



# Tourism stakeholders attitudes toward sustainable development: A case in the Arctic

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## ABSTRACT

This research attempts to explore tourism stakeholders' attitudes toward the practices of sustainability in Arctic destinations that have been regarded as sacred and pristine places that are susceptible to the influx of tourists. A mixed-method approach involving qualitative and quantitative studies is deployed in the Scandinavian Arctic region to facilitate data collection on three groups of tourism stakeholders: residents, tourists, and tourism operators. From the qualitative study, stakeholder attitudes toward environmental protection and cultural preservation emerge as the exogenous variable influencing the practices of sustainability. A host of questionnaire surveys is conducted at various Arctic destinations and results in 593 questionnaires are used for further data analyses. This research finds that among the three groups of stakeholders studied, tourists exhibit the strongest interest in sustainable tourism development in the Arctic region. Further, path analyses demonstrate that a positive attitude toward cultural preservation is considered as the driving force in promoting sustainable operations in Arctic destinations. A positive attitude toward environmental protection also prompts the stakeholders to consider setting a limit for tourism development in the Arctic.

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## 1. Introduction

Significant to human history in regards to conquering the challenges posed by extreme natural environments, mankind has permanently and comfortably settled in small parts of the Arctic. In the Arctic, human movement originally resulted from harsh conditions of survival for living, such as hunting, fishing, and mining, and has in modern times transcended basic life sustenance to leisure pursuits such as recreational fishing, skiing, and sightseeing (Hall and Johnston, 1995). In the imagination of tourists, the Arctic regions are often viewed as exotic locations furnishing monumental nature settings, such as breathtaking scenic views, unusual climatic conditions, and singularly dramatic geographic formations. Furthermore, the indigenous culture and the traces of human movement over time have also been brought to the awareness of Arctic adventurers.

Indeed, the Arctic has been viewed as being on the edge of the world, both geographically and culturally (Viken, 1993). Yet the boundary of the Arctic is still unclear (Mason, 1997; Mason et al., 2000) since different measures (e.g., tree-line and latitude) are used to delineate the region (Mason, 1997). Politically, an inter-governmental forum – The Arctic Council – recognizes eight Arctic

states, including the United States, Canada, Denmark, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia. And while Iceland is below the Arctic Circle, it has successfully marketed itself as an Arctic destination for years. This suggests that tourists may identify Arctic destinations as locations adjacent to or above the Arctic Circle. Above all, the Arctic-related characteristics such as extreme weather, unique geological formations, and exotic natural phenomena (notably, the midnight sun and northern lights) have attracted tourists to the area to enjoy a so-called Arctic experience regardless of whether those destinations are situated on, above, or close to the Arctic Circle.

Owing to the spectacular landscape in the Arctic, the tourist movement in the area is largely related to nature-based (Mason et al., 2000) leisure activities, including hiking, hunting, fishing, sea excursion (e.g., whale safari and bird-watching), and snow-related sport (Førland et al., 2012; Mason et al., 2000; Stewart et al., 2007). Experiencing the indigenous culture is also an important itinerary for Arctic tourists (Mason, 1997; Notzke, 1999). Mason (1997) found that the number of tourists in the Arctic region has risen, parallel to the increase in disposable income, leisure time, and the improvement of transportation. He further identified six of the most popular Arctic locations around the world: (1) Northwestern Scandinavia, (2) Yukon, Canada, (3) Northwest Territories Canada, (4) Iceland, (5) Greenland, Denmark, and (6) Alaska, USA. Northern Scandinavia receives the most visitors followed by Yukon, Canada, and Iceland.

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Tourism literature probing contemporary issues arising in the Arctic are limited. Relevant studies have been framed in various fashions, including trivial or superficial discussions (Kaltenborn, 2000), conceptual frameworks (Hall and Saarinen, 2010), and empirical undertakings of an exploratory nature (Nellemann et al., 2000). At the early stage of Arctic tourism research, scientific studies centered on development issues. To avoid mass arrivals to the Arctic, Anderson (1991) advocated alternative tourism as a strategy for developing peripheral tourist destinations, described as small-scale, locally-controlled tourism development. This small-scale, limited-growth ideology in the context of tourism has been discussed for several decades in responding to the negative impacts generated by tourism development in the area. Moreover, touching on the ideal form of operations in the Arctic, Jacobsen (1997) researched the chance of the North Cape – mainland Europe's northernmost point – surviving as a tourist destination by using the MacCannell's (1976) sociological theory on five-stage sight sacralization that describes five developmental phases of a tourist destination. He concluded that further "enshrinement" as a cherished locale could transform the North Cape to a perpetual destination of travel. Most recently, however, there has been much discussion on the climate change of global warming, which threatens tourism development in the Arctic (Denstadli et al., 2011; Førland et al., 2012). These studies emphasize, for instance, that the weather conditions might create serious impacts on tourists' overall experience and intention to revisit the destination.

In light of the pristine, unsoiled nature of traditional Arctic destinations, vigilant tourists are interested in a stewardship of preserving the nature, wildlife, and indigenous culture. The development of sustainability practices is therefore a vital issue for these tourists. In recent years, sustainable management has indeed emerged as an integral component of research in dealing with tourism flow in the Arctic (Newton et al., 2002). But scientific investigation on the sustainability of tourism development in the Arctic region still remains in an embryonic stage.

## 2. Sustainability in tourism development

Overall sustainability is not a foreign concept to tourism researchers or professionals. In response to the movement toward conservation in relation to social justice concerns, tourism academics and practitioners have furnished a variety of propositions on the prevailing challenges to sustainable development and have paved a successful path for such sustainability in tourism operations. Sustainability has in fact become a practical concept that is deemed beneficial to the progress of tourism development. Recent studies (Chiu et al., 2014; Dolnicar et al., 2010; Dolnicar and Leisch, 2007; Mihalič, 2013; Weaver, 2013) have shown that performing environmentally friendly operations allows a tourism entity to build its image as an operation that cares about the living environment of human beings, a view that could broaden its current consumer base.

The natural environment has long been utilized as a resource for tourism development (Maher, 2012). Particularly, tourists are attracted by breathtaking landscapes in protected areas such as the glaciers in the Arctic. Unfortunately, these tourists may not be aware that they could easily create damage in the environment they visit. Miller et al. (2009) in their study of public understanding of sustainability reported the unwillingness of tourists to change their behavior toward the environment, which includes walking, driving, and camping in sensitive environments, wherein nature takes a great deal of time to recover from such damage. If the degradation issue at the destination is out of control due to the mischief, neglect, or ignorance of tourists, the number of visitors will be eventually reduced. It is therefore imperative to

develop and enforce appropriate practices in accordance to sustainability concepts before the mass arrival of tourists in protected areas causes further disruption of nature.

A considerable amount of research has advocated pragmatic frameworks for sustainable tourism. But the inconsistency in defining the concept of sustainability has also been documented (Johnston and Tyrrell, 2005; Ko, 2005). Although various certification programs in the tourism industry have been introduced, consumers have been confused about such practices (Font, 2001; Font and Harris, 2004). In light of a lack of universal sustainability standards and criteria acceptable to stakeholders of tourism, a so-called green-wash (Font, 2001; Sloan et al., 2012) practice has developed, which denotes a marketing gimmick suggesting concern for the environment to boost the sales of tourism without implementing any sustainability concepts. As a result, mainstream researchers have been prompted to stress the significance of the ethics (Holden, 2009) and the code of conduct (Twynam and Johnston, 2002) in implementing sustainable policies and actions. Above all, there is a sense of urgency in constructing a sustainable model of operations that are widely agreed upon by the stakeholders of tourism. In other words, grasping collective viewpoints on sustainability from the stakeholders now seems to be an urgent agenda in tourism research.

At early stages of studies on sustainable tourism, the emphasis was on the attitudes of local residents (Burns and Sancho, 2003). Recently, tourism scholars (e.g., Imran et al., 2014; Waligo et al., 2013) have backed an integrated plan to construct the network and partnership that entails all stakeholders of tourism in development of sustainable tourism. In addition, Ballantyne et al. (2009) expounded that the enlistment of tourists as a conservation partner is critical for the progress of sustainable management. Moreover, Vernon et al. (2005) presented a collaborative approach in making sustainable policies, involving residents, governments, and tourism businesses. Buckley (2012) argued that regulation is the main driver for improvement in sustainable management. Indeed, as Yasarata et al. (2010) have expressed, political maneuvering is the key to advancing the concept of sustainability. As the opinions of politicians are highly influenced by the public and business interests, local residents and businesses could be important actors in the development of sustainable tourism. In sum, tourist, local residents, and businesses along with the government constitute an integrated decision-making network for sustainable development.

### 2.1. Purpose of study

Due to the paucity of literature that investigates sustainable operations in Arctic destinations, where the natural environment and human society are highly vulnerable to the influx of mass tourism, this study addresses the shortcomings of current sustainable tourism efforts. It examines stakeholder attitudes towards sustainable practices that involve three parties, that of tourism businesses, local residents, and tourists in Arctic destinations. Specifically, two research objectives are examined. First, what are the important agendas in relation to sustainable management in the Arctic from the perspectives of tourists, tourism operators, and residents? And second, how do those agendas affect the attitude of tourists, tourism operators, and residents toward implementation of sustainable practices?

As the current literature (Ballantyne et al., 2009) has suggested, building an integrated, collaborative network that embeds the voices from all groups of tourism stakeholders is imperative in the implementation of sustainability concepts for tourism development. The resulting data from the study may help shed light on both opinion accords and variances of the stakeholders toward sustainability in response to tourism development in Arctic

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