Management Effectiveness Evaluation of Finland’s Protected Areas

Summary of the Evaluation Report and Management Actions in Response to It
Simultaneously with this evaluation, the Ministry of the Environment financed an assessment on how Finland has reached its general biodiversity targets through measures of various fields of administration. Together with the detailed international review on the protected areas, it offers a good foundation for understanding the present status of biodiversity and its conservation.

Protected Area System in Finland

Finland has a well-developed network of protected areas (PAs), numerically spread around the country and covering about 10% of the total area, but with the majority of the area protected being in the far north. There are generally no permanent settlements in protected areas and no logging, although reindeer herding and subsistence hunting are allowed in the northern regions.

The protected areas on state land are mostly administered and managed by the Natural Heritage Services (NHS). The NHS is a part of Metsähallitus, which

First Comprehensive Evaluation of a European Park System

A comprehensive international management effectiveness evaluation (MEE) of the Finnish protected area system was commissioned by Metsähallitus Natural Heritage Services (NHS) and organised in cooperation with the Ministry of the Environment and stakeholders in 2004. The evaluation report was published in 2005. The Finnish MEE represents one of the largest protected area assessments undertaken to date and is the first such national-level assessment initiated by a protected area agency in a developed country.

The evaluation was carried out in accordance with the Programme of Work on Protected Areas of the Convention on Biodiversity (CBD) approved in Malaysia in 2004. It has been Finland’s aim to support the ambitious realisation of the CBD in halting the loss of biodiversity by 2010. Protected areas and their good management play a key role in attaining this goal.

The evaluation results illustrate the substantial progress made since the first evaluation was carried out on Finnish protected areas in 1994. The report gives much insight as to how Finland’s most valuable natural sites are managed. It shows, how effectively the financial and other means granted to the NHS are used, and how successful the result-oriented guidance and the creation of operating conditions for the protected areas have been.
is also responsible for the management of state forest lands. Metsähallitus is supervised by the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry and the Ministry of the Environment. The large majority of funding for the NHS comes from the state.

The backbone of the Finnish protected area system is a network of national parks, strict nature reserves and wilderness reserves on state land. Most of the large areas consisting of representative forest, mire and fell habitats are situated in Northern Finland. There are also numerous national parks in the southern part of the country, but many of them are small. There are currently 34 national parks managed by the NHS, registering over 1.4 million visitors in 2005 (Finland has 5.2 million inhabitants). One national park and a few other PAs are managed by the Finnish Forest Research Institute.

Another main element in the Finnish protected area system is a series of sites protecting specific ecosystems and their species’ assemblages. National conservation programmes including areas on both state and privately-owned land have been established for mires, herb-rich forests, waterfowl wetlands, shores, and old-growth forests. The present programmes will be implemented by the end of 2007.

Since Finland joined the European Union (EU) in 1995, a national Natura 2000 network has been created, mostly of areas already protected. This network has the overall goal of protecting biodiversity within the EU. Finland’s Natura 2000 network was approved by the European Commission on January 13, 2005. Together with sites designated by Sweden and those to be designated by the Baltic states, which joined the EU in 2004, most habitats of the boreal region are well represented in the network.

International Framework for Evaluation

The management effectiveness evaluation of the Finnish protected areas was conducted in the IUCN World Commission on Protected Areas (WCPA) framework, but was adapted to the conditions of Finland. In accordance with the framework, the elements of the management cycle considered were context, planning, resources, process, outputs and outcomes.

An international steering group was identified to help to develop and comment on the assessment. A four person evaluation team was identified and appointed, including someone with specific experience in running a comparable protected area programme, someone with expertise in Natura 2000, a representative from a conservation NGO and a local independent, scientific expert.

Questions and Answers from Inside and Outside

The evaluation team first reviewed a large amount of literature. Park managers in Finland also filled out a self-assessment questionnaire, modified from the World Wildlife Fund Rapid Assessment and Prioritization of Protected Area Management (WWF RAPPAM) method. The assessment included 70 of the nearly 500 statutory protected areas, covering 80 % of the network and including the national parks, strict nature reserves, wilderness reserves and national hiking areas. Drawing on these, the team developed a series of specific questions based on the WCPA framework.

To assist in focusing the evaluation work, a set of assessment criteria were drafted for each question. The questions were answered by the NHS staff and they formed the core of the assessment and the subsequent report. The MEE was finalised by a field assessment, which included visits to representative protected area sites as well as meetings with NHS staff and representatives of directing and financing ministries, local stakeholder groups and NGOs.
Key Results and Recommendations

The management effectiveness evaluation gave the general rating that Finland’s protected areas are well managed, and with some exceptions, they appeared to be achieving their aims of conserving biodiversity. However, the evaluators gave a number of recommendations for improvements, summed up into ten areas of suggested action. Some of these rise from the Finnish context specifically, all reflect the goals and targets of the CBD Programme of Work on Protected Areas.

- **Ecosystem approach** in planning was recommended to integrate protected areas with the land and water mosaics surrounding them to form effective ecological networks. Regional landscape plans for conservation were suggested to involve innovative partnerships with private land owners, local communities and other state land managers.

- **System planning** was recommended to be supported by national strategies addressing invasive species and climate change. In addition a gap analysis of threatened species was suggested to see whether current conservation actions are adequate.

- **Site planning** for management was observed to be falling behind schedule; strategic targets and milestones were recommended to finish and update this process. Periodical risk assessment was suggested to help to focus planning on sites in greatest need of action.

- **Conservation outcomes** in view of the evaluation should be emphasized in management of protected areas. Certain declining habitats deserve greater attention. More areas where hunting and fishing is prohibited are needed as are efforts to reduce impacts of overgrazing by reindeer in the far north.

- **Community outcomes**: specific efforts should be made to poll opinions and build arguments for protection with rural local communities to reduce still continuing antipathy for protected areas.

- **Visitor outcomes**: visitor impacts should be assessed and impact reduction looked into by raising public awareness of service costs and environmental effects.

- **Financing** provided by the Finnish government was in general seen adequate in international comparison. Exploration of options for other kinds of support were recommended. Annual audits should be checked against delivery on objectives, especially on those related to conservation.

- **Global role** of Finland’s protected areas and the significance of conservation work was seen not fully to be comprehended by all NHS staff. Better understanding of the Convention of Biological Diversity and Natura 2000 targets was suggested as a potentially motivating factor for staff.

- **Assessment** of cultural values was seen to require a strategy. Terrestrial and underwater habitat inventories are to continue. A Natura 2000 master plan for monitoring is needed. Assessment and monitoring systems should to be worked into a coherent framework and resources concentrated on a suite of key indicators to sum up biodiversity and cultural outcomes in protected areas.

- **State of the Parks** reporting was recommended on a regular basis to analyse and communicate management effectiveness and support a culture of adaptive management. Reporting should involve external review.
Responsive Action by Many Actors

Many of the recommendations made by the evaluators were directed to the Natural Heritage Services of Metsähallitus. Some are minor ones which are relatively easy to put in practice, others complex strategic challenges which will take a lot of time. Several recommendations were related to the environment administration in general, e.g. legislation, political strategies and cooperation between different sectors and stakeholders. Immediate action has been taken by both Metsähallitus and the Ministry of the Environment.

New Tools for Conservation: The Ecosystem Approach

A broader ecosystem approach in management planning is seen important by the entire Finnish environmental and forestry administration. Regional natural resource plans of Metsähallitus have already utilised the ecosystem approach successfully in the north, where most of the land is state-owned. Through participatory approaches with local stakeholders and active dialogue with NGOs, an agreement has been reached on 100,000 hectares of state-owned land (half of which is forest) to support the ecological network of protected areas.

New measures are being developed in southern Finland, where the proportion of state-owned lands is minimal and the network of small scattered protected areas is surrounded by other land use pressures. Connectivity of protected areas needs to be improved, otherwise expected climate change will be detrimental to the Finnish parks. The national METSO programme includes several pilot projects aiming at the conservation of the biodiversity values in southern forests, on a voluntary basis and emphasizing cooperation between different stakeholders. The situation is still more challenging as regards other habitats, including traditional agricultural lands. Efforts are made to encourage private landowners to participate in management schemes.

Ecosystem-based, integrated marine and coastal area management (IMCAM) approaches are being applied to the Baltic Sea area by an Action Plan incorporating biodiversity and nature protection as one of the key themes. Finland has been active in promoting the implementation of strategic goals and objectives through the Helsinki Commission (HELCOM).

The ecosystem approach is a challenge also to ecological research, since the baseline ecological information is often missing in areas surrounding protected areas. Although Metsähallitus carries out comprehensive inventories on state-owned lands and waters, private lands are usually poorly studied. The NHS has made arrangements to enable inventory data of privately-owned PAs to be incorporated into the GIS systems of Metsähallitus, which makes integrated land use and management planning easier in practice.

System and Site Management Planning

The evaluation emphasized the necessity of a strategic national plan for the Natura 2000 network. The Regional Environment Centres and Metsähallitus have jointly drawn up regional master plans for Natura 2000 areas resulting in plentiful information that allows strategic site planning. New guidelines for site management planning have been established by Metsähallitus enhancing productivity and emphasizing effectiveness of conservation through objective-related monitoring.

The environment administration has already paid attention to the adaptation to the climate change and to invasive alien species, but their relation to protected areas shall be studied further. The Ministry of the Environment has also established several working groups to tackle national issues, such as hunting in national parks. Another group is working to amalgamate recreational use of nature, aims of securing biodiversity and forestry in state hiking areas and in municipal recreational forests. It seeks to look into, how these areas can support protected areas and enhance the ecological functioning of the PA network.
Cultural Heritage and Socio-economic Impacts in Focus
As suggested the NHS has continued terrestrial habitat inventories in PAs in the METSO project area and they will be completed by the end of 2006. Marine underwater inventories have progressed from the South Western to the Western coast and will continue until 2010 and include the entire coast. A strategy and action plan for inventory and protection of cultural heritage in PAs is being drawn up by Metsähallitus in cooperation with the National Board of Antiquities.

A national action programme for development of nature recreation and tourism aims to increase visitation to PAs and enhance local economy and employment. Pilot studies on social and economic impacts have been conducted in several national parks and best practices in study methodology are presently being spread throughout the NHS.

State of the Parks Reporting Makes Sense
The recommendation for State of the Parks reporting was a major strategic proposal, but still relatively simple to take on board. An internal project was established by NHS in 2005 to gather data needed and the first State of the Finnish Parks report will be published in 2006.

In Finland, the proposed park-level reporting is a novel approach. The NHS has even intentionally suppressed park-centred ideas of protected area management in favour of cost-efficient process-based management which is coordinated on the regional (unit) level. However, the park-level reporting, particularly in the proposed format of the WCPA evaluation framework, provides a comprehensive way to gather and present the existing data in an interesting way. There is also a need for more protected-area-specific aims and activities, defined on the basis of specially conducted assessments and risk analyses. A suite of indicators to evaluate the biodiversity and cultural outcomes of management in protected areas is under construction as part of the system.

The NHS plans to publish similar reports every five years. They will provide a useful tool to monitor as to how the agency and country is reaching the 2010 target to significantly reduce the loss of biological diversity. It will allow the agency to develop its own work, to understand changes and to assess threats. Not the least, it gives the NHS the opportunity to tell about the natural and cultural values and challenges to decision-makers and the public at large. It may also help NHS personnel to understand the links between the national, European and global values and targets.

Publications are available in electronic format:

Cover: The Louhimaa Croft and surroundings, Linnansaari National Park in the eastern lake area in Finland. These are home waters to the remaining endemic Saimaa Ringed Seals. (Photo: Lentokuva Vallas)

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