

Wetland Tourism: Estonia - Soomaa National Park

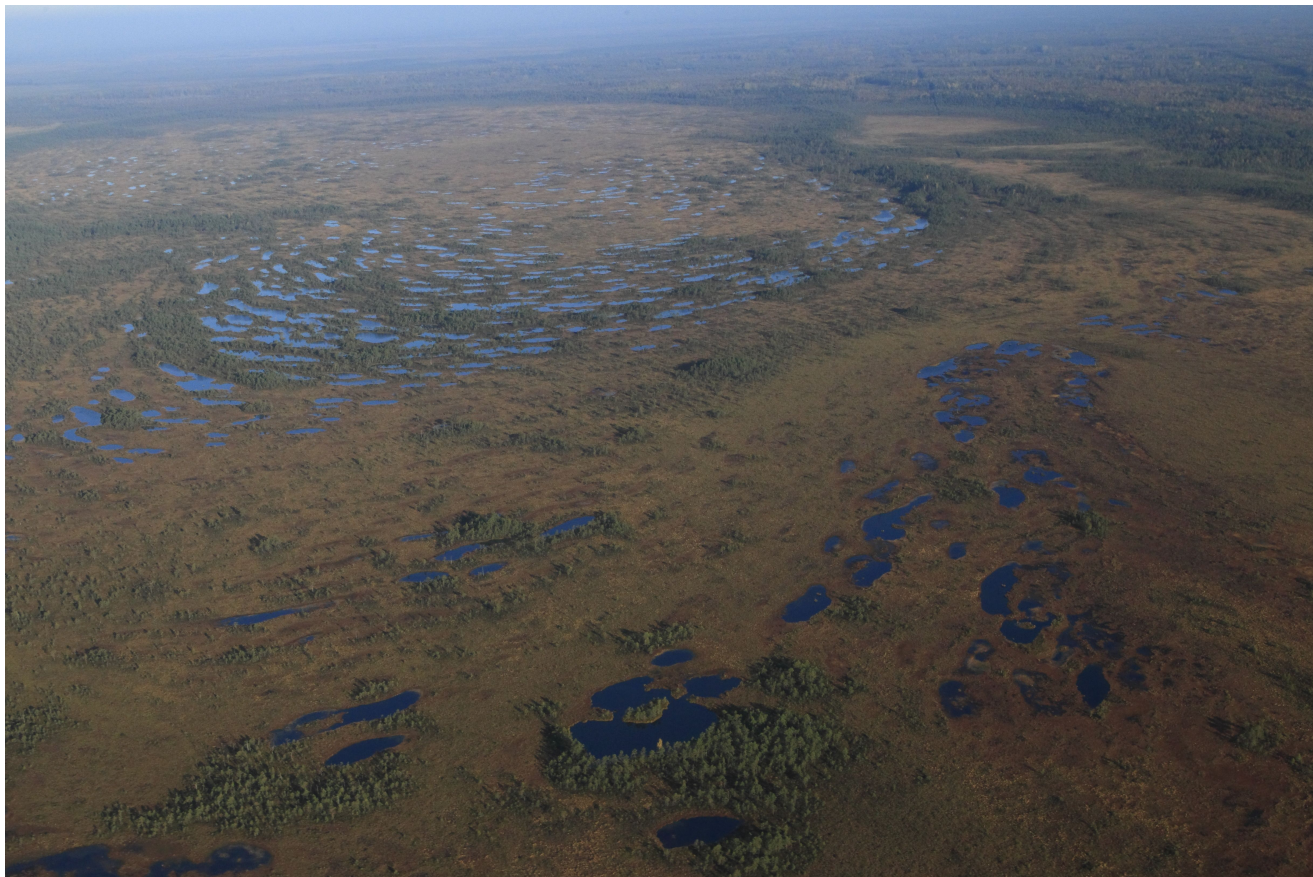


Estonia, Soomaa. Fifth Season in a Soomaa Boat. © Mati Kose

Estonia's Soomaa National Park is a land of peat bogs, naturally meandering rivers, swamp forests and meadows on the rivers' floodplains. Its bogs and rivers began to develop around 10,000 years ago when the last of the European ice sheets retreated northwards. Today the area contains some of the best preserved and most extensive raised bogs in Europe. Each spring, it is subject to spectacular floods over a vast area – a time of the year that is known locally as the 'fifth season'. Soomaa also has rich wildlife which includes golden eagles, black storks, woodpeckers, owls, various kinds of bog waders such as golden plovers, wood sandpipers, whimbrel, curlew, great snipe, and corn crake, as well as elk, wild boar, beaver, wolf, lynx, and brown bear.

Soomaa National Park is the most popular wilderness tourism destination of the Baltic countries. Its tourism products are based on wilderness experiences, the uniqueness of Soomaa and its cultural heritage, and the quality services that are offered by the local tourism entrepreneurs and stakeholders.

The Park was established under Estonian legislation in 1993, and joined the PAN Parks Network of European wilderness areas in 2009. It also received an EDEN (European Destinations of Excellence) award from the European Commission in 2009 for promoting sustainable tourism in and around a protected area. The site has been listed as a Ramsar Wetland of International Importance since 1997.



Estonia, Soomaa. Mire landscape in Soomaa. © Mati Kose

The Park receives 45,000 visitors per year: 90 % of these come from within Estonia, and 10% from overseas. There is no entrance fee, and the park does not receive any direct income from tourism. Visitor services, including a visitor centre, are provided by park management, mostly by the State Forest Centre, and are free for visitors to use.

Private entrepreneurs provide accommodation and restaurants, as well as most of the tourism activities available with the Soomaa National Park. These include:

- canoeing – the greatest spring adventure in Soomaa
- nature trails in bogs
- bog walking with snowshoes
- bird, butterfly and plant watching
- cultural history (traditional meadow

management, old lifestyles/adaptations for living in a wetland wilderness environment).

The State Forest Centre also provides a Visitor and Nature Centre that provides information, including leaflets and brochures, about Soomaa's habitats, wildlife and history, as well as about the various tours and trails that are available for visitors.

The Sustainable Tourism Development Strategy aims to develop tourism in ways that support the Park's objectives for nature conservation, to create jobs and businesses for local communities, and generally to support the welfare of local communities and help to preserve the local ways of life. It also sets out zoning for Sustainable Tourism. The strategy has been developed with the Soomaa Cooperation Panel which has been

established as the main participatory mechanism in and around the site. The panel brings together the park managers and local government, business and community representatives, including the National Environmental Board, the State Forest Center, local authorities, the Friends of Soomaa, the Soomaa Tourism Association, and village groups. A Tourism Marketing Plan for 2010-2012 has also been developed, which includes international marketing especially of Soomaa's wilderness aspects, in cooperation with the PAN Parks Foundation; improvements in the quality of the existing visitor infrastructure; and monitoring of the effects of tourism on both conservation and the local economy.

Soomaa National Park has benefited from its membership of the PAN Parks Network, which has provided guidance on developing sustainable tourism in the region, working with the private sector, and encouraging local businesses to become engaged in tourism so that they can benefit economically.

All members of the PAN Parks Network have to comply with a series of criteria for conservation (natural values, habitat management, visitor management) and tourism (sustainable tourism development strategy, tourism business partners), and they are independently audited against these standards every five years. As well as ensuring that the parks apply sound management and high standards in tourism and conservation, the PAN Parks Network also gives them access to experience and expertise from other regions.

Practical benefits that Soomaa National Park has gained from its membership of the PAN Parks Network have included encouraging an increase in positive attitudes to conservation amongst local stakeholders; providing a focus for cooperation between public authorities, tourism businesses and communities; creation of more employment and business opportunities in tourism; and development; joint planning and coordination on tourism and economic development. There has also been an increase of awareness about the importance of old cultural traditions.

A combination of zonation and visitor management methods is used as a management tool to help conflicts between conservation of sensitive sites and public use areas. This, along with Soomaa management's ways to control visitor impact, has created a good balance between the two aims of preservation and promotion.



*Estonia, Soomaa
Nature Trail, Wilderness Core Area.
© Mati Kose*

Soomaa National Park has established a series of specially designed boardwalks to provide the general public with access to the bogs without damaging them. Using the boardwalks, visitors are able to view the wildlife and vegetation of the Park's bogs and forests; while the boardwalks do provide access, however, tour operators found that they were also limited in the types of tourism experience it was possible to offer visitors to the Park. Soomaa National Park has therefore worked with local tour operators to develop innovative tour products that give visitors' wilderness experiences of the bogs, while protecting the site's fragile habitats and wildlife. This has led to development of guided tours over the bogs using snowshoes which allow people to walk over the spongy and fragile bog vegetation without causing damage to it and without sinking into the bog.

Using snowshoes, tours can leave the boardwalks and explore more remote areas of the park. The snowshoe tours have helped to diversify the tourism products that the Park can offer and provide an almost unique experience that attracts visitors and helps to promote the Park and its tourism, with benefits for local tour operators and other businesses. At the same time, the Park and tour operators work closely together to ensure that snowshoe tours are carefully controlled and

monitored to ensure that no damage is caused to the bogs and their wildlife.

The management's efforts provide a great example of finding innovative ways to reduce negative visitor impact. It has been observed, for example, that bog waders will tolerate the boardwalk and continue to breed about 500 meters away -- so as long as visitors stay on the boardwalks, their presence does not interfere with the life of bog waders. Experience has also shown that waders prefer to breed in pools and hollow rich areas where they are safely hidden from their natural predators. The management system of Soomaa National Park reduces human disturbance by controlling access to such areas during the breeding season, when the breeding success of waders could be in danger.

Only a limited number of local tour operators provide the tours, and all of them work in close cooperation with the National Environmental Board, which controls access to sensitive areas, for example during the breeding season for the wading birds that nest on the bog during May and June. The breeding success of these birds is extremely sensitive to disturbance from tourism, and so during the breeding season tour operators have developed alternate snowshoeing routes that avoid the breeding areas.



A Ramsar Case Study on Tourism and Wetlands

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The Ramsar Secretariat selected 14 case studies for a publication on wetlands and sustainable tourism, to be launched at the 11th Conference of Parties, July 2012. www.ramsar.org/tourism