



# Towards culturally sensitive tourism: The educational role of the Sámi tourism guidelines

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## Abstract

The tourism industry's growth has resulted in unethical impacts on the local communities which prompted the implementation of controls such as policies, codes of conduct, and indigenous tourism guidelines to maintain ethical standards. While policies and codes have been widely studied, research on indigenous tourism guidelines is limited. The master's thesis, which this text is based on, aimed to understand how the principles for responsible and ethically sustainable Sámi tourism are recognized and implemented and to explore their role in enhancing cultural sensitivity. The conceptual framework was guided by Viken et al.'s (2021) study on cultural sensitivity, which considers sensitive behaviors as guided by respect, recognition, and reciprocity. The main findings suggested that tourism actors in Finnish Sápmi actively engage in promoting cultural sensitivity towards the Sámi people and show awareness and implementation of the Sámi tourism guidelines. Additionally, cultural education was identified as an opportunity to enhance cultural sensitivity. Indeed, the study participants emphasized the educational role that the Sámi tourism guidelines have played in their work since implementation.

*Keywords: Sámi tourism, Sámi tourism guidelines, cultural sensitivity, cultural education*

## Tourism in Sápmi and the Sámi tourism guidelines

Tourism has grown to be an important industry in the Nordic Arctic, and the influx of tourists has brought numerous benefits to Sámi communities, including job creation, a strengthened sense of cultural identity, and an enhanced awareness among tourists and tourism professionals about Sámi people and cultures (Olsen et al., 2019). However, Whitford and Ruhanen (2016, p. 1082) tell us that "tourism can be a double-edged sword". Therefore, despite the positive impacts, tourism has also brought negative consequences for Sámi communities such as disruption of lifestyle, racism, exploitation and misrepresentation of culture, cultural and land appropriation, and destruction of habitats (Smith, 2003; Zoomers, 2010). Although the commodification of Sámi cultures is decreasing (Kugapi et

al., 2020), this process is not occurring rapidly enough, and unethical transgressions persist (Gardiner, 2021; Quinn, 2020).

In response to these ongoing issues, the Sámi Parliament created the “Principles for Responsible and Ethically Sustainable Sámi Tourism” in 2018. The primary objectives of these tourism guidelines are to prevent the appropriation of Sámi cultures, correct misinformation about the Sámi, protect Sámi people and communities from negative impacts of tourism, and preserve Sámi cultural heritage (Sámi Parliament, 2018). The guidelines target Sámi and non-Sámi tourism actors, the Finnish government, and visitors to the Sámi Homeland (Sámi Parliament, 2018). This wide range of target groups underscores the recognition that the entire tourism industry needs to adopt a more respectful and ethical approach. The guidelines are made of seven principles, each addressing different aspects such as preserving cultural heritage, fostering cooperation among stakeholders, improving tourism marketing, and ensuring respect for Sámi cultural heritage. The principles can be observed in Figure 1.



Figure 1. Principles for responsible and ethically sustainable Sámi tourism (Source: Sámi Parliament, 2018)

As tourism gains more popularity in Finnish Sápmi, it is important to understand how the Sámi tourism guidelines seek to help the tourism industry to move away from historical patterns of stereotyping, appropriation, and assimilation and go towards more culturally sensitive tourism. In my master’s thesis (Plesa, 2024) I explored the role Sámi tourism guidelines play in the enhancement of cultural sensitivity by interviewing three tourism actors and analysing eight tourism actors’ websites. While the guidelines have a multitude of target groups, I chose to focus on non-Sámi tourism actors such as destination management

organisations (DMOs), municipalities, safari companies, reindeer farms, and accommodation providers from Finnish Lapland.

### What is cultural sensitivity and why do we need it?

“Tourism is often blamed for being culturally insensitive and ignorant”, states Viken (2022, p. 1). The Sámi cultures have long been exoticized in tourism and portrayed as primitive or outdated (de Bernardi, 2022). This exoticization and stereotypical marketing have led to several negative impacts: non-Sámi tourism workers wearing traditional Sámi clothing and disturbances in reindeer herding areas (Kugapi et al., 2020), “souvenirization of Sámi culture” (Viken, 2022), objectification of Sámi people (Quinn, 2020), the fabrication of rituals and traditions, like the “Lapland baptism” (Gardiner, 2021). Therefore, promoting cultural sensitivity in Finnish tourism is crucial for preserving, recognizing, and respecting Sámi people and cultures.

Cultural sensitivity is a relatively new concept in tourism which gained attention in recent years, particularly through projects like ARCTISEN, an international initiative from 2018 to 2021 aimed at increasing knowledge about culturally sensitive tourism development (Olsen et al., 2019). My study adopts Viken, Höckert, and Grimwood’s (2021) framework for cultural sensitivity, which is characterized by three behaviours: respect, recognition, and reciprocity. According to them, insensitive behaviors can be transformed into sensitive ones by showcasing those key behaviors in interactions with others (Viken et al., 2021).

While reviewing previous research on cultural sensitivity, I questioned whether sensitivity can be taught or shaped through tourism guidelines. The opinion on the matter is divided. However, Viken et al. (2021) believe that implementing guidelines can enhance the recognition of cultural traditions. They also noted that the Sámi tourism guidelines strengthen mutual understanding and respect, which are paramount to culturally sensitive tourism.

### The need for education on cultural issues

Donohoe (2011) noted that education and training, though sometimes barriers to cultural sensitivity, also offer significant opportunities. She highlighted that a lack of communication is a major impediment that can be overcome by investing in staff training and education. My study participants similarly emphasized the necessity of cultural education to increase responsibility in tourism, emphasizing such need for both the tourism industry and tourists visiting the Sámi Homeland. Previous research has also stressed the importance of cultural knowledge, with participants from Kugapi et al.’s (2020) study suggesting the creation of courses for tourism workers to enhance their cultural understanding. In response to these educational needs, the ARCTISEN project co-created two free courses designed to improve culturally sensitive tourism.

Interviews for my master’s thesis revealed that tourism professionals from Lapland, especially from Sápmi, believe educating local and foreign tourism operators is the key to

fostering cultural sensitivity. This is particularly important for foreign and seasonal workers, who often lack essential knowledge about Sámi people and cultures. Without accurate information, these workers may unknowingly spread misinformation. While they do not need to have all the knowledge about the Sámi, they should at least know where to find the correct information.

Tourists themselves would also benefit from education on Sámi-related issues to enhance cultural sensitivity. Study participants highlighted the importance of effectively communicating desired behaviors to tourists to foster more culturally sensitive interactions. Effective communication is also critical for the successful implementation of the Sámi tourism guidelines, as their impact depends on positively conveying their message. Enhancing cultural sensitivity among all stakeholders can lead to a more respectful and informed tourism experience, benefiting both Sámi communities and tourists.

### Tourism guidelines as educational tools

It is clear the participants see a need for improved cultural education among tourism workers to enhance cultural sensitivity. Throughout the interviews, participants discussed the various roles the Sámi tourism guidelines have played in their work, particularly the guidelines' utility in self-education and educating tourists on Sámi related issues.

Firstly, the guidelines have helped tourism actors in Sápmi to improve their understanding of Sámi culture. They now know where to find accurate information and how to share it correctly in their marketing of the Sámi Homeland. Additionally, the participants use the guidelines to educate tour operators operating in Finland or promoting Finland, ensuring they convey an authentic image of Sámi people and cultures.

Secondly, the Sámi tourism guidelines helped tourism actors educate tourists about respectful ways to visit the Sámi Homeland and communicate desired behaviours. Participants mentioned using digital tools like social media to raise tourists' cultural awareness. However, they stressed that tourists do not respond well to being lectured or told what not to do. Therefore, instead of giving tourists a list of "How NOT to..." or fill the destination with "Do not..." signs, my study participants suggested that the tourism industry should offer recommendations on "How TO" support local cultures and guide tourists to ethical options.

Overall, using the Sámi tourism guidelines as educational tools has allowed tourism actors in Finnish Sápmi to improve their marketing of the Sámi Homeland and their communication with tourism stakeholders and tourists. This approach helps to reduce misinformation and stereotypes about Sámi people and cultures, moving the tourism industry closer to achieving this goal. Educated tourists are more likely to have respectful visits, avoiding unethical behaviour and clashes between hosts and guests. Lastly, a well-informed tourist will not expect a Disney-like experience when visiting the Sámi Homeland, but rather know how to appreciate the vibrant, dynamic, and modern Sámi cultures.

To ensure the long-term durability and continuous implementation of the Sámi tourism guidelines, several strategies could be adopted. Increasing the visibility of the guide-

lines is crucial, not only among tourism actors in Finland but also among tourists. Placing the guidelines in bar lobbies, hotel rooms, and cabins can help achieve this, although the document being 20 pages long may discourage tourists from reading it. Therefore, enhancing the accessibility of the guidelines through visual representations, such as the existing illustrations by Sámi comic artist Sunna Kittu, is essential. Efforts should be made to better disseminate these visual tools, ensuring that they are widely recognized and utilized by tourism actors in Finland. Furthermore, integrating the guidelines into certification systems, as seen with the Sustainable Travel Finland program, can significantly boost their visibility and encourage their adoption. By including the guidelines within such frameworks, the tourism industry can be motivated to uphold these standards, thereby promoting sustainable and respectful Sámi tourism practices in the long run.

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