RESULTS OF INTERVIEWS

Change for locals and their relationship with management actors

Regarding changing values and practices, one interviewee said that there had been a lot of change in 20 years, but that it wasn't clear how many people feel about that change. As already mentioned, the younger generation is said to be interested in the beautiful environment but not in farming it, [which presumably will affect the continuity of conservation management]. After COVID more Estonians with summer and second homes were spending more time in the NP. They worked from home and so became more involved in local life/school life. But the difference is not large. There are issues with internet connectivity in such a remote place.

As regards social conflict and building a consensus on the future of the NP landscapes, one interviewee noted that [local] society is polarised and consists of diverse stakeholder/interest groups with divergent interests. It is not possible to give everyone what they want. You have to strike a balance and look at the big picture holistically. People still differ in what they would prefer. Some would have preferred just a nature or bird reserve. Some don't like the advent of tourism and visitors.

As regards social and cultural change in the NP landscapes, one noted that there was more social discussion about NP management than 20 years ago, and more awareness of the NPs uniqueness and the importance of cultural heritage. It's not just a nature reserve, though some still see it as that. The NP recognises not just natural but also cultural and social value [unlike NNR], and has raised the profile of the area nationally and drawn attention to it from diverse sectors. It confirms the importance of the area regarding agricultural subsidies. In recognising local cultural and social values, it hopefully gives a voice to local people e.g. regarding the Conservation Management Plan. One interviewee noted that it was important to educate local people [about the importance of the area and the NP and what it does]. Through profile raising, the NP provides an extra dimension to nature protection.

Having said this a number of comments were negative in this regard. One noted that, whilst the NP recognises the cultural heritage of local people, this heritage may be diminishing anyway. Indeed local life itself appears to be diminishing, with less going on in the area. Cultural heritage projects also appear to be declining, and again, one noted that social activity was declining, but that this may also be a function of modern life and technology, of virtual living.

There are initiatives to keep traditional skills alive like hand cutting of hay, but they don't seem optimistic it will survive. There are still many cultural heritage practices that could be preserved but more could be done here. Furthermore it was said that whilst the NP may acknowledge local people's culture, it also appears to be alienating them from nature ('don't touch!'). The interviewee is reportedly pro-nature but said that the NP does not take local people into account.

RESULTS OF INTERVIEWS

Management actors and community relations

Other comments on governance of the NP were also mixed. On the positive side, one said that the NP management and the local community have a good relationship and the NP has been cutting edge in terms of conservation. So it has worked well. NP management was said to involve the local community. It was noted that there is a NP centre with an on-site staff presence, which enables communication with the public. The staff are both local, sometimes doing land management themselves, and involved in nature conservation. This may have aided the NP's success. The staff know the area, the community and their concerns. Local relations with officials remain unchanged and with the same people. There is no great difference over time. NP management is not anonymous, it has a face. Other NPs have lost that local presence, which is about money. This local presence is in the interest of conservation and the community.

In contrast one noted that there had been a past scientific community and local NNR administration, which have now gone. This interviewee also noted that local people are excluded from much conservation work and can't act independently e.g. regarding maintenance work. They have no right to get involved. Work is done by State entities through formal procurement processes and locals are kept at a distance.

Management and regulation of the landscapes

Further to this, comments on regulation and control from most interviewees were negative. One noted that regulations (e.g. on fishing) are too restrictive, unnecessarily so, whilst another said that traditional land hunting and fishing groups were least happy with rules. Overall, regulations (e.g. on fishing) are unnecessarily restrictive and restrictions on agricultural operations are a disincentive to engage in agriculture, including pro-conservation agriculture and landscape management. Straightforward agricultural operations were said to have become increasingly complicated in the last 10 years, with lots of rules and you have to ask permission like in the old days of militarised borders. A third noted that local people don't seem to be pushing back against regulation that is marginalising them; only outsiders from the capital, though they offered no explanation for this. This may result from the history that the original NNR concept was more narrowly a nature reserve and it was not intended to let people have access. Significant change in governance and management related to the protection rule(s). A key change has been the process towards updating the protection rules. The protection rule process seems to have been a long-term discussion with many and changing participants. One interviewer seemed sceptical regarding the authorities and the usefulness and reasonableness of the rules. They were said to chop and change to be contradictory. This interviewee also seems to question the utility of much activity in the NP.

RESULTS OF INTERVIEWS

Whilst the NP is here to stay, the landscape may change. If people withdrawn from landscape management for economic or social reasons, the socio-ecological systems will alter. The younger generation was said to be interested in the beautiful environment but not in farming it. So in the future the population may become more economically inactive, and the economically active population will become more marginal to the NP, as restrictions limit their ability to develop new businesses. Indeed, Local people were said to be excluded from much conservation work and can't act independently e.g. regarding maintenance work. They have no right to get involved. This work is done by State entities through formal procurement processes and locals are kept at a distance. So whilst conservation farming appears to be surviving for now, the economic situation appears to be precarious and the future sustainability uncertain.

Infrastructure and development

Regarding the withdrawal of infrastructure noted earlier, and that may interact with demographic change, one said that the wider social infrastructure is being withdrawn e.g. schools, so the State is withdrawing in a range of ways. There appears to be no coherent policy to make local life liveable or sustainable. Human infrastructure is being withdrawn: school, library, cultural centre etc. There is not enough initiative to develop the area for people. Infrastructure is primitive for tourism, and declining for locals. The NP can be made to work if people can manage to live there.

Economics and practicalities of agriculture

Many of the comments on the economy of the NP area related to the agricultural economy and in particular the future sustainability of nature conservation land management. One interviewee noted that the local economy seemed to be getting poorer. Life is getting more expensive to live in the NP, and there appears to be greater demand for resources, perhaps relate to the larger local population, though this is not clear.

Nevertheless, nature conservation agriculture was still surviving in Matsalu but was seen to be collapsing in other NPs, as the economics of conservation management collapses. Thanks to agri-environmental scheme subsidies, the conservation management in Matsalu appears to be stable, but its continuity will depend on these subsidies continuing. However, the NP recognises natural and cultural value (unlike the older NNR), raising the areas profile nationally and drawing attention to it from diverse sectors, and confirming the importance of the area regarding agricultural subsidies. The focus of initiatives is moving towards sustainable agriculture, business and sustainable tourism, and perhaps associated assessment and certification, and there have been projects to make use of sustainable local resources such as hay or reeds for energy. However, these have been funded from abroad, as local government can't fund this.

RESULTS OF INTERVIEWS

It was suggested that during COVID there has been growing interest in land management and animal husbandry (rural agricultural) work, mainly promoted by COVID, not agricultural subsidies, and that there appeared to be more active landscape management post-COVID. Some people may realise that you are more self-sufficient in the country than in the city, which helps in a crisis like the pandemic. Despite this increase in interest, one interviewee noted that straightforward agricultural operations have become increasingly complicated in the last 10 years, with lots of rules and you have to ask permission like in the old days of militarised borders. This may have the opposite effect of disincentivising farming, including pro-conservation land management.

Tourism and visitation

The alternative source of income for local people is tourism, typically nature tourism, which is a useful source of income for local people. Comments regarding tourism and visitors focussed on economic issues, the changing type of tourists visiting, and impact if infrastructure provision on the tourism industry locally.

Nature tourism such as bird watching was noted as an actually useful and a source of income. One interviewee noted that there are typically very few Estonian visitors, they are mostly foreign, and now they don't come either. So there has been a loss of business from foreign tourism; prices have risen recently and people now go elsewhere where it is cheaper. So there is little work in that, but largely, this loss of foreign tourism is no longer affected by COVID but rather by geo-political events related to the Russia/Ukraine war. COVID has also made the business environment more unstable and has inhibited development a bit. Costs have gone up, but it's not a disaster. One interviewee noted that some businesses have stopped whilst others have been able to continue, whilst another claimed none had closed. Another interviewee noted that whilst these events have had a negative impact on tourism businesses, they seem to have adapted and coped, and perhaps the impact overall may not have been so bad. The war may well be a bigger negative impact on tourism (esp. foreign) than COVID, but people adapt even to this reality and things may settle down.

One noted how COVID created overcrowding as more people visited including some who didn't normally visit. There were new types of visitors whose behaviour challenged NP norms and rules and management had to adapt to encourage dispersion. [This effect is in line with impacts seen across the world at the time].

RESULTS OF INTERVIEWS

An on-going concern about the sustainability and viability of tourism in the NP related to infrastructure provision. One noted that there has been very little development of visitor infrastructure to improve access over the life of the NP. Indeed it was claimed that less effort has been made with hiking trails and access than at other NPs and what there is isn't always maintained. The situation was said to be not good. In line with the run-down of wider State infrastructure in the area, there were said to be fears that (NP) local engagement points with visitors may be removed to save money. Beyond this, another interviewee thought that a new tourism business models was needed. It was suggested that much tourism business is a side-line and perhaps even amateur. Situation was said to be a bit static, and so innovation and new ideas were needed.

There are always economic and other challenges. These would have happened anyway, although there have been an exceptionally large number of challenges in close succession (2009 downturn, Russia/Ukraine war, COVID pandemic). Adapting to it makes you stronger, more resilient. Overall, The NP can be made to work if people can manage to live there, but the economy is precarious and the withdrawal of infrastructure by the State makes the future viability of life in the NP less secure, and there are fears that local engagement points with visitors may be removed to save money.

Wider governance issues and funding

One interviewee noted that [nationally?] there are many different agendas and priorities regarding land use and even environmental goals can conflict with one another. Biodiversity may not always be top priority and the policy landscape is always changing. The NP at least provides a higher profile level of assurance of protection of nature meaning that the NP should be less vulnerable to political considerations. This interviewee also noted that research should be a priority and taking place in a NP.

Regarding the organisation of NP and environmental governance more broadly, one noted that State governance actors have been reorganised, and everything is very climate focussed. Biodiversity is a poor relation and will probably struggle to attract limited funding. Governance and funding are uncertain. Lack of funds is in the background of all initiatives. In a field of competing priorities for limited funds, the NP is not a priority for the municipalities.

Again, regarding management structures, one noted that management of the NNR was coherent, but now there are a range of [competing?] agencies and a lot of constitutional change. Also, the NP no longer has a local management presence. Management actors are only there co-incidentally, and have a much wider remit than just Matsalu NP.

MATSALU NATIONAL PARK

EXPLORING PEOPLE'S VIEWS AND CHANGE OF PERCEPTIONS THROUGH TIME



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