

Matsalu National Park:

Exploring views of local communities regarding the social impacts of the national park and changes due to covid-19 on everyday life



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1. INTRODUCTION

National parks in Estonia are important because of their high biodiversity and landscape value and the socio-economic benefits they provide for people. Protected landscapes play a crucial role in improving physical and mental health and wellbeing and protecting social and cultural values at local level.

As one of Europe's most important waterfowl feeding and resting areas between the Arctic and Western Europe, Matsalu National Park (Figure 1) is a true paradise for bird lovers. Birdwatchers from all over the world visit Matsalu every year in spring and fall. In addition to birds, the Park also protects the semi-natural habitats characteristic of Western Estonia and the cultural heritage of Väinameri Sea, such as coastal and flood meadows, alvars and wooded meadows, reed beds and small islands. In addition to eco-tourism, fishery and livestock farming are also an important source of income and way of lifestyle for Matsalu's local communities. The COVID-19 pandemic which started in March 2020 meant that social distancing and travel restrictions were introduced in the area of Matsalu similar to the national regulations introduced in Estonia. These restrictions were expected to have changed the way local communities interact with the natural environment and their everyday activities. However, to date, no evidence exists regarding pandemic-related changes in everyday lives in the area.

In this context, an online questionnaire was distributed during October-November 2020 to local communities living inside or near the Matsalu National Park. The questionnaire was the result of a collaboration between researchers from the University of Cambridge, the University of Warwick and the Estonian University of Life Sciences. The aim of the questionnaire was to explore the social impacts of Matsalu National Park for local communities as well as their views about the management of the National Park. Furthermore, as the questionnaire was distributed during the COVID-19 pandemic, the questionnaire also explored how COVID-19 restrictions imposed during the pandemic impacted people who live inside or near the Matsalu National Park.

The results of the survey are presented in the next sections. For further details of the results please get in touch with the research team at: fidelio@warwick.ac.uk

The report will also be made available via the following websites:
<https://www.warwick.ac.uk/fidelio>
<https://www.fidelio.landecon.cam.ac.uk>
<https://pk.emu.ee/struktuur/keskkonnakaitsejamaastikukorraldus/projektid/fidelio/>

2. BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF METHODS

Due to COVID-19 restrictions the questionnaire was mainly distributed via an online platform (Qualtrics). The research team from the Estonian University of Life Sciences published two press releases in October 2020 to invite local people to participate in the survey. One press release was published on the Estonian University of Life Sciences webpage and the other one on the Environmental Board webpage. The survey was also advertised online via social media and informal networks with the help of Kaja Lotman from the Environmental Board. The online questionnaire was 'live' between 14.10.2020 and 30.11.2020. In total, 98 responses were received and 92 of them were fully completed. Sample characteristics are presented in Table 1.

The questionnaire focused on four main issues:

- People's views on the National Park and the environment in general;
- The impact of COVID-19 on everyday life;
- Different options for managing aspects of the National Park during the COVID-19 pandemic;
- Trust in institutions involved in the management of the National Park.

Table 1. Sample characteristics of 98 participants

Age category	%	Household Income (annual)	%
18-25	4.1	No income	2.0
26-35	11.2	Up to 10,000 euro	21.4
36-45	14.3	10001-25000	42.9
46-55	30.6	25001-50000	9.2
56-65	20.4	Over 50000	2.0
66-75	11.2	Prefer not to say and missing values	22.4
76-85	2.0	Relationship with the Matsalu area	%
86+	1.0	Permanent resident	45.9
Missing values	5.1	Owner of second home	39.8
Gender	%	Other	12.2
Male	43.9	Live here during COVID-19	2%
Female	51.0	Years living in the area/owning 2nd home	%
Missing values	5.1	Less than a year	
Education	%	1-5	9.2
Basic Education	2.0	6-10	6.1
Secondary education	19.4	11-20	13.3
Vocational/industry focused qualification	4.1	21-30	21.4
Bachelor degree	16.3	31-40	21.4
Master degree	46.9	Over 40 years	28.6
Doctoral degree	6.1		
Missing values	5.1		

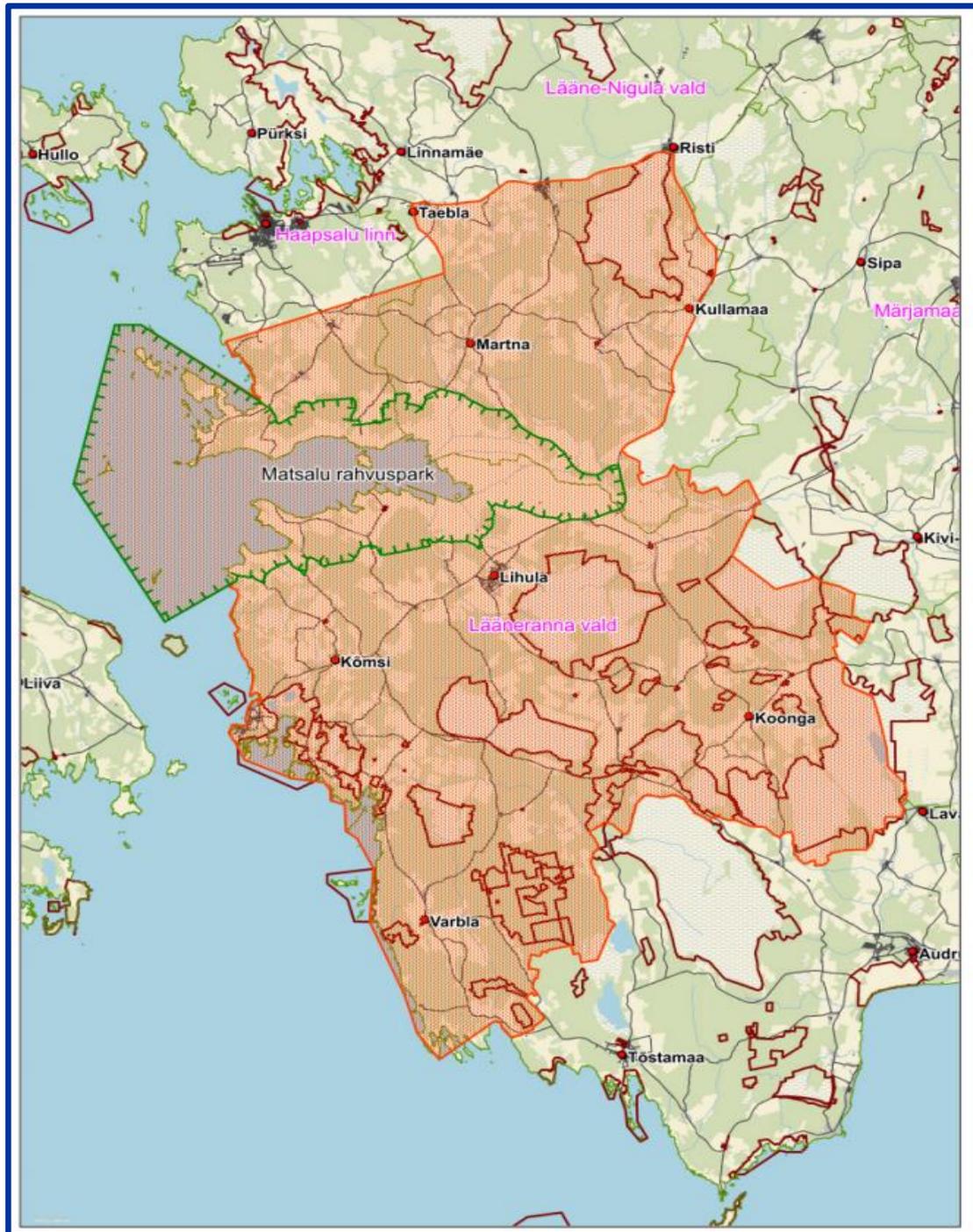


Figure 1. The Matsalu National Park (in red) and surrounding areas expected to be impacted by the park

3. RESULTS

3.1. Respondents support for Matsalu National Park

A series of questions were aimed at capturing how important the Matsalu National Park is for locals. **In total, 55.3% of respondents strongly agreed that Matsalu National Park should be cared for and protected and a further 36.2% stated that they agreed (Figure 2).** Only 1.1% stated that they strongly disagree that the National Park should be cared for and protected. **A strong place attachment was also observed,** with over 90% of respondents stating that they agreed or strongly agreed that Matsalu meant a lot to them.

Respondents were 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 4.27) but that they had less time, money and opportunities to engage with supporting activities (mean score 3.26, see also Figure 3).

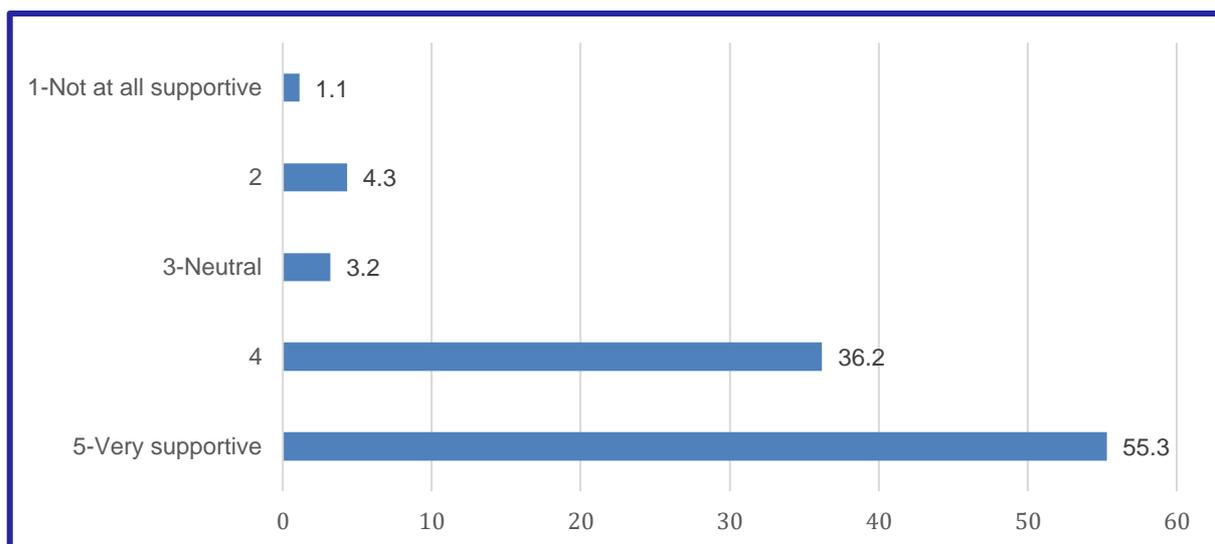


Figure 2. Level of agreement (%) with Matsalu National Park being cared for and protected

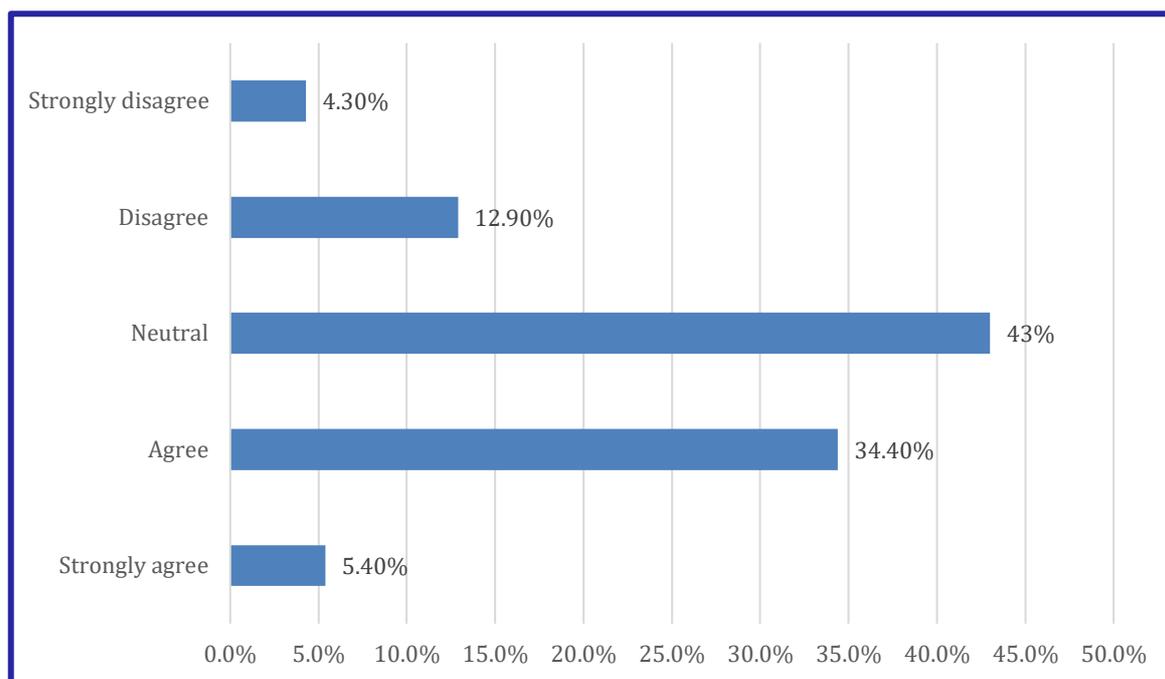


Figure 3. Participation in NP environmental protection related activities (%)

Respondents were asked 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 (Table 2) 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.

Table 2. Involvement in environmental protection related activities

Activity	Frequency
Public participatory meetings	17
Work related actions	8
Cooperation Council meetings	7
Collective action days	4
Involved by research	4

3.2. Social impacts of Matsalu National Park in the past five years

A key aim of this survey was to capture the social impacts of Matsalu national park for local residents. **Overall, living inside or near the National Park has had a very positive impact for local communities in the past 5 years.** The most positive impacts reported were related to a ‘sense of feeling connected to nature’, ‘quality of life’ and ‘recreation’. Impact on personal

income was lower compared to other impact categories but overall it was still considered to be positive by respondents (Figure 4).

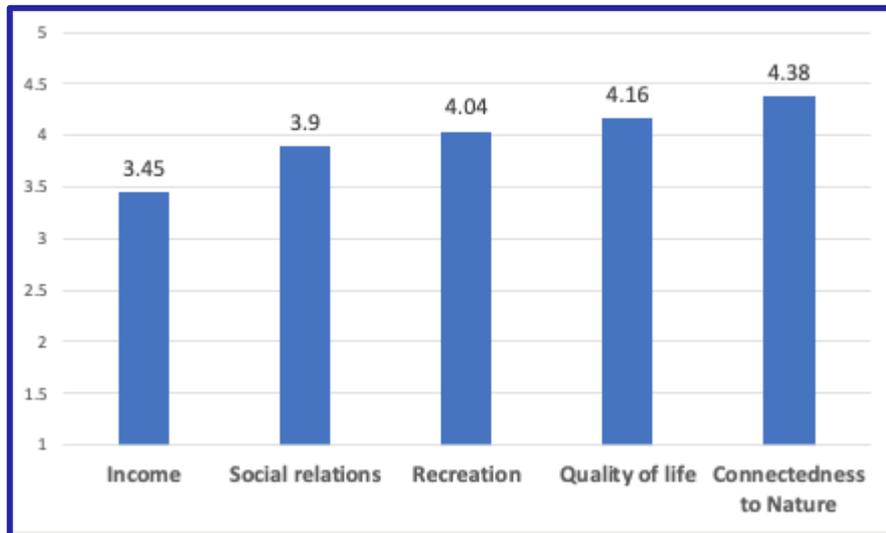


Figure 4. Perceived social impacts of Matsalu National Park in the past five years (Mean values, Scale 1-5: 1 representing negative impact, 5 positive impact, 3 no impact)

3.3. Users’ behaviour when in the National Park

Participants were asked a series of questions regarding their behaviour when using the National Park (Figures 5a-5f). The majority believed they personally acted responsibly when they were taking part in activities (such as walking and cycling) within the boundaries of the Park. However, staying on designated paths was a behaviour that people did less frequently than the other responsible behaviours included in the questionnaire. In addition, 29.5% of respondents said that they kept dogs on a lead so that wildlife was not disturbed ‘most of the time’ but not ‘always’. Similarly, 73.3 % of respondents claimed that they ‘always’ took other walkers into consideration and 25.6% that they did this ‘most of the time’.

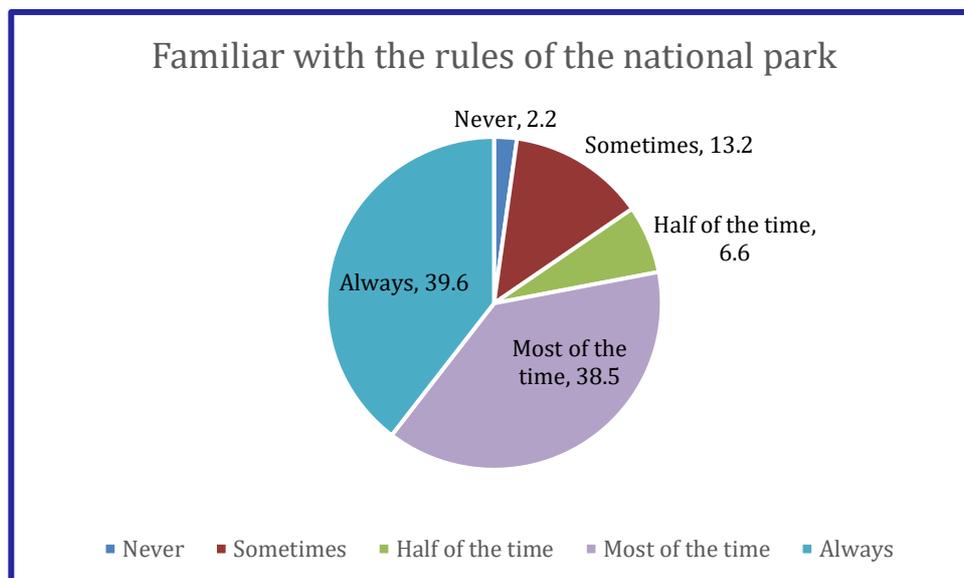


Figure 5a. Level of familiarity with the main rules of the national park (%)

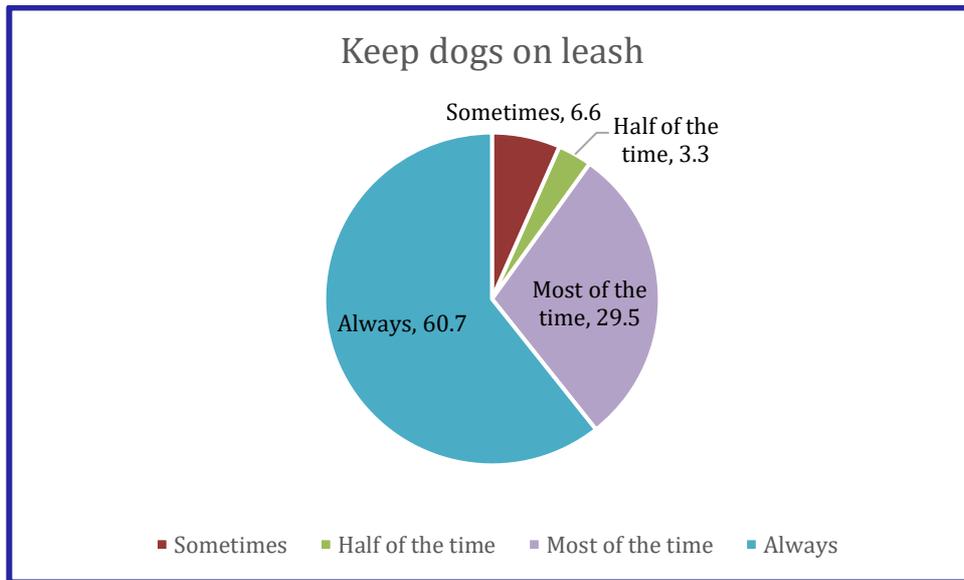


Figure 5b. Frequency of keeping dogs on leash when in the national park (%)

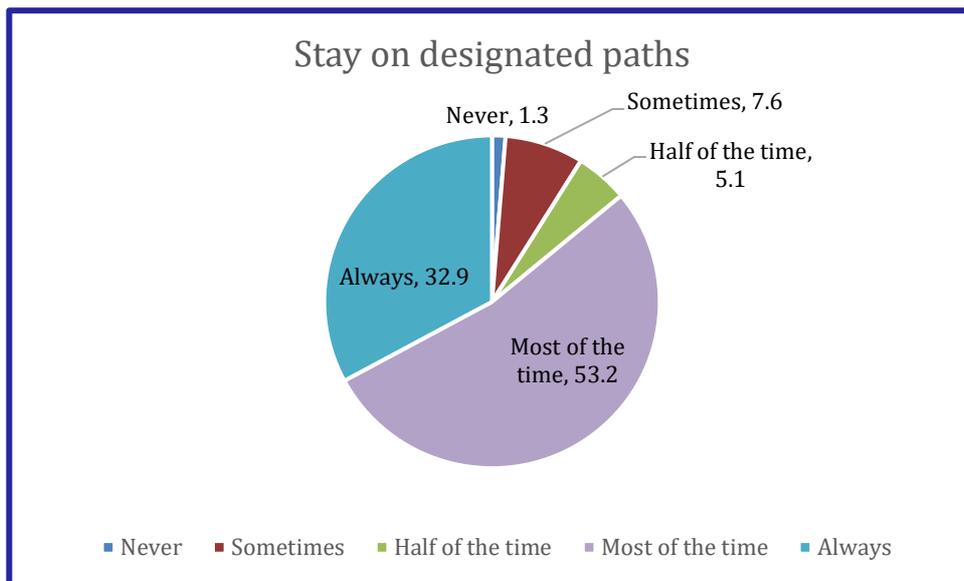


Figure 5c. Frequency of staying on designated paths (%)

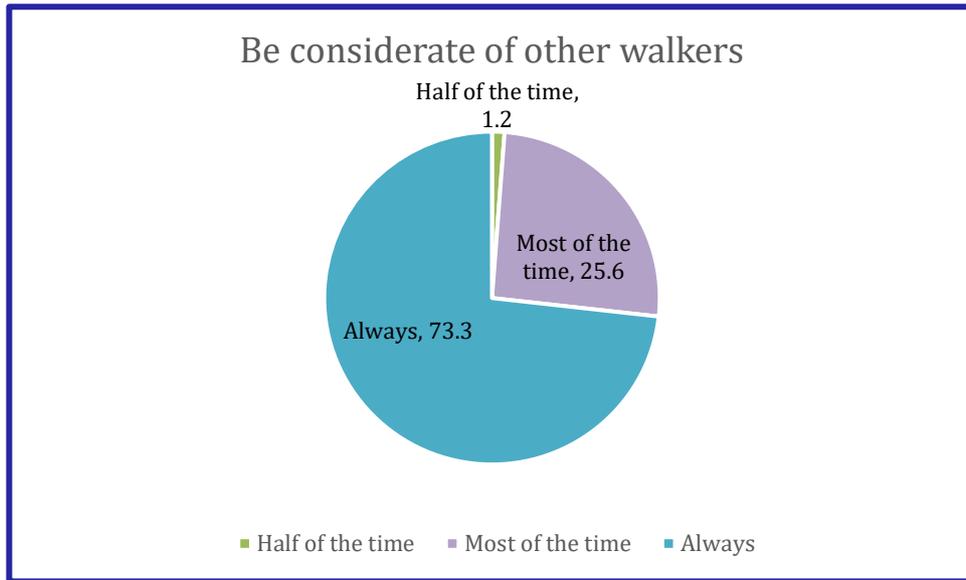


Figure 5d. How often people are considerate of other walkers (%)

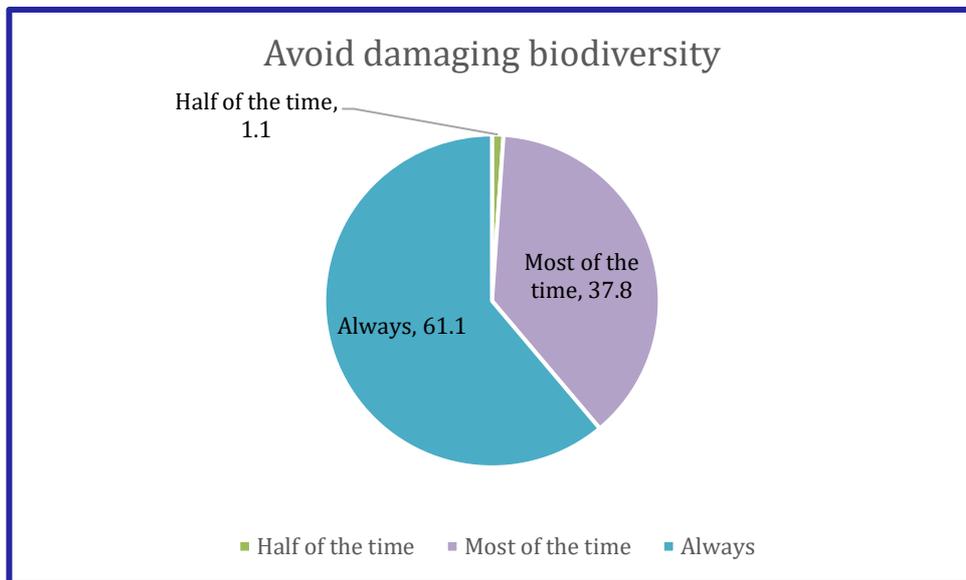


Figure 5e. Frequency of avoiding damaging biodiversity when in the national park (%)

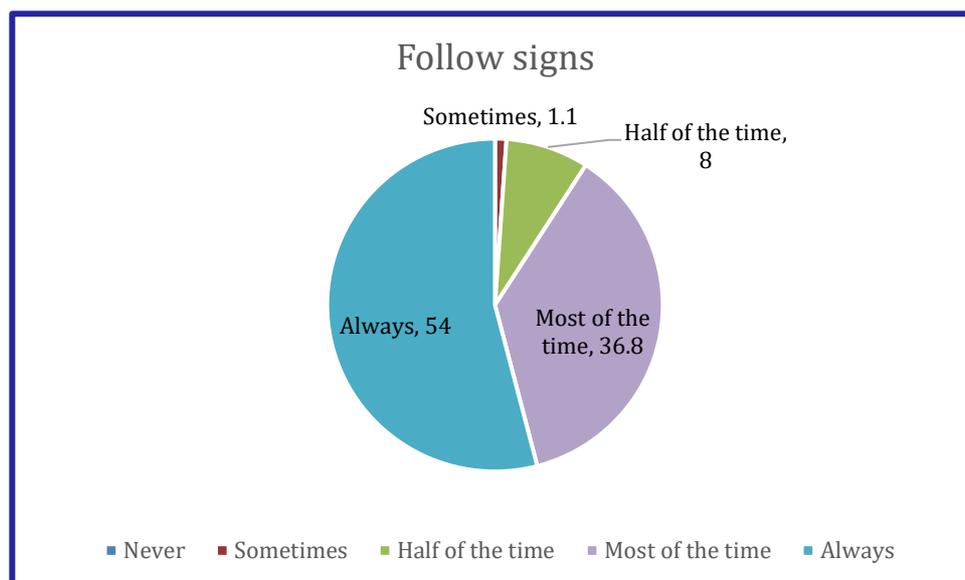


Figure 5f. Frequency of following signs when in the national park (%)

Respondents were also asked if they thought that other people (both locals and visitors) used the National Park responsibly by following the relevant National Park regulations. **83% thought that ‘most people’ used the park responsibly, 14.9% stated that ‘some people’ used it responsibly and 2.1% that ‘everyone’ used the park in a responsible way.**

3.4. Impact of COVID-19 restrictions

In March 2020, new regulations came into force in Estonia. People were allowed to travel around within the country (except for Estonian islands) and so Estonian residents were allowed to visit and access the National Park. However, no more than two people from different households were allowed to be together outdoors and were required to keep a distance of at least 2 meters from other people (the ‘2+2 rule’).

It should be noted that international borders were closed so there were no foreign tourists. Therefore, foreign bird watchers, who usually visited the national park during spring, were not present in Matsalu in 2020.

As a result of the pandemic, some Estonian recreational areas and hiking trails (e.g. at Lahemaa National park) became so overcrowded that police intervention was required. This was not the case at Matsalu National Park, although in the Bay of Matsalu there were more people fishing than usual due to the closure of the islands.

Participants were asked about the impact of the wider COVID-19 restrictions on their everyday lives (Figure 6). **The most positive changes were that they spent more time with household members and they were able to work from home. Maintaining social distance with friends and relatives and not being able to travel were the most negative aspects.**

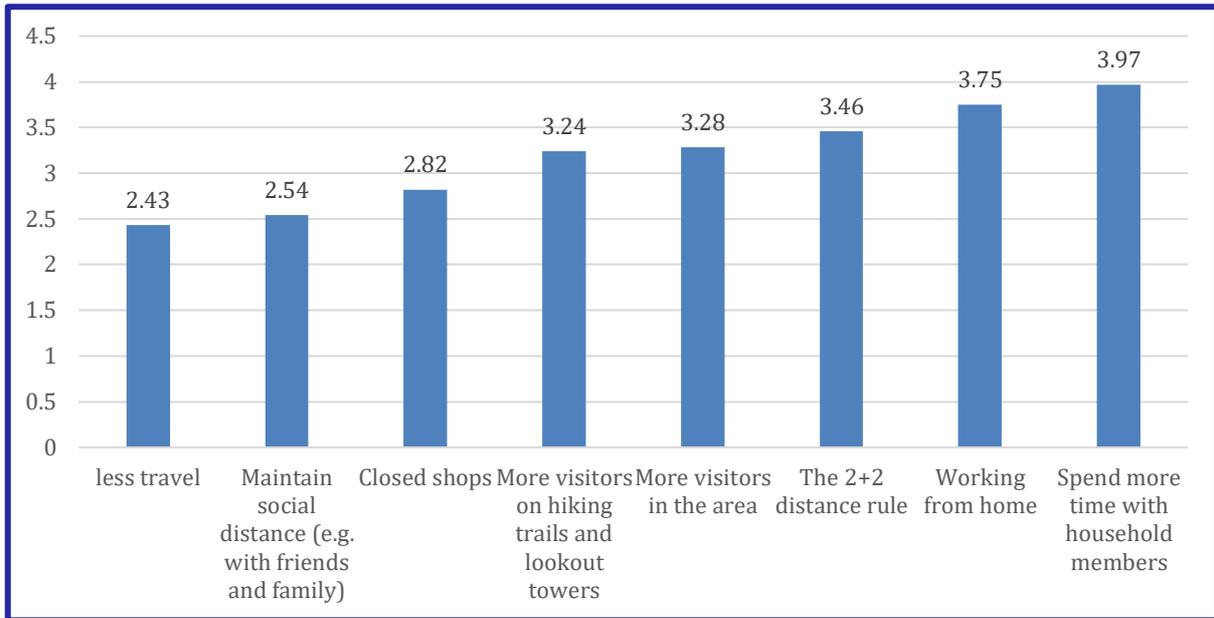


Figure 6. Changes in aspects of people’s everyday lives during the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions (5 point Likert scale, 1: Very negative change, 5: very positive change)

It is also important to note that **living in the area of the Matsalu National Park had a positive impact for 60.2% of the respondents on how they coped during lockdown.** Living near or in Matsalu National Park during the COVID-19 pandemic had positive impacts for the majority of respondents. The most positive impacts were that people became more connected to nature and that they engaged with several recreational activities (Figure 7).

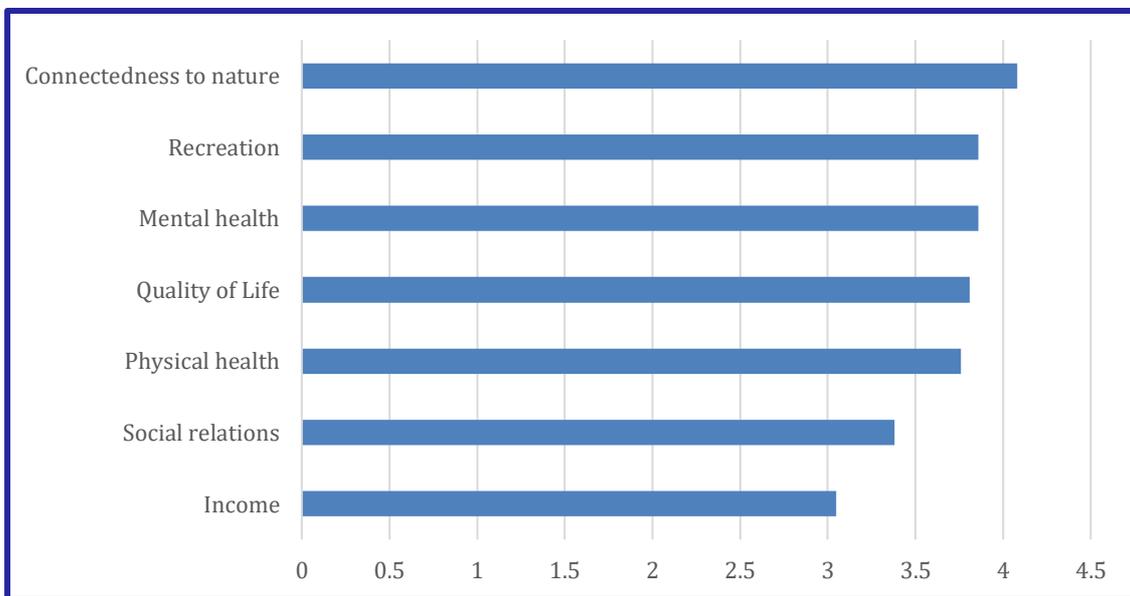


Figure 7. Impact of living near or in Matsalu National Park during COVID-19 pandemic. (5 Point scale, 1: Most negative impact, 5: Most positive impact)

Several respondents declared that they spent more time in Matsalu (due to working from home) than they would have done if there were no lockdown regulations. It was also mentioned that being near nature in the Park created a sense of safety, as it is a more sparsely

populated area and therefore people could move around without coming into contact with others. This allowed them to be more connected with nature and provided them with a sense of spiritual wellbeing. At the same time, it is worth noting that a quarter or respondents stated that nothing changed during COVID-19.

3.5. Policy tools to preserve and protect Matsalu National Park

Respondents were asked in an open-ended question what they would change in the management or the protection rules of Matsalu National Park to improve the goals of protecting nature, local culture and landscape. Several activities were mentioned which are presented in Table 3. **Most frequently, respondents noted that authorities should trust and listen more to local people and favour them instead of visitors.** Easing protection rules was also frequently cited.

Table 3. Improving management and protection rules in Matsalu NP

(The aim of Matsalu National Park is to protect nature, folk culture and landscapes in such a way that even today a person feels comfortable here. What would you change in Matsalu's rules to make this task better accomplished than it has been so far?)

Type of answer	Frequency	Type of answer	Frequency
Trusting more local people and to favour them instead of visitors	10	More public recreational areas	3
Easing protection rules	9	Forbidding hunting	2
Improving infrastructure	6	NP should be publicised more and in a better way	2
Wouldn't change anything	5	Improving cooperation between different parties	2
Strengthening protection rules	5	Restricting tourism	1
Improving cooperation between different authorities	4	Separate rules for locals and visitors	1
More attention is needed in nature protection	4	Improving support measures	1
Better rewording and introducing of protection rules	4	Valuing more forest areas	1
Better supervision by authorities	3	Limiting the number of jackals	1
Creating more public swimming places	3	Allowing boat traffic in the bay	1
Can't answer the question	10		

Due to an increase of visitors in Matsalu during the COVID-19 pandemic, preference for a number of policy tools to manage overcrowding were also explored in the questionnaire. **Most preferred tools were to develop a mobile application and erect information boards for visitors (Figure 8). More restrictive tools, such as closure of towers and trails for visitors, were less favoured by respondents.**

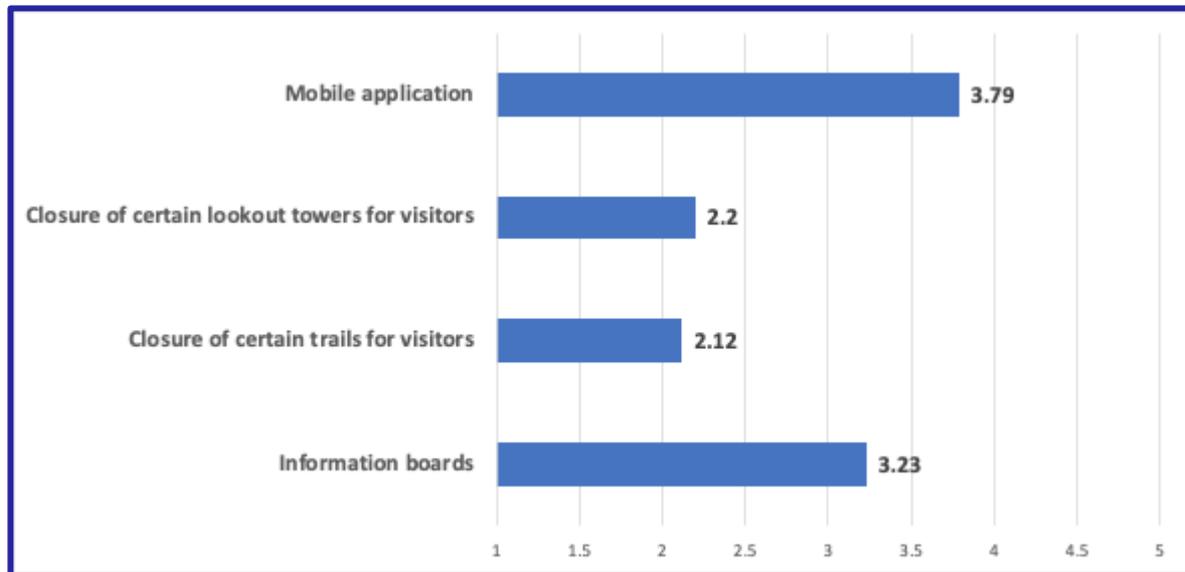


Figure 8. Preferred tools to manage overcrowding in Matsalu National Park (Level of agreement measured in 5 point Likert scale with 5 representing highest level of agreement)

3.6. Level of trust in institutions

Finally, respondents were asked how much they trusted a number of institutions and social actor groups involved directly or indirectly in the management of the National Park (Figure 9). This was measured on a 5-point Likert scale with 1 representing low level of trust and 5 the highest. The highest levels of trust were reported for researchers followed by local community organisations. The Estonian government and the Ministry of Environment were not trusted as much by respondents but in all cases the average was above 3 (overall net positive trust).

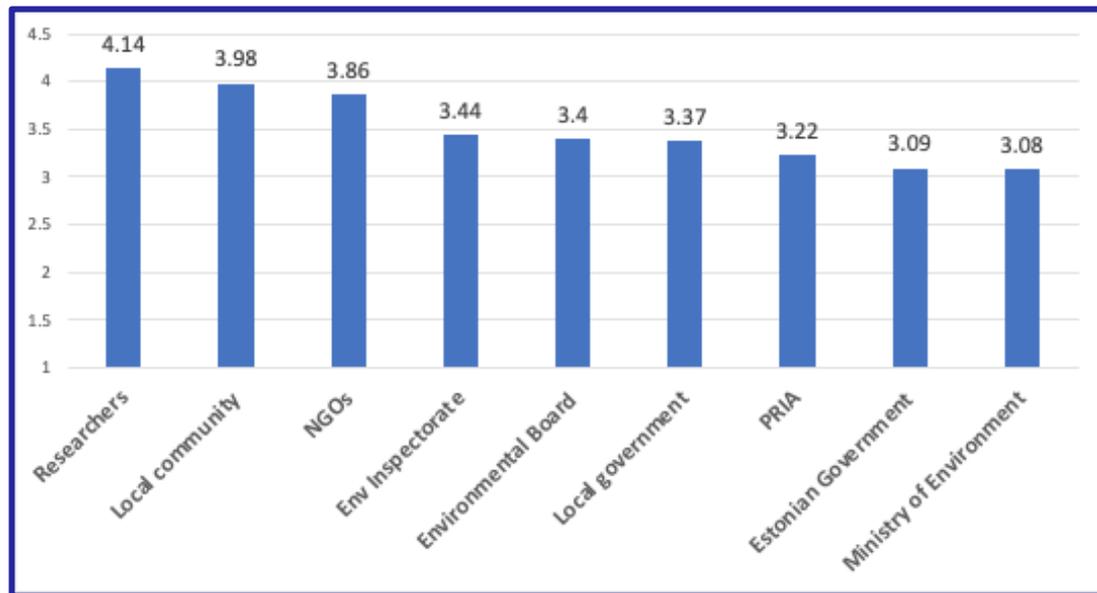


Figure 9. Level of trust in institutions and social actor groups (mean scores, measured in a 5-point Likert scale, 1 representing low level of trust, 5 representing highest level of trust)

4. CONCLUSIONS

The present study aimed to provide a detailed exploration of:

- a) People's views on Matsalu National Park and the environment in general;
- b) The social impacts of the NP on daily life in normal times;
- c) The impact of COVID-19 on everyday life in the NP;
- d) Different options for managing aspects of the NP during the COVID-19 pandemic;
- e) Trust in institutions involved in the management of the NP.

Key findings:

- The study showed that more than 90% of respondents stated that they 'strongly agree' or 'agree' that Matsalu National Park means a lot to them. This supportive attitude towards NP is also shown by the fact that almost 60% of respondents also stated that they were involved one way or another in environmental-related activities.
- Respondents considered that living in or near Matsalu NP enhanced their quality of life more in the sense of connectedness to nature and less in terms of economics.
- Respondents proposed several measures to improve management and protection rules in Matsalu NP. They mentioned that authorities should trust and listen more to local people and favour them instead of visitors. A desire to ease and reconsider protection rules in different fields (fishery, hunting, restrictions on movement) was mentioned quite a lot in open ended responses.

- Respondents claimed a very high level (83%) of adherence to rules and norms of pro-NP behaviour in Matsalu NP and also 76% of respondents expected people living inside or visiting the area should use the NP responsibly.
- During COVID-19 restrictions, living in the area of the Matsalu National Park had a positive impact for 60.2% of the respondents in how they coped. Several respondents declared that they spent more time in Matsalu than they would have done without a lockdown. This was certainly related to increased opportunities for remote working, enabling people usually living or working in bigger cities to stay longer in their second home.
- Respondents also stated that they felt safe in the Park, reflecting the ability of people to move around the park without coming in to contact with other people due to the sparse population in the area. This opportunity to spend more time outside in natural surroundings increased their sense of spiritual wellbeing. In addition, a quarter of respondents stated that nothing has changed for them during the pandemic restrictions, possibly indicating that lockdown measures did not have an adverse effect on local people. Survey responses suggest that increased traffic and overcrowded footpaths and popular places were not significant issues in Matsalu National Park in the way that they were in other popular places in Estonia.
- The most negative impacts of the COVID-19 restrictions were people being unable to socialise and the impact on travel. The most positive impacts were spending more time with household members and working from home.
- Regarding potential overcrowding of the National Park, the most preferred tools were the development of a mobile application and use information boards for visitors. More restrictive tools such as closure of towers and trails for visitors were less favoured by respondents.
- Given the challenges that the near future presents, it is encouraging to note that respondents had a moderately positive level of trust in the National Park Authority.

In the next phase of the project, the team will do further analysis, exploring differences in people's views and taking into consideration certain demographic parameters. Furthermore, a spatial analysis will be conducted aiming to explore differences in people's views across different locations in the National Park.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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FIDELIO Research Project

FIDELIO is a research project funded by the European Research Council (project no 802605). The project aims to explore why some Protected Areas are supported more than others setting at its core the unravelling of complexities in socio-ecological systems of Protected Areas and the important role of social impacts of these conservation policies. During the project, a large amount of qualitative and quantitative social data is being collected in 20 European Protected Areas including the Black Forest National Park. All reports of the project are available at: www.fidelio.landecon.cam.ac.uk and <https://warwick.ac.uk/fidelio>



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