Towards an ethical tourism recovery in Northern peripheries

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Abstract

Unsustainable tourism growth prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and disruption of tourism caused by its outbreak, together with the global environmental crisis and different global and local injustices, have raised debates on what tourism should be like in the future. A more ethical tourism sector post-recovery has become a topical issue for strategy making in post-pandemic tourism. In this research note, we tie together local stakeholder views on ethical tourism recovery in northern peripheries, a review of current tourism strategies in the area and relevant literature to add to the debate regarding ethical tourism recovery in the region. Our findings show that the local stakeholders participating in our research saw need for more inclusive and participatory community-centred tourism planning and development than most of the reviewed tourism strategies, which were mainly following neoliberal utilitarian ethics. Ethics should be explicitly referenced and discussed in tourism planning and policy making and form an integral part of tourism strategies, and further research is needed to support this transition.

Keywords: tourism, COVID-19, recovery, ethics, northern periphery, local community, tourism strategy

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic had a wide range of impacts on tourism. In Europe's northern peripheries, some places received more tourists, due to the growth of domestic tourism, while others suffered a decrease in visitor numbers (Jóhannesson et al., 2022; Macaulay et al., 2022). The pandemic strengthened and, in some places, dramatically highlighted some trends that had already been gaining ground in tourism consumer behaviour. Attitudes were more favourable towards local tourism as travelling was restricted and interest in

pro-environmental travel was growing (Ianioglo & Rissanen, 2020). Correlative with a general desire for more open and perceptually-safe spaces, nature-based tourism was popular, with greater visitor numbers creating challenges for nature conservation and local communities (Jóhannesson et al., 2022; Macaulay et al., 2022). Thus, some of the only options for tourism were those limited possibilities offered by the strictures of lockdown.

Unsustainable tourism growth prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and disruption of tourism caused by its outbreak, together with the global environmental crisis and different global and local injustices, have raised debates on what tourism should be like in the future (e.g. Gösling et al., 2020; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020; Rastegar et al., 2021; 2023). As Rastegar et al. (2021) have noted, tourism recovery strategies cannot be formulated without consideration of ethics. Yet ethics are rarely discussed in tourism strategies, and a more ethical tourism sector post-recovery is thus a topical issue in post-pandemic tourism strategy making.

In this paper, we tie together local stakeholder views on ethical tourism recovery in northern peripheries collected in the ETRAC (Ethical Tourism Recovery in Arctic Communities) project, a review of current tourism strategies in the area and relevant literature to add to the debate on post-pandemic tourism strategies in the region. Investigating regional tourism strategies is important as they provide a framework within which decisions affecting tourism development and practices are taken (Goeldner & Ritchie, 2012). By pointing out what kinds of tourism development ethics these strategies incorporate in comparison to local stakeholder views, we seek to contribute to the debate on shaping better tourism futures in the North and beyond.

Ethical Frameworks for Tourism Recovery Strategies

There is a growing body of literature on ethics in tourism. In the scope of this research note, we can only briefly introduce some ethical principles that are compatible with our research materials.

Inclusion and participation are much discussed ethical principles in the context of tourism policy making, planning and development, and yet are not necessarily taking place in practice. Local people should be able to participate in or, better, have control over planning and decision-making that affect their lives (e.g., Buzinde & Caterina-Knorr, 2022; Höckert et al., 2021). Or, as Höckert et al. (2021) propose, they should be able to participate in their own development as hosts, and, importantly, also have the possibility to stay outside tourism development if they want to. Drawing on a Levinasian care ethic, Höckert et al. (2021) suggest that tourism development should be based on openness to different participants and reciprocal care of each other's well-being.

An increasing number of tourism researchers sees justice as a key ethical principle to guide tourism policy and development toward individual, communal, societal and planetary well-being (see Guia, 2021; Jamal & Higham, 2021; Rastegar et al., 2023). In line with this, the framework of Rastegar et al. (2021) places justice at the centre of tourism planning and development with four dimensions: 1) Recognition or 'how vulnerable groups and eco-

systems, their needs and rights are identified at local level', 2) procedural justice or inclusion of different rights, values and ideas in decision-making, 3) distributive justice or an equal distribution of the costs and benefits of tourism strategies, and 4) restorative justice or 'actions required for an equitable and just future' (Rastegar et al., 2021, p. 2).

There is still little empirical research on how the framework of Rastegar et al. (2021) can be applied to tourism strategies in practice (Rastegar & Ruhanen, 2022). In the following we will offer some insights based on our empirical materials. The concept of justice is, however, much wider than this framework and understanding how to apply the concept in tourism is continuously evolving (see Jamal & Higham, 2021; Rastegar et al., 2023) and this paper seeks to contribute to that debate.

Materials and Methods

During ETRAC, in winter 2021–2022 a semi-structured survey was distributed among tourism stakeholders in the project area (North Karelia, Finnish Lapland, Northern Sweden and Norway, Scotland, Northern Ireland, Ireland, Iceland, Greenland, and New Brunswick, Canada) concerning the impacts of COVID-19 on tourism and stakeholder views on ethical tourism recovery strategies. In total 38 responses were received, from Finland, the UK, Canada, Belgium, Greenland, Iceland, Ireland and Russia. The most common respondents were businesses or academics, followed by interest groups, business support organisations, Destination Management Organisations (DMOs) and other types of enterprise. In addition, small group discussions on the same topics as in the survey were facilitated at a kick-off webinar in October 2021 for 20 participants representing similar stakeholders from the project area (see Macaulay et al., 2022).

Furthermore, a stakeholder workshop, with 15 participants from the project area, was organised in February 2022 in order to create a bottom-up strategy for ethical tourism recovery in northern peripheries. The main themes of the survey results and kick-off deliberations were used as discussion starters in the workshop. Attendees represented a broad range of perspectives and sectors, including academia, DMOs, tourism companies and regional development organisations. Finally, based on a synthesis of a data-driven thematic analysis of the kick-off meeting, survey and workshop materials, four interconnected strategic pillars for an ethical tourism recovery in northern peripheries were formed (see Macaulay et al., 2022).

For this research note, we reviewed the commensurate, and available, regional tourism strategies from the project area: Finnish Lapland, North Karelia, Scotland, Greenland and New Brunswick (Government of New Brunswick, n.d.; Regional Council of Lapland, 2021; Scottish Tourism Alliance et al., n.d.; Visit Greenland, n.d.; Visit Karelia, n.d.). Our review focused on ascertaining whether the identified four strategic pillars were represented in the regional strategies. Finally, the findings were compared with the academic discussion on tourism ethics presented above.

Results

We have structured our results around the four strategic pillars of ethical tourism recovery in northern peripheries which were formed on the basis of the stakeholder views (see Macaulay et al., 2022). The pillars are congruent with current local movements to centre and empower local communities (Higgins-Desbiolles & Bigby, 2022), offering practical ways to develop ethical tourism on the local level and hinting at the systemic changes needed for a sustainable tourism future (see Roxas et al., 2022; Varzaru et al., 2021).

Pillar One: Inclusive Network Development

The local tourism stakeholders participating in our kick-off webinar, survey and workshop saw a need for strong collaboration between businesses and communities engaged in ethical tourism recovery which could include knowledge sharing, joint packages and product development for mutual benefit (Macaulay et al., 2022). This pillar implies an ethic of care (see Höckert et al., 2021), fostering inclusion, participation, recognition, and procedural and distributive justice (see Buzinde & Caterina-Knorr, 2022; Rastegar et al., 2021).

The reviewed regional tourism strategies emphasise collaboration and network development, but only the strategies of New Brunswick and Scotland recognise local communities as partners in these activities. As Guia (2021) notes, there is, however, the risk that instead of an ethic of care, neoliberal utilitarian ethics are followed where local people are used as resources to satisfy tourists whose well-being is prioritised over that of the local communities. Hence, ethical consideration is needed at both the strategic and implementation level.

Pillar Two: Housing and Employment

According to the local stakeholders' responses in the kick-off webinar, survey and workshop, there is a need to address structural challenges with policy interventions, as the poor reputation of the tourism industry as an employer and a shortage of affordable housing, partly caused by tourist demand for accommodation, are contributing to out-migration and constraining the ability of tourism businesses to recruit and retain employees. For example, short-term housing rentals to tourists could be restricted and guidelines given to improve employer practices in the sector (Macaulay et al., 2022; see also Harju-Myllyaho et al., 2022).

A lack of employees in the sector is present in all the tourism strategies examined. The employee issue has particular prominence in the Scottish strategy, where Brexit is exacerbating the situation, as over 11 % of tourism employees have been EU nationals. The poor image of seasonal, low paid tourism jobs, or the need to increase the workforce and migration to the area, are also widely acknowledged in the strategies. The employment and housing issues of this pillar are questions of distributive justice, but as different vulnerable groups (e.g. low paid seasonal tourism workers, immigrants, local people without affordable housing) are included, recognition and restorative justice are needed as well (see Jamal & Higham, 2021; Rastegar et al., 2021), and this is not sufficiently acknowledged in the reviewed strategies.

Pillar Three: Changing Inappropriate Tourist Behaviour

The local stakeholders emphasised in our kick-off webinar, survey and workshop that problems caused by inappropriate tourist behaviour, such as littering and irresponsible wild camping, and exacerbated by the pandemic, could be tackled by providing easily accessible online and on-site information, as well as sufficient facilities and encouraging their responsible use. Taking into consideration visitors' growing interest in ethical tourism, products should be developed and marketed proactively through local collaborations between businesses and communities. To share the financial benefits of tourism to multiple locations, and ease the burden on the most visited sites, alternative routes and places should be promoted for visitors (Macaulay et al., 2022) thus fostering inclusion, participation and distributional justice (see Höckert et al., 2021; Rastegar et al., 2021).

None of the reviewed tourism strategies mentions inappropriate tourist behaviour, but the strategy of Lapland acknowledges that during peak-season some destinations suffer from over-tourism, while the Scottish strategy recognises tourism pressures in Scotland and the potential negative impacts of overcrowding (see also Ross, 2020). Many northern communities have created guidelines for tourists to advise them on appropriate behaviour (see Kugapi et al., 2020; Macaulay et al., 2022), but this kind of visitor guidance is not part of the reviewed strategies. None of them speaks specifically of developing products for ethical, sustainable or responsible tourists. Together with the ignorance of inappropriate tourist behaviour, this suggests that no responsibility is expected from tourists on a strategic level.

All the strategies aim for sustainable tourism growth and, with the exception of the Visit North Karelia strategy, distributive justice, by spreading tourism across their areas. For example, in Lapland and Greenland, the aim is to have tourism everywhere to enable employment and business activities in all local communities. The communities have, however, not been asked whether they want to have this kind of development. In North Karelia, distributing tourism more evenly across the region is not a strategic aim as there are already tourists visiting every municipality (A. Härkönen, Visit Karelia, personal communication, November 13, 2023).

Pillar Four: Local Strategic Approaches

Our kick-off webinar, survey and workshop for the local tourism stakeholders resulted in consideration of strong leadership from the local DMOs to be important, as well as recognition of local communities as relevant and active partners in inclusive local tourism planning which feeds into broader strategic decision-making. Communities should have opportunities to engage in proactive planning rather than reactively responding to problems (Macaulay et al., 2022). This pillar implies an ethic of care (see Höckert et al., 2021) that fosters inclusion, participation, recognition and procedural justice (see Buzinde & Caterina-Knorr, 2022; Rastegar et al., 2021).

Of the reviewed tourism strategies, the Scottish document is the most community-centred (see Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2019), acknowledging that engaging with local communities is a vitally important step in destination development, ensuring that local needs

are understood and accounted for in decision-making. In the other tourism strategies examined, community needs, interests and well-being play only a minor role or no role at all in tourism planning and decision-making, following neoliberal utilitarian ethics where tourist and business needs are prioritised (see Guia, 2021). The same ethics dominate the reviewed tourism strategies in many other respects as well.

Conclusions

There is a growing school of thought that suggests that focus should be shifted away from visitor growth (see Cave & Dredge, 2020; Dwyer, 2023; Pollock, 2019), and the global tourism system reoriented towards sustainability (Gössling et al., 2020). We argue that transition from market-driven to community-centred (Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2019), just and participatory tourism planning and development should be one such change. Combining the values and perspectives of local communities with stakeholders in the tourism sector is a central tenet of sustainable tourism (UNWTO & UNEP, 2005) but, as our analysis shows, it is still far from happening everywhere (see also Collins-Kreiner & Ram, 2020).

All the tourism strategies reviewed aim at growth which is principally justified by economic reasons. At the same time, there are not enough local employees for tourism jobs, as well as housing issues undermining the viability of the sector in fragile peripheral areas. Clearly there is also a real focus on economic survival among many small businesses as they continue to navigate recovery from COVID-19, exacerbated by inflationary issues caused by the war in Ukraine, that has to be recognised alongside the development of more ethical practices. Yet there are structural issues that need to be considered and addressed. Should the workforce be attracted from elsewhere or should tourism numbers relate to the number of local employees? Should tourists pay more to enable the payment of higher wages? These are ethical questions related to justice that demand further research.

The purpose of this research note was to contribute to the debate on how a more ethical tourism sector can be instigated post-COVID. Through interrogation of regional tourism strategies and kick-off webinar, survey and workshop with stakeholders a number of key themes started to emerge which formed the basis of the four strategic pillars presented. The limitations of this approach are acknowledged; this research was undertaken in the knowledge that it would hopefully start to precipitate discussion and contribute to the debate rather than presenting comprehensive empirical findings.

More research is needed on post-COVID tourism recovery, not least in terms of ascertaining if and how the pandemic has altered views on the changing tourism industry at a strategic level, as well as how ethics can, and should, play a more central role in both tourism policy-making and research. While the views of many of the stakeholders engaged with were commensurate with the moral aims of the research it is notable that most of the tourism strategies interrogated reveal a sizeable lacuna between traditional economic imperatives and more contemporary ethical considerations.

Ethics should form an integral part of tourism strategy making. Crucial in this is developing a better understanding of the balance to be found between the needs of tourists and

those of local communities and the planet. Only through this understanding will be recognised the just and ethical tourism future that forms the idealised reality of many scholars, visitors and local community members alike.

Acknowledgements

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