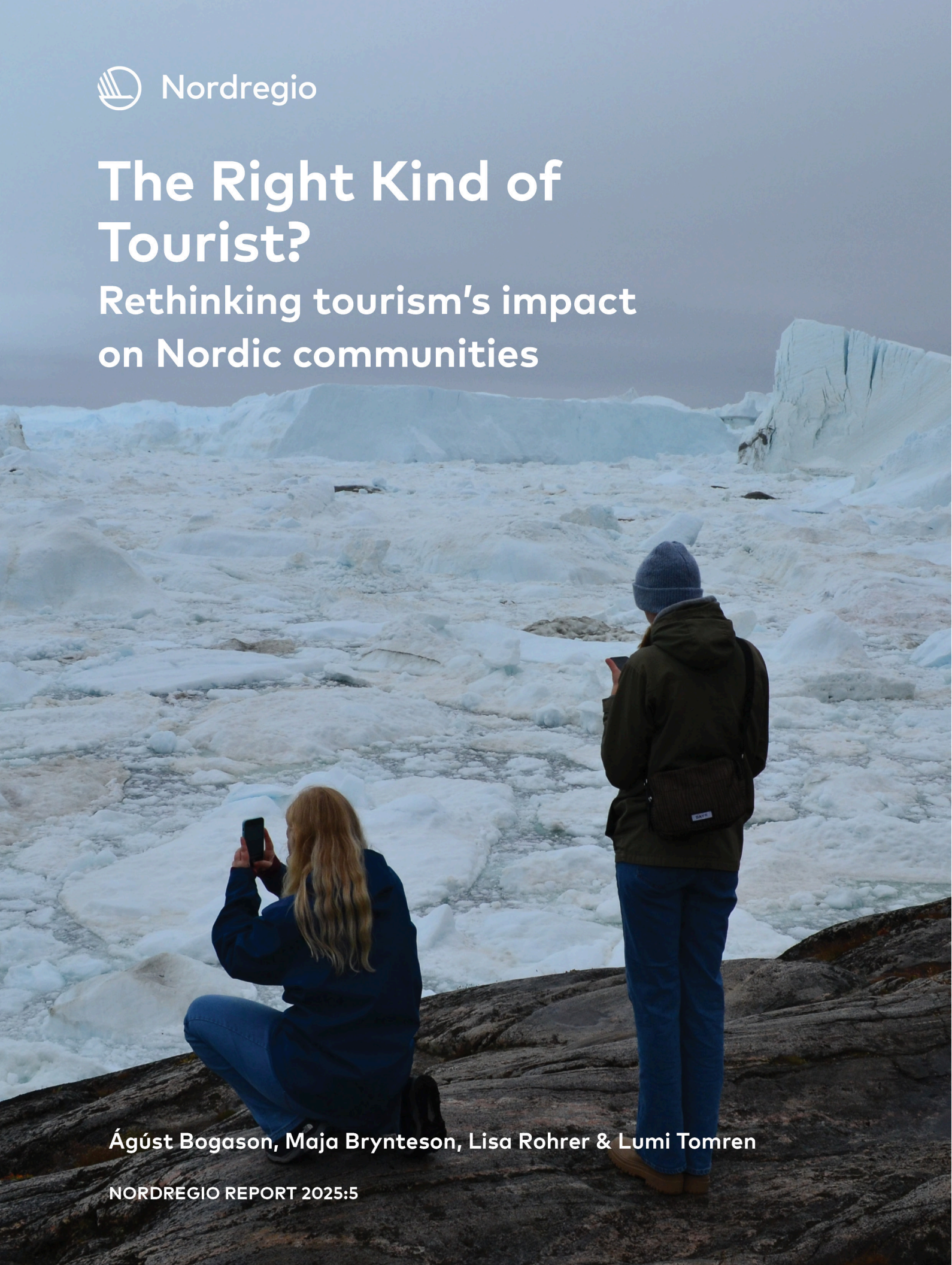


The Right Kind of Tourist?

Rethinking tourism's impact on Nordic communities

A photograph of two people on a rocky shore looking at a large field of icebergs in the ocean. One person is crouching and taking a photo with a smartphone, while the other is standing and looking at a tablet. The icebergs are large and white, floating in the water. The sky is overcast.

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NORDREGIO REPORT 2025:5

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Preface

The Nordic Vision 2030 aims for the Nordic Region to become the most sustainable and integrated region in the world. To realise this vision, the focus is on creating:

- a green region, promoting a green transition of our societies,
- a competitive region, promoting green growth based on knowledge, innovation, mobility and digital integration,
- and a socially sustainable region, promoting an inclusive, equal and cohesive region with strengthened cultural exchange and welfare.

Tourism plays a critical role in achieving this vision. While it presents significant opportunities for regional development, it's imperative to consider its impact. The Nordic focus on digitalization, innovation, and attracting long-haul markets aims to strengthen the industry's competitiveness and raise the region's profile, all while prioritizing sustainable tourism practices (Nordiska Ministerrådet, 2020).

Within this context, the research project "Socially Sustainable Rural Tourism" seeks to look further into the concept of sustainable tourism development from a sociocultural perspective in the Nordic context. The focus will mainly be on regional and local tourism (not urban tourism) since tourism is also being utilised and promoted as an important regional development tool. While tourism is seen as having great economic possibilities for the more rural regions it will also have environmental impacts as well as social. The project will examine what the Nordic countries consider and define as the social and cultural impacts of tourism development to be, and what indicators are used to measure and evaluate the social dimension of sustainability in the Nordic countries' ongoing quest for sustainable tourism development.

The project is part of an assignment Nordregio has been commissioned to do by the Nordic Thematic Group for Green, Innovative and Resilient Regions, which is a part of the Nordic Co-operation Programme for Regional Development and Planning. For further information about the Nordic Thematic Group for Green, Innovative and Resilient Regions, please see: <https://nordregioprojects.org/innovation/>

This report is the second publication of the project "Socially Sustainable Rural Tourism". The content of the first report was based on a literature review of academic publications, inputs from existing international indicator frameworks for measuring the sustainability of tourism and the most recent and relevant national policy documents of the eight Nordic countries.

This second report utilized the findings from the first report to conduct in-depth case studies and stakeholder interviews across eight Nordic countries. These case studies aimed to explore the practical application of socially sustainable tourism principles identified in the initial report. By focusing on real-world scenarios, the report assessed how elements identified in the initial phase of the research – such as community engagement, cultural preservation, equity, and stakeholder collaboration – are implemented in practice. The insights gained from these case studies provided a more detailed understanding of the challenges and facilitators in policy execution, offering valuable perspectives on the effectiveness of socially sustainable tourism development in the Nordic region as well as inputs into what the Nordic understanding of socially sustainable tourism entails.

Summary

This report delves into the intricate dynamics of socially sustainable tourism within the Nordic region. The primary objective is to explore how and if rural tourism is developed in a manner that not only boosts the economy but also preserves the cultural and social fabric of local communities. This was done through a comprehensive analysis of various case studies across eight Nordic countries, each offering unique insights into the practical application of socially sustainable tourism principles.

The report begins by establishing the theoretical framework, emphasizing the need to balance economic, social, and environmental factors in tourism development. It highlights the importance of specific topics that were established most relevant in the first phase of this research, such as community engagement, cultural preservation, and equitable distribution of tourism benefits. The initial findings from the first report laid the groundwork by identifying key themes and indicators for measuring social sustainability in tourism.

Building on these findings, the second report conducts case studies and stakeholder interviews in regions such as Salla in Finland, Lofoten in Norway, and the High Coast in Sweden. These case studies examine how local strategies prioritize maintaining cultural identity and enhancing the quality of life for residents while managing the influx of tourists. The report also uncovers significant challenges and gaps between policy and practice. The case studies reveal that while policies emphasize community engagement and sustainable practices, the practical implementation often falls short, resulting in a mismatch between policy goals and reality.

One of the critical insights from the report is the need for clearer definitions and robust measurement tools for social sustainability in tourism. The lack of regular and standardized indicators makes it challenging to assess the true impact of tourism on local communities. The findings of the report show the need for a more holistic approach that includes comprehensive indicators encompassing economic, social, and ecological aspects.

The findings also highlight the importance of place development over mere destination development. This approach ensures that tourism initiatives are integrated with the local community, supporting the preservation of local traditions, services and overall societal development.

In conclusion, the report underscores the necessity of aligning policy goals with practical outcomes to promote socially sustainable tourism. By addressing the gaps in policy implementation, enhancing stakeholder collaboration, and developing clear guidelines and measurement tools, the Nordic countries can advance their efforts towards a more equitable and sustainable tourism industry. The results also show that while social effects of tourism in the rural regions of the Nordic countries are being considered and addressed in policy, they still tend to fall short of economic and environmental issues when it comes to destination development.

The analysis provided in the report offers valuable insights into the complexities of socially sustainable tourism development, emphasizing the need for a balanced and inclusive approach that benefits both residents and visitors while considering social – as well as economic and environmental – aspects in sustainable tourism development.

Sammenfatning

Denne rapport dykker ned i de udviklede dynamikker bag socialt bæredygtig turisme i Norden. Det primære mål er at undersøge, om og hvordan turisme i landdistrikterne udvikles på en måde, der ikke kun fremmer økonomien, men også bevarer lokalsamfundenes kulturelle og sociale strukturer. Det er sket gennem en omfattende analyse af forskellige casestudier på tværs af otte nordiske lande, som hver især giver et unikt indblik i den praktiske anvendelse af socialt bæredygtige turismeprincipper.

Rapporten begynder med at etablere en teoretisk ramme og understreger behovet for at afbalancere økonomiske, sociale og miljømæssige faktorer i turismeudviklingen. Den fremhæver vigtigheden af specifikke emner, som blev fundet mest relevante i den første forskningsfase, såsom engagement i lokalsamfundet, kulturbevarelse og retfærdig fordeling af turismens fordele. De første resultater fra den første rapport lagde fundamentet, ved at identificere nøgletemaer og indikatorer til måling af social bæredygtighed i turismen.

På baggrund af disse resultater gennemfører den anden rapport casestudier og interviews med interessenter i regioner som Salla i Finland, Lofoten i Norge og Nordkysten i Sverige. Disse casestudier undersøger, hvordan lokale strategier prioriterer opretholdelse af kulturel identitet og forbedring af livskvaliteten for indbyggerne, samtidig med at de håndterer tilstrømningen af turister. Rapporten afdækker også betydelige udfordringer og kløfter mellem politik og praksis. Casestudierne afslører, at mens politikkerne lægger vægt på samfundsengagement og bæredygtig praksis, kommer den praktiske implementering ofte til kort, hvilket resulterer i et misforhold mellem politiske mål og virkelighed.

En af de kritiske indsigter fra rapporten er behovet for klarere definitioner og robuste måleværktøjer for social bæredygtighed i turismen. Manglen på regelmæssige og standardiserede indikatorer gør det udfordrende at vurdere turismens reelle indvirkning på lokalsamfundene. Rapportens resultater viser, at der er behov for en mere holistisk tilgang med omfattende indikatorer, der omfatter økonomiske, sociale og økologiske aspekter.

Resultaterne fremhæver også vigtigheden af stedsudvikling frem for blot destinationsudvikling. Denne tilgang sikrer, at turismeinitiativer integreres med lokalsamfundet og støtter bevarelsen af lokale traditioner, offentlige ydelser og den overordnede samfundsudvikling.

Afslutningsvis understreger rapporten nødvendigheden af at tilpasse de politiske mål til de praktiske resultater for at fremme socialt bæredygtig turisme. Ved at

tage fat på hullerne i den politiske implementering, forbedre samarbejdet mellem interessenter og udvikle klare retningslinjer og måleværktøjer kan de nordiske lande fremme deres indsats for en mere retfærdig og bæredygtig turismeindustri. Resultaterne viser også, at selv om de sociale effekter af turisme i de nordiske landes landdistrikter bliver overvejet og behandlet i politikken, er der stadig en tendens til, at de kommer til kort i forhold til økonomiske og miljømæssige spørgsmål, når det gælder destinationsudvikling.

Analysen i rapporten giver værdifuld indsigt i kompleksiteten bag socialt bæredygtig turismeudvikling og understreger samtidig behovet for en afbalanceret og inkluderende tilgang, der gavner både beboere og besøgende, så der tages hensyn til sociale - såvel som økonomiske og miljømæssige - aspekter i bæredygtig turismeudvikling.



Photo: Anne Katrine Ebbesen / Ilulissat harbour in Greenland is the backbone of the local economy, crowded with fishing and tourism boats alike.

Introduction and background of the research

The Nordic Vision 2030 aims for the Nordic Region to become the most sustainable and integrated region in the world. This vision emphasizes creating a green, competitive, and socially sustainable region. Tourism plays a critical role in achieving this vision, presenting significant opportunities for regional development while considering its impact on the environment and local communities.

The project "Socially Sustainable Rural Tourism" was commissioned by the Nordic Thematic Group for Green, Innovative, and Resilient Regions under the Nordic Co-operation Programme for Regional Development and Planning. The first report, called [*The value of social sustainability in Nordic Tourism Policy*](#), provided a foundation for understanding the concept of socially sustainable tourism in the Nordic region. It included a literature review of academic publications, grey literature on tourism development from the Nordic countries, and the most recent and relevant national policy documents.

This report highlighted several key areas. It began with the theoretical background of tourism, defining tourism and sustainable tourism, and emphasizing the need to balance economic, social, and environmental factors. It also discussed related concepts such as responsible tourism, ecotourism, community-based tourism, cultural tourism, adventure tourism, heritage tourism, and slow tourism. Further, the report explored the dimensions of sustainable tourism in Nordic national tourism policies and the effects of tourism on various aspects such as the economy, environment, and local communities.

The literature review was divided into academic and grey literature reviews. The academic literature review focused on rural tourism, social sustainability, and components of socially sustainable tourism, while the grey literature review discussed frameworks and indicators for measuring sustainable tourism. The academic literature review revealed several key insights. Studies on rural tourism, such as those by Aslam (2016) and Rosalina et al. (2021), highlighted the importance of sustainable development and community-based features in rural tourism. These studies emphasized the need for tourism initiatives to be tailored to the specific needs and preferences of local communities, ensuring that tourism development benefits both residents and visitors. Additionally, the review identified the significance of adaptive tourism and the potential for rural tourism to contribute to economic and social development, as noted by McAreavey (2011) and Sharpley (2002). However, these studies also pointed out the challenges of institutional capacity, stakeholder interests, and the dominance of mass tourism operators.

In terms of social sustainability, the literature review underscored the need for more attention and research in this area. Indicators for measuring social sustainability in tourism include community, destination, and organizational variables, as discussed by Franzoni (2015). The review also highlighted the lack of consensus on the concept and definition of social sustainability in tourism, as noted by Nugraheni (2019). Despite these challenges, the review found that social indicators for measuring tourism sustainability are better oriented to the behaviour of key actors and the achievement of stakeholder consensus.

The grey literature review focused on frameworks and indicators for measuring sustainable tourism. The Statistical Framework for Measuring the Sustainability of Tourism (SF-MST) and the UNWTO's Guidebook for Indicators of Sustainable Development for Tourism Destinations were among the key frameworks identified. These frameworks aim to record data about tourism's economic, environmental, and social connections. The review also highlighted the work of Eurostat, the OECD, and the European Commission in developing indicators for sustainable tourism. These indicators cover various dimensions, including economic, environmental, and social aspects, and provide a comprehensive framework for assessing the sustainability of tourism initiatives. However, it is important to note that while there are various ways to measure the economic aspects of tourism and, to an increasing degree, the environmental aspects, the social indicators and measurements are still lacking. The review found that there is generally a lack of robust and standardized indicators for social sustainability in tourism. This gap highlights the need for further research and development of social indicators to ensure a more holistic approach to sustainable tourism.

The analysis of Nordic tourism policies revealed several key themes related to socially sustainable tourism which then are anchored in the academic literature on sustainable tourism and to some extent in the existing indicators and monitoring

systems. The policies of the Nordic countries e.g. highlight community engagement and empowerment as vital when it comes to socially sustainable tourism development. Community engagement and empowerment are in fact emphasized across the national tourism policies of the Nordic countries, with policies especially highlighting the importance of involving local communities in tourism planning and development. This approach ensures that tourism initiatives meet the specific needs and preferences of local residents, fostering a sense of ownership and empowerment. Cultural integrity and heritage preservation are also central themes. The policies advocate for the preservation of cultural heritage and the promotion of authentic tourist experiences. This involves balancing tourism development with the need to maintain cultural and environmental values, ensuring that tourism does not erode the cultural fabric of local communities.

The issue of over-tourism and community displacement are also generally addressed, with policies emphasizing the need for impact assessments and measures to manage visitor pressure. This includes strategies to distribute visitor numbers more evenly throughout the year and to prevent the displacement of local residents. Furthermore, equity and accessibility are highlighted as crucial for promoting inclusivity and diversity in tourism. The policies discuss the importance of ensuring that tourism benefits are distributed fairly among different community groups and that tourism opportunities are accessible to all. General stakeholder collaboration and partnerships are also seen as important for promoting socially responsible tourism practices. The tourism policies emphasize the need for collaboration among government entities, local communities, and industry partners to achieve sustainable tourism development.

Finally, the adequacy of public services and infrastructure are discussed as essential for supporting tourism development and maintaining community well-being. The national tourism policies highlight the need for infrastructure that meets the needs of both tourists and local residents, enhancing the overall quality of life in the destination. These themes collectively underscore the Nordic countries' commitment to socially sustainable tourism development, at least at the policy level. The results of the first report of this project therefore provided a better understanding of the key variables and topics related to socially sustainable tourism – in academic literature, in grey literature and finally at the Nordic policy level. The results are that the importance of community engagement, cultural integrity, equity, stakeholder collaboration, and the well-being of the local population are among those highlighted. These findings align closely with Nordic values and priorities, making them particularly significant in the context of tourism development in the region.

In this next phase of the projects the initial findings were used to conduct case studies to examine the practical application of the identified aspects of socially sustainable tourism. This will be achieved through eight case studies, one in each of the Nordic countries, to assess how some of these elements are implemented in real-world scenarios.

Initial research questions and findings

The initial phase of the project aimed to explore several key research questions related to socially sustainable tourism. These questions guided the research and provided a framework for understanding the social dimensions of tourism development in the Nordic region. The research questions addressed in this project are as follows:

How do social and cultural aspects influence sustainable tourism?

The first report found that social and cultural aspects play a significant role in sustainable tourism. These aspects influence the way tourism is perceived and managed in different regions. For example, community-based tourism initiatives that involve local residents in decision-making processes tend to be more successful in achieving social sustainability. Cultural heritage and traditions also shape the tourism experience and can enhance the attractiveness of a destination.

What is socially sustainable tourism?

Socially sustainable tourism is defined as tourism that not only considers economic and environmental factors but also prioritizes the well-being of local communities. It can for example involve creating opportunities for local employment, preserving cultural heritage, and ensuring that tourism development does not negatively impact the social fabric of the community. The first report emphasized the importance of balancing these factors to achieve truly sustainable tourism. It also found that in Nordic tourism policy this balance is emphasised but not necessarily operationalised or conceptualised.

Are social aspects of sustainable development being considered as well as environmental and economic aspects in current Nordic tourism development?

The initial report revealed that while environmental and economic aspects are often prioritized in tourism development, social aspects are sometimes overlooked. However, there is a growing recognition of the importance of social sustainability, and some Nordic countries have started to incorporate social indicators into their tourism policies. The report highlighted the need for a more holistic approach that equally considers all three pillars of sustainability.

What are the main social indicators for measuring impacts of tourism in the Nordic regions?

The report identified several key social indicators for measuring the impacts of tourism, including local employment rates, community involvement in tourism planning, preservation of cultural heritage, and the quality of life of local residents. These indicators provide a framework for assessing the social sustainability of tourism initiatives but are to a far less degree included in the assessment of tourism effects than environmental or economic indicators.

What can the Nordic countries and regions learn from each other when it comes to sustainable tourism development?

The cross-Nordic comparison and analysis in the first report showed that there are valuable lessons to be learned from each country's approach to sustainable tourism. For instance, some countries have successfully implemented community-based tourism models, while others have developed effective policies for preserving cultural heritage. By sharing best practices and learning from each other's experiences, the Nordic countries can enhance their collective efforts towards socially sustainable tourism.

Objective of case studies, selection and methods

Building on the insights gleaned from the first part of this research project, the next phase of the project has involved a more detailed analysis of how these themes are applied in practice. This was carried out through case studies and stakeholder interviews to provide a more comprehensive understanding of social tourism sustainability, if and how it is applied in practice.

The case study selection based on looking further into one case from each of the eight Nordic countries that was selected to ensure diversity and relevance. The cases were chosen based on their connections to socially sustainable tourism and the topics and challenges identified in the initial report. The challenges varied significantly, being place-specific and different in scale, for example in relation to the impact of tourism on the place, effects of seasonality of tourism and the impact on local economy. Cases were further selected based upon consultation with the members of the Nordic Thematic Group for Green, Innovative and Resilient Regions (TGC). This group consists of members from all the Nordic countries who are public officials and practitioners within ministries, cross-border organizations, regions, municipalities, and other relevant stakeholders. Their expertise and insights were invaluable in identifying cases that are representative of the diverse contexts within the Nordic region.

A maximum case variation sampling method was used for this study. The methodological construct adopted a multi-case approach based on the maximum case variation sampling method where cases, despite having diverse variations, exhibit important common patterns that cut across variations. Therefore, some cases are regional, others on a single municipality while others cover an entire country. This selection method allows us to better answer our research questions and the aims of the project. Specifically, it helps us understand how different countries, regions, and municipalities approach and work with various topics and challenges of socially sustainable tourism in practice.

The case studies involved conducting interviews with tourism-related actors in the case study areas, including public officials, tourism planners, tourism workers, and

those having tourism companies along with local people living in each area. A policy and document analysis were also be conducted for each case study area. The case studies carried out between May and November 2024. A total of 41 interviews were conducted in the 8 case study regions.

Report Outline

In the following chapters, each case and its specific challenges related to socially sustainable tourism, will be presented. The results of this phase are then analysed along with the findings from the first report to assess how socially sustainable tourism development is initially presented on a policy level and subsequently implemented in practice. Case studies and field visits will in this way provide opportunities to gather information on the realities of tourism policy implementation based on findings in the first phase of the project. By engaging with key stakeholders – such as local government officials, tourism operators, and community members – the research team was able to gather more qualitative data to assess the alignment between the policies' intended goals and their actual outcomes. These interactions have to some extent revealed the practical challenges and facilitators in the policy execution and offered a nuanced understanding of its efficacy. In this way, the case studies of specific tourism destinations or initiatives at different scales within the Nordic region can further illustrate how, and if, the tourism policy regarding socially sustainable tourism development is operationalized and in which contexts. These case studies, drawn from different geographic and socio-economic settings, are then drawn together in a comparative analysis to identify common themes and unique variations in a discussion chapter. The report then provides a final chapter offering conclusions and presenting some recommendations.



Photo: Julia Kivelä / Visit Finland

Case 1. Finland – Salla: Tourism in the middle of nowhere

Introduction

Salla, located in the eastern parts of Finnish Lapland, is a vast and sparsely populated municipality. With approximately 3300 residents scattered across an area of 5,873 square kilometers, Salla is characterized by its remote geography, wilderness, and a landscape dominated by boreal forests, wetlands, and hilly terrain. The Arctic Circle cuts across the southern parts of Salla and the municipality experiences a subarctic climate, with long, cold winters and short, mild summers, shaping both the natural and cultural environment. Roughly half of the population resides in the parish of Salla, while the rest of the population is spread relatively evenly across 30 small villages. While long distances pose challenges with accessibility, tourism has emerged as a crucial economic sector, supporting local employment and vitality. As the jocular slogan *“Salla – in the middle of nowhere”* insinuates, remoteness is a local asset, appealing to those who seek wilderness and tranquil experiences away from the crowds.

As a case, Salla exemplifies how a small, remote municipality has fostered tourism by prioritizing controlled growth, community engagement, and natural preservation. Highlighting the social dimension of sustainability, this case study examines the policy frameworks, local strategies, and concrete efforts towards developing the tourism industry. Further, the case study discusses the

opportunities, challenges, benefits and trade-offs associated with tourism. By drawing on Salla's experiences the case study concludes with recommendations for strengthening governance structures to help promote socially responsible tourism and support local communities.

Background

Tourism is a major economic driver in the Lapland region, and its impact on employment and local economies is profound. The sector is described as one of the three pillars of the regional economy, alongside mining and forestry. The region has seen rapid international tourism growth since the early 2000s, supported by concerted efforts by regional bodies to develop tourism strategies that capitalize on the area's unique natural and cultural assets (Interviewee 1, 2024). Tourism has been particularly effective in creating jobs in areas where other economic opportunities are limited. This is especially important in Lapland, where population decline and an aging demographic are significant challenges. In this context, tourism has provided a lifeline for rural communities, offering employment opportunities that help keep young people in the region, while attracting workers from other areas. However, this growth has also led to over-tourism in certain areas. Rapid increase in visitors, foreign investments, and the expansion of services such as Airbnb, has led to political tensions, conflicts and even protests from locals (Interviewee 1 & Interviewee 2, 2024).

In contrast, Salla has experienced more controlled growth, and tourism has largely been welcomed by the local community (Interviewee 2, 2024). While visitor numbers are notably lower than in the most popular Lapland destinations (see fig. 1) the tourism industry has seen significant growth over the last decade. This upward trend was, however, disrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic. Although an increase in domestic travellers compensated for the drop in foreign tourists during the pandemic, the direct tourism revenue and tourism employment fell compared to the pre-pandemic years. In 2021, the direct tourism revenue in Salla was €9.3 million (compared to €11.9 million in 2019), and direct tourism employment stood at 65 person-years (compared to 96 person-years in 2019) (Visit Salla, 2024). Facing these challenges, strategic efforts by the municipality and industry stakeholders have led to a recovery in visitor numbers. As visitor numbers are expected to grow, ensuring sustainable practices remains highly pertinent.

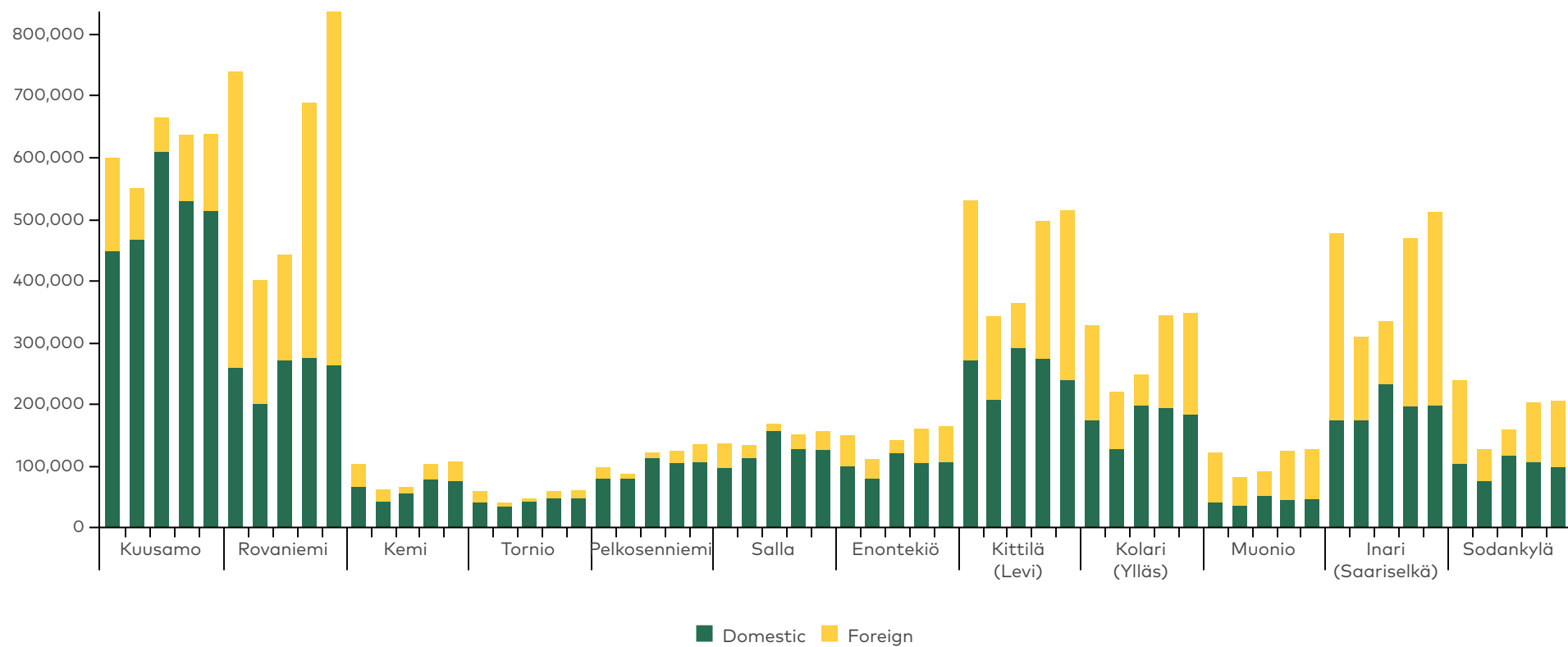


Figure 1: Development of registered overnight stays in the Lapland region 2019–2023. Blue bars represent domestic visitors, green bars represent foreign visitors. The observed dips in foreign visitors for 2020–2021 illustrate the impact of the COVID-19. Chart based on data from: [Visit Finland](#), [Rudolf statistical database](#).

The socio-economic context of Salla

Salla's early inhabitants were the Sámi people, whose traditions and subsistence practices — such as reindeer herding and fishing — have played a foundational role in the region's identity. Over time, Finnish settlers integrated in Salla, becoming the dominant demographic group. While some Forest Sámi families remain, Salla is no longer part of the official Sámi homeland. The relatively small Sámi population in Salla reduces the visibility of Sámi culture and its susceptibility to exotification — a pressing concern in other regions of Lapland.

In the 20th century Salla was deeply affected by World War II, as the region became a battleground during the Winter War (1939–1940) and Continuation War (1941–1944). The war led to significant losses as nearly half of the territory was forfeited to the Soviet Union and entire communities were displaced. Wartime history remains an important cultural marker, which has been incorporated in tourism offerings, such as the Museum of War and Reconstruction, several war memorials and historical sites scattered across the municipality. While the natural landscapes and wilderness are the main draw for tourists, there is continuous effort to incorporate local narratives and history into service offerings, inviting tourists to explore the events that have shaped the identity of Salla (Interviewee 2, 2024).

Today, the relatively small population of Salla reflects a tightly knit community with strong connections between individuals (Interviewee 2, 2024). The population is aging, as in many rural parts of Finland, with younger generations increasingly moving to urban areas for education and employment. Tourism has helped retain younger residents by creating employment opportunities in accommodation, guiding, and activity services. However, visitor numbers to Salla, like Lapland in general, peak during winter months, with lower activity during summer and mid-seasons. These seasonal fluctuations lead to job instability, with many residents relying on temporary employment that forces some to seek work elsewhere during the off-season (Interviewee 2, 2024).

The tourism offering is closely linked to the values of the local community, which centres around closeness to nature and tradition. Many residents engage in activities like fishing, reindeer herding, hunting, foraging, and handicrafts – and with increasing interest in authentic experiences in the tourism industry, Salla has leveraged these traditions in its offerings. In turn, this demand contributes to the preservation of cultural practices and traditional livelihoods. However, commercializing local culture to meet tourists' demands also raises questions about the authenticity and long-term sustainability of traditional practices, especially in the event of a rapid expansion of tourism (Interviewee 2, 2024). In Salla, the municipality and industry actors are, however, highly conscious of the potential risks and consequences of high visitor numbers. As noted by a municipal representative, a more prudent approach to growth is preferred: *"We want to grow,*

but we want it to be controlled growth. We aren't aiming for massive luxury hotels but rather want to keep it cozy, reasonably small, and responsible going forward." (Interviewee 2, 2024).

Tourism governance structure in Salla

Salla's governance of the tourism sector is characterized by a collaborative approach that integrates national policy frameworks, regional strategies, local initiatives and stakeholder collaboration.

At the national level the overarching goals for tourism are outlined in [Finland's Tourism Strategy 2022-2028](#) (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment, 2022). The strategy emphasizes environmental conservation, community involvement, and leveraging Finland's natural and cultural assets as competitive advantages. Operating within this broader strategy is the [Sustainable Travel Finland](#) (STF) program, which provides tools and certifications for destinations and businesses to implement sustainable practices. The STF program offers a seven-step development path that includes commitment, capacity building, certification, sustainability communication, sustainability indicators, development planning, and verification. Participants who complete the program and meet a set of criteria are eligible for the Sustainable Travel Finland label. In 2024, Salla became the sixth area in Finland to receive the STF destination label. As the destination label requires that at least 51% of its tourism businesses adopt certified sustainable practices, the label demonstrates the coordinated efforts and broad commitment to sustainable tourism in Salla.

At the regional level, tourism development is overseen by the Regional Council of Lapland (*Lapin Liitto*), which also supports the sector through funding, infrastructure projects, and marketing efforts. Overarching goals and strategic priorities for tourism are outlined in the Lapland Agreement ("*Lappi Sopimus*") (Regional Council of Lapland, 2022), and the Smart Specialization Strategy for 2023-2027 (Regional Council of Lapland, 2023). These plans are further supplemented by specific tourism strategies that provide more detailed guidance on how to achieve the region's tourism goals. The latest regional tourism strategy for 2020-2023 places a strong emphasis on developing year-round tourism, improving accessibility, and developing authentic cultural experiences (Regional Council of Lapland, 2020).

A new tourism strategy for the region is currently underway, which aims to ensure a balance between growth and sustainability. As a representative from the Regional Council observed, the governance of the tourism sector in Lapland has experienced a notable shift from growth-driven strategies towards sustainable management, responding to concerns about over-tourism, the pressure on local communities and the region's vulnerable Arctic ecosystem (Interviewee 1, 2024). Therefore, upcoming strategies are set to focus increasingly more on the dimensions of environmental and social sustainability.

On the local level, the municipality of Salla is responsible for tourism strategies, project management, and advocacy. The municipality actively engages stakeholders, with tourism governance coordinated through the *Travelling in Salla Association (Matkalla Sallaan ry)*, a membership-based organization representing 35 local businesses and stakeholders. Together with the association, the municipality has outlined its goals and objectives in the Strategy for Sustainable Tourism 2020-2025 (*Kestävän matkailun strategia*), and the more recent Development Plan for Tourism (*Salla 2030 kehittämissuunnitelma*) (Municipality of Salla, 2024). These strategies underscore the importance of maintaining Salla's identity as a small, wilderness destination while enhancing the quality of life for residents.

To support the sustainable growth, diversification of the local economy is a priority, with a focus on supporting small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and encouraging entrepreneurship. A major focus of current strategies in the region and in Salla is also the promotion of year-round tourism. Domestic travellers remain the largest visitor group year-round but in winter there are also significant numbers of international travellers. By expanding the tourism season, Salla can create more stable employment opportunities, reduce the environmental pressure on peak season destinations, and spread the economic benefits of tourism more evenly across the year. The strategies also take note of diversifying and targeting markets across multiple countries, to ensure that if tourism from one country slows down the local industry will not collapse.

Discussion

The governance of tourism in Salla is characterized by a highly collaborative approach that includes the municipality, the tourism association, local businesses, and the wider community. The tourism association plays a key role in implementing strategies, but as it is largely funded by the municipality, occasional challenges arise concerning the division of responsibilities (Interviewee 2, 2024). While communication between stakeholders is generally open and productive, there are moments when internal communication gaps exist. For instance, strategic initiatives risk stagnating due to unclear delegation of responsibilities, leading to inefficiencies in follow-through.

One of Salla's governance strengths is its approachable and engaged local leadership. The municipal administration is considered tourism-positive and actively supports sustainable tourism development. Local leaders, including the mayor, maintain direct interactions with the community, fostering a sense of transparency and accessibility. Regular events allow residents to voice their concerns, and local stakeholders are actively included in decision-making processes. As noted by a representative from the municipality, broad participation has been key to the progress: "*Including all stakeholders and the local population, definitely puts*

pressure on decision-makers. When there are many stakeholders involved in common strategies and initiatives, joint efforts can really drive change" (Interviewee 2, 2024).

Despite broad community support, tourism funding allocation can sometimes cause tensions, with some residents questioning whether too many municipal resources are directed towards tourism instead of local welfare. In response, governance bodies strive to maintain an open dialogue about how decisions are made and how tourism can deliver economic benefits to the area (Interviewee 2, 2024). For instance, biannual events organized by the tourism association provide a platform for discussion and engagement, with the goal of ensuring that local voices remain central in shaping the tourism sector.

The general support for the tourism industry in Salla is tied to the economic benefits that it provides to the community. Tourism creates job opportunities, with one in four private-sector employees deriving their income from the industry. Unlike in some tourism hotspots, economic benefits in Salla largely stay within the local community due to the predominance of locally owned businesses, and there is little concern about revenue flowing outside the region (Interviewee 2, 2024). As mentioned, year-round employment remains a challenge, as much of the work is seasonal. To this end, the strategies emphasize continued diversification of tourism offerings and workforce development to help retain workers.

The economic benefits also extend beyond direct tourism businesses, helping to sustain shops, restaurants, cultural venues, and sports facilities, contributing to the vitality of the local community. Further, the economic impact of tourism also extends to indirect beneficiaries such as transportation providers and construction companies. Infrastructure investments, such as new accommodations, create demand for local construction and maintenance services, further strengthening the regional economy.

To date, sustainable tourism in Salla has been most closely linked to ecological responsibility and environmental stewardship. Environmental strain from tourism, such as waste generation and trail overuse, indirectly affects the community's well-being by impacting the pristine nature that forms the foundation of Salla's identity. To mitigate these challenges, several commitments and measures have been made, reflecting a view of shared responsibility among actors in the tourism industry. These commitments are highlighted in an *environmental promise* that has been developed by stakeholders in the tourism sector (see text box below).

The Salla environmental promise

The people working in tourism in Salla have prepared an environmental promise that ensures a genuine and natural experience for guests in Salla:

We promise to live with pride in Salla like our mothers and grandfathers, with respect for nature and history, and we will welcome you as a part of this.

We protect our pure nature so that both we the people of Salla and our guests can breathe the cleanest air in the world. We take care of our mutual climate. It is a matter of honour for us to take good care of our animals. We offer experiences in the local nature.

We prefer local products and we offer local food and expertise. What we offer is clean, traditional, and local. We commit ourselves to responsible procurement and practices.

The people from Salla are as good as their word – together, we take good care of people and the environment.

Source: Visit Salla, <https://www.visitsalla.fi/en/know-salla/responsible-tourism-2/>

A concrete example of environmental protection is the [Salla Nature Compensation Campaign](#) – a collaborative initiative between the Finnish Natural Heritage Foundation (*Luonnonperintösäätiö*) and Salla's tourism sector, launched in February 2023. Its primary goal is to purchase, protect, and restore a diverse 33-hectare forest area along the Oulankajoki River in Southern Salla. Through the initiative people can donate to different types of habitats – such as bogs or forests – providing a tangible method for offsetting the ecological footprint of tourism. While the campaign primarily seeks to raise funds, it also organizes annual restoration events, inviting community members and visitors to engage directly in conservation efforts. As such, the initiative is also considered a means to bridge environmental and social dimensions of sustainability: *"The campaign involves local people coming together to work for the environment and our collective well-being. In that way it also promotes social sustainability."* (Interviewee 2, 2024).

Conclusion and recommendations

This case study highlights how Salla has successfully maintained local ownership and minimized negative impacts while benefiting from Lapland's increasing popularity as a travel destination. By leveraging the areas remoteness, and embedding local values and traditions in its offerings, Salla has been able to foster a growing tourism industry that supports the community. Looking ahead, the development of a sustainable tourism sector in Salla hinges on growth that will strengthen the robustness and positive impacts of the sector, while ensuring that tourism does not surpass the capacity of the local community and the natural environment. Based on the learnings from Salla, key take-aways for supporting socially sustainable tourism are:

- **Leverage *small and remote* as strengths:** Smaller and remote destinations can benefit from close stakeholder collaboration, built on trust and connections between individuals in the community. Fostering community values and welcoming local participation can strengthen a sense of shared responsibility and joint commitment to sustainability.
- **Include locals and preserve authenticity:** Emphasizing local history, livelihoods, and cultural identity can enhance the visitor experience while maintaining the integrity of local traditions. In Salla, most tourist guides are locals or people with roots in Salla, who know the history and culture of the region.
- **Manage growth strategically:** Ensuring controlled, gradual growth helps prevent the negative impacts of over-tourism and maintains a balance between tourism and local well-being. Supporting small-scale initiatives and natural preservation over large-scale infrastructures (such as big resorts) fosters ownership and delivers local benefits.
- **Strengthen coordination and certification:** Participation in sustainability programs and seeking accreditations (such as the STF-label), can provide structured guidance and credibility for responsible tourism, while aligning efforts and knowledge among stakeholders. These programs often include indicators and assessments tools, which can contribute to accountability and help support decision-making.



Photo: Sebastien Goldberg / Unsplash.com

Case 2. Norway – Lofoten: 30,000 to 1 – Locals and nature outnumbered

Introduction

Located north of the Arctic Circle, the Lofoten Islands are an archipelago on the Norwegian coast known for the natural beauty. Lofoten is just one area made up of six municipalities (Vågan, Vestvågøy, Flakstad, Moskenes, Værøy, and Røst) that sits within Nordland County (*Nordland fylkeskommune*). Just under 25,000 people live across the 1,200 km² of the Lofoten municipalities, with Vestvågøy hosting a large portion of the total population—around 11,600 inhabitants. It is also the home of one of the two main towns in Lofoten—Leknes—of around 3,700 inhabitants, which is outnumbered only by Svolvær, located in Vågan Municipality which is home to just over 4,700 inhabitants).

Background

The first settlement was established in the Middle Ages in Vågan, and the islands have a long history in the fishery industry that continues today, especially with cod (*skrei*). In fact, the fishing industry accounts for nearly 10% of employment in Nordland County (Nyrud et al., 2022). In the two municipalities at the western end

of the archipelago (Værøy and Røst), the fishing industry accounts for 61% and 47% of private sector employment (McBride, 2023). However, within the past decade, the tourism industry has also grown in the Lofoten municipalities, particularly nature-based tourism. Due to the different kinds of visits, ways of passing through a destination, and the complexities of identifying a precise definition of “tourist,” tourism statistics are difficult to measure in any comprehensive way. According to SSB, there are 618, 902 commercial guest nights in Lofoten; however, accounting for other short-term rentals as well as free camping numbers, Destination Lofoten estimates the number of annual tourists—arriving by cruise ship, car, bus, and air—at around 1 million per year. Recognising the variation in precise numbers, it is clear that the tourism industry is a significant sector for the Lofoten Islands, with an estimated 19% of all employees working in the tourism industry (interview 3).

There are several key drivers to tourism in the area, but the main attractions are the natural landscape of the mountainous islands, where visitors can hike, camp, and kayak. Popular destination points include Lofotodden National Park in Moskenes, the fishing village of Njusfjord in Flaksted, and Haukland Beach in Vestvågøy. While these areas are common environments for both international and domestic tourists, the natural landscapes are also at risk of suffering from the high numbers of tourists who contribute to pollution and denigration of the nature through irresponsible hiking and camping practices. Furthermore, some social and economic tensions also exist between visitors and those who call the islands home. In recent studies, researchers have pointed out the paradox of tourism as an ecosystem service in that the industry’s economic growth is, to some extent, dependent on ecosystem services that are “threatened by the consequences of its growth,” thereby making “nature-based tourism a potentially vulnerable system” (Antonsen et al., 2022).

The Lofoten Islands were selected as part of this report due to their major growth in tourism in recent years, but also due to the perceived imbalance of tourism across the different municipalities. Through interviews with representatives from Vestvågøy, Nordland County, and Destination Lofoten,^[1] we found that sustainability efforts are high on the agenda in the municipalities, with many policies and initiatives in place to manage tourism in socially, environmentally, and economically sustainable ways. In addition to a recent robust regional strategy for sustainable tourism,^[2] Lofoten has been named a “Sustainable Destination” by Innovation Norway, a labelling scheme developed by Innovation Norway alongside the tourism industry, research institutions, and national authorities. Recognised by the Global Sustainable Tourism Council, the scheme includes 42 criteria and 104 indicators for destinations to work towards, with the overarching aim of imbedding sustainability into the strategic work of the tourism industry (Visit Norway, n.d.-a).

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1. Destination Lofoten is the area’s official destination company working on behalf of the municipalities and tourism industries. See <https://visitlofoten.com/bransjeside/hva-er-destination-lofoten/>
 2. See https://www.nfk.no/f/p1/i44240311-6afb-434d-9dbf-7aa1dc3a7ee2/byraa_nfk_reiselivstrategi_23_27_web_uu.pdf

Box 1. Social sustainability-related criteria under the Sustainable Destination label

- C1-1: The destination management must have an overview available of material and intangible culture and cultural heritage and plans in place for the responsible dissemination and use.
- C1-2: Active efforts must be made to develop local offerings of food and beverages.
- D5-1: In an inclusive process, the destination management must plan and incorporate measures for the use and communication of natural and cultural areas that promote good interaction between the tourism industry, local communities, and visitors.
- D6-1: The destination management must measure and publicly report the local communities' ambitions, concerns, and satisfaction with the development of tourism.
- D7-1: The destination management must work to promote more local employment, status, and pride in tourism.
- D7-2: The destination management must take the initiative to increase expertise in areas that are important for the responsible development of tourism.
- D8-1: The destination management must carry out visitor surveys in key customer segments.
- D8-2: The destination management has a system for monitoring, preventing, and publicly reporting risks, health hazards, and crime.
- D8-3: The destination management must work to ensure that the tourism industry facilitates public access for people with special needs, as well as inform them about this on its website.
- E9-2: Economic value creation and the ripple effects of tourism must be monitored.
- E9-3: The destination management must work to promote balanced development of arrivals throughout the year as a basis for broad local employment and value creation.
- E10-2: The destination management must monitor the development of employment and recruitment in tourism.
- E10-3: The destination management promotes partnerships and supports local SMEs that develop and sell sustainable products, services, and experiences.

We protect our pure nature so that both we the people of Salla and our guests can breathe the cleanest air in the world. We take care of our mutual climate. It is a matter of honour for us to take good care of our animals. We offer experiences in the local nature.

We prefer local products and we offer local food and expertise. What we offer is clean, traditional, and local. We commit ourselves to responsible procurement and practices.

The people from Salla are as good as their word – together, we take good care of people and the environment.

Source: Visit Sal

Source. Innovation Norway, 2022.

Box 2. 10 principles outlined in the Sustainable Destination label by Innovation Norway

Conservation of Nature, Culture, and Environment

1. **Cultural identity:** Respect, further develop, and highlight the local community's historical cultural heritage, authentic culture, traditions, and distinctiveness.
2. **Biodiversity:** Support the conservation of natural areas, wildlife, and habitats, and minimise their destruction.
3. **Climate emissions and climate adaptation:** Minimise the climate emissions of tourism and tourists, and adapt tourism to a changing climate.
4. **Clean environment and resource efficiency:** Minimise pollution of air, water, and land (including noise) by tourism businesses and tourists, and reduce waste and consumption of scarce and non-renewable resources.

Strengthening of Social Values

1. **Quality of life and social Values:** Preserve and enhance the quality of life in the community, including social structures, access to resources, facilities, and common goods for all, while avoiding any form of social degradation and exploitation.
2. **Local control and engagement:** Engage and empower local communities and local stakeholders regarding planning, decision-making, management, and development of local tourism.
3. **Job quality for tourism employees:** Enhance the quality of tourism jobs (direct and indirect), including wage levels and working conditions without discrimination based on gender, ethnicity, disabilities, or other factors.
4. **Guest satisfaction, safety, and quality of experiences:** Ensure safe, satisfying, and enriching experiences for all tourists regardless of gender, race, disabilities, or other factors.

Economic Viability

1. **Economically viable and competitive tourism destinations through local value creation:** Ensure the viability and competitiveness of tourism destinations in the long term, through maximising tourism's value creation in the community, including the value visitors spend locally.

Economically viable and competitive tourism businesses: Ensure the viability and competitiveness of tourism businesses in a long-term perspective.

We prefer local products and we offer local food and expertise. What we offer is clean, traditional, and local. We commit ourselves to responsible procurement and practices. The people from Salla are as good as their word – together, we take good care of people and the environment.

Source: Visit Sal

Source. Visit Norway, n.d.-b.

The label is awarded on a commitment rather than achievement basis, meaning that labelled destinations are not yet fully sustainable, but have agreed to progress along the sustainability criteria and come under evaluation every 3 years. Thus, while sustainable tourism is a major priority, it is no surprise that, despite many efforts made by the Lofoten municipalities, several gaps and concerns remain. Some of these concerns are in regards to the small populations living in tourist-heavy pockets on the islands, difficulties with local-level funding to support tourist services, challenges to enforce the tourism code of ethics that keeps visitors accountable and responsible for caring for the destination, uneven distribution of tourism throughout Nordland County, and challenges with national level tourism regulations. This case study examines how the Lofoten Islands have worked with sustainability principles to foster sustainable tourism, with aims of maintaining environmental integrity and local community well-being, while also serving guests who travel from far and wide to visit the unique landscape.

The socio-economic context of Lofoten

The Lofoten Islands have a long history of fishing, which continues to be a major element in the coastal communities today, such as in Henningsvær, Kabelvåg, [Nusfjord](#), and Røst. Since the Viking Age, the culture and economy were built around fisheries, specifically for Arctic cod, or *skrei*. But the fishing season (winter to early spring) has also been closely connected to a tradition of welcoming others into Lofoten. Traditionally, fishermen arrived from all over Norway to fish during this season, and the local people have historically received them. Therefore, the economic history of fishing in the islands has always been interwoven into the social and cultural fabric of tourism on the islands. While the fishing industry has continued, other major events and exhibition sites have also emerged that preserve the cultural heritage, such as the World Cod Fishing Championship, hosted in Svolvær since 1991. The activities celebrate both the economic history as well as cultural and natural history of the islands as a place where local inhabitants successfully developed techniques to live off the land and sea and formed cultural traditions of welcoming strangers in.

Today, visitors from all over the world travel to Lofoten and get a taste of this heritage through new avenues of tourism. While most people pursue the islands as a nature-based tourism destination for hiking and sea activities due to the dramatic natural landscape of the archipelago, the municipalities of Lofoten have also developed their hotel and restaurant offerings highlighting traditional stockfish dishes alongside the culture of the Norwegian coastal communities. An interviewee from Destination Lofoten noted the holistic approach to the travel industry in Lofoten, emphasising that the destination has, in recent years, shifted their approach towards guest satisfaction and providing higher value experiences that attract conscientious visitors who are willing to invest in a more profound type of tourism. Focussing on things like photography workshops, ski retreats, and

Northern Lights safaris are some ways that Destination Lofoten works to shape and attract particular kinds of tourists—those who may stay longer and visit outside of peak-seasons. A representative from Nordland County also highlights how the municipalities aim to share their values of hospitality with visitors around the world, rather than viewing tourism as a financial exploitation of local culture. Local populations have inherited this tradition of hospitality as a way of life, baked into the identity of many of the fishing villages, such as Ballstad in Vestvågøy. Instead of orienting the municipalities towards tourists or towards residents, those working with tourism in the region emphasise that the two go hand in hand: places that are good to live are usually good to visit; if a destination is not a nice place to visit, it is probably not a nice place to live.

In some ways, tourism is a means of preservation—a way to keep the cultural heritage alive and to maintain pride in the landscape stewarded by and sustaining inhabitants for generations. Providing glimpses of this lifestyle is a way to continue historic practices and ideas still today. According to one representative from Destination Lofoten, tourism can enrich the life of the destination, and local populations are not threatened by, for example, losing their language, dialect, or cultural practices. And given the county-wide work with visitor management, the idea—at least in theory—is that local populations have a greater say in how and how many visitors come to Lofoten. Despite intrinsic challenges, the representatives from Destination Lofoten and Nordland County report that, on the whole, tourism is positive—both for locals and travellers. From a regional perspective, those working with tourism express that the kind of tourism offered in Lofoten is not a heavily commercial and transactional form, with aims of hosting hordes of tourists at a time; rather, the region has a slower approach where tourism should build up the local society—including those who don't work within the tourism industry themselves.

One example of this is with regards to local services: through an increase in tourism, municipalities like Vestvågøy gain better transport connections (e.g., flight routes) and high-quality restaurants. And greater services in general also mean that the municipality is more attractive for young people to return and settle in the municipality after studying in cities like Oslo or Bergen. According to a regional representative, young people are, in some ways, victims of tourism in that this place they know as home is oriented towards tourism. But rather than driving people out of the region, young people are also responding to this reality by seeking new ways to build the tourism industry. The region is also working on improving the transportation sector to improve the flows of tourists throughout the Lofoten municipalities to enable, for example, better bus transport at low costs, which can benefit both tourists and residents.

The representative from Nordland County also stressed the benefits of the size and diversity of the 41 municipalities in the region. From a national perspective, the small municipalities are sometimes considered problematic—they are too small or

too weak to support tourism, for example. However, the regional representative noted that these municipalities have unique cultures and strong identities, where locals are able to be involved, cope with, and, importantly, benefit from regenerative tourism opportunities.

But while welcoming visitors is a long tradition in this corner of Norway, the kind of hospitality required of local populations has changed over the years as the Lofoten Islands have become more popular with both domestic and international travellers. The interviewees from regional and local levels described the inevitable difficulties due to the number of visitors compared to local population. Vestvågøy is home to some of the most popular beaches and hiking destinations in Norway, but the local communities are dramatically overpowered by visitors. Based on measurements of car movements and hiking around the beaches of Uttakleiv and Haukland, visitors outnumber residents 30,000 to 1 in some areas. Despite some improvements to local services, the high numbers of tourists passing through these destinations places a substantial strain on small communities, the nature, and the local infrastructure. The roads along these northwestern coastal villages, for example, are quite narrow, and there are several small farms in the area. Visitors who come to park at the beaches or hike through the mountains create congestion on the roads, scare away the sheep, and create new demands for services like toilets and wayfinding that are not required by the locals alone. The municipalities need to cater to the needs of tourists and improve visitor experience by providing clear signs and knowledge that equips them while protecting locals from being infringed upon. While these concerns do not threaten local culture per se, they do impact residents' daily life.

According to one municipal representative of Vestvågøy, inhabitants of many micro-communities (10-30 local residents) living in popular destinations often report negative perceptions of tourism compared to other parts of the municipality. Despite these areas attracting many visitors due to the natural landscape and hiking opportunities, few people in such communities are working with the tourism industry and therefore do not see direct benefits from visitors passing through. But even in some larger communities where more people work with tourism, the large-scale visibility of the environmental impacts of tourism are difficult to escape—for example, in the port of Leknes where cruise ships dock throughout the year.

In instances in where the locals feel encroached upon by the volume of visitors, the region is also working to support them with rules and regulations that enable some beaches, for example, to be protected or developed with local needs in mind. In some areas, locals have led the charge. By working with various actors and their municipality, they have established some fees for tourists to access natural areas, such as certain beaches that local residents want to keep clean and uncrowded. In other cases, residents have led initiatives to prevent camping in certain areas, or limited camping by tent, but not with a camper van or car. These kinds of initiatives

are ways for residents to receive guests, but on their own terms. Importantly, local communities are not homogeneous groups, and while some inhabitants benefit from the increase in visitors—not merely economically but also socially—the crowds of tourists can also make other inhabitants feel like strangers in their own home.

Much of the tensions around tourism in the Lofoten Islands comes down to trust—trust between local inhabitants and visitors as well as trust between the local inhabitants and the municipality or county council. The sustainability coordinator from Destination Lofoten emphasised how those living in Norway, and particularly among large stretches of nature, have grown up with a sense of respect for the environment from an early age. Cultural norms like following the path or leaving no trace may be common sense for local inhabitants, but these ways of life are not always obvious to tourists who have not been exposed to these kinds of natural environments outside their front doors. The discrepancies create a lot of practical issues for the municipalities—like dealing with human waste in the rivers (which affects the water source). While cruise ships are often the most visible form of tourism in the key port towns of the Lofoten Islands, some of the major issues often come from those using motor homes and rental cars who camp or park in inappropriate areas. In some cases, ignorance or unfamiliarity with these natural environments can put tourists themselves at risk—for example, by not understanding what kinds of shoes or clothing may be necessary for safely navigating a hike. Some initiatives have been implemented to respond to these concerns, such as the Sporløs Lofotturisme project. Researchers from the Norwegian Institute for Nature Research (NINA) and the Norwegian University of Life Sciences (NMBU) worked to map the wastes problem in Lofoten, interview tourists about their experiences, and develop the foundations for a long-term waste management programme that helps make tourism more sustainable in the popular hiking destination of Lofotodden National Park, and elsewhere around Lofoten (NINA, 2021).

In addition to building trust between tourists and local inhabitants, there is also lack of trust between some smaller communities and the municipality or region when it comes to responding to tourism. Some civil servants are dedicated to bridging the gap between inhabitants of small communities and the municipality as well as the County Council in order to find better solutions and work towards common goals. Locals need to feel they are heard and that their suggestions are taken into account when it comes to questions of where tourists can go or how to place a cap on the volume of visitors passing through their communities.

Tourism governance structure in Lofoten

As a region, Nordland County established a robust tourism strategy (*Strategi for reiseliv og opplevelser i Nordland 2023–2027*) to guide the region towards *regenerative* tourism practices. While the strategy comes from a business

perspective, it takes a holistic approach and aims for solutions that strengthen both the tourism experience and the sustainable development of the municipalities:

Regenerative means a form of tourism whose ambition is to contribute to the renewal of resources and create positive added value for local communities, the climate, and the environment. In other words, regenerative tourism takes sustainability further than trying to avoid damage or compensate for it. ... The focus is on how visitors can help to leave a destination in better condition than when they arrived. This includes supporting local value creation as well as preserving local cultural and natural resources. (Nordland fylkeskommune, Forord)

This approach of regenerative tourism has emerged elsewhere around the world, but the Nordland County strategy is a breakthrough in Norway, especially with regards to integrating tourism into other sectors, such as transportation, education, and the environment. The strategy involved participatory processes via meetings with local actors and the tourism industry, municipalities, and politicians. And the regional representatives noted the importance of involving local leaders and considering local conditions when creating the strategy. For example, open meetings where local farmers could express concerns regarding overtourism and discuss how to receive guests in a different way. One such area is Vågan, a municipality of just under 10,000 residents that receives a high number of visitors, especially in the town of Svolvær and the surrounding mountains and pinnacles such as the picturesque Svolværgeita. The municipality aims to develop visitor management solutions that build up the local society while also supporting tourism. Insights from the local level were taken up in the regional strategic work to understand how tourists could be received in a more integrative manner that serves both parties.

The strategy also highlights how popular tourist destinations require innovative systems to respond to challenges and facilitate value creation for sustainable development. In some regions, this may be through regional actors that can build collaborative efforts for local development, visitor management, and marketing. Destination Lofoten is one example of this.

Destination Lofoten is a destination management company owned by a combination of stakeholders from the private sector (e.g., hotels, activity providers, restaurants, and experience companies) as well as the public sector (i.e., the six municipalities in Lofoten). The company has the mandate to work with visitor management, uniting place and tourism development, facilitation, comprehensive planning, and coordination among municipalities. Their aim is to "ensure development that is within the limits of what nature, landscape, environment, local community, and local culture can tolerate, while also providing a basis for healthy business operations and local value creation" (Visit Lofoten, n.d.-b)

One of the tangible efforts made by Destination Lofoten at the local level, has been the promotion of the Lofoten Code of Conduct (Box 3). Adapted from Norway's

national mountain guide rules, the Lofoten Code of Conduct is a way to present tourists with clear guidelines for how to engage with the natural and social environment of the Lofoten Islands. It guides visitors to make good decisions by educating them on basic principles for waste management, camping, and respecting local inhabitants. Destination Lofoten collaborates with Lofoten Friluftsråd to ensure the Code of Conduct is visible throughout Lofoten where tourists may be hiking or passing through.

Box 3. The Lofoten Code of Conduct

1. CAMP IN DESIGNATED AREAS (see map [here](#))
2. LEAVE NO TRACE – Avoid leaving traces in nature, such as cairns, tent pegs etc. Allow others to have the same great experience that you've had.
3. FOLLOW THE PATH AND AVOID THE CREATION OF NEW PATHS
4. THROW WASTE IN THE WASTE BINS – If you are in an area without bins, bring your waste with you until you can dispose of it.
5. USE PUBLIC TOILETS – If none are present, go in the ocean or dig a pit in the ground (bring paper with you, and cover the hole). Avoid using wet wipes, as they take a long time to decompose.
6. RESPECT PRIVATE PROPERTY – Camping closer than 150 metres from an occupied house or cabin is forbidden. You can only camp on cultivated land if you have an agreement with the land owner.
7. BE CONSIDERATE IN TRAFFIC – The roads in Lofoten are narrow, yet many use them. Keep well clear of cyclists when passing them. Be especially mindful of bicycles in tunnels.
8. BAN ON FIRES – During the summer months, there is a general ban on open fires. Use designated sites for fire, and make sure there is no risk of a forest fire.
9. RESPECT WILDLIFE – Avoid disturbing animals unnecessarily. Dogs must be kept on a leash at all times.
10. IN THE INTEREST OF THE ENVIRONMENT, as well as your own experience and safety, we recommend activities organised by a tour operator. You can find a list of such organisers at www.visitlofoten.com.

Source. Visit Lofoten, n.d.-a.

The region employs guards or hosts in some tourist areas as another way to reduce the risks of injuries or accidents, especially around popular hiking destinations. They also work with Lofoten friluftsråd when it comes to measuring flows of people to identify areas most heavily affected by tourists. With better data, the municipalities can make a stronger case for acquiring the right funding to manage or provide services to these areas, such as bus routes. In 2021, outdoor recreation

regulations^[3] (Friluftsforskrift for Lofoten, Røst, Værøy, Moskenes, Flakstad, Vestvågøy og Vågan kommuner, Nordland) were established in order to safeguard water sources, limit public access to protect nature, and promote overall nature-friendly recreation in cooperation with landowners. The regulation defines 14 areas that disallow tent camping and 4 areas that limit caravan and motorhome parking. These regulations are dynamic tools for tourism management and will continue to be revised with the inclusion or exclusion of various areas. The region also works to identify the heavy burden placed on local and regional infrastructure such as roads to gain more national support for maintenance that accounts not only for the 25,000 inhabitants, but the high quantities of visitors that utilise these streets and services throughout the year.

Local level governance is critical in the municipalities of Lofoten, especially in popular destination areas where communities face both benefits and tensions due to tourism. In parts of Vestvågøy, civil servants work with a matrix of hotspot areas (e.g., Unsted, Effum, Uttekleiv, Haulkand, and Vik) to manage things like parking, sanitation, and ongoing projects. But many challenges remain when it comes to funding, action, communication, and trust.

One local representative working with business relations in a municipality highlighted difficulties for the Lofoten Islands to be made up of six different administrative areas rather than one unified administration. From a business perspective, it could be beneficial for these municipalities to coalesce so that they can better serve the 25,000 residents scattered across them. The municipalities vary greatly in terms of population—from Vestvågøy with 11,600 inhabitants, to Røst, with less than 500 at the western end of the archipelago. But each of these municipalities are responsible for providing various services and responding to tourism demands, leaving some municipalities in particularly precarious situations. Vågan, with 9,793 inhabitants, experienced some financial trouble in 2023 and has needed to close schools and other services to save money, yet the municipality is home to some of the highest numbers of tourists. A more collaborative effort is needed to ensure that the municipalities can respond to the pressures of tourism while also serving the needs of residents.

The local municipalities have followed the work of the regional government when it comes to the approaches of visitor management and regenerative tourism. The municipalities have also been able to inform the county about local ways of working. One key takeaway from this has been that visitor management is a cross-cutting theme for the Lofoten municipalities. Rather than being relegated to the work of tourism, local administrations view it as a key approach that influences or plays a role in all other areas of development—whether that be business planning, social or cultural aspects, or spatial planning. And the concept is highly relevant for ensuring that when residents allow visitors into their neighbourhoods, they get something in return—financially or culturally—that benefits them.

3. See <https://lovdata.no/dokument/LTI/forskrift/2021-06-22-2418>

Representatives from the local and regional levels expressed further needs for support from the national level: with more visitors comes the need for more tools and stricter regulations to control the flows of tourists. In addition to local regulations for things like camping and parking, some municipalities also express an interest in concrete visitor management through a “visitor contribution” or tourist tax. Furthermore, regional representatives also raised the point that national guidelines could better guide international guests. While national regulations like the Outdoor Recreation Act^[4] (*Friluftsloven*) help to define basic principles (e.g., requiring consent from landowners for camping in a destination more than two nights), some alternatives to the Nordic *allemansrätten* or freedom to roam may be important to enforce for areas with high levels of international tourists. While this right provides local people the freedom to move, it also assumes a certain level of basic trust and respect for the area—something that may be unique to international visitors from contexts where such freedoms don’t exist. National guidelines could be installed to safeguard hotspot areas and their local communities so that the burden of managing or educating visitors does not fall on residents. One interviewee also highlighted the lack of a minister for tourism in the Norwegian government which could otherwise help to provide direction on tourism management from a national level.

At the same time, if too many national regulations are put in place, these could burden local municipalities if they require time and resources to meet certain standards. The work could also take away from the localised needs of the communities.

Knowledge exchange among government actors and industry

To continue learning, the region works with many different actors in and beyond the tourism industry at conferences for experience-based tourism. The region also hosts courses for municipalities to look into visitor management and to understand the regional tourism strategy and how its aims can be worked out at the local level. Some local level actors also participate in international visitor management conferences. For example, the representative from Vestvågøy has participated in discussions around the UNESCO system and learned from experiences abroad in places like Canada and Iceland.

Discussion

As previously noted, many local communities benefit from high levels of tourism by also gaining access to goods and services they would otherwise lack—such as restaurants, more grocery stores and shopping, and improved transportation services. However, not all tourist services cater to locals. Haukland Beach is one popular destination where the municipality felt pressure to develop a visitor centre

4. See https://lovdata.no/dokument/NL/lov/1957-06-28-16/KAPITTEL_1#%C2%A79

to accommodate the high number of tourists, especially during the summer months when visitors flock to the area to enjoy the dramatic scenes of the midnight sun. The municipality received some funding from the National Department of Roads and the county administration; but the municipality still contributed 26 million NOK of the 55 million NOK project on their own to fund parking facilities, a service building, and improved sewage systems to accommodate large quantities of guests during their visits (predominantly in the summer months). While these facilities can be used by residents, tensions arise when, for example, local inhabitants are required to pay for parking at a facility which they have already financially contributed to through taxes. The example highlights the concerns around who the municipality has invested for and who benefits.

Destination Lofoten is also working closely with airlines to improve international connections. The Evenes airport, about 2.5 hours drive from the Lofoten Islands, is one of the most weather-safe airports; therefore, enabling more international airlines to connect to this route has the potential to improve year-round tourism. The municipalities have been working towards year-round tourism as a way to ensure full-time employment, which means people can settle down and invest in the area rather than only in the high season of May to September. In the past, there have been many seasonal workers, which has posed some challenges to economic development in the community since the workers hold their permanent address in other cities, thereby contributing through taxes outside of their Lofoten communities. Increasing winter tourism and year-round employment opportunities is likely to increase local revenue through investments in housing and local shops and services in all seasons.

Given the strong connections between industry and politicians, the tourism industry is, according to some regional representatives, a good industry to work in within Norway, and will continue to play a role in the future. But Nordland County as a whole is made up of 41 municipalities, many of which are less than 2,000 citizens, and many even with less than 500. Tourism is not the primary industry in all municipalities, but the regional representatives stress that this is not necessary. Each have their own identity and context, so while there is a potential for uneven distributions (with some municipalities gaining greater economic benefits from tourism), other municipalities benefit through different industries and exports.

Working hand-in-hand with the tourism industry in the Lofoten Islands is the fishing industry. By working together, the harbours become common tourist destinations and places for traditional fishing services. But different fishing towns and villages respond to tourism in unique ways. In Vestvågøy's Ballstad Harbour, the area has maintained a policy to preserve its fishing community and refused the development of large hotels to accommodate visitors. Compared to areas like Svolvær in Vågan Municipality where tourists can find larger hotels, Vestvågøy has relied on traditional fisherman's cabins, smaller apartments, and short-term rentals through platforms like AirBnB to accommodate visitors. The neighbouring

municipalities highlight two distinct approaches—in one case, the municipality wants to ban AirBnB because it creates competition between short-term rentals for tourists and seasonal workers struggling to find housing; meanwhile, in Vestvågøy, the municipality benefits from AirBnB rentals without which very few people would stay overnight in the area. These overnight stays contribute more to the local people who can make money from tourism instead of remaining a place where people pass through to use the nature while staying in overnight accommodations in neighbouring municipalities.

The regenerative tourism approach in the Lofoten Islands is one way for tourists to become part of the solution to protecting and restoring nature. The idea that visitors should leave no trace is encouraged through the Code of Conduct but also in other initiatives, such as inviting visitors to participate in low-impact activities (e.g., kayaking, horseback-riding, or snow-shoeing) or to pick up plastic from the sea during their visit. Establishing sherpa stairs has been another way to manage visitors. The stone steps have less impact on the natural environment compared to other methods and encourage visitors to stay on the path when hiking. However, it is easy for local inhabitants to associate tourism to negative climate and environmental impacts. Visually, the presence of large cruise ships in the ports exuding smoke leads to negative perceptions of tourists choosing these methods for visiting the area. When it comes to air travel, regional representatives make the case that providing ease of travel to Lofoten can actually reduce the overall footprint for tourists. As of spring 2024, a route from Frankfurt to Evenes airport opened. Those traveling from all over the world to experience the islands will still have a carbon footprint, but if they can arrive by two flights rather than four or five, their travel will be somewhat more environmentally friendly. Enabling smoother air travel also enables visitors to stay in the region longer and spend more time both contributing to the local economy and understanding the local community.

Conclusion and recommendations

Drawing from Lofoten's insights, the essential strategies for promoting socially sustainable tourism include:

- **Strengthen Local Governance and Collaboration:** Improve coordination between municipalities to ensure a unified approach to tourism management, and foster stronger collaboration between local authorities, tourism operators, and community members. In Lofoten, trust among residents, tourists, and local leaders is crucial for effective governance.
- **Implement Comprehensive Visitor Management Strategies:** Develop strategies to manage the flow of tourists, particularly in high-traffic areas,

and invest in infrastructure improvements to mitigate the impact of high visitor numbers. Local perceptions of visitor management vary, and more needs to be done to operationalize these strategies in small communities.

- **Promote Sustainable Tourism Practices:** Launch educational campaigns to inform tourists about responsible behaviour and continue and expand environmental conservation initiatives. Efforts to protect the natural environment and the ways of life of local inhabitants are essential.
- **Enhance Economic Benefits for Local Communities:** Provide support and incentives for local businesses to thrive and develop and promote year-round tourism activities to reduce seasonal fluctuations. Ensuring smart economic growth contextualized to the region is vital.
- **Address Social and Cultural Impacts:** Ensure local residents are actively involved in tourism planning and decision-making processes and promote and preserve local cultural heritage through support for traditional crafts and festivals. Small communities in highly sought-out natural landscapes are often infringed upon, and there is a lack of clarity regarding who benefits from the services developed.
- **Improve Data Collection and Monitoring:** Develop comprehensive indicators to measure the social, economic, and environmental impacts of tourism, and conduct regular assessments of tourism impacts and adjust strategies as needed. Regular assessments will help in understanding and mitigating the impacts of tourism.



Photo: Friluftsbym Högå Kusten/imagebank.sweden.se

Case 3. Sweden – The High Coast: QR codes and park stewards: Nudging tourist behaviour

Introduction

Nestled along Sweden's northeast coast, the High Coast (*Högå Kusten*) is renowned for its landscape, including cliffs, vast forests and archipelago. The region attracts visitors seeking outdoor adventures like hiking the High Coast Trail, exploring the Ulvön Islands, visiting Skuleskogen National Park or one of the many nature reserves (Högå Kusten Destinationsutveckling, 2022). The High Coast was designated a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 2000,^[5] meaning that it is a cultural and/or natural site considered to be of 'Outstanding Universal Value' This designation is largely due to the record-breaking land uplift, unmatched anywhere else in the world since the last ice age (Länsstyrelsen Västernorrland, n.d.).

5. In 2006, the World Heritage Site was extended to include the Kvarken Archipelago in Finland, together creating the High Coast / Kvarken Archipelago Natural World Heritage Site (Länsstyrelsen Västernorrland, n.d.).

Background

Over the past decade, the High Coast has emerged as one of Sweden's fastest-growing tourist destinations, with overnight stays increasing by 58% since 2010 (Höga Kusten Destinationsutveckling, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic further accelerated this trend, attracting both seasoned outdoor enthusiasts and newcomers. While this growth has brought economic benefits, it has also raised concerns about the impact on the natural environment and local communities (see e.g., Ivarsson, 2020; Liden, 2020).

High visitor numbers can lead to trail wear, littering, and traffic issues, necessitating effective management and education. To balance the influx of tourists with the preservation of the High Coast's natural beauty and cultural heritage, the region promotes both hospitality and guest responsibility. This approach emphasizes hosts providing a welcoming experience while guests behave respectfully and contribute positively to the local environment and community. This case study explores how the High Coast addresses the challenges and opportunities presented by increased tourism. By educating visitors and engaging the local community, the region aims to ensure sustainable tourism development that benefits both residents and visitors alike.

The socio-economic context of the High Coast

The High Coast region, located in Västernorrland County, includes the municipalities of Härnösand, Kramfors, Sollefteå, and Örnsköldsvik. This area spans 14,500 km² and is home to 120,000 people.^[6] The region's coastline stretches along the Gulf of Bothnia (Höga Kusten Destinationsutveckling, n.d.). The demographic profile is marked by an aging and declining population, low density, and seasonal fluctuations due to a significant influx of tourists in the summer and a high number of second homeowners. The High Coast boasts a rich history and culture, known for its ancient rock carvings, fishing villages, lush forests, cultural offerings, and reindeer herding. The landscape has long inspired artists and craftspeople (Leader Höga Kusten, 2023).

In 2022, the High Coast recorded approximately 687,400 commercial guest nights, marking a record year. The destination aims to expand beyond the peak tourist season to become a year-round attraction (Höga Kusten Destinationsutveckling, 2024). However, like many Swedish destinations, it struggles with seasonality and high peak demand. As shown in Table 1, a large proportion of visitors arrive during the summer.

6. Note that the designated High Coast World Heritage Area covers a smaller area than that of the High Coast touristic concept (the touristic concept is here referred to as the High Coast region). The High Coast World Heritage Area is located in the municipalities of Kramfors and Örnsköldsvik, encompasses 1,520 km² (57% land) and around 5,500 people live there (Nyström Forsén et al. 2020).

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
January	21 216	27 391	22 722	21 761	24 390	25 115	13 262	22 948
February	24 866	27 770	22 151	24 828	27 160	30 389	16 066	27 465
March	25 964	28 026	27 280	25 909	29 480	20 278	18 277	38 363
April	27 043	24 310	21 948	21 647	28 591	12 332	19 113	0
May	41 858	39 179	40 238	37 892	45 156	24 872	41 039	0
June	64 072	63 532	65 380	68 603	78 512	50 952	62 373	0
July	148 171	149 293	142 730	148 369	160 163	141 749	185 165	0
August	80 729	84 439	78 712	78 290	85 943	79 691	107 101	0
September	38 946	37 540	38 915	40 094	45 644	39 189	42 266	0
October	38 752	34 909	33 786	31 058	33 947	36 524	39 833	0
November	38 459	25 903	27 266	27 639	28 330	16 653	33 473	0
December	31 168	19 759	21 760	22 557	23 266	11 869	26 061	0

Table 1. Overview on guest Nights in the High Coast area by month (source: Region Västernorrland, 2022).

Tourism in the region has been on the rise, with no signs of a significant decline in the future. Although the pandemic years saw extreme figures, a more stable increase is anticipated. Some measurements are available to track the development of tourism. Both local attitudes (Research One AB, 2023a; 2023b) and visitor satisfaction (Research One AB, 2023c; 2024) indicate a positive trend, highlighting the overall positive impact on the community beyond financial benefits.

Locals' presence and interactions significantly contribute to visitors' experiences and hospitality. Currently, the general sentiment among locals remains positive, reflected in hospitality measurements. Locals take pride in living in the High Coast and often identify with the region rather than their specific municipality. Keeping residents involved and in control of the development process is essential, especially as the tourism industry in the area grows (Interviewee 8).

”

If these trends continue, with increased tourism and positive attitudes among both locals and visitors, we can expect overall positive tourism development. However, we must keep tracking this to ensure that development remains positive and does not overly impact our nature or locals

- Interviewee 6

Governance and Policy Framework

The High Coast's tourism development is guided by a governance framework involving multiple stakeholders, including municipalities, Västernorrland County, the High Coast World Heritage Site, and Höga Kusten Destinationsutveckling AB, a municipal company responsible for strategic tourism development. All interviewees also emphasized the importance of involving local communities in tourism development and decision-making processes to foster positive attitudes towards tourism. *"Cooperation is essential for shaping sustainable tourism policies and a joint view and direction for future tourism development,"* noted one interviewee (Interviewee 7).

The region's strategies and policies all address sustainable tourism, though they vary in detail regarding social sustainability. They generally focus on enhancing social sustainability by promoting inclusive community involvement and ensuring equitable benefits for locals (Höga Kusten Destinationsutveckling, 2021b), engaging and collaborating with the local community (Öhlén et al. 2024), and involving locals in decision-making processes to foster a sense of ownership and pride, creating local ambassadors (Bylund & Henriksson, 2023). The need for inclusivity and accessibility in tourism, ensuring everyone can experience the offerings, is also highlighted (Landstinget Västernorrland, 2017).

Interviewees mentioned several collaborations among key stakeholders in the tourism sector, ranging from informal to formal structures (Interviewee 7 & 10). While collaborations existed before the COVID-19 pandemic, the surge in visitors during the pandemic revealed areas needing development to manage increased numbers effectively. A more proactive approach evolved, shifting focus from immediate problem-solving to strategic development to prevent recurring issues and ensure better preparedness (Interviewee 8).

In 2023, Höga Kusten Destinationsutveckling AB launched "The High Coast Promise" campaign, inspired by Iceland's approach "The Icelandic

Pledge",^[7] to promote responsible behavior among visitors (Höga Kusten Destinationsutveckling, 2023; Interviewee 1). The High Coast Promise encourages visitors to enjoy the region's beauty while minimizing their negative impact on the environment and respecting the local community (see: Lova Höga Kusten, n.d.). In well-visited areas with rest benches, signs with QR codes have been placed to remind visitors to behave responsible. These reminders are important, especially in the moment, to reinforce good practices and ensure the preservation of the natural environment. The strategic decision to phrase calls to action as "promises" aims to nudge visitors towards positive behavior. *"We want to encourage and guide visitors to make the right actions and decisions,"* explained one interviewee (Interviewee 7).

Discussion

Tourism in the High Coast is deeply intertwined with the local social and economic fabric, relying heavily on local businesses, services, and culture. Tourism boosts the local economy by supporting businesses, creating jobs, and enhancing community services. Numbers from 2019 show that 2000 people were employed in the tourism sector (Höga Kusten Destinationsutveckling, 2021a). Many locals are directly involved in the tourism industry through accommodations, restaurants, guiding, and activities, or indirectly through retail, services, and transportation.

As a popular tourist destination, the region benefits from an influx of visitors who support hotels, restaurants, attractions, and other tourism-related services. Additionally, tourism revenues help sustain local services and businesses, offering a broader range of amenities that remain open even after peak season. This seasonal boost helps businesses stay viable year-round, maintaining employment and essential services like postal and package handling, which are crucial for locals. One interviewee noted that *"Tourism has helped to maintain community services such as grocery stores and hardware stores in small communities that wouldn't exist otherwise. And there are lots of things happening in the summer, with restaurants and farm shops popping up, festivals and events and so on"* (Interviewee 8). This benefits both visitors and locals, ensuring that the community enjoys the same developments designed to attract and accommodate tourists.

Tourism also provides diverse job opportunities, serving as an entry point for newcomers and those outside the labor force. It offers essential job opportunities for new residents and young people, especially in rural areas, broadening their chances to join the labor market. Many may not realize their role in promoting social sustainability. Businesses that employ a significant number of foreign-born individuals, contribute to social integration and employment in the area. Acknowledging and valuing these contributions is essential for holistic development.

7. The Icelandic Pledge is an online agreement where tourists promise to respect nature and travel responsibly while visiting Iceland. It was put into action in 2017 (Icelandic Tourist Board, 2017).

While increased tourism generates benefits for the local community, it also brings challenges. High visitor pressure can negatively affect the local community, particularly if traffic volumes on minor roads become too high. Interviewees reported traffic congestion at popular sites and dissatisfaction among locals living near or along roads to these destinations. Traffic congestion and parking problems are more visible during the peak summer season, especially during the COVID-19 restrictions in 2020. Several interviewees also pointed out the lack of public transportation in the area. If visitor numbers continue to rise without improvements in public transportation, the region will remain heavily dependent on cars. To address these issues, measures such as hiring park stewards (who essentially worked as parking attendants) and improving and re-routing roads have been implemented (Interviewees 7, 8 & 9).

Like other nature tourism destinations, the High Coast has experienced environmental impacts due to tourism activities. High visitor numbers can lead to trail degradation and littering, particularly during peak seasons. Increased human presence can also displace wildlife from popular areas (Interviewee 3). Local efforts to promote sustainable tourism practices and minimize environmental damage include restoring and reinforcing trails, installing waste bins and information boards, and educating visitors on responsible behavior. Naturum, a visitor center in Sweden's national parks and nature reserves, plays a crucial role in this education, offering information and activities about the local area's geology, flora, fauna, cultural history and the do's and don'ts in vulnerable nature areas (Interviewee 10).

Interviewees expressed that most visitors want to do the right thing and learn, but they may lack knowledge and experience about how to be a good visitor. That is why informing and steering the visitors to behave in a good way for the nature and local community is important. This can be done in several ways. For example, educational campaigns on responsible behavior and the right of public access have been produced, with the aim of reducing environmental damage. The High Coast Promise also promotes sustainable tourism practices to minimise environmental damage (Interviewee 6).

"The High Coast region may be best known for its nature and landscape, but the friendliness and hospitality of the locals are also key determinants of a visitor's experience. The locals act as ambassadors and should be seen as great assets. But in order to do so, they need to be on board with the overall tourism development and see and benefit from the advantages tourism brings to the local community" notes one interviewee (Interviewee 6). All interviewees emphasized the importance of integrating tourism initiatives with the local community, focusing on "place development" rather than just "tourism development." This approach ensures that tourism not only boosts the economy but also supports the preservation of local services and overall societal development (Interviewees 7 & 8). Social considerations involve ensuring that tourism development benefits local

communities and aligns with their needs and values. One interviewee explained that social sustainability in tourism development may be more difficult to define and measure but is still of utmost importance (Interviewee 6).

In general, interviewees highlighted the lack of measurements available. While some parameters, such as visitor statistics and local attitudes are available, more comprehensive indicators are needed to encompass all economic, social, and ecological aspects. Larger destinations may have the resources to develop and track their own indicators, but smaller destinations often lack this capacity. Centralized, national-level data collection would benefit all destinations, providing support and comparability (Interviewees 6, 8 & 10).

In the context of the High Coast, several key social considerations were highlighted. Firstly, community involvement is vital to anchor tourism developments among the locals. Engaging locals in tourism planning and decision-making processes can foster a sense of ownership and pride. Additionally, addressing quality of life issues is crucial to ensure that tourism does not negatively impact locals' daily lives but instead improves them. This includes managing traffic situations and ensuring access to services. From the visitors' perspective in the High Coast region, social considerations involve respecting local culture and customs, supporting local businesses, and engaging positively with the local community. It also focuses on responsible behavior to minimize negative impacts on the local environment and society.

Conclusion and recommendations

While sustainable tourism is a major point of discussion within the municipalities of the Lofoten Islands and the Nordland region as a whole, there remains much more to be done with regards to social sustainability. Trust is key—both among residents and tourists as well as residents and their local and regional leaders. While it was not made known from the interviews with local and regional representatives that local culture is heavily affected by tourism, small communities in highly sought out natural landscapes are infringed upon, and there remains a lack of clarity regarding who benefits from the services that are developed in these areas (and who foots the bill). While concepts like visitor management and regenerative tourism have been popularised, local perceptions of this work vary throughout the Lofoten municipalities, and there is more to be done to operationalise this work in small communities inundated with out-of-town guests. As both the fishing and tourism industries continue, local and regional authorities must work with the national level to implement policies that protect the natural environment and the ways of life of local inhabitants while ensuring smart economic growth contextualised to this region.

The recommendations for sustainable tourism development from The High Coast case in Sweden emphasize::

- **Focusing on place development:** This approach involves anchoring decisions and plans within the local community to ensure they are beneficial and sustainable.
- **Improving measurement methods:** Enhancing methods for measuring tourism impacts and sustainability is crucial for informed decision-making and effective management.
- **Fostering hospitality and responsibility:** Successful tourism development hinges on fostering both hospitality from locals and responsibility from visitors. Visitors should be aware of their role in contributing to sustainable travel, while locals should act as ambassadors, welcoming visitors and promoting their region. This mutual effort, supported by education and community engagement, helps create a sustainable experience for both tourists and the local community.



Photo: Rebecka Eriksson / Visit Åland

Case 4. Åland: Navigating Maritime Heritage and Tourism Challenges

Introduction

Nestled in the Baltic Sea, halfway between Sweden and Finland, lies Åland, an archipelago of 6,757 islands. The largest island in the archipelago, Fasta Åland, is home to the capital, Mariehamn. Visitors can stroll through cobblestone streets, visit museums, and enjoy the pleasant surroundings. West of Åland lies the Åland Sea, an open water area between the Swedish Roslagen archipelago and Åland. To the east, the Åland archipelago borders the Finnish Archipelago Sea. The dense network of islands and bays offers nature experiences and a peaceful atmosphere (Åland, 2022).

Background

Tourism is vital for Åland. In 2023, more than 210,000 people stayed overnight in commercial accommodation facilities. Over half of these visitors came from Finland and more than a third from Sweden. In 2023, Åland received almost 1.3 million inbound visitors^[8] (ÅSUB, 2024a).

8. The statistics on inbound visitors include cruise passengers, day-trippers, overnight visitors and returning Ålanders arriving by ferry or air but excludes people arriving by own boat (ÅSUB, 2024a).

For Åland, the majority of tourists arrive in the summer months, especially in July. July is also the busiest month regarding different events, such as the Rockoff Festival, Poker Run, Oldtime Cruisers and Ålands Dansbandsfestival (Visit Åland, n.d.). These activities attract many visitors and creates a buzz in society. However, this also leads to a major peak in visitor numbers concentrated over just a few weeks. During the rest of the year, Åland is much quieter and calmer. There is a desire to even out this peak in visitor numbers and attract more visitors outside of the peak season (Lokalkraft Leader Åland r.f., 2023).

The biggest event outside of the peak season is the Harvest Festival ("Skördefesten"). It is a three-day event held annually in the second-to-last weekend of September, promoting Åland's countryside. During the festival, visitors can interact with local producers and learn about life as a farmer, while farmers showcase their traditions and products. The Harvest Festival aims to highlight Åland as a destination during autumn. With almost 16,000 visitors in 2023 and a total turnover of €942,000 for the vendors, the event is an important factor for the local communities and for promoting out-of-season travel (Skördefestens Vänner r.f, 2023). This case study focuses on the strategies to extend the tourist season for increased but sustainable tourism growth, using the Harvest Festival as an example of extending the tourist season while promoting sustainable practices.

The socio-economic context of Åland

Åland is a self-governing part of the Republic of Finland and has a high degree of autonomy with its own parliament and government. As of 2022, Åland had a population of around 30,000. It is divided into 16 municipalities, with one-third of the population living in the capital, Mariehamn. The Ålanders speak Swedish as their native language (Nordiskt samarbete, n.d.).

Tourism is Åland's largest export industry, contributing significantly to the local economy. In 2023, tourist land consumption in Åland was estimated at EUR 107 million (including VAT). When considering the broader definition of tourism, Åland's total tourism income exceeded EUR 700 million. Notably, sea-based tourism continues to represent a larger share than land-based tourism, contributing significantly to the overall tourism income (ÅSUB, 2024c). Åland's tourism industry is directly dependent on the efficiency and capacity of its ferry connections, as ferry traffic is the basis for the vast majority of transportation to and from Åland (ÅSUB, 2024c).

Tourism is embedded in the Ålandic society, and most businesses are small-scale family businesses (ÅSUB, 2024b). One in five Ålanders in the private sector works in tourism. Tourism significantly enhances Åland's appeal to residents, visitors, and businesses, as it serves as a showcase for potential new residents and provides entry-level jobs, especially for young people and newcomers (Ålands Landskapsregering, 2024a).

As noted above, most of the visitors arrive during the summer months. The seasonality of tourism is a common challenge in many destinations. One interviewee noted that *"Seasonality is something that has been discussed for a long time. It is a phenomenon inherent in tourism that you can't really eliminate, but you can perhaps mitigate the effects a bit"* (Interviewee 12).

Tourism governance structure in Åland

Åland's tourism development is directed by a governance framework that includes multiple stakeholders. One key document in this context is Åland's strategy for sustainable development (*Bärkraft*). This strategy serves as the guiding framework for Åland's future development, incorporating tourism development and goals, particularly in Target Area 5: "Attractiveness for residents, visitors, and businesses." The strategy highlights three objectives for 2030: increasing the population to 35,000, creating 14,000 jobs in the private sector, and attracting 300,000 overnight visitors annually. In short, Åland aims to grow. The strategy emphasizes the importance of high attractiveness for both residents and visitors, noting that the aspiration to grow drives progress, enhances societal vitality, and helps ensure a high level of service and infrastructure for Åland's residents (Bärkraft, 2022).

Another strategy guiding tourism development is Åland's Roadmap for Sustainable Tourism 2030. This roadmap provides stakeholders in the tourism sector with a common direction to rally around, relate to, and refer to. Regarding sustainable tourism, it underscores the importance of addressing all three dimensions of sustainability. There is an increased focus on companies' efforts in social sustainability, such as offering entry-level jobs to people new to Åland or those outside the labor market. Additionally, there is a focus on strengthening the skills of personnel in the tourism industry and making tourism activities more accessible. The roadmap notes that increased overnight stays will impact all of Åland, placing demands on sustainable development, including infrastructure and public services (Ålands Landskapsregering, 2024a).

The accompanying Action plan 2024-2025 translates the tourism strategy into measures. It explicitly discusses social sustainability in tourism, noting that social sustainability is about the benefit to society. Social sustainability involves creating long-term local values and supporting the community by generating local income, employing local residents, and utilizing local labor as much as possible. It also includes developing skills when they are lacking locally. Furthermore, social sustainability encompasses preserving local cultural heritage, such as traditions, food, and crafts. Considering the local perspective in tourism development is significant and a key factor in achieving success. The action plan also stresses the importance of sustainable place development, which means creating attractive places for visitors, residents, businesses, and investments. This work should be based on the specific conditions, challenges, and needs of each place, with local influence being a key factor (Ålands Landskapsregering, 2024b).

The strategies address sustainable tourism, although they differ in the specifics of social sustainability. One interviewee noted, *"I think that this social dimension is addressed in a different way now. Previously, there was an environmental focus. Now, we also focus more on social issues"* (Interviewee 13). However, interviewees generally pointed out that there is still a lack of a clear definition of social sustainability and what it includes, which can impact the understanding of how to work with the social aspects.

This issue is also connected to the absence of indicators or measurements for sustainable tourism, particularly socially sustainable tourism. While some metrics exist in the strategies, capturing aspects such as attractiveness, well-being, trust, and participation, they are not exclusively focused around tourism. Instead, they address the overall development of Åland. Data collection and reporting specifically for tourism are not being conducted (interviewee 14). One interviewee explained that *"I think that we lack measurement methods for sustainable tourism. Without proper metrics, it's hard to know if we're improving or on the right track. It's difficult to know where you're going without something to measure"* (Interviewee 13).

All strategies focus on growing in a sustainable way that benefits Ålanders. Interviewees highlighted the significance of engaging multiple stakeholders, including local communities, in tourism development and decision-making processes to cultivate positive attitudes towards tourism (Interviewees 13 & 14). Additionally, the concept of place development was discussed among interviewees, emphasizing that any developments in tourism should also benefit local communities (Interviewee 12).

Box 1. The High Coast Promise

I promise to take my rubbish away with me or dispose of it in the dedicated places.

I promise to keep the clean water clean and not break branches or remove bark from living trees.

I promise not to burn directly on mountains. And to be aware of any fire bans and designated burning areas.

I promise to take beautiful selfies without risking my own or others' lives, and to only park in the designated places.

I promise to enjoy nature while respecting the rules of nature reserves and national parks.

I promise to act consciously with responsibility for future generations.

Source. Lova Höga Kusten, n.d.

Discussion

Tourism is a key industry in Åland, creating social, economic, and environmental impacts. Land-based tourism in Åland contributed 3.2% to the GDP at basic prices in 2023, amounting to EUR 45.3 million. When considering the broader definition of tourism (tourism in total), the total contribution to GDP was estimated at 16%, roughly EUR 225 million. The tourism industry is not only important for companies' income and for Åland's GDP. The industry also creates significant employment effects both in and outside Åland (ÅSUB, 2024c).

One interviewee explained that "*Tourism significantly impacts our region, being a major employer and source of revenue. Beyond economic benefits, tourism helps maintain services and brings cultural events and restaurants that enhance attractiveness and quality of life. It also provides entry-level jobs, fostering social integration. These social and cultural aspects are just as important as the economic benefits for Åland*" (Interviewee 14).

Another interviewee discussed ways to keep the locals engaged with the tourism developments, expressing that "*To foster a sense of local engagement to tourism, I think it's very important to develop services that both locals and tourists can use. You should always keep both these customer groups in mind when planning for tourism developments, it should serve both*" (Interviewee 14).

Interviewees discussed the importance of tourism for Ålandic society, noting a general acceptance among locals who see the benefits. However, locals may feel that July is often too busy due to a large influx of visitors over a few weeks. They understand that this period will end, and things will return to normal. There is a desire to even out tourist flows, attracting more visitors during fall and spring

instead of increasing summer numbers (Interviewees 13 & 14). It was argued that tourism in Åland cannot grow further in July, as accommodation capacity is reached (Interviewee 12). One interviewee expressed, *"Everything happens in July. And then it's hard to find something for the other months. It becomes a bit of a vicious circle, where not many people come to Åland because it's closed, but it's closed because not many people come. It's a difficult balancing act"* (Interviewee 11).

Seasonality also presents challenges for tourism-related companies, especially regarding staffing. If companies cannot offer permanent positions, meaning jobs during both high and low seasons, people may go abroad or change professions. This makes it difficult to retain employees and invest in their skills (Interviewee 12). Discussing the long-term benefits of extending the season, interviewees noted that it could lead to better utilization of accommodation capacity, more job opportunities, longer work contracts, and potentially year-round employment (Interviewee 13).

Interviewees argued that Åland currently does not experience problems of mass tourism. However, the archipelago faces increased pressure during the summer months, such as freshwater shortages. While Åland does not face severe environmental or social wear and tear, interviewees emphasized the importance of sustainable planning to avoid potential future problems (Interviewees 13 & 14).

There are plans in place to extend the tourism season or create new ones, both from tourism strategies and practitioners. The newly published tourism strategy for Åland highlights the importance of extending the existing season and finding new seasons. Promoting events outside of peak season is seen as an important tool for attracting new visitors and encouraging repeat visits, showcasing Åland (Ålands Landskapsregering, 2024a). One of the most cost-effective ways to create demand outside of the high season is through events (Interviewees 12 & 14). Events are also highlighted as something Ålanders agree are very important for the tourism industry and something they can enjoy as well (Interviewee 13). One interviewee discussed measures to extend the season, expressing that *"We have started to look at what we can offer outside of peak season and how we can extend the season. The best opportunity is to start with fall and spring and see what we can offer there. Here, the Harvest Festival is an excellent example of how an event can contribute to extending the season"* (Interviewee 13).

The Harvest Festival is the largest event outside of the peak season. It is organized by the non-profit association Skördefestens Vänner. Since 2017, the association also organizes the spring event Åland Grönskar, and since 2022, the Christmas event Åland Glimrar (Skördefest, n.d.). The Harvest Festival is the heart of Åland's food culture and the highlight of the autumn. The festival cherishes and highlights local traditions, promoting authentic, local, and traditional food and farming culture. It engages the local community, with farms in the countryside opening up for visitors to learn about rural life, farming, and traditions, and to shop for locally produced food products directly from the producers (Interviewee 11).

The Harvest Festival has a strict policy that all vendors and farms participating in the festival can only sell fully Ålandic products. Strict criteria ensure that only locally produced items are sold, promoting local producers (Interviewees 11 & 14). For the farms, being part of this event is significant. It is both a great source of income and creates visibility. As a visitor, you get to visit a farm, understand more about how a farm works, how the things we eat and drink are produced, and learn about the history and culture of the farm. It is also a knowledge-raising experience (Interviewee 13). One interviewee discussed the role of the event, noting that *"Our guiding principles are to increase knowledge about the countryside, educate people about rural life, and promote Ålandic culture and locally produced products. We want the Harvest Festival to foster pride in Åland's crafts and traditions"* (Interviewee 11).

These events aim to create new tourist seasons and provide opportunities for visitors to experience Åland's culture and natural beauty year-round. By diversifying the range of events and promoting them effectively, Åland can attract a steady flow of tourists throughout the year, reducing reliance on the summer peak season. Åland supports a vibrant cultural and sports association life, offering event grants to cover costs. These events, often organized by associations rather than companies, include competitions, tournaments, jazz festivals, and literature days. Financing these associations is crucial for sustaining and expanding these activities (Interviewee 14).

Overall, the strategic use of events is a valuable tool for addressing the seasonality of tourism in Åland. By creating engaging and culturally rich experiences outside the peak season, Åland can achieve more balanced tourist flows, support local economies, and promote sustainable tourism practices. This approach not only benefits the tourism industry but also enhances the quality of life for residents and preserves the region's cultural heritage.

Conclusion

The case study highlights several key findings and implications for the development of socially sustainable tourism. Firstly, seasonality is a common issue in tourism and is not entirely unavoidable. However, there are ways to even out tourism flows. The emphasis on extending the tourist season through events like the Harvest Festival demonstrates a practical approach to extending seasons or creating new ones, mitigating the challenges of seasonality. Additionally, the Harvest Festival is seen as a good example of how to engage the local community, promote local crafts and products, and educate about rural lifestyles.

By promoting off-peak events, Åland not only attracts visitors year-round but also supports local economies and preserves cultural heritage. Although events cannot solve seasonality problems in isolation, other measures need to be in place. This can involve campaigns showcasing attractions outside of peak season and ensuring that sightseeing places, cafés, and other amenities remain open.

Based on these findings, several key takeaways can be made for policymakers and tourism practitioners:

- **Promote off-peak events:** Encourage the development and promotion of events outside the peak tourist season to distribute visitor numbers more evenly throughout the year. This can help alleviate the pressure on local infrastructure and provide a steady income for local businesses.
- **Engage local communities:** Involve local communities in the planning and decision-making processes of tourism development. This ensures that tourism initiatives align with the needs and values of the residents, fostering a sense of ownership and positive attitudes towards tourism.
- **Focus on social sustainability measurements:** Develop clear definitions and indicators for social sustainability in tourism. This can help track progress and ensure that tourism development benefits local communities by creating jobs, preserving cultural heritage, and supporting local businesses.



Photo: Elin Tabitha / Unsplash.com

Case 5. Faroe Islands: Preservation Amidst Tourism Growth

Introduction

The Faroe Islands are an archipelago located in the North Atlantic Ocean, an autonomous territory within the Kingdom of Denmark. Covering an area of approximately 1,399 km², the 18 islands have a population of around 54,000 as of 2024. The population density is relatively low, with about 39 inhabitants per km² (Statistics Faroe Islands, 2025). The economy of the Faroe Islands is predominantly driven by the fishing industry, which accounts for the majority of exports and employment (government.fo, 2025). However, tourism has become an increasingly important sector, contributing to some economic diversification and providing new opportunities for local communities. The Faroe Islands are administratively divided into 29 municipalities, with Tórshavn, the capital, being the largest and most significant. Other key municipalities include Klaksvík, Runavík, and Vágur (Bornholms Tidende, 2024). These municipalities play a crucial role in the islands' economic and social development.

Background

Tourism in the Faroe Islands is centred around the islands' natural landscapes, rich birdlife, and cultural experiences. Visitors are mainly drawn to the Faroe Islands for activities such as hiking, bird watching, and exploring traditional Faroese villages. The islands' commitment to sustainable tourism is evident in initiatives such as the "Closed for Maintenance" program, where certain areas are temporarily closed to tourists to allow for environmental restoration (Visit Faroe Islands, 2025).

Historically, tourism in the Faroe Islands has developed gradually. In recent years, the sector has seen significant growth, with increased marketing efforts and the development of tourism infrastructure, including accommodations and transportation. Tourism is expected to continue its growth, and in 2023, Visit Faroe Islands launched a new strategy setting out the direction of travel and goals for Faroese tourism over the coming years. The role of tourism in the Faroese economy has grown significantly, generating revenue, creating employment opportunities, and supporting local businesses (interviewee 16). The strategic location of the Faroe Islands between Europe and North America, along with direct flights from several European cities, has further bolstered the sector's growth. However, this increased growth has also brought about certain challenges.

The socio-economic context of The Faroe Islands

The Faroe Islands face several social and economic challenges. One of the primary issues is demographic decline, particularly among the younger population, who often migrate to Denmark and mainland Europe for education and more diverse employment opportunities (interviewee 15). This migration has resulted in an aging population, putting additional pressure on social services and healthcare systems (Tyril, 2023). Economically, the Faroe Islands are heavily reliant on fishing and aquaculture, making them vulnerable to fluctuations in global markets and environmental changes. The limited range of employment opportunities further contributes to the outmigration of young people seeking better prospects (interviewee 16). Additionally, the geographical isolation and rugged terrain of the islands pose challenges for infrastructure development and accessibility, with gaps in public services such as transportation, healthcare, and education affecting the quality of life for residents (interviewee 18).

Tourism is seen as a potential solution to some of these challenges. It can provide an alternative source of income, reducing the dependency on fishing and aquaculture, and create employment opportunities, particularly for young people. By creating jobs and improving infrastructure, tourism is seen as one tool to help retain the local population and attract new residents, especially to the areas outside the capital and in the rural regions. Moreover, tourism is considered by some

as a way to help promote and preserve the unique Faroese culture, making it an attractive place to live and visit (interviewee 14).

The perception of international tourism among locals is mixed. Many locals recognize the economic benefits of tourism, including job creation and increased revenue, and see it as a way to promote and preserve Faroese culture and traditions. However, some residents are concerned about overcrowding and the impact on their quality of life, as well as the environmental impact of increased tourism and the potential for damage to natural sites (interviewee 14, 17 & 18).

While tourism presents significant opportunities for economic and cultural development in the Faroe Islands, it also brings challenges that need to be carefully managed to ensure sustainable growth and positive outcomes for both residents and visitors.

Tourism governance structure in the Faroe Islands

The governance of tourism in the Faroe Islands is primarily overseen by the Faroe Islands Tourist Board, which operates under the Ministry of Environment, Industry, and Trade. The board is responsible for maintaining connections with and collaborating with the tourism industry. The HEIM: Tourism Strategy towards 2030, launched by Visit Faroe Islands in 2023, aims to develop a sustainable and balanced tourism sector. This strategy emphasizes environmental preservation, social responsibility, and economic benefits. It includes initiatives to spread tourism throughout the year, promote niche markets like business and cultural tourism, and enhance infrastructure and mobility (Visit Faroe Islands, 2023).

Despite these efforts, there are challenges in achieving effective governance and policy implementation. One of the primary issues is the fragmented collaboration among tourism stakeholders. Many stakeholders operate in isolation, focusing on local rather than regional collaboration, which limits the overall impact of tourism initiatives (interviewee 18). The HEIM strategy emphasizes the importance of inclusive community involvement, aiming to ensure that tourism development aligns with local needs and values. However, the success of this approach is not yet to be seen, and according to interviewees, it can be hard to achieve (interviewee 17 & 18). While there have been efforts to involve local communities in tourism planning and decision-making processes, the level of participation varies. Some initiatives, like the nationwide conversation initiated by Visit Faroe Islands in 2022, have successfully gathered input from various stakeholders, including the public, industry representatives, and political decision-makers (interviewee 14). However, there are still gaps in ensuring that all segments of the population are equally involved and benefit from tourism development.

The strategies and policies addressing sustainable tourism in the Faroe Islands have in the past been well-articulated at the national level but often lack strong

linkages to local or regional strategies. This disconnect has led to inconsistencies in policy implementation and challenges in achieving cohesive and sustainable tourism development. The focus on inclusive community involvement is evident in the new national tourism strategy, which promotes local ownership, job creation, and environmental protection. However, the practical implementation of these principles varies, with some areas showing more progress than others (interview 17 & 18).

Collaboration among key stakeholders in the tourism sector ranges from informal to formal structures. The North Atlantic Tourism Association (NATA) promotes and supports cooperation in tourism for the West Nordic countries, including the Faroe Islands, Greenland, and Iceland. This collaboration provides opportunities and grants for joint ventures and cultural exchanges within the region. However, there is still a need for more structured and consistent collaboration at the local level to ensure that tourism development is sustainable and benefits all stakeholders. Some municipalities also have their own strategies in place, such as the capital Tórshavn with its "People and Tourism – Side by Side," adopted by the city council in May 2022 and covers the years 2022-2026 (Tórshavn Municipality, 2022).

This strategy includes 26 recommendations and specific actions aimed at sustainable tourism development through culture, balance between residents and visitors and green solutions. The strategy also includes specific actions such as developing a cultural policy with visions and goals for the next 10-12 years, increasing funding and support for business tourism, establishing more tourism-related educational programs, improving tourism statistics, and revisiting the cruise strategy to manage visitor impact on popular sites (interviewee 15). The policy involves collaboration between the municipality, local businesses, and various stakeholders, with regular assessments and adjustments to ensure the policy's goals are met (Tórshavn Municipality, 2022).

On the policy level, Faroe islands therefore has a good foundation for cooperation and the policies are a result of extensive consultations focusing on local involvement and sustainable practices. It must also be considered that tourism at a larger scale is a new phenomenon on the islands and governance structures, infrastructure and ways to handle the new reality are therefore in the midst of implementation. Still, there are areas of concern among the Faroese people regarding tourism development on the islands. The involvement of foreign companies and "outsiders" in the tourism industry is one area of concern (interviewee 15). This is apparent with the cruise ship tourism that has grown considerably in recent years. While international collaborations and investments can bring valuable resources and expertise, they can also lead to tensions and conflicts with local stakeholders. The presence of foreign companies in the tourism sector can sometimes result in perceived inequities and dissatisfaction among local businesses and communities (interviewee 20). This has been an area of dispute that resulted in certain changes in fundamental laws in 2024 to meet the new reality.

Discussion

Tourism in the Faroe Islands has become increasingly intertwined with the local social and economic fabric over the past 10-20 years. The region has seen significant growth in tourism, which has brought both opportunities and challenges. Economically, the influx of visitors has provided a much-needed boost to the local economy. Tourism has created jobs, stimulated entrepreneurship, and generated revenue through taxes and spending on local services and products (interviewee 16).

The development of tourism has also had positive effects on services and infrastructure. Investments in transportation, accommodation, and public amenities have improved the overall quality of life for residents and made the islands more accessible to visitors. However, the rapid growth of tourism has also put pressure on existing infrastructure and services, leading to concerns about sustainability and the capacity to manage increased visitor numbers (interviewee 18 & 19).

Socially, tourism has had a mixed impact on the Faroe Islands. On the one hand, it has promoted cultural exchange and increased awareness of Faroese culture and traditions. On the other hand, the influx of tourists has sometimes led to overcrowding and disruptions to the tranquil lifestyle of the local population (interviewee 18 & 20). There are also concerns about the environmental impact of tourism, particularly in terms of preserving the islands' natural beauty and biodiversity.

While tourism has helped many local businesses stay viable year-round, maintaining employment and essential services, it has also brought challenges. The seasonal nature of tourism means that some businesses struggle during off-peak periods, leading to fluctuations in employment and income (interviewee 19 & 20). Additionally, the focus on tourism can sometimes lead to the neglect of other important sectors, creating an over-reliance on tourism for economic stability.

The governance and policy framework for tourism in the Faroe Islands is in many ways a bit of a complex landscape of opportunities and challenges. While the new tourism strategy towards 2030 outlines a comprehensive vision for sustainable tourism, the practical implementation of these policies reveals several gaps and areas for improvement. One of the primary issues identified is the fragmented collaboration among tourism stakeholders (interviewee 19). Many stakeholders operate independently, focusing on local rather than regional collaboration, which limits the overall impact of tourism initiatives. This lack of cohesive strategies disrupts continuity and hinders long-term planning. While the new tourism strategy addresses some of these issues, stakeholders in general have pointed out the absence of comprehensive measurements to evaluate the full spectrum of tourism's impact (interviewee 18). While some data are available, there is a need

for more holistic indicators that encompass economic, social, and ecological aspects. This gap in data collection and analysis makes it challenging to assess the true impact of tourism and to develop targeted interventions.

The emphasis on inclusive community involvement in the new strategy is commendable, but the success of this approach has so far been mixed and efforts to involve local communities in implementing tourism planning and decision-making have varied in effectiveness (interviewee 18 & 19). While initiatives like the nationwide conversation initiated by Visit Faroe Islands in 2022 have successfully gathered input from various stakeholders, there are still gaps in ensuring that all segments of the population are equally involved and benefit from tourism development. This uneven participation can lead to perceived inequities and dissatisfaction among local communities (interviewee 17).

Socially, tourism has had a mixed impact on the Faroe Islands. While it has promoted cultural exchange and increased awareness of Faroese culture and traditions, it has also led to overcrowding and disruptions to the tranquil lifestyle of the local population (interviewee 18). The environmental impact of tourism is another critical concern, particularly in terms of preserving the islands' natural beauty and biodiversity. Initiatives like the "Closed for Maintenance" program, where certain areas are temporarily closed to tourists for environmental restoration, highlight the need for sustainable practices. It also showcases commitment of authorities to protect natural and social values, but at the same time such initiatives have made global news, further promoting Faroe Islands as a destination and ultimately resulting in more visitors (interviewee 18). According to tourism planners in Faroe Islands this however is also the intended goal, to be able to increase tourism at a gradual rate while also creating the means to support and manage that increase in visitor numbers without effecting the natural landscape or social composition of the islands in a negative way (interviewee 14). None the less, these initiatives also face criticism for their scope and effectiveness.

Socially Sustainable Tourism Conflicts

Local concerns about tourism development are significant (interviewee 19). Research by Plieninger et al. (2018) highlighted that more than half of the Faroese respondents expressed concerns regarding tourism development, worrying about the potential impact on their culture and environment. This sentiment is still shared in some smaller villages where residents express concerns about the influx of tourists disrupting their daily lives, some saying that tourism development seems focused on catering to tourists rather than addressing local needs (interviewee 19). Some locals also feel that although strategies have been made and policies put in place, the smaller villages often experience loss of control in the tourism development and that they sometimes experience "being on display" for visiting tourists for the benefit of others (interviewee 19). This is also reflected in strain on

infrastructure which smaller communities see as a challenge as managing the influx of tourists due to limited resources and infrastructure can be problematic. This includes issues with transportation, waste management, the maintenance of public facilities and other services.

Some economic disparities also arise from tourism development in the more rural regions. While tourism brings economic benefits, local businesses and residents feel that the majority of the financial gains are concentrated to foreign companies or in the capital, Tórshavn, rather than benefiting the rural areas directly (interviewee 20). While the governance and policy framework for tourism in the Faroe Islands has recently tried to address the challenges of fragmented collaboration, data gaps, and uneven community involvement there are still some grievances and scepticism.

A recent change in laws in the Faroe Islands also shows clearly what the disputes regarding tourism development have concentrated around in the past few years. The law addresses some needs of landowners and farmers in the more rural regions of the islands. The law is aimed at protecting the environment and supporting some local interests. This legislation introduces a few key measures, including specific guidelines for hiking across the islands, which now require access fees for certain trails. Additionally, tourists aged 16 and above staying in paid accommodations must pay a sustainability fee of 20 krona per night, capped at 200 krona (around 25 euro). The revenue generated from these fees is to be allocated to maintaining hiking paths, supporting tourism planning, and improving conditions for tourists. The law also allows for access restrictions to certain areas during specific times, such as lambing season or adverse weather conditions, and grants local communities the authority to limit the number of tourists to ensure the quality of life for residents SUSTON. (2024). Overall, the law aims to achieve environmental, social, and economic sustainability by protecting the natural environment, supporting agricultural activities, and ensuring local participation.

The enactment of this law addresses several challenges and reasons for its necessity. The previous legislation from 1937 was outdated and did not account for modern tourism, leading to unregulated and unauthorized systems by farmers and tourism operators. The surge in tourism in recent years created a pressing need for regulation to manage its impact on the environment and local communities (interviewee 18). However, the introduction of the law was met with strong protests from farmers and groups advocating for the right to roam, similar to other Nordic countries, resulting in heated political and public debates. The law's development involved a long consultation process with multiple rounds to address various concerns and reach a consensus, ultimately aiming to balance the benefits of tourism with the preservation of the Faroese way of life and natural heritage.

These recent changes have to some state settled certain disputes regarding tourism development but understandably, there are still divided opinions on the overall development of tourism in the Faroe Islands. The example also shows clearly

that the social, economic, and environmental impacts of tourism need to be carefully managed to ensure sustainable development and positive outcomes for both residents and visitors. By prioritizing comprehensive data collection, inclusive community participation, and sustainable practices, the Faroe Islands could continue to develop a tourism model that benefits all stakeholders and preserves the character of the islands.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The Faroe Islands' tourism sector has experienced significant growth, bringing both opportunities and challenges. Social sustainability remains a critical area of focus, particularly in addressing the cultural and economic impacts of tourism. Tourism has been identified as a potential tool to counterbalance challenges of demographic decline and rural development by providing alternative sources of income and creating employment opportunities, particularly for young people. However, the rapid growth of tourism has also led to concerns about overcrowding, environmental degradation, and the impact on the quality of life for residents. The perception of international tourism among locals is mixed, with some recognizing the economic benefits and others expressing concerns about the potential negative impacts on their daily lives and the environment. The governance and policy framework for tourism in the Faroe Islands, while well-articulated at the national level, often lacks strong linkages to local or regional strategies, leading to inconsistencies in policy implementation and challenges in achieving cohesive and sustainable tourism development.

The fragmented collaboration among tourism stakeholders further complicates the effective governance of tourism. Many stakeholders operate independently, focusing on local rather than regional collaboration, which limits the overall impact of tourism initiatives. The emphasis on inclusive community involvement in the new national tourism strategy is commendable, but the success of this approach has been mixed. The surge in tourism in recent years created a pressing need for regulation to manage its impact on the environment and local communities. New laws introduce specific guidelines for the right to roam. Additionally, tourists must pay a sustainability fee which is allocated to maintaining tourism infrastructure, supporting tourism planning, and improving conditions in popular destinations. This legislation aims to achieve environmental, social, and economic sustainability by protecting the natural environment, supporting agricultural activities, and ensuring local participation.

While tourism has generated possible benefits for the local community, it also brings challenges that need to be carefully managed. At the policy level, the key to sustainable tourism development in the Faroe Islands is said to be in balancing economic growth with social and environmental considerations, ensuring that tourism benefits all stakeholders and preserves the unique character of the islands.

That way the aim is to grow at a pace that is manageable, a sustainable growth. Still, the pace of movement of the tourism industry in Faroe Islands is disputed by locals. By addressing the challenges of fragmented collaboration, data gaps, and perceived uneven community involvement and benefits, the Faroe Islands can keep developing a sustainable tourism model that benefits all stakeholders while also preserving the character of the islands, both environmentally and socially.

Based on the Faroe Island case the following recommendations have been highlighted:

- **Enhance Stakeholder Collaboration:** Establish formal structures for collaboration among tourism stakeholders to ensure cohesive strategies and effective governance. Coordination between different levels of governance, mainly between rural municipalities and the more central level.
- **Improve Data Collection and Analysis:** Develop comprehensive indicators that encompass economic, social, and ecological aspects of tourism. This includes considering the cultural and social fabric of local communities, ensuring that data collection methods are sensitive to place-based and local needs. By incorporating these aspects, tourism development can be more aligned with the unique characteristics and values of each island and settlement.
- **Promote Inclusive Community Involvement:** Ensure that all segments of the population are involved in tourism planning and decision-making processes. While this is done to some degree, some remote areas still feel that inclusion and cooperation could be better.
- **Environmental Sustainability:** Implement and enforce sustainable tourism practices to minimize environmental impact. Expand initiatives like the "Closed for Maintenance" program and invest in conservation projects to protect natural resources and biodiversity. Continue and expand the encouragement of eco-friendly practices among tourists and businesses.

Capacity Building and Education: Invest in capacity building and education programs to equip local residents with the skills and knowledge needed to participate in and benefit from the tourism industry. Promote awareness of sustainable tourism practices among both residents and visitors. Offer training sessions and educational materials to enhance understanding.

Capacity Building and Education: Invest in capacity building and education programs to equip local residents with the skills and knowledge needed to participate in and benefit from the tourism industry. Promote awareness of sustainable tourism practices among both residents and visitors.



Photo: Anne Katrine Ebbesen

Case 6. Greenland – Ilulissat: Government's Ambitions vs. Local Capacity Constraints

Introduction

Ilulissat is located in western Greenland, 300 km north of the Arctic Circle. The town has around 4.700 inhabitants and is part of the Avannaata municipality (Avannaata, 2025). The town's name means "icebergs" in Greenlandic, reflecting its proximity to the Sermeq Kujalleq Glacier Fjord, a UNESCO World Heritage site (Visit Greenland, 2025). The town of Ilulissat is the third largest settlement in Greenland (Grønlands Statistik, 2024) and the surrounding areas are characterized by spectacular landscapes with icebergs, glaciers, glacial fjords, eroded rocks, and marine wildlife. The climate is Arctic, with long, cold winters and short, cool summers (Visit Greenland, 2025).

Background

Historically, fishing has been the primary economic activity in Ilulissat, contributing significantly to the local economy. However, tourism has rapidly grown. Early tourism began in the 1980s-1990s, with significant growth in the 21st century due to the UNESCO classification and the Arctic's symbolism in climate change (Visit

Greenland, 2025). The main attractions include icebergs, glaciers, wildlife, hiking trails, boat excursions, and cultural experiences. Overnight stays and cruise ship visits to Ilulissat have already surpassed the pre-pandemic numbers when almost every accommodation facility was fully book during the peak summer months (Grønlands Statistik, 2023). To accommodate the increasing number of tourists, new infrastructure, including an international airport has been developed and is under construction.

For such a small community to accommodate such a large influx of tourists demands different kinds of infrastructure, labour and investment and the high visitor numbers have already led to a labour shortage and inadequate facilities (interviewee 25). If the growth plans of the government of Greenland will come to a reality when the new international Airport in Ilulissat will be opened, the town will be able to welcome far more visitors. This also opens the possibility of far larger aircraft to land at the airport.

This growth in tourism, largely driven by the governmental level, will bring about various economic opportunities but also challenges at the more local levels related to social sustainability, environmental protection, and cultural preservation. The necessary infrastructure to accommodate more visitors in Ilulissat is already lacking while the influx of tourists has impacted local cultural identity as well and transformed the town centre to cater primarily to tourists (interviewee 27). Therefore, a gap between national policy and local and regional capacity seems to be emerging which can have negative effects for the local population.

Governance and Policy Framework

Tourism development in Greenland is guided at the national level through the state-owned Visit Greenland. The destination management office is responsible for publishing Greenland's tourism plan, which after covid was published under the name "Towards More Tourism" and it concentrated itself around a tourism restart initiative. It contains 4 main goals; to attract adventure tourists, promote year-round tourism across all regions, enhance the skills and knowledge of tourism industry professionals, and create supportive conditions for tourism growth (Visit Greenland, 2021). The state is also the owner and operator of Air Greenland which again has within its group some sub-companies e.g. travel agencies and a hotel (Air Greenland, 2025).

The strategy places a strong emphasis on sustainability, addressing economic, social, and environmental aspects. Social sustainability is highlighted through community engagement, cultural sensitivity, and equitable economic benefits. The strategy aims to create job opportunities for local residents and ensure that tourism development respects and preserves Greenlandic culture (Visit Greenland, 2021). Environmental sustainability is addressed through measures to minimize the environmental impact of tourism, such as waste management and the preservation

of natural landscapes. Economic sustainability is promoted in the strategy through supporting local businesses and creating a stable and resilient tourism industry that benefits the local economy (Visit Greenland, 2021).

The Greenlandic state, its institutions and companies therefore play a crucial role in shaping the industry. The national government sets the overarching tourism strategy and policies, ensuring alignment with national goals and priorities. It provides funding, regulatory oversight, and support for parts of the infrastructure development. Local municipalities, such as the municipality of Avannaatta, are responsible for implementing these policies at the regional level (interviewee 29). They manage local resources, infrastructure, and services to support tourism, while also engaging with local communities to try and ensure that tourism development aligns with their needs and aspirations. Tourism operators, both local and international, deliver experiences and essential services to tourists provide such as tours, accommodations, and transportation. Many stakeholders are therefore involved, but the state is the main policy actor in a rather top-down manner (interviewee 20, 22 & 32).

Discussion

The UNESCO classification of the Sermeq Kujalleq glacier has played a significant role in promoting tourism while protecting the site. The classification has attracted investors and facilitated the implementation of projects such as the construction of a visitor centre (interviewee 29 & 31). The goal is to find the right balance between protection and tourism, involving locals in tourism and connecting their world to the UNESCO site with a focus on sustainable tourism. The municipality faces challenges in managing the increasing number of tourists and the need for clear regulations and policies to ensure sustainable tourism development.

Tourism in Greenland is to a greater extent becoming more integrated into the local society, influencing various aspects of social, economic, and environmental life. In Ilulissat, economic activities are still mainly related to fishing while the economic integration of tourism is becoming more important as it provides job opportunities in sectors such as hospitality, transportation, and tour guiding. However, there is a need to ensure that these opportunities can to a greater extent benefit local residents rather than being mainly carried out by foreign-born individuals (interviewee 21 & 25). The Greenlandic tourism strategy emphasizes the importance of training and education to enhance local involvement in the tourism industry (Visit Greenland, 2021) while locals point out that despite will, both at national and local level, to further include locals in the tourism sector, Ilulissat is already heavily reliant on foreign labour (interviewee 29). During peak tourism seasons there is a lack of labour within the tourism sector and therefore many young and seasonal workers, mainly from Denmark, fill those positions (interviewee 22).

This again effects the social integration of tourism into the Ilulissat community. While certain opportunities for cultural exchange and interaction between tourists, seasonal workers and local residents come with this, it mainly creates a divide. The influx of tourists and seasonal workers can create tensions, particularly since there seems to be a lack of integration which poses challenges related to cultural preservation and social cohesion (interviewee 28 & 29).

The environmental impact of tourism is also a concern, and in the case of Ilulissat this is particularly relevant in terms of waste management and the preservation of natural landscapes. The Greenland policy includes measures to promote sustainable tourism practices and minimize the negative effects of tourism on the environment (Visit Greenland, 2021). This is however not operationalised in any way in the policy beyond stating that its essential to protect important nature sights, like the Ilulissat fjord and its glacier, at the same time as tourism grows and is promoted (Visit Greenland, 2021).

Tourism in Greenland, and especially in Ilulissat where the bulk of foreign visitors come, therefore has significant effects on both the society, economy and environment. While opportunities are highlighted in national policy, mainly in reference to economic possibilities, increased tourism also presents challenges that need to be addressed through coordinated efforts and more effective policies (interviewee 22 & 30). The development of tourism infrastructure, such as hotels and airports, is seen as crucial for the industry's growth, but there are challenges related to funding and the capacity to accommodate increasing numbers of tourists (interviewee 25). The coexistence between the fishing industry and tourist activities is also complicated and the increasing number of tourists puts pressure on local infrastructure, such as transportation, accommodation, and healthcare services (interviewee 23 & 29).

Tourism has a complex relationship with the local economy. There have been conflicts between parts of the local population and tourism operators related to this. Many locals feel that operators, especially foreign ones, do not contribute sufficiently to the local economy, as seasonal foreign workers do not have to change their tax addresses and often pay limited or no taxes in Greenland. This has led to demonstrations and a push for more local control over tourism (interviewee 22 & 25). The economic benefits of tourism are substantial, providing job opportunities and stimulating local businesses. However, these benefits are not always equitably distributed according to some locals (interviewee 29). Larger companies, sometime based outside Greenland, tend to reap the most significant profits, leaving local businesses at a disadvantage. Additionally, the seasonal nature of tourism means that many jobs are temporary, leading to economic instability for local workers. One interviewee mentioned that foreign operators often take up valuable space in the harbour without contributing at the same rate as fishers or local tour operators to local taxes, causing frustration (interviewee 24).

The integration of foreign workers and tourists into the local community is also minimal. The seasonal workers are often referred to by locals as "butterflies", in the

sense that they come for the summer and leave as soon as the fall come (interviewee 21). Since these seasonal workers will leave at the end of the main tourism season, locals will often not bother interacting much with them. Likewise, the seasonal workers often have more in common with each other than with locals and therefore they often interact more among each other than with locals (interviewee 23 & 24). Both therefore lead to minimal interactions and true integration into the local society. This creates a divide between locals and foreigners, which can sometimes lead to social tensions and a lack of cohesion within the community. The interviewees for this case study highlight that the presence of foreign workers and tourists can also lead to cultural insensitivity, such as taking photos without permission or climbing on icebergs, which frustrates local residents. The competition for resources, such as housing, can also exacerbate these tensions (interviewee 24 & 25).

Governance and policy issues further complicate the situation. There is some lack of coordination and communication between local authorities and tourism operators. However, interviewees mainly say that there is lack of consensus and cooperation between the governmental and local levels (interviewee 21, 25 & 29). Local authorities feel that there is insufficient support from the government to manage the increasing number of tourists. The interviews reveal that the lack of clear guidelines and regulations has led to confusion and frustration among both locals and tourists. For instance, authorities and tourism operators often do not communicate effectively, leading to misunderstandings and inefficiencies.

The current infrastructure in Greenland is for example inadequate to handle the growing number of tourists (interviewee 20). There is a need for more hotels and better facilities to accommodate both tourists and local patients who need to travel for medical care. The healthcare system in Greenland faces some challenges due to the remote and vast geographical area. Transport problems are common, and the healthcare system must manage expectations differently compared to many other regions. Tourists, especially older ones which make up a large proportion of the cruise ship tourists, regularly require medical attention, which can strain local resources. Local patients from different parts of the Ilulissat region sometimes also have to stay in the town of Ilulissat for a few days or even longer when being treated and for that, they need hotel rooms. However, during peak seasons these rooms are occupied by visitors. One interviewee highlighted that the healthcare system is not equipped to handle the influx of tourists, leading to delays and inadequate care for both tourists and locals. The lack of sufficient medical facilities and personnel exacerbates these issues, highlighting the need for better healthcare infrastructure to support the growing tourism industry. For example, tourists often do not bring enough medication for extended stays, leading to complications when transport delays occur (interview 23 & 25).

The construction of a new airport in Ilulissat is then expected to increase tourism substantially which can increase problems like the one mentioned earlier. The aim for substantial tourism growth poses certain challenges, as it is driven mainly by

the government of Greenland and Visit Greenland with limited consultation with the region in question. As there is a lack of sufficient accommodation during peak seasons increase in visitors raises concerns about where these additional tourists will stay and that it will also increase pressure on the housing situations of locals.

The locals feel that while the initiatives of the government can serve good purposes, the necessary funds and investments do not go hand in hand with the simultaneous plans to welcome more visitors. The interviews reveal that some locals fear the city will become overcrowded, losing its unique charm and tranquillity (interviewee 27 & 24). For example, the new airport may bring more tourists, but without adequate infrastructure, it could lead to overcrowding and strain on local resources. It has also been pointed out that in a small community like Ilulissat, a major construction like an international airport, takes up a great deal of labour and available machinery. While all construction is focused on one large project, there is little room to start other necessary construction projects, like housing and other transport infrastructure (interviewee 25).

Suggested changes in laws about tourism and ownership of tourism operations have been discussed and are expected to impact the involvement of foreign, especially Danish companies, in the tourism sector. The laws suggest that local ownership must be 50% in specific companies which is also very debated among locals. While the aim is to secure better local involvement and secure more that economic gains stay behind in Greenland it will also hamper necessary investments and therefore this suggestion is very debated. Already, economic disparities are a concern in relation to the tourism development. The economic benefits of tourism are not evenly distributed, and many local businesses struggle to compete with larger, often foreign-owned companies. There is also a concern that the local workforce is not benefiting as much as it should from the tourism industry. The interviews highlight that the presence of foreign workers and companies can lead to a sense of economic disenfranchisement among locals (interviewee 21, 25 & 29). For instance, larger companies often dominate the market, leaving smaller local businesses struggling to compete but at the same time larger companies that can bring about much needed investments (interviewee 32).

Cultural preservation is another critical issue. There is a tension between preserving local culture and catering to tourists. Some locals feel that tourism can help preserve culture by providing a market for traditional crafts and performances (interviewee 26 & 27). However, there is also a concern that tourism can lead to the commercialization and loss of cultural authenticity (interview X). The interviews reveal that some locals feel their culture is being overshadowed by the demands of the tourism industry. The presence of tourists can sometimes lead to the commercialization of local traditions, reducing their authenticity and significance. For example, traditional crafts and performances may be altered to cater to tourist expectations, losing their original meaning and value (interviewee 26).

Cruise tourism presents specific challenges for Greenland. While cruise ships bring large numbers of tourists, these visitors often spend little money locally and contribute to overcrowding and environmental degradation. The interviews reveal that cruise tourism leaves a significant environmental footprint and often negatively affects the social life in Ilulissat since the cruise tourists often do not spend much money locally, leading to minimal economic benefits while still contributing to environmental and social issues (interviewee 21 & 25). The new airport may not necessarily minimize the negative effects of cruise ship tourism. Instead, it could add to the crowding problem, as more tourists arrive by air and sea. However, the tourist that come by air and stay longer are much preferred to those that come by sea and might only stop off for the day. The main problem of an increase in long-term guests is however accommodation. Effective management and regulation of both cruise ship and air travel are essential to ensure sustainable tourism development in Greenland.

In conclusion, tourism in Greenland involves a great deal of stakeholders that effect and area effected by tourism. While tourism brings both benefits and challenges, the economic, environmental, and social costs of tourism must be carefully managed to ensure sustainable development. Greater local involvement, effective regulation, and educational initiatives for tourists are essential to address these challenges and promote a tourism industry that benefits both tourists and the local community. The interviews highlight the need for better coordination and communication among stakeholders to create a more sustainable and inclusive tourism industry as well as much more focused infrastructure and investment at the local level to be able to accommodate the expected larger visitors' numbers in the coming years.

Conclusions and recommendations

Tourism in Ilulissat presents a multifaceted scenario with both opportunities and challenges. The town's unique Arctic environment and cultural heritage have made it a significant tourist destination, particularly following the UNESCO classification of the Sermeq Kujalleq Glacier Fjord. However, the rapid growth in tourism, that is planned to increase even further in the next few years, has brought about several socio-economic, environmental, and infrastructural issues.

The economic benefits of tourism are evident, providing job opportunities and stimulating local businesses. However, many locals feel that these benefits are not evenly distributed, with larger, often foreign-owned companies reaping the most significant profits. This has led to economic disparities and a sense of disenfranchisement among local businesses and workers. The seasonal nature of tourism further exacerbates economic instability for local workers.

Socially, the influx of tourists and foreign seasonal workers has created tensions within the local community. The lack of integration and cultural sensitivity among tourists and foreign workers has led to social divides and sometimes cultural

insensitivity. The competition for resources, such as housing and employment, has also been known to further strain relations between locals and foreigners.

Environmentally, the increased number of tourists has put significant pressure on local infrastructure and natural landscapes. Waste management and the preservation of natural sites like the Ilulissat fjord are critical concerns. The construction of new infrastructure, such as the international airport, aims to accommodate more tourists but also poses challenges related to funding, capacity, and environmental impact.

Governance and policy issues also play a crucial role in shaping the tourism industry in Greenland. The top-down approach from the national government, with limited consultation with local communities, has led to a lack of coordination and communication between stakeholders. This has resulted in confusion and frustration among some of the locals that feel that plans for increase of visitors are not met with necessary investments in the infrastructure needed.

Based on the Ilulissat case the following recommendations have been highlighted:

- **Enhance Local Involvement:** While increasing local ownership and participation in the tourism industry is crucial, there are significant barriers to achieving this. Local businesses often struggle to compete with larger, foreign-owned companies, and incentives alone may not be sufficient to overcome these challenges. Additionally, promoting local entrepreneurship requires substantial support and resources, which may not be readily available.
- **Improve Infrastructure:** Investing in infrastructure is essential, but the reality is that Greenland faces considerable difficulties in this area. Building more hotels, improving waste management systems, and enhancing healthcare facilities require substantial financial investment and long-term planning. The remote and harsh environment further complicates these efforts, making it challenging to provide adequate infrastructure for both tourists and local residents.
- **Promote Cultural Sensitivity:** Implementing educational initiatives for tourists and foreign workers is important, but there are inherent challenges in ensuring that these initiatives are effective. Cultural sensitivity and respect for local customs and traditions can be difficult to instil, especially among short-term visitors. Creating clearer guidelines and informational materials is a step in the right direction, but it may not be enough to foster genuine understanding and must also be adopted by tourism operators.
- **Strengthen Governance and Coordination:** Better coordination and communication between national and local authorities, as well as between tourism operators and local communities, is necessary. The local levels often point out that they do not receive the necessary resources and support to accommodate the policies and plans of the national level.

- **Sustainable Tourism Practices:** Encouraging sustainable tourism practices is vital to minimize the environmental impact of tourism. However, promoting eco-friendly activities, implementing strict waste management protocols, and protecting natural landscapes are challenging tasks. There is often a lack of awareness and commitment to sustainability and enforcing these practices requires robust regulatory frameworks and continuous monitoring.
- **Regulate Cruise Tourism:** Implementing better regulations to manage the impact of cruise tourism would be beneficial. Setting limits on the number of cruise ships and passengers allowed to visit at any given time can be met with resistance from the tourism industry. Additionally, ensuring that cruise tourism contributes positively to the local economy while minimizing environmental and social disruptions requires careful planning and enforcement.
- **Address Economic Disparities:** Developing policies to address economic disparities within the tourism industry is something that is frequently mentioned in Greenland. Providing support and resources for local businesses to compete with larger, foreign-owned companies requires significant investment and long-term commitment.

Box 1. The 10 Commandments of culturism in North Greenland

The 10 Commandments of culturism in North Greenland were created to address the impacts of increased tourism and ensure respectful and responsible behavior among tourists. These commandments emphasize the importance of respecting local people, their privacy, and the environment. They aim to foster positive interactions between tourists and residents, and to preserve the natural beauty and cultural heritage of North Greenland, promoting a sustainable and harmonious tourism industry.

1. Show respect for the people whose country you are visiting.
2. Behave as you would want tourists to do in your own town.
3. Talk to and not about the people you meet, try it!
4. Respect privacy, keep your distance from houses, only walk on roads and paths.
5. Ask permission before taking photos - any hesitation means NO.
6. Cairns are signposts, do not alter them.
7. Do not leave litter in nature - burn toilet paper on a rock.
8. In towns and settlements only allow tents on campsites.
9. Participate in city life, but always give space to the city's own citizens.
10. Do not approach dogs, they are working animals - not pets.

Source. KNR, 2007



Photo: Paul Taton / Unsplash.com

Case 7. Iceland – South-Iceland Region: Local Infrastructure Strain and increased service needs

Introduction

The tourism industry in Iceland has grown rapidly for the past 15 years, with the number of tourists reaching record highs. In 2023, Iceland welcomed approximately 2.2 million tourists, with a slight increase in 2024 and projections for 2025 -2027 suggesting further increases (Ferðamálastofa, 2025). This growth has been particularly pronounced in southern Iceland, known for its landscapes and natural attractions. This surge has brought both opportunities and challenges, particularly during peak seasons.

Southern Iceland, encompassing 15 municipalities with a collective population of 35,000 people (Hagstofan, 2025), covers an extensive area of 30,966 km², stretching approximately 375 km from Herdísarvík in the west to Lónsheiði in the east. This region is rich in resources, including powerful rivers, geothermal energy, fertile soil, unique natural phenomena, and stunning landscapes. It is divided into three distinct areas: the western lowland, which is fertile, has many rivers, summer houses and is in parts quite densely populated; the eastern area, characterized by mountains, glaciers, and deserts with sparse vegetation and a declining population; and Vestmannaeyjar (Westman Islands), which has significant fishing and fish processing industries, a dense population and remarkable nature (SASS, 2025).

Background

Tourism is vital for Iceland. It has become a significant part of the economy, contributing to job creation, income generation, and regional development. The industry supports a wide range of businesses, from hotels and restaurants to tour operators and retail shops. However, the rapid growth of tourism has also led to several challenges such as congestion, strain on resources, seasonality, environmental impact, and housing issues. The influx of tourists has put immense pressure on roads and other infrastructure, while health care, security, and police services are particularly strained during peak seasons.

Despite the economic benefits, the expected improvements in public services and infrastructure have not fully materialized. The tourism industry in Iceland is highly seasonal, leading to fluctuations in demand for services and resources, making it difficult for businesses and local authorities to plan and manage effectively. Housing issues have been exacerbated by the tourism boom, with many properties being converted into short-term rentals for tourists, reducing the availability of long-term housing for residents. The influx of workers in the tourism sector has also increased demand for housing, driving up prices and sometimes making it difficult for locals to find affordable accommodation. Addressing these challenges requires effective governance, community engagement, and sustainable practices to ensure that Iceland can continue to benefit from tourism while preserving its cultural and natural heritage.

The socio-economic context of tourism in S-Iceland

Community engagement is a critical component of sustainable tourism, ensuring that local communities are actively involved in tourism planning and decision-making processes. In Iceland, various methods have been employed to involve local communities, such as public consultations, community meetings, and participatory planning workshops (Menningar- og viðskiptaráðuneyti, 2024). These initiatives include the development of local tourism boards that involve residents in decision-making processes, ensuring that their voices are heard and their concerns addressed. Additionally, educational programs aimed at both tourists and locals help foster a mutual understanding and respect for the local culture and environment. Preserving and promoting local cultural heritage is essential for maintaining the unique identity of tourist destinations. In Iceland, strategies for cultural preservation include the promotion of traditional crafts, music, and festivals.

The Icelandic government has also implemented policies to protect historical sites and support cultural institutions. The impact of tourism on cultural integrity is a

double-edged sword; while it can lead to the commodification of culture, it also provides opportunities for cultural revitalization and increased awareness of local traditions. Ensuring that the benefits of tourism are equitably distributed among different community groups is crucial for social sustainability. In Iceland, measures to promote social equity include providing training and employment opportunities for local residents, supporting small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), and ensuring that tourism infrastructure is accessible to all. Efforts to improve accessibility for people with disabilities ensure that tourism benefits are shared more broadly across the community and are included in the new tourism strategy for Iceland.

Tourism is a significant driver of economic growth in Iceland, contributing to job creation, income generation, and economic diversification. The quality of employment and working conditions in the tourism sector is a key consideration for social sustainability. Efforts to improve working conditions include providing training and development opportunities, ensuring fair wages, and promoting work-life balance. In Iceland, as well as many other places, tourism related work is however often seasonal and carried out by migrant workers that do not permanently settle in the communities they work in (interviewee 33).

The economic impact of tourism is measured through indicators such as GDP contribution, employment rates, and business revenues. In 2023, tourism accounted for approximately 8.8% of Iceland's GDP, highlighting its importance to the national economy workshops (Menningar- og viðskiptaráðuneyti, 2024). The industry supports a wide range of businesses, from hotels and restaurants to tour operators and retail shops. However, the rapid growth of tourism has also led to economic disparities, with some regions benefiting more than others. Ensuring equitable distribution of economic gains is a key priority for sustainable tourism development and in some of the more popular destinations, e.g. Southern-Iceland, many feel that this is not the case (interviewee 37 & 33). This is especially common when talking about public infrastructure and necessary resources to perform the services needed with the increased tourism flow (interviewee 33).

In Iceland, practices to mitigate negative environmental impacts include promoting eco-friendly tourism activities and protecting natural sites. The Icelandic government has also introduced policies to reduce the carbon footprint of tourism although that is not operationalised in detail in any of the current strategies or policies (Menningar- og viðskiptaráðuneyti, 2024). Efforts to promote environmental sustainability often involve collaboration between government agencies, local communities, and tourism businesses. For example, the Icelandic Tourist Board has implemented programs to educate tourists about responsible travel practices, such as minimizing waste and respecting natural habitats (Samtök Ferðapjónustunnar, 2025).

Overall, tourism is a large force in Icelandic society, both economically, environmentally and socially. There are certain clear benefits of tourism increase, e.g. the possible regional development effects, employment opportunities and some increased services that have benefitted local communities. However, many feel that the necessary infrastructure does not go hand in hand with the influx of tourists, such as roads, safety, rescue, healthcare, and police services, to name the most common (interviewee 35 & 36). In Southern-Iceland for example, many locals felt that these necessary services have not increased or been maintained correctly and in proportion with the tourism increase.

Tourism governance structure in Iceland

The governance framework for tourism in Iceland involves multiple stakeholders, including government agencies, local authorities, tourism businesses, and community organizations. The ministerial level plays a central role in developing and implementing tourism policies, while the Icelandic Tourist Board oversees the regulation and promotion of tourism activities. Local authorities are responsible for managing tourism at the municipal level, including infrastructure development and community engagement. Effective governance is essential for ensuring that tourism development aligns with sustainability goals. In Iceland, the tourism governance framework emphasizes collaboration and coordination among stakeholders, with a focus on transparency, accountability, and stakeholder participation. Policies and strategies are developed through a participatory process, involving input from various stakeholders to ensure that diverse perspectives are considered. The "Ferðamálastefna til 2030" (Tourism Strategy to 2030) outlines Iceland's main strategy in tourism. The strategy is built on the concept of sustainable development and includes several key measures to address the challenges posed by the rapid growth of tourism (Menningar- og viðskiptaráðuneyti, 2024).

These measures include investments in infrastructure, enhancements to public services, and initiatives to promote environmental conservation. The strategy also emphasizes the importance of preserving and promoting Icelandic culture, ensuring that tourism activities respect and enhance local traditions and heritage. The action plan of the strategy highlights needs for better and more reliable data collection and research to inform policy decisions and ensure that tourism development is based on reliable information. While it is not specified in the strategy, there are hints that this data will include wellbeing and opinions of locals regarding tourism development (Menningar- og viðskiptaráðuneyti, 2024).

Discussion

Over the past 15 years, tourism in Southern Iceland has increased exponentially. While the local population in Southern Iceland is around 35,000, the region receives approximately 2 million foreign visitors annually (Ferðamálastofa, 2023). In 2024, close to 2.5 million foreign visitors came to Iceland, with about 80% visiting the southern regions (Ferðamálastofa, 2024). This surge in tourism has brought both positive and negative impacts to the region. On the positive side, tourism has boosted the local economy in some places through the purchasing power and presence of visitors, creating jobs and supporting local businesses. However, the rapid growth in tourism has also led to several challenges. Locals report issues such as road congestion, illegal off-road driving, and wear and tear on main roads (interviewee 33). The strain on services and infrastructure is evident, with the limited number of healthcare professionals and police officers posing significant dilemmas. In such a geographically large region with few inhabitants, the nearest healthcare professionals can be very far away, and the distance to the nearest hospital can be substantial. This is particularly problematic during larger accidents, often involving tourists, which have occurred and are likely to happen again (interviewee 37). Harsh weather conditions can further complicate rescue operations, as rescue helicopters may be grounded because of weather in the time of most need. Increasing the number of medical staff and police officers, as well as improving their distribution across the region, can enhance response times and ensure that help is available when needed. Additionally, investing in rescue services, which are often voluntary groups of locals, is crucial to support their efforts in assisting tourists in distress.

Irresponsible behaviour by some tourists around powerful natural phenomena, such as icebergs, glaciers, and the large sandy beaches of the Atlantic Ocean, poses safety risks and too often result in fatalities (interviewee 35). The rescue squads in Iceland are voluntary groups of locals who are frequently called upon to bring trapped or stranded tourists to safety, search for missing individuals in the highlands or on glaciers and respond to other emergencies (interviewee 36). This reliance on voluntary rescue squads highlights the need for better support and resources for these critical services.

Road safety and maintenance are also major concerns for locals in Southern Iceland. While local authorities do what they can, many public services, such as healthcare, police, and maintaining main roads, are the responsibility of the national government. Despite the southern region attracting millions of visitors each year, locals feel that the necessary support, resources, and investment in infrastructure and services have not kept pace with the increase in visitor numbers, leading to frustration (interviewee 36 & 37).

The concept of "visitor management control" or "álagsstýring" is crucial in addressing these challenges. This involves measures such as improving infrastructure, disseminating information, and possibly implementing booking systems and fees to manage tourist flow and protect natural sites. The goal in the Icelandic tourism strategy is to balance the economic benefits of tourism with the preservation of the environment and the well-being of the local population. Recommendations include improving road safety and maintenance, enhancing healthcare and police services, and fostering better integration of foreign workers into local communities (Menningar- og viðskiptaráðuneyti, 2024). While these are clear goals on the policy level the locals still feel that considering the societal and environmental costs the tourism causes to their infrastructure, the governmental level does not bring back the necessary maintenance and investment with the economic gains they gather from the increased tourism, mainly from state level taxes that tourists bring in (interviewee 33 & 35).

Survey results show mixed impacts on services, commerce, and community spirit (Árnason & Kolbrúnardóttir, 2019). Increased traffic and strain on healthcare and police services are however significant issues according to these surveys. The adaptation of foreign workers and community integration varies, but with clear calls for better language support and housing solutions for foreign workers. Addressing road safety, healthcare, police presence, housing, and community engagement are all subjects that surveys show are pending while local expressed some of these topics in interviews undertaken for this study as well (interviewee 33 & 36).

Conclusion and recommendations

While tourism has brought economic benefits to Southern Iceland, it has also created significant challenges that need to be addressed to ensure socially sustainable tourism. A balanced approach that considers the well-being of local communities, improves infrastructure and services, and involves residents in decision-making processes is essential for the sustainable development of tourism in the region. What interviews undertaken for this research highlight are that the most pressing social issue regarding tourism development in Southern Iceland is securing adequate public services, maintaining roads and safety through better police and health care professional presence.

The rapid growth of tourism in Southern Iceland has placed immense pressure on infrastructure and public services. The strain on roads, healthcare, and police services is particularly pronounced during peak tourist seasons. Locals have expressed frustration over the lack of investment in maintaining and improving these essential services, which are crucial for both residents and tourists. The reliance on voluntary rescue squads further underscores the need for better support and resources for emergency services.

To address these challenges, it is essential to gather comprehensive data on the social impacts of tourism. This includes evaluating social measures, social costs, and social gains to ensure a holistic understanding of tourism's effects. The Icelandic government's tourism strategy emphasizes the need for reliable data collection and research to inform policy decisions. By incorporating the well-being and opinions of locals into this data, policymakers can develop more effective strategies for managing tourism sustainably.

Improving public services and infrastructure is vital for enhancing the well-being of local communities and ensuring that the benefits of tourism are equitably distributed. Investments in healthcare, police services, and road maintenance can significantly improve the quality of life for residents and create a more positive perception of tourism. Additionally, fostering better integration of foreign workers into local communities through language support and housing solutions can enhance social cohesion and ensure that the economic benefits of tourism are shared more broadly.

Lastly, addressing the challenges of socially sustainable tourism in Southern Iceland requires a comprehensive approach that prioritizes the well-being of local communities, improves public services, and involves residents in decision-making processes. By evaluating social measures alongside environmental costs and economic gains, policymakers can develop strategies that balance the benefits and challenges of tourism, ensuring a more sustainable and equitable future for the region.

Based on insights from Southern Iceland, the key recommendations for promoting socially sustainable tourism include:

- **Improve Infrastructure and Public Services:** The national government needs to invest in road maintenance and safety to handle the increased traffic from tourism, enhance public services like healthcare and police presence in the remote areas that are large tourist destinations, to ensure timely response during emergencies, and support voluntary rescue squads with better resources and training.
- **Community Engagement and Governance:** Involve local communities further in regular tourism planning and decision-making processes through public consultations and participatory planning workshops and involve local tourism boards that include residents to ensure their voices are heard and concerns addressed.
- **Equitable Distribution of Economic Benefits:** Provide training and employment opportunities for local residents to ensure they benefit from tourism, and support small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and ensure that tourism infrastructure is accessible to all.
- **Cultural and Environmental Preservation:** Promote traditional crafts, music, and festivals to preserve and promote local cultural heritage, implement

policies to protect historical sites and support cultural institutions, and promote eco-friendly tourism activities and protect natural sites through collaboration between government agencies, local communities, and tourism businesses.

- **Integration of Foreign Workers:** Improve language support and housing solutions for foreign workers to ensure better integration into local communities.
- **Better measurement of different social indicators:** This needs to be done on a regular basis to assess social effects alongside economic and environmental indicators. This approach ensures a holistic understanding of tourism's impact on local communities. By regularly monitoring social indicators such as community well-being, employment rates, and cultural preservation, policymakers can make informed decisions that balance the benefits of tourism with the needs and resources of local residents.

By implementing these recommendations, Southern-Iceland can better address the challenges of socially sustainable tourism and ensure that the benefits of tourism are shared more broadly across the community while preserving its unique cultural and natural heritage.



Photo: Aiva Apsite / Unsplash.com

Case 8. Denmark – Billund: Tourism and hospitality is the regional identity

Introduction

Billund, Denmark, represents a distinctive case within the context of rural tourism in the Nordics. Billund Municipality, situated in the Region of Southern Denmark, encompasses an area of 540.18 km² and has a population of 27,119 as of 2024, with a population density of 50 inhabitants per km² (Statistics Denmark, 2025). The municipality's economy is notably influenced by the presence of the LEGO Group, with the mass tourist attraction of Legoland and other related major attractions. Unlike many traditional rural tourism sites, Billund's tourism model is characterized by substantial visitor numbers and significant economic impact that has evolved over several decades. Large-scale attractions and family-friendly resorts have emerged in and around Billund since the establishment of Legoland, further solidifying Billund as a tourist region that builds its identity and economy around the hospitality sector (Billund Kommune, 2025).

The presence of a global brand like Lego has also contributed to the development of the transport and logistics sectors in nearby regions, particularly due to the

strategic importance of Billund Airport. The airport, initiated by the Lego Group, played a key role in its development with the involvement of neighbouring municipalities. Since its establishment, the airport has become the second most important airport in Denmark, enhancing Billund's and the surrounding regions connectivity and accessibility and positively impacting the region by creating employment opportunities. The tourism and hospitality sector in Billund serves as a fundamental component of the society and identity, driving economic growth and fostering a sense of community and cultural pride.

In the following sections, we will delve into the social aspects of tourism development in Billund, exploring community engagement, cultural preservation, and the broader implications of socially sustainable tourism development in a very tourism-driven economy where the tourism also has a strong presence in cultural and environmental identity.

The socio-economic context of Billund

Billund is renowned for its deep connection with the Lego brand, which has significantly shaped its economy, cultural, and social landscape. The economy of Billund has developed significantly since the establishment of the Lego factory in the 1930s, further boosted by the opening of Billund Airport in the 1960s. Annually, Billund attracts approximately two million tourists, primarily drawn by major attractions like Legoland (interviewee 38).

Tourism is therefore a significant economic driver in Billund, providing employment opportunities and contributing considerably to the regional economy. The town's infrastructure, including hotels, restaurants, and recreational facilities, has expanded to accommodate the influx of tourists. The larger towns in Billund Municipality, such as Billund Town and Grindsted, have shown consistent growth over the past 15 years, while smaller towns like Filskov, Hejnsvig, Stenderup-Krogager, and Sønder Omme have either remained stable or experienced slight declines (Billund commune, 2025).

One of the primary challenges in Billund is the seasonal nature of tourism. The peak tourist season, which coincides with school holidays and summer months, leads to a surge in demand for services and infrastructure. This seasonality can strain local resources and create fluctuations in employment, with many jobs being temporary or part-time (interviewee 40). The environmental footprint of tourism, including increased waste, water usage, and carbon emissions from transportation, are also seen as challenges. On the outside, Billund is seen as a tourist destination while those living in the region view it as something much more (interviewee 38). Naturally, the people of Billund know what their position is and therefore the local

authorities, businesses and other stakeholders have tried to utilise the presence of large actors that attract many people to create an environment where smaller businesses can also thrive (interviewee 39). Ensuring that tourism development includes support for small and medium-sized enterprises has therefore been considered crucial for equitable economic growth and possible benefits of locals.

Tourism provides a substantial economic boost to Billund and its neighbouring regions. The development of new attractions and the expansion of existing ones has in the past created jobs, stimulated local businesses, and attracted investment. Diversifying the tourism offerings to include cultural, historical, and nature-based experiences has also been used to reduce reliance on a few major attractions and promote a more sustainable growth (Billund kommune, 2025). The need to accommodate tourists drives improvements in local infrastructure, including transportation, public services, and recreational facilities, which is often viewed as positive by the locals although the sometime feel that more emphasis could be put on specific local needs (interviewee 38). Overall, these enhancements benefit both visitors and residents, contributing to a higher quality of life.

Recognized as Denmark's first child-friendly city by UNICEF in 2020, Billund aspires to be the best place in the world for children and families. The city's vision emphasizes children's well-being, play, and learning, viewing children as competent individuals who actively shape the future. This vision is supported by initiatives such as the Youth Council, which provides a democratic platform for young people aged 13-23 to influence matters affecting their lives (CoC Playful Minds, 2020). Additionally, Billund's educational approach, known as Playful Learning, encourages children to learn through play, fostering creativity and a lifelong desire to learn. The municipality also offers numerous cultural and recreational activities, promoting community involvement and volunteerism (Billund kommune, 2025).

Billund's commitment to social sustainability is evident through its inclusive development practices, community engagement, and educational innovation. The city's partnerships with organizations like the LEGO Foundation enhance its resources and initiatives, contributing to a well-rounded and educated community. These efforts collectively support Billund's vision of being a socially sustainable place, prioritizing the well-being and development of its residents, particularly children (Villumsen, 2021).

Tourism governance framework of Billund

The tourism governance framework in Billund and Denmark as a whole is structured to promote sustainable tourism development, coordination, and promotion across various sectors. The Danish Tourism Act, established by the Ministry of Business and Growth of Denmark, creates a comprehensive framework

for organizing, promoting, and developing tourism in Denmark. This act establishes the National Tourism Forum to coordinate public tourism efforts, develop national strategies, and conduct annual analyses. It also sets up regional and local bodies to facilitate tourism development and marketing, emphasizing sustainable tourism and ensuring consumer protection (Ministry of Business and Growth, 2024)

In Billund, the local authorities play a pivotal role in coordinating tourism development efforts, ensuring alignment with broader social sustainability goals. The Billund Municipality emphasizes the importance of local engagement in tourism planning and decision-making processes. Initiatives such as public consultations and workshops aim to involve residents in shaping the future of tourism in Billund (Villumsen, 2022). Collaboration between the public and private sectors is essential for sustainable tourism development. The LEGO Group, as a major stakeholder, works closely with the municipality to promote tourism while ensuring that it benefits the local community (interviewee 40).

Key stakeholders in Billund's tourism governance include the local government, tourism organizations, and major private sector players like the LEGO Group and Lalandia. The LEGO Group significantly influences Billund's tourism sector, driving economic benefits and attracting large numbers of tourists through attractions like Legoland and the LEGO House. Other large-scale attractions like Lalandia amusementpark complement LEGO's attractions by offering additional recreational activities, enhancing Billund's appeal as a family destination. Billund Airport, established by LEGO, plays a crucial role in facilitating tourism by providing easy and affordable access to the region (interviewee 39). The airport supports logistics for the town and region, enhancing connectivity and economic opportunities.

Billund's tourism strategy aims to leverage its strong position as a popular destination and the presence of large actors and attractions to create an environment where smaller actors can benefit. The focus is on family-friendly tourism, encouraging visitors to stay longer and enjoy nature and local sights, not just the large attractions like amusement parks, zoos, and LEGO-related attractions (Villumsen, 2022).

Discussion

Billund is not "rural tourism" in the traditional sense. It is a mass tourism town that has developed as such, with tourism being one of the backbones of the community. Billund presents a unique case of mass tourism within a rural context. While it is classified as rural in Danish terms, Billund's tourism model is characterized by high visitor numbers and significant economic impact, driven primarily by major attractions like Legoland and the LEGO House.

The town and the municipality, as well as neighbouring regions, have utilized tourism to their best abilities in their development. Tourism and hospitality are integral parts of Billund's identity, and the town has embraced this role (interviewee 41). The town's identity is deeply intertwined with the LEGO brand but local events and festivals, such as the Billund Culture Week, enhance the cultural landscape and strengthen community bonds of locals. The "ildsjæleværksteder" (enthusiast workshops) initiative aimed to engage the community in tourism planning, although some workshops faced challenges like low participation (interviewee 39). These efforts underscore the importance of local involvement in tourism development.

However, the massive influx of tourists can also lead to social challenges in the region. The increased demand for services and infrastructure during peak tourist seasons can strain local resources and affect the quality of life for residents (interviewee 40). To address these issues, it is crucial to involve residents in tourism planning and ensure that their voices are heard in decision-making processes. This has Billund done a regular basis as mentioned earlier.

Billund and LEGO also support research on tourism, acknowledging the importance of understanding the field and supporting sustainable practices. Partly based on this initiative, the municipality has established mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating the impact of tourism on the community and environment, using regular assessments and feedback from residents and stakeholders to inform policy adjustments (interviewee 41). Of course, tourism is a major economic driver in Billund, creating numerous employment opportunities in hospitality, retail, entertainment, and transportation. The development of bed & breakfast accommodations and the renovation of local inns have further contributed to economic growth and made some opportunities for local people in the region (interviewee 41). This way, the economic benefits of tourism extend beyond Billund town, positively impacting neighbouring towns by creating jobs and enhancing regional connectivity.

However, the economic benefits of tourism are not always evenly distributed according to some. Larger businesses, particularly those directly associated with major attractions like Legoland, often reap the most significant rewards, while smaller local businesses may struggle to compete. Efforts are being made to balance mass tourism with rural tourism elements (Villumsen, 2022). This includes promoting local cultural and natural attractions beyond the main tourist sites, such as world-class gastronomy, locally produced food, adventure, nature up-close, recharging holidays, art and design tourism, history and culture tourism.

Billund's tourism strategy also includes measures to mitigate negative environmental impacts. The development of cycling and walking paths not only

enhances the visitor experience but also promotes environmentally friendly transportation options. The LEGO House and other attractions incorporate environmental education into their offerings, raising awareness among visitors about the importance of sustainability. These initiatives help to foster a culture of environmental responsibility among both tourists and residents (interviewee 40). However, the environmental footprint of tourism, including increased waste, water usage, and carbon emissions from transportation, poses a significant challenge. The local authorities are addressing this in accordance to the national policies. At the local levels they have implemented regulations to manage tourism growth, including zoning laws and environmental protection measures. These regulations aim to balance the economic benefits of tourism with the need to preserve the town's cultural and natural heritage (interviewee 39).

The efforts of Billund to balance large scale tourism and mega attractions with more traditional rural tourism are noteworthy. This includes promoting local cultural and natural attractions beyond the main tourist sites, such as world-class gastronomy, locally produced food, adventure, nature up-close, recharging holidays, art and design tourism, history and culture tourism (interviewee 41 & Villumsen, 2021).

Conclusions and recommendations

Billund's approach to tourism governance and its social, economic, and environmental impacts highlight the complexities and opportunities of developing a sustainable tourism model, especially in a mass tourism setting like Billund truly is. Billund's tourism model is a unique case of mass tourism within a rural context. While it is classified as rural in Danish terms, Billund's tourism is characterized by high visitor numbers and significant economic impact, driven primarily by major attractions. This mass tourism has become one of the backbones of the community, deeply integrated into the town's identity and economy.

Tourism is deeply integrated into the DNA of Billund, forming a significant part of its identity. While most people are happy with tourism, there is a desire for a more balanced, less seasonal, and more diverse tourism sector. Efforts to accommodate smaller actors, promote food and leisure tourism, and support locally produced products are ongoing. The social effects of tourism are nuanced, with both positive and negative impacts, but overall, tourism is seen as a vital part of Billund's culture and economy. The town and the municipality, as well as neighbouring regions, have utilized tourism to their best abilities in their development. Tourism and hospitality are integral parts of Billund's identity, and the town has embraced this role. Billund's approach to tourism governance highlights the complexities and opportunities of developing a sustainable tourism model in a mass tourism setting.

By involving local residents in planning processes, fostering partnerships between the public and private sectors, and implementing regulations to manage growth, Billund aims to create a balanced and inclusive tourism sector.

Addressing challenges such as seasonality, housing affordability, and environmental impact, while leveraging opportunities for economic growth, cultural exchange, and community engagement, will be key to ensuring the long-term sustainability of tourism in Billund.

Based on the Billund case the following recommendations can be highlighted:

- **Diversify tourism offerings further:** By promoting a wider range of experiences beyond the major attractions this can be achieved. This includes cultural, historical, and nature-based tourism, as well as world-class gastronomy and locally produced food. Diversifying the tourism offerings can help reduce reliance on a few major attractions and promote sustainable growth.
- **Address seasonality:** Developing strategies to manage the seasonal nature of tourism in Billund is something that is constantly being done and must continue. While the nature of the tourism in the region makes this hard the diversification of tourism offerings will also contribute to this goal, which can help stabilize demand for services and infrastructure.
- **Support small and medium-sized enterprises:** Ensuring that tourism development includes initiatives to promote equitable economic growth for smaller and local businesses. This can be achieved through financial assistance, marketing support, and capacity-building programs for local businesses.
- **Monitor and evaluate the impact of tourism on the community and environment:** In many ways, Billund does a good job of for regular assessment of tourism. Establishing mechanisms for assessing social and cultural effects of tourism could make Billund a frontrunner in such research, using feedback from residents and stakeholders to inform policy adjustments and ensure that tourism development aligns with broader goals of social and environmental sustainability.



Photo: Anne Katrine Ebbesen

Discussion: Cross-Nordic understanding of the social in sustainable tourism

The initial phase of this project aimed to explore the social and cultural impacts of tourism development in the Nordic countries and to identify the indicators used to measure and evaluate the social dimension of sustainability. The review of different indicator systems revealed a significant gap: there is a lack of robust and standardized indicators for social sustainability in tourism. This gap underscores the need for further research and development of social indicators to ensure a more holistic approach to sustainable tourism. The social indicators currently used in the Nordic countries are often subjective, highlighting the potential benefit of quantifying these subjective indicators or conducting quantitative analysis of qualitative data. This process involves converting qualitative, subjective data into numerical values that can be analysed statistically.

The national tourism policies of the Nordic countries emphasize community engagement and empowerment as vital components of socially sustainable tourism development. These policies highlight the importance of involving local communities in tourism planning and development to ensure that tourism initiatives meet the specific needs and preferences of local residents, fostering a sense of ownership and empowerment. Cultural integrity and heritage preservation are also central themes in these policies, advocating for the preservation of cultural heritage and the promotion of authentic tourist experiences. This involves balancing

tourism development with the need to maintain cultural and environmental values, ensuring that tourism does not erode the cultural fabric of local communities. These priorities go hand in hand with academic literature on the subject and in this sense, on the policy level, the Nordic countries do a good job of including cultural and social aspects high in regard to tourism development.

Equity and accessibility are also highlighted as crucial for promoting inclusivity and diversity in tourism. The issue of over-tourism and community displacement is generally addressed in Nordic policy, with policies emphasizing the need for impact assessments and measures to manage visitor pressure. This includes strategies to distribute visitor numbers more evenly throughout the year and to prevent the displacement of local residents. Furthermore, the policies emphasize the need for collaboration among government entities, local communities, and industry partners to achieve sustainable tourism development. The adequacy of public services and infrastructure is discussed as essential for supporting tourism development and maintaining community well-being. The national tourism policies highlight the need for infrastructure that meets the needs of both tourists and local residents, enhancing the overall quality of life in the destination.

The results of the first report provided a better understanding of the key variables and topics related to socially sustainable tourism in academic literature, grey literature, and at the Nordic policy level. These findings align closely with Nordic values and priorities, making them particularly significant in the context of tourism development in the region. Building on these initial findings, the current report conducted eight case studies, one in each of the Nordic countries, to examine the practical application of the identified aspects of socially sustainable tourism. These case studies aimed to assess how elements such as community engagement, cultural preservation, equity, and stakeholder collaboration are implemented in real-world scenarios.

In practice, the case study of Salla in Finland highlights the municipality's focus on controlled growth and community engagement. The local strategies prioritize maintaining Salla's identity as a small, wilderness destination while enhancing the quality of life for residents. This approach aligns with the policy emphasis on place development, ensuring that tourism benefits the local community. In contrast, Billund's tourism model is characterized by high visitor numbers and significant economic impact, driven primarily by major attractions like Legoland. The town has embraced its role as a mass tourism destination, but efforts are being made to balance this with rural tourism elements, promoting local cultural and natural attractions beyond the main tourist sites.

National tourism policies across the Nordic countries emphasize the importance of community engagement and empowerment. Policies highlight the need for involving local communities in tourism planning and development to ensure that tourism initiatives meet the specific needs and preferences of local residents,

fostering a sense of ownership and empowerment. The case study of Lofoten in Norway reveals a strong emphasis on community engagement. The region's tourism strategy involves participatory processes, with local actors and the tourism industry collaborating to develop visitor management solutions that benefit both tourists and residents. However, the high number of tourists in some areas has led to tensions, highlighting the challenges of balancing community needs with tourism growth. In Åland, the Harvest Festival is an example of successful community engagement. The event promotes local traditions and products, involving the local community in tourism activities and fostering a sense of pride and ownership. This aligns with the policy emphasis on community engagement and empowerment.

Cultural integrity and heritage preservation are central themes in Nordic tourism policies also. Policies advocate for the preservation of cultural heritage and the promotion of authentic tourist experiences, balancing tourism development with the need to maintain cultural and environmental values. The case study of the Faroe Islands highlights the challenges of preserving cultural integrity in the face of increasing tourism. While tourism provides opportunities for cultural exchange and economic development, it also raises concerns about overcrowding and the impact on local culture. The "Closed for Maintenance" program is an example of efforts to balance tourism growth with environmental and cultural preservation. In Ilulissat, Greenland, the UNESCO classification of the Sermeq Kujalleq glacier has attracted tourists and facilitated the implementation of projects like the construction of a visitor centre. However, the influx of tourists has impacted local cultural identity, transforming the town center to cater primarily to tourists, while others also feel that local arts are being exploited and commodified to better fit tourists instead of honouring cultural identity. This highlights the challenges of preserving cultural integrity while promoting tourism. In Salla, Finland, the tourism offering is closely linked to the values of the local community, which centers around closeness to nature and tradition. Many residents engage in activities like fishing, reindeer herding, hunting, foraging, and handicrafts, and with increasing interest in authentic experiences in the tourism industry, Salla has leveraged these traditions in its offerings. This approach aligns with the policy emphasis on balancing tradition and innovation.

Over-tourism and community displacement are significant concerns in several case study areas. The national tourism policies emphasize the need for impact assessments and measures to manage visitor pressure and protect residents. The Lofoten Islands in Norway exemplify the challenges of over-tourism. The high number of tourists in some areas has led to tensions between visitors and residents, with locals feeling overwhelmed by the influx of visitors. The region's tourism strategy involves participatory processes, but the high number of tourists in some areas has led to tensions, highlighting the challenges of balancing community needs with tourism growth. In Southern Iceland, the rapid growth of tourism has placed immense pressure on infrastructure and public services. Locals report issues such as road congestion, strain on healthcare and police services, and

inadequate support for voluntary rescue squads. This highlights the gap between policy goals and the reality of managing over-tourism and community displacement.

Collaboration among government entities, local communities, and industry partners is vital for socially responsible tourism practices, fostering a collective approach to sustainable development. The national tourism policies emphasize the need for collaboration among government entities, local communities, and industry partners to achieve sustainable tourism development. In Billund, Denmark, the collaboration between the public and private sectors, particularly with the LEGO Group, is essential for sustainable tourism development. The local authorities emphasize the importance of local engagement in tourism planning, and efforts are being made to balance mass tourism with rural tourism elements. However, in the Faroe Islands, the fragmented collaboration among tourism stakeholders limits the overall impact of tourism initiatives. This underscores the disparity between policy goals and the reality of stakeholder collaboration and partnerships.

Robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms are also regularly mentioned as essential in policy for assessing social sustainability and community well-being, ensuring adaptive policy improvements. In the High Coast, Sweden, the region's strategies and policies address sustainable tourism, though they vary in detail regarding social sustainability. The need for inclusivity and accessibility in tourism, ensuring everyone can experience the offerings, is highlighted. However, interviewees highlighted the lack of measurements available, with more comprehensive indicators needed to encompass all economic, social, and ecological aspects. This highlights the gap between policy goals and the reality of monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. Similarly, Lofoten and Iceland reported similar issues of lack of measurements.

Understanding the socio-economic impacts of tourism on residents is critical for creating models that enhance livelihoods and community welfare. The national tourism policies emphasize the importance of understanding the socio-economic impacts of tourism on residents. In Southern Iceland, the rapid growth of tourism has placed immense pressure on infrastructure and public services. Locals report different issues mainly related to public services and not receiving sufficient resources from the state level to accommodate the high visitor numbers. Adequate public services and infrastructure are essential for supporting tourism development and maintaining community well-being. The national tourism policies emphasize the importance of infrastructure that meets the needs of both tourists and local residents but as the examples show, that is not always the case. In Ilulissat, Greenland, the construction of a new international airport aims to accommodate more tourists, but there are concerns about the adequacy of infrastructure to handle the growing number of visitors. This highlights the challenges of aligning infrastructure development with tourism growth as well as communication and cooperation between different levels of governance.

National tourism policies emphasize the importance of ensuring that tourism growth does not negatively impact housing affordability and accessibility for locals. However, this remains problematic in places like Lofoten, Iceland, and Greenland, where the influx of tourists has strained local housing, especially during peak seasons and made housing more expensive for locals.

At the policy level, private companies are encouraged to balance profit motives with social and environmental responsibility to promote social sustainability in tourism. In Billund, Denmark, the collaboration between the public and private sectors, particularly with the LEGO Group, exemplifies an example of social awareness as the company funds initiative for local children and research on tourism. However, in e.g. Ilulissat Greenland, the economic benefits of tourism are not always evenly distributed, with larger companies often reaping the most significant profits and many local feeling that foreign companies take a large share of the economic gains while leaving social and environmental costs behind. Promoting fair employment opportunities in tourism enhances job quality, social equity, and community well-being. But in Ilulissat, Greenland, as well as Southern Iceland, the tourism industry provides job opportunities, but there is a need to ensure that these opportunities benefit local residents to a more extent rather than being mainly carried out by seasonal workers.

Understanding community attitudes toward tourism development is crucial for fostering positive relationships and support for sustainable initiatives. In the High Coast, Sweden, the general sentiment among locals remains positive, reflecting a community that largely supports tourism. However, there is a recognized need for more comprehensive indicators to measure the economic, social, and ecological impacts of tourism. This gap in measurement tools and definitions hinders the ability to fully understand and manage the effects of tourism on local communities.

In the case of Lofoten, Norway, community attitudes toward tourism are mixed. While some residents appreciate the economic benefits brought by tourism, others are frustrated by the disruptions to their daily lives, such as traffic congestion and environmental degradation. This mixed sentiment underscores the importance of having robust indicators to measure the social impacts of tourism, which can help in addressing community concerns and improving tourism management practices. Similarly, in Southern Iceland, the rapid growth of tourism has led to significant pressure on local infrastructure and public services. The strain on healthcare and police services, along with road congestion, has caused frustration among locals. This situation highlights the need for better measurement tools to assess the social sustainability of tourism and to develop strategies that mitigate negative impacts while enhancing positive outcomes.

The Faroe Islands and Greenland also face challenges in balancing tourism growth with environmental and cultural preservation. While efforts are being presented on paper to address this topic, to manage tourism's impact, more efficient tools and clear definitions of social sustainability in tourism are needed to guide these efforts

and ensure that tourism development aligns with the needs and values of local communities. This also calls for tackling the sometimes reported fragmented collaboration among stakeholders which limits the overall effectiveness of such initiatives.

The need for comprehensive indicators and clear definitions of social sustainability in tourism is evident across these case studies. Indicators that encompass economic and environmental aspects are in some ways quite advanced, comparable and reliable. However, social indicators that can provide a more holistic understanding of tourism's impacts are clearly needed. Economic indicators include e.g. measures of local employment, income distribution, and business growth while ecological indicators measure environmental impacts such as resource depletion, pollution, and biodiversity loss. Social indicators could assess community well-being, cultural preservation, and public attitudes toward tourism, but these indicators are in very few instances gathered and then often in an unsystematic and incomparable way.

The case studies reveal both alignment and gaps between the intended goals of national tourism policies and their practical implementation. While policies emphasize community engagement, cultural preservation, infrastructure development, and stakeholder collaboration, the reality on the ground often presents challenges in achieving these goals. The case studies provide valuable insights into the practical challenges and facilitators in policy execution, offering a nuanced understanding of the efficacy of socially sustainable tourism development in the Nordic region.



Photo: Anne Katrine Ebbesen

Conclusion and Recommendations

The overall findings of the "Socially Sustainable Rural Tourism" project show that, on the whole, tourism is viewed as positive—both for locals and travellers. However, there are certain issues, when it comes to socially sustainable tourism development. One of the main challenges is the lack of understanding and a clear definition of social sustainability is and what it includes. Naturally this impacts the understanding of how to work with the social aspects when it comes to sustainable tourism development.

One of the key insights from the project is the need to focus on place development rather than just destination development. This means taking into account the needs of visitors but, to a much higher degree, the needs and wishes of the locals. Integrating tourism initiatives with the local community ensures that tourism not only boosts the economy but also supports the preservation of local services and overall societal development. For instance, in Salla, Finland, the local strategies prioritize maintaining the area's identity as a small, wilderness destination while enhancing the quality of life for residents. Similarly, the Harvest Festival in Åland successfully engages the local community by promoting local traditions and products, fostering a sense of pride and ownership.

In smaller rural settings, especially where tourism has grown significantly in a short amount of time and maybe even gotten out of control, such as in Iceland, Lofoten, and to an extent the Faroe Islands and Greenland, the different levels of governance are not communicating sufficiently. While communication and cooperation might be high nonetheless, the local levels often feel that they do not

get enough support from the state level. These smaller places bear the brunt of the environmental and social costs of hosting visitors that are much larger in numbers than the local population, yet the necessary resources and funds to properly accommodate these visitors often do not follow. This can easily lead to feelings of frustration with the deterioration of transport infrastructure, insufficient safety measures, and a lack of healthcare and rescue workers. For example, in Southern Iceland, locals report issues such as road congestion, strain on healthcare and police services, and inadequate support rescue operators. Similarly, in Ilulissat, Greenland, the influx of tourists has impacted local cultural identity and pressured local infrastructure.

From the cases conducted for this research, it is clear that most visitors want to do the right thing and learn, but they may lack knowledge and experience about how to be a good visitor in the place specific context. The sheer numbers and presence can also cause stress and problems for locals. Therefore, visitors, willing to be responsible visitors, often don't realize the indirect impact they are having. Addressing quality of life issues is crucial to ensure that tourism does not negatively impact locals' daily lives but instead improves them. The importance of high attractiveness for both residents and visitors is noted, as the aspiration to grow drives progress, enhances societal vitality, and helps ensure a high level of service and infrastructure.

Social sustainability involves creating long-term local values and supporting the community by generating local income, employing local residents, and utilizing local labour as much as possible. It also includes developing skills when they are lacking locally. Furthermore, social sustainability encompasses preserving local cultural heritage, such as traditions, food, and crafts. The governance of the tourism sector needs a shift from growth-driven strategies towards sustainable management, responding to concerns about over-tourism and the pressure on local communities. For example, in Lofoten, Norway, the region's tourism strategy involves participatory processes to develop visitor management solutions that benefit both tourists and residents and in Salla the local strategies prioritize maintaining the area's identity as a small, wilderness destination while enhancing the quality of life for residents.

Local communities are not homogeneous groups, and while some inhabitants benefit from the increase in visitors—not merely economically but also socially—the crowds of tourists can also make other inhabitants feel like strangers in their own home. Much of the tensions around tourism in the rural regions of the Nordics seems to come down to trust—trust between local inhabitants and visitors as well as trust between the local inhabitants and the municipality or county council. A more collaborative effort is needed to ensure that the municipalities can respond to the pressures of tourism while also serving the needs of residents. One key takeaway from this has been that visitor management and place development is a

cross-cutting theme for the rural regions. Rather than being relegated to the work of tourism, local administrations view it as a key approach that influences or plays a role in all other areas of development—whether that be business planning, social or cultural aspects, or spatial planning. And the concept is highly relevant for ensuring that when residents allow visitors into their neighbourhoods, they get something in return—financially or culturally—that benefits them on their terms. However, since the hosting communities have a relatively low population they also often lack the resources to manage their tourism in the desired way.

Clearer guidance on what socially sustainable tourism is needed. Developing robust measurement tools and clear definitions of social sustainability in tourism can help policymakers and practitioners better understand and manage the impacts of tourism. This, in turn, can foster positive community attitudes, support sustainable initiatives, and ensure that tourism development benefits both residents and visitors. By addressing these gaps, the Nordic countries can enhance their efforts toward socially sustainable tourism development, aligning policy goals with practical outcomes and promoting a more equitable and sustainable tourism industry.

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