



Friends of Ukko-Koli Association – A success story of a cohesion seeking experiment in Koli NP, Finland

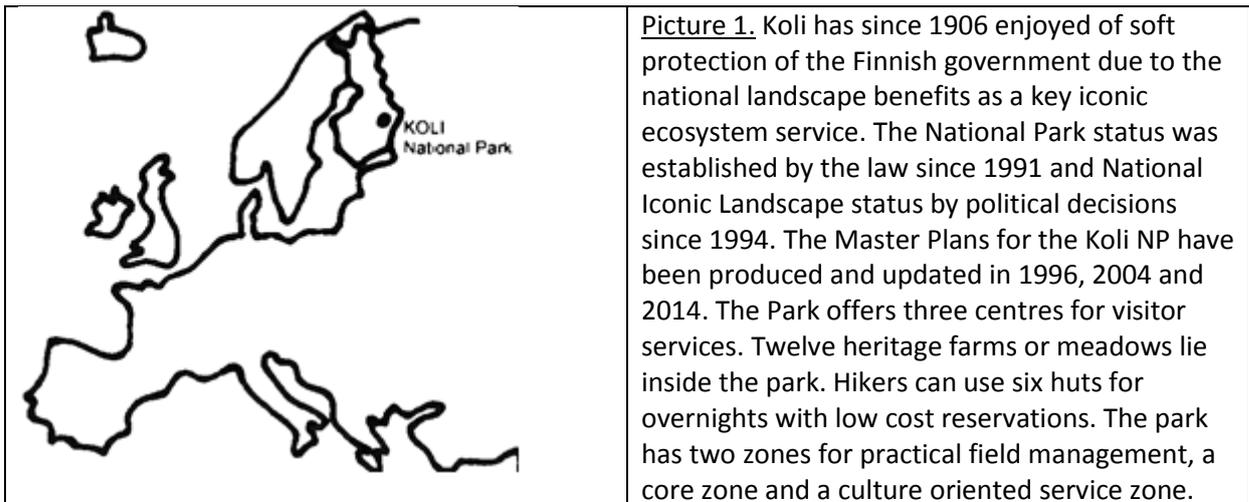
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Innovative model for low budget visitor services as a target

The Friends of Ukko-Koli Association was founded in 1999 as a supportive society for Koli National park in Finland. Koli NP is one of the 39 National Parks in Finland, 3000 hectares in size, lying in Eastern Finland in the Northern part of the Finnish Lakeland. Koli NP is the core area of the Koli National Landscape in Finland. The Friends Association was founded as a legal body to help the park manager to organise innovative visitor services with almost 0-budget in the Heritage Centre Ukko in the core visitor service area in Koli NP. The new visitor centre was opened in 2000 as one Millennium project in Finland. The new visitor service model was a pilot experiment agreed with the Minister of Environment and to be monitored and analysed in a scientific procedure.

The Ukko-Koli Friends have collected some 30 private person members, about 10 SMEs for face-to-face visitor services in the Heritage Centre and networked with some 50 local SMEs producing local products and services for the visitors and nature schools. The new organisation model was tested during the years 2000-2012 with measured and monitored success. After 2012 the Ukko-Koli Friends have focused their activities on volunteering for field management in park in co-operation with the park manager and increasing international visibility and attractiveness to Koli Resort. The Association has been member of EUROPARC Federations since 2014.



Koli was a classical case for environmental conflicts in Finland. The process to create a National Park had taken almost 100 years because of the local and regional opposing. There was an urgent need to activate the positive development in the local society, create positive visions for the younger generation, find actions which help to rise the social capital from the lowest possible level. The Friends of Ukko-Koli was a local initiative as a tool for more effective conflict management and for developing social cohesion in the Koli society. It also tried to give local SMEs an opportunity to market and sell their products in connection to the concentrated visitor and tourist flow in the National Park.

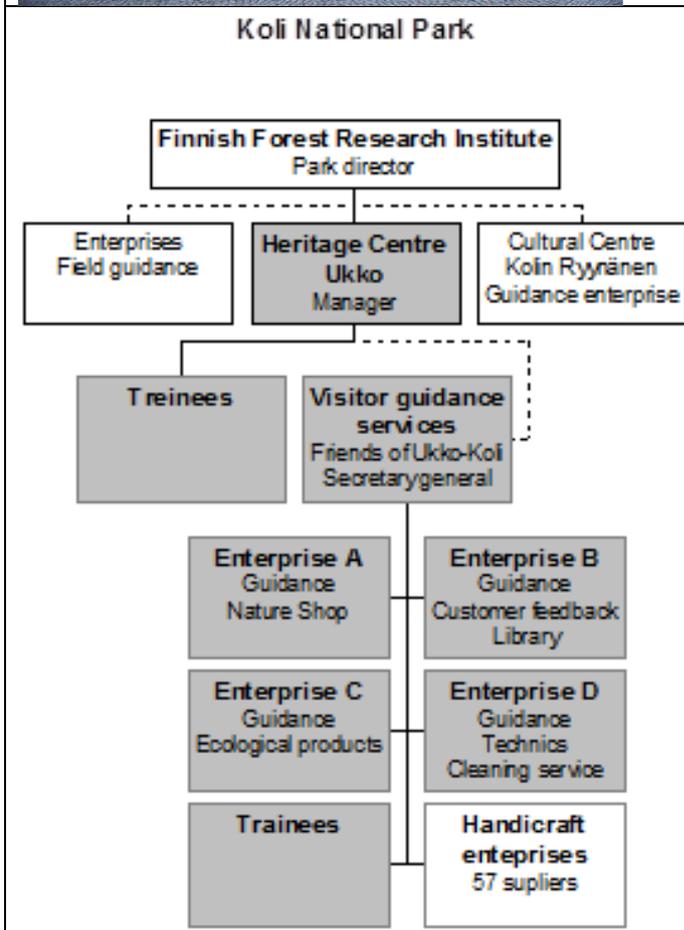
Partnership Idea benchmarked in the Wild West

The organisation model, which was adapted, was an application of the model in use in the Mid-West National parks in the USA. We brought the 3rd sector actor to the front line of the visitor services as a social business enterprise and let the few park officers to stay in the background in the most necessary administrative tasks. The Friends created a partnership model which was successful in applying external funding sources, which were critical in developing the services and producing necessary infrastructural investments like harbour services, cultural services in the Koli village and the environmental education services and resources in the Koli resort on the whole.

The Friends helped park manager to apply successfully project funding for several Regional development projects, INTERREG and LEADER. Also bridging with Russian parks was organised with TACIS funding. The internationalisation was activated also with foreign internships when the Friends organised basic board and lodging services and in addition the working management services.



Picture 2. The experiment for producing the visitor services in the central visitor centre was the main task for Friends during 2000-2012. Within that time frame the Friends served about 600 000 visitors, sold some 150 000 passports to the exhibitions and programmes within the centre and collected feedback from the customers on regular bases.



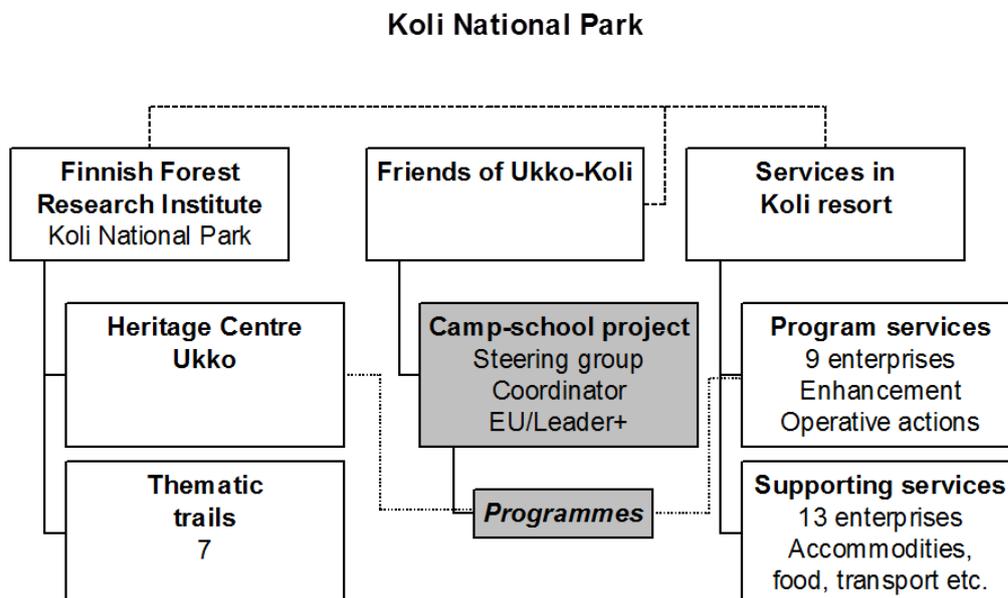
Picture 3. During the experiment the park director had only one person acting as the manager for the visitor centre. She had domestic or foreign trainees had as occasional workers. All the others working in the visitor centre for direct visitor services (guides, salespeople, cleaners, project persons) were externalised in the service provided by Ukko-Koli Friends Association. The Friends had one permanent Secretary General and working under her were contracted 4-6 SMEs in the guiding services and 50-60 local or national handicraft enterprises producing supplies to the shop in the visitor centre. Some trainees were also appointed directly under the Friends.

In the terrain the Park director had contracted several external field guide SMEs. Outside the park in the Koli Village was another visitor centre called Kolin Ryyänen. It was contracted and integrated to the parks services especially focusing on the info cafe, bed and breakfast and cultural residence services.

Environmental education in Nature School of Koli

Another special organisation was developed for the environmental education to provide the comprehensive Nature School services in Koli Resort. The Action Model was developed in several EU-partly funded LEADER, INTERREG and LIFE programme projects during the years 2001-2007. The core unit for the Nature school organisation was the Friends Association, who communicated with the schools and marketed the Environmental Education Network services in Koli Resort. The National Park has created the physical infrastructure for the 7 thematic education trails, partly the educational content (Programmes) for the trails was produced in the Friends project work and the 9 local SMEs

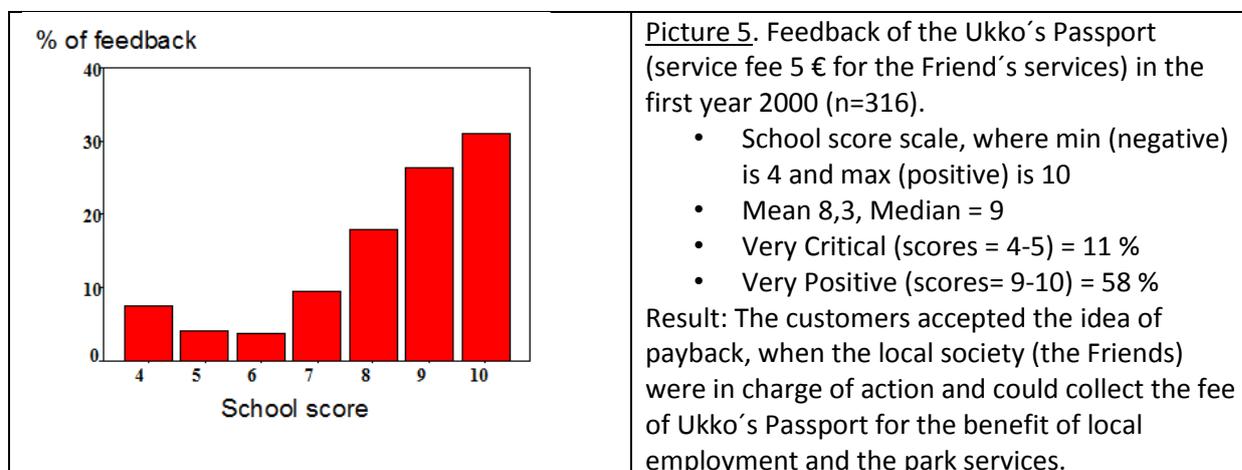
were taking care of the practical hands-on educational services in the Visitor Centre and in the terrain. The necessary secondary services for transport, food, overnights, social programmes etc. were provided by 13 SMEs in Koli Resort.



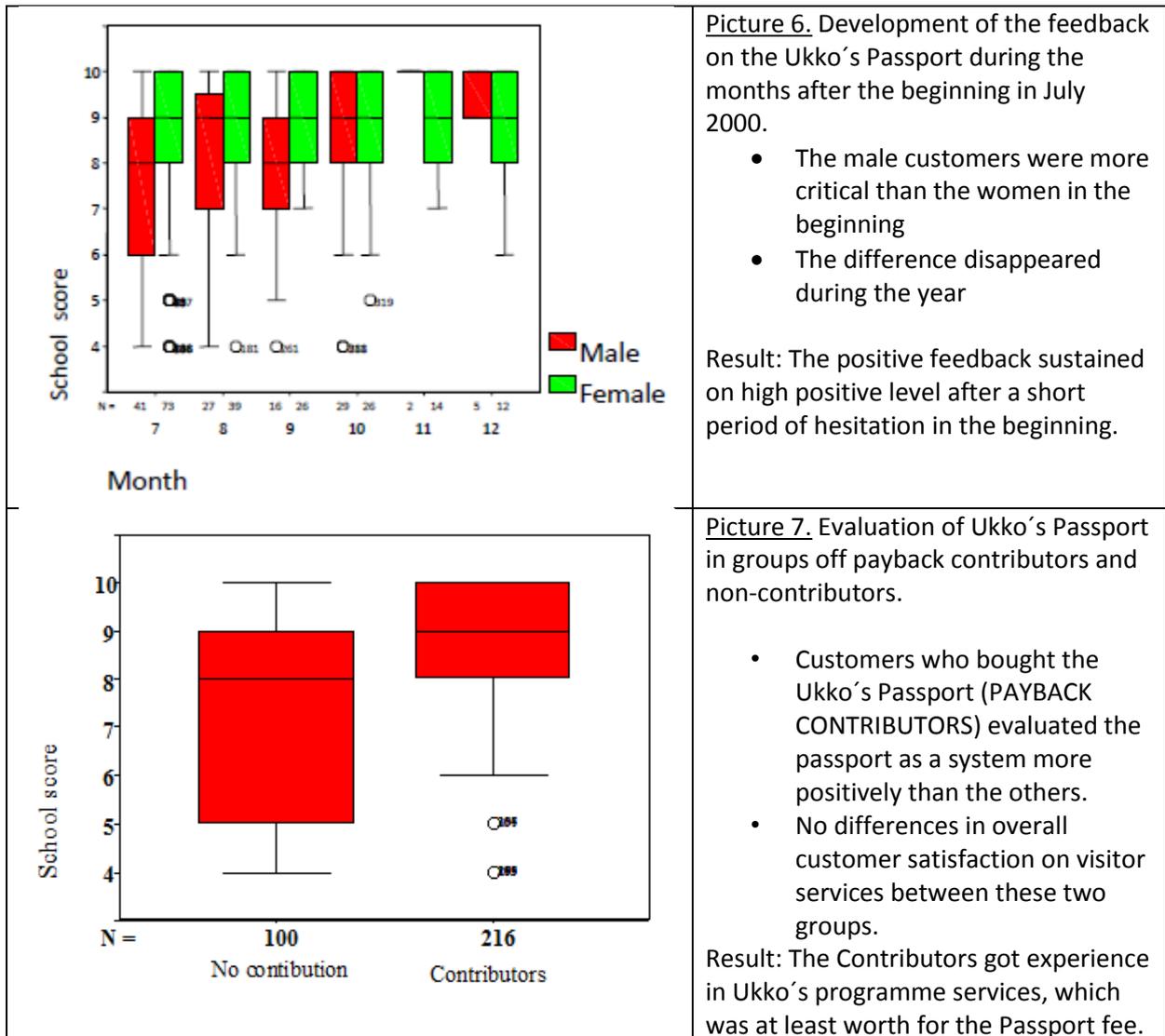
Picture 4. Koli Nature School services; organisation in 2004.

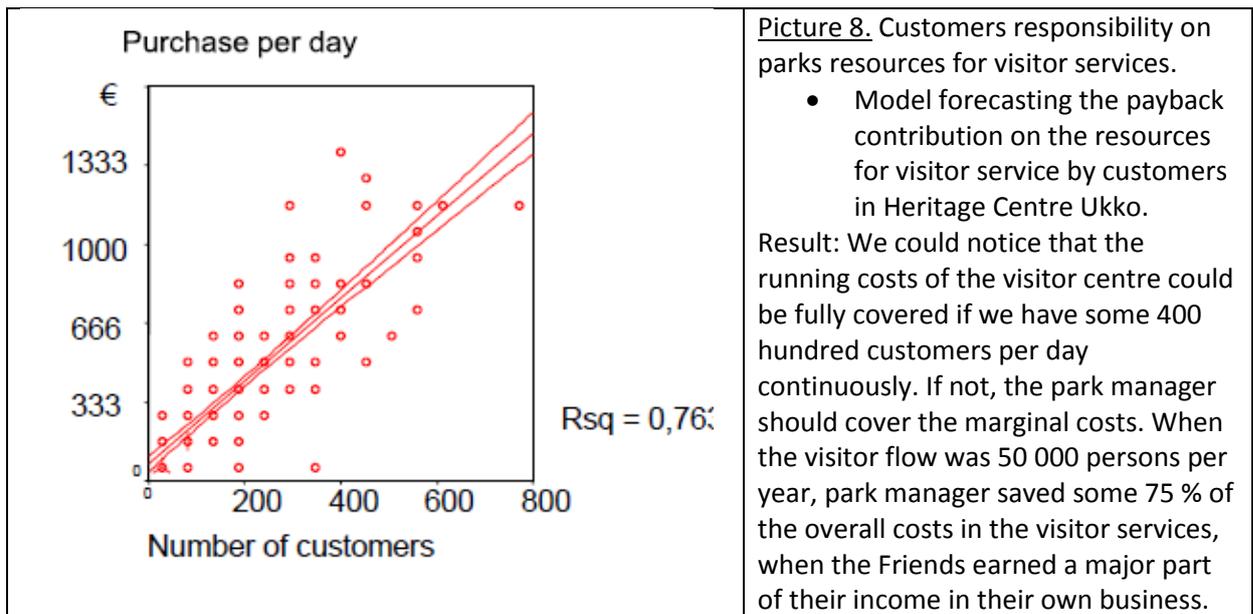
Customer satisfaction and payback-scheme monitored

One key task in the Koli experiment was a study on the customer satisfaction in the main Visitor Centre Ukko. Customer satisfaction was measured and monitored in the Ukko Centre and the results were used as a barometer or indicator of social carrying capacity of the park services, when the externalised service model with customer payback option model was introduced in the standard national park service culture where all the interpretation and programme services have been free for direct customers.



Our hypothesis was in the beginning that we produce higher overall satisfaction for the customers, when we do high quality guidance services with smile in traditional clothing and telling always to the customers that the visitor services are organised here according to the local initiative with local society, not according to the national administrative standard. In the end of 2004, after 5 years monitoring period, we could prove that this hypothesis was valid in practise, too. The success in guidance and interpretation was directly in positive correlation to the overall satisfaction on the complex mix of services in the visitor centre.



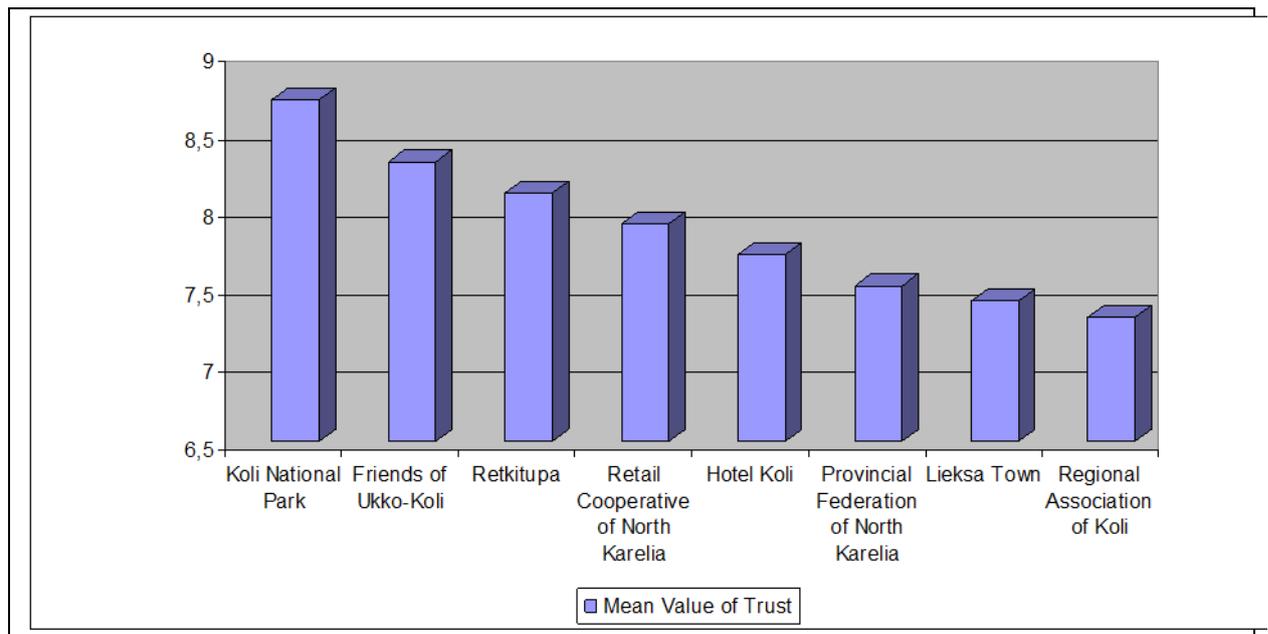


The first part of the Ukko-Koli Friends experiment in visitor services concerned the responsibility of the customers, especially the willingness to pay one part of the costs of the services directly to the service provider. The other part of the study was to estimate how the conflict on the nature conservation could be mitigated when increasing the role of the local society in face-to-face park services and at the same time developing the networking the local SMEs and 3rd sector societies to the park managers.

Barometer for social capital gain

There we developed the monitoring tools for estimation of the customer satisfaction on the partial and overall visitor services. Also we developed a barometer or a monitoring method to estimate the state of the local social capital in connection of the park management. The results of the first two estimations of the social capital gain were very interesting. We sent a questionnaire to 215 SMEs and third sector associations and asked how they communicate with the park manager and with each other. They were also asked to estimate on which level they trust the actions of the park manager and each other. Five actors answered in all the questions and therefore their evaluations could be used as rough results of the tested method.

The results of this study showed that the park manager and the Friends Association were together with the complex business group of the National Park Hotel Enterprise among those three, which got the highest points in changing information and in trust estimations. This monitoring was done in 2005 and 2007. The results were similar both times. The National Park and the Parks Friends Association were the driving forces of the cohesive development in Koli Resort ("Trust barometer" score values on the level 8,7 - 8,4, when min was 4 and max was 10). Also it was interesting to notice that the Ministry of the Environment and the Regional NGO for Nature conservation got the most lowest scores in the Trust barometer (Score value 7,0 - 7,1).



Picture 9. The Trust barometer for different actors in Koli Resort (n=75).

Go to Siberia and learn a lesson

During the 12 years period in delivering the visitor services in the Koli Visitor Centre, we learned that the social capital created by national park and visitor centre services is a solid framework for study and it also functions as a proper tool for conflict management. The overall benefit - partial benefit - model creates efficient concept for analysis what are the key services in the service chain to give highest efforts in training and monitoring. The “partnership programme” and “responsibility on resources” -policy can be accepted also by customers. The customers feedback system provides useful tools to control the sustainable social development in park.

We learned that the innovative new model, which we called “With a Little Help from My Friends”, really was a success story for park management. It is also a best practise management model, which we can show to the other parks and local communities to develop cohesion and sustainable economy integrated in the park management.

The outcomes in numbers during the period 2000-2012 were also amazing:

- Visitor Centre served between years 2000-2012 more than 600 000 customers, and sold some 150 000 Ukko’s passports.
- Nature Shop networked continuously with more than 50 local or Finnish SMEs, who participated on their own risk.
- Camp School Network covered ten local SMEs.
- Conferences and events were organised or served more than 100.

- Local SME enterprises contracted for guiding and interpretation; providing annually a full-time and 2-6 part-time jobs and 4-6 local SMEs used in service delivery.
- International and domestic internships appointed some 30 persons during the 12 year period.
- Harbour services opened and organised with the Friends in 2004-2005; about 15 000 customers.
- Five EU-funded projects in partnership with the Friends on environmental education and nature trails.
- Customer satisfaction on the Friend's services level 8,5-9/10 continuously.
- Annual turnover for Friend's social business 200 000 €.
- Net surplus for the Friend's to be used for the development of the park services 2000-5000 € annually.
- Investments in real estate in the village and art in the visitor centre.
- Information services via internet homepages www.ukko-kolinystavat.fi.

New strategy after experiments in visitor services and cohesion policy

New strategy was created for the Friends of Ukko-Koli in 2013, when the Metsähallitus Parks & Wildlife Finland started to run on their own organisation all the visitor services in the Visitor Centre Ukko. We are now focusing on the normal free community based activities, not on the social business ideas.

- Key Objectives;
 - Protection of Koli Landscape; Supporting the tentative list of UNESCO WH for Saimaa-Pielinen Finnish Lakeland area.
 - Activating the Social capital gain in networking with other 3rd sector societies in Koli Resort and Finland.
- Internationalisation of Koli; Activation of European Network for parks Friends and Partners; EUROPARC membership 12.6.2014; Changing experiences, actions, projects.
- Activating volunteering in Koli NP; contract for Soikkeli hut and meadows; heritage landscape maintenance.
- Increasing information and supporting research and education: home page and Facebook 2014; Social Media network now 250 members ; Koli "knowledge and education resources" in home pages and in [https:// www.facebook.com/Ukko-Kolin-Ystavat-ry-225205247672284](https://www.facebook.com/Ukko-Kolin-Ystavat-ry-225205247672284)

- Investment for the future resources; one of the owning partners in the village community business centre Kolin Ryynänen.

Partnership meadow “Soikkeli” in park since 2014



Thank You

Picture 10. Mowing the “Soikkeli “ heritage meadow for the Koli NP is one of the new joyful actions as volunteering for the Ukko-Koli Friends. The NP logo has also developed after the change in the park management from a research project to a standard management model of Metsähallitus Parks & Wildlife Finland services. Photo: Lasse Lovén.

See more:

www.ukko-kolinystavat.fi

Nuutinen, M. ja Rantala, H. 2010. Sosiaalisen pääoman kertyminen ympäristökasvatuksen kumppaniverkostossa. Selvitys Kolin, Leivonmäen ja Rantasalmen yritysten ja yhteisöjen näkemyksistä.

A pdf-report on INTERREG IVB Northern Periphery programme NEED project, partly funded by the EU: <http://www.ukko-kolinystavat.fi/media/Kolin%20tutkimukset/NEEDraportti%20Sosiaalinen%20paaeoma%202010.pdf>

www.facebook.com/Ukko-Kolin-Ystävät-ry-225205247672284