INGO project

WP 3: Tourism

1st biannual report

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1. Report Summary

This report outlines a general overview of the progress done so far by our work group. This is done by:

- roughly summing up the main points highlighted in a literature review conducted over the topics of Nature-based tourism and Forest-based tourism
- describing the current research in progress and the expected outcomes
- drafting the research directions planned for the immediate future

Conducting a literature review over the topic of Tourism in forests and forest tourism experiences constituted a major part of the job done so far, and allowed to visualize the state of the research done within Fennoscandia, strength and weaknesses of the sector, recent trends within Nature-based and Forest-based tourism, and finally important research gaps. Consequently, the points highlighted in the literature reviews constitute the largest part of this report. Different areas around the general question of what constitute a forest-based experience were detected, subsequently, in which to do further research, basing on trends, gaps and relevance for the project stakeholders.

The current research in progress, focused on place valuation and value co-creation on Instagram, aims at addressing on how the forest landscape is valued in nature-based and forest-based tourism experiences, and the role of UGC on Instagram in the overall experience value creation. The kind of qualitative knowledge produced by this research is argued, on one hand, to expand the existing survey-based knowledge on aesthetical preferences, and, on the other, to introduce a solid methodological reference for small and micro firms interested in getting in-depth knowledge about the salience of the tourist experience from tourists' point of view.

Research planned for the immediate future will be focused, on the other hand, on an intensive field work to be conducted at Fulufjället National park in the summer, and will likely revolve around experience value creation on-site, place attachment, and the relationship between forest-based tourism experiences and Internet connectivity.

2. Literature review

2.1. Nature-based tourism in Fennoscandia: context, strengths and challenges

Nature remains a major element for tourism development, and nature-based tourism (NBT) is perceived as one of the most rapidly expanding sector within tourism, in Northern Europe and elsewhere (Elmahdy et al. 2017, Fredman & Tyrväinen 2010). Accordingly, an increasing numbers of destinations are investing in nature-based tourism as a tool for regional development and socio-economic progress (Olafsdottir 2013, Fredman & Margaryan 2017a, 2017b).

In Fennoscandia, from the 1970s onwards, a focus on aesthetic and conservation aspects of forest ecosystems substituted the main paradigm of a forest as a sole locus of wood production. Consequently, the inclination and profitability to organize Outdoor Recreation (OR) and Nature-Based Tourism (NBT) in forests within and outside protected areas has been widely recognized by research (Bell et al 2010, Fredman & Margaryan 2017a, 2017b, Elmahdy et al. 2017, Fredman & Tyrväinen 2010).

Countries located in Fennoscandia feature a low density of population, which pairs up with one of the richest provision in Europe of forests and natural amenities ((Bell et al 2010). In Sweden, for instance, around 90% of the population lives in the urban and coastal areas of Svealand and Götaland, whereas much of the vast Norrland and the countryside areas, covered of boreal forests, lakes and mountains, are sparsely populated (Fredman & Margaryan 2017b). These two factors plays an obvious role in facilitating NBT and OR: for instance, the area of Norrland, which is the least populated in Sweden, shows the highest concentration in the country of tourism companies and activities focused on the predominant natural amenities of the area: forests, as well as mountains, lakes/rivers and glaciers (Fredman & Margaryan 2017b).

An associated competitive advantage, in relation to several cases of forest management worldwide, is that conflicts related with the use of forests have been noticeably low (Bell et al 2010), despite the forests in the area have been historically characterized by the development of forestry and other extractive industries (Ibid, Fredman & Margaryan 2017b). The abundance of pristine land and the scattered population play an important role in mitigating land use conflicts, and are generally synergic with the laws, common across (and specific of) Fennoscandia, which grants the right of public access to most of the natural areas (Sandell & Fredman 2010). Together, freedom of access and scattered population contribute in tackling another main challenge faced by Forest recreation and tourism worldwide, besides the land use conflicts: the one of overcrowding (Font & Tribe 2000, Bakhtiari et al 2014). Even though the public access does not generally generate clashes between different forest uses and activities across the country (Sandell & Fredman 2010), it is also true that such clashes are more difficult to detect and manage, given their unusual nature (Bell et al 2010).

On the other hand, the increasing unemployment and population in many rural areas will likely raise the conflicts between the emerging demands of tourism development, the analogously emergent development of bio-energy production, and the traditional extractive activities (Bell et al 2010, Fredman & Tyrväinen 2010, Elmahdy et al. 2017). Place-specific challenges are added to the list of the ones commonly found across the industry, which range from product seasonality to the particular sensitivity of nature-based activities to the effects of climate change (Ibid, Bell et al 2010, Elmahdy et al. 2017), which of course dramatically affect the supply of nature-based activites.

A perhaps less direct, yet similarly critical challenge for the development of Forest-based tourism in Fennoscandia comes from the scant state of the literature over the area, which normally should inform practitioners, public bodies, as well as capacity building and policy making (Fredman et al. 2012, Elmahdy et al. 2017). In his paramount work over the general NBT in Sweden, Peter Fredman argued knowledge gaps to range from innovation processes, constrains and networking within NBT business (Fredman & Tyrväinen 2010), to qualitative assessments of the NBT service- and experience-scape, both from the producers and the consumer's prospective (Fredman et al. 2012, Gundersen & Frivold 2008). It is therefore important to further research these areas, in order to build a theoretical knowledge able to achieve an informed growth of the sector, and to make the industry able to meet the latest trends and achieve competitiveness.

2.2. A rough state of art

One of the first things that can be detected in the literature around forest-based tourism experiences is a general fragmentation and a lack of systematic conceptualizations, as the theme of forest-based tourism experiences remains split, on one hand, in the academic realm of general Nature-Based Tourism, and on the other in the one of Forest Leisure and Recreation.

Much of the literature related with the latter explores the environmental management of forests and forests in National parks, and often discern between the categories of conservation, forestry and recreation, in which the word "tourism" is either not mentioned (Abildtrup et al. 2013) or considered as included in a general "recreation" (Font & Tribe 2000, Rossi et a. 2015). On the other hand, in the literature realm of Nature-based Tourism, It has been underlined the necessity of discerning the two concepts into a distinct Nature-Based Tourism and Outdoor Recreation, as in several instances it is convenient to consider the ´nature tourist' different than the 'outdoor recreationist' (Fredman & Tyrväinen 2010, Fredman & Margaryan 2017a): yet, in this regard, multiple and conflictual definition attempts exist, which affect research systematicness.

Even though in the NBT literature it is generally possible to detect a distinct concept of "Tourism", the same cannot be said for the concept of "Forest-based Tourism", as studies in this field tend to look at forests as natural features of a general NBT experience. As a result, it is very complicate to discern field studies made on Nature-based experiences from tourism experiences specifically related with forests.

A significant part of the literature related with leisure and tourism activities in forests is about visitors' aesthetical preferences. Gundersen & Frivold (2008) reviewed most of the surveys done over forest visitors' aesthetical preferences in Fennoscandia between 1972 and 2006, and noted that, other than making use of a limited set of points of view (mainly psychological-cognitive and professional) most of these surveys appear to share the assumption is that "scenic forest landscapes" can be designed rather

easily, given the right conditions. Indeed, comprehensive guidelines of this kind for forest aesthetical design, that address visitor satisfaction from this point of view, exist nowadays (e.g. Bell et al. 2007, Pröbstl et al. 2010), even though often difficult to apply to a context of public access rights.

Yet, other measures in forest management, and related with the tourism experience, remain under-researched and important to investigate (Ibid, Li et al. 2010, Lee et al 2004). Most importantly, the authors note that more than being just visually amiable, forest landscapes are diverse and can be repositories of unique "history, rituals, cultural and spiritual meanings, social and personal identities, and emotional memories; values that are not measured directly in quantitative surveys of forest preferences" (Gundersen & Frivold 2008:254): surveys alone cannot fully capture, for instance, people's values and place attachment related with a forest landscape. Therefore, more focus should be put on qualitative, place-related research in the future, including methods like in-depth interviews, and focus-groups (Ibid). Finally, partially reflecting the above mentioned lack of distinct categorizations of NBT and OR under the general labels of "recreation", the authors recognize that attitudes of groups different than adult native speakers, like children, teenagers, immigrants and foreign tourists, are rarely considered worthy of distinction, and should be more conceptually distinguished in further research.

On the other hand, we also need more research on how experience staging and interpretive tools affect visitor satisfaction and value, and how is this in turn reflected in the general Forest-based tourism experience (Lee et al. 2004, Li et al. 2010, Williams 2006, Vespestad & Lindberg 2010). Particularly, as it will be addressed below, new technological developments affect contemporary trends in Nature-based tourism, in a way that makes mandatory to address the role that digital technologies (e.g. mobile-based application, social media) play in the tourist experience.

2.3. Relevant trends in Nature-based tourism experiences

During the course of the last years, there has been a noticeable tendency towards creating, staging and 'selling experiences' to consumers. This has been characterized as a post-fordist tourism trend, also known as the 'new tourism' (Prats 2011; Urry 1990; Majdoub 2011): the starting assumption is that tourists, nowadays, require a new type of tourist product, given a higher level of environmental and cultural awareness, and seek experiences focused on knowledge, discovery, relaxation and enjoyment (UNWTO 2015, Elmahdy et al. 2017). Most importantly, the new tourist is "place specific" and "experience specific" (Ashworth and Tunbridge 2005: 46), in the sense that the distinctive narrative advantage of a "unique value proposition", able to attract the 'new tourist', is based on the specific resources and characteristics of the region, which should create the right circumstances to have a "unique experience" (Marzo-Navarro and Pedraja-Iglesias 2010). This resulted into the idea that functional features of goods and services are not sufficient anymore in order to achieve differentiation: tourists seek the different, the authentic, the unusual, now more than ever.

NATURE WALK
Talking Trees -Indigenous Walking Tour
198 kr DKK per person
★★★★★ 21

Contemporary research in NBT trends confirmed the tourist´s seek for authentic, unique, personalized and sensational experiences as a major trend in tourist behaviour (Elmahdy et al. 2017). A profound and immersive NBT experience is, in the eye of the tourist, a mean to achieve strong sensations, personal growth, identity building and environmental awareness (Ibid). At the same time, given the destinations' "differentiation race", place-specific compositions of nature and heritage are emerging.

In the meantime, such experiences are also becoming progressively mediated by ICTs and mobile technologies, and co-created by increasingly empowered customers, who make use of an array of C2C content and User-generated content as integral part of their tourism experience (Ibid, Prahalad & Ramaswamy 2004, Binkhorst & Dekker 2009, Neuhofer et al. 2012, Helkkula et al. 2012). This general trend is valid when it comes to Nature-based tourism and, in a similar way to other markets and industries, is profoundly affecting the way in which tourism businesses look at tourism branding, marketing and experience management. The tourist is engaged in bottom-up communications with the producers, is encouraged to produce his/her own salience according to his/her personal lifeworld and values, and to act through e-WoM as co-producer and brand evangelist.

The technology mediation is important even in a specular sense. Recently, Dickinson (2016) studied the use of digital medias in a natural setting (camping tourism) and detected that, while roughly half of the surveyed tourists make use of social media and smartphones during the camping experience as part of a general digital engagement (Ibid), others consider the necessity *not to use them* as a critical aspect of the same experience, and related with the desire to disconnect, in order to experience "digital detox", "escape", and "getaway" (Ibid). Buckley et al. (2015) and Dickinson (2016) found that many people want to experience natural environments because of their willingness to "disconnect" from an invasive hyper-connection experienced during the daily life: a NBT experience, therefore, becomes an escapist experience made of hiking, yoga and bird-watching, in which participants are supposed to leave their mobile technologies behind (Ibid).

Especially in relation with natural areas, the authors underline how research on the topic could shred light over the convenience of limiting mobile device use at the destination level, as opposed to implement and develop it (Neuhofer et al. 2012). This is an aspect that need to be further investigated when developing forest-based tourism experiences: while some tourists might expect a digital infrastructure at the destination level which would facilitate their digital engagement, some others would find it "intrusive" and perceive their experience negatively affected by it.

2.4. What "Nature" is sought in Nature-based tourism experiences

Vespestand & Lindberg (2010) reviewed much of the studies produced on Nature-based tourism experiences until 2010, and grouped them according to what the tourists seek, how they perceive nature phenomenological-wise and the value it is given to it, and the related roles of the presenters. According to the authors, within the context of Nature as "the main reason why the tourism consumption takes place", the former is sought by tourists as a way for experiencing *the genuine*, *entertainment*, a *state of being* or reiterating the bond with a peculiar *socio-cultural community* of value.

WELLNESS CLASS
Forest Therapy Walk
193 kr DKK per person
★★★★★ 14

WORKSHOP
Forest Foods Forager
222 kr DKK per person
★★★★★ 9

In the first case, nature is the very core of the whole experience, a setting in which the Real, the Authentic, as 'holy' idealistic and meaningful constructs, are sought, and whose experience bring salience and value. Often in this case, Nature is in opposition to an urban daily life that tourists attempt to leave behind. Instead, in the other cases, Nature is more a setting than a goal, this being specific sensations and activities that happen to be experienced in Natural settings. Tourists engage in extreme and low-paced sports, in order to experience specific sensations, to be entertained or feel satisfaction when reaching a determined (often difficult) achievement, such as encountering wildlife. Alternatively, the engagement in these sensation-driven activities set in Nature is seen as a second setting that bring tourists to feel part of specific communities, e.g. hikers, skiers, rafters, and so on.

SANCTUARY VISIT
Wolf Encounter
1,108 kr DKK per person
★★★★★ 745

Other authors expand on the role of Nature in Nature-based experiences by distinguishing experiences *dependent* on natural setting, e.g. rafting, *enhanced* by natural setting, e.g. camping, or in which Nature has a *subordinate* role, e.g. outdoor spas (Fredman et al. 2012).

In general, what emerges from the literature is that, according to the specific role that Nature has in a given Nature-based experience, different services, experiential presentation (e.g. interpretive tools) and different roles of mediators (e.g. guides) should correspond from the supply side. For instance, guiding and staging should greatly influence the experience outcome for Nature-based experiences focused on entertainment, but should be instead very unobtrusive when Nature as a depository of "genuineness" and "authenticity" is the core of the experience. On the other hand, this connection remains still largely unexplored.

3. Present focus: Value creation and place valuation in forest-based tourism on social media

As the main points delineated above from the literature emerged, It became clear that two important points of departure for future research were the ones of place experience, valuation and experience value in the context of forest-based tourism, as well as the role that digital technologies play, nowadays, in the overall tourist experience value creation. Questions that arose during the literature review, and that remained largely unanswered were: What do tourists value in forest-based experiences? What do they find meaningful? And how is value created across the experience spectrum? What is the role of digital technologies in contemporary value creation?

Value has been given many labels, and investigated sing related quantitative scales, such as the Theory of Reasoned Action, in an attempt to simplify and generalize the mechanisms of its creation. Yet, Helkkula, Kellher and Philström noted that a specific and complex experience value is derived from the tourist's subjective sense making of a phenomenon (2012): in agreement with the authors' concerns regarding the limits of traditional measurement tools to grasp the complexity of experience value creation, we made our research aim to study the creation of experience value as it emerges from tourists' individual narratives and, therefore, using mainly qualitative and inductive research techniques.

Therefore, we set out to study the aforementioned areas in the context of Instagram. Instagram was chosen because of the richness of information it can provide, given the aims, and because of the easiness to access such information in a time, the beginning of 2018, in which seasonality was an issue in terms of field data collection. Other relevant reasons are explained in the paragraph below. Data is being collected, at the present time, after a specifically tailored literature review.

A combination of different types of qualitative data is being collected and analysed through a participatory netnography on Instagram, and encompassing pictures, hashtags, captions and, finally, online interviews through the Instagram instant-messaging feature "Direct". After selecting an initial sample of participants, data collection and data analysis will proceed simultaneously, by the means of grounded theory. Therefore, themes and patterns emerging from data will be repeatedly challenged and refined by new data, with the aim of identifying, upon saturation, recurring concepts from the data. Such kind of research strategy is advocated, as experience value creation and valuation need to be further
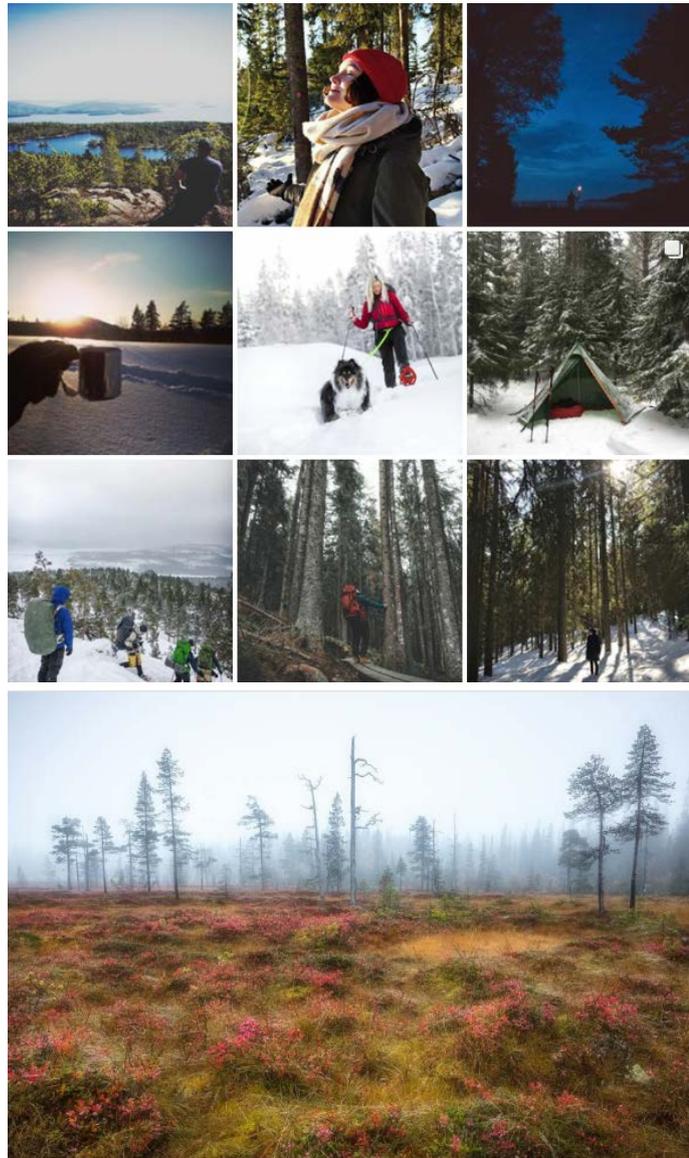
assessed through innovative forms of in-depth and inductive research methods, which adopts the phenomenon of reference as the starting point.

Preliminary results emerging from participants' experiential narratives, so far, confirm ongoing processes of valuation of "Nature" as a meaningful place during the tourist experience, which fully account for the complexity of each participant's lifeworld, and that go beyond the customer/producer and the tourism/ everyday life dualisms traditionally seen in the literature.

3.1. Importance of the focus

Other than being interesting academically-wise, the results acquired constitute important knowledge about what tourists value in forest-based experiences, both in terms of tangible and intangible aspects. This kind of knowledge, rather difficult to obtain adopting traditional survey techniques, is very important for the supply side to understand what constitute a resource in terms of forest-based tourism, beyond scenic elements and visual planning.

Additionally, other than constituting knowledge about what tourists value, and how do they value places in forest-based tourism, the outcomes contribute also in shredding light over UGC and experience co-creation on Instagram, therefore helping in tuning social media strategies for the second most important social media worldwide, whose critical importance for tourism is being increasingly acknowledged. According to recent statistics, Instagram resulted the preferred social network for 48% of people who want to choose the destinations to visit. 35% of them use Instagram to get inspired and discover new places. In 2015, the tourism board of the small town of Wanaka, New Zealand, began inviting and hosting "influencers"—social media trendsetters with large followings—to post about their adventures. The result was the fastest tourism growth in the country: a 14 percent increase.

Finally, the methodology implemented in this study is highly cost/effective, given the results it provides. Tourism micro-firms and SMEs often lack of the capacity to acquire knowledge about what do their target tourists want, and what allow them to achieve visitor satisfaction. It has been argued that, even when a survey-based feedback mechanism is implemented, the kind of knowledge acquired is rather insufficient (ask Jonathan about sources). On the other hand, their capacity to establish deeper connections with their customers is higher, and when a personal conversation with tourists using Instagram is established, similarly to what achieved in this study, the knowledge acquired in terms of the aspects mentioned above is deeper, more representative (given that it starts from content created spontaneously by the tourist) and more comprehensive.

3.2. Present and future research diffusion

The research, alongside its preliminary results, is going to be presented this May at the International Student Conference of Tourism (ISCONTOUR) in Krems, Austria, where experts in the field of value creation on social media, such as Barbara Neuhofer and Dimitros Buhalis, will likely be present.

An abstract has been sent for the International ATLAS Conference as well, having place this September, where the goal is to present the research at a stage in which it will be mostly complete. Other publication opportunities are being currently explored.

4. Planned research activity and field work

While the abovementioned research project progresses, multiple field work activities are planned for the upcoming summer, centred on the areas of Fulufjället and Skuleskogen national park. We conducted an in-depth analysis of all the national parks in Sweden, and these two parks, as well as few others, showed to be particularly relevant in terms of the tourism experience marketed and offered (largely related with forests) and in terms of popularity and accessibility.

4.1. Forest-based experience value creation on-site

Although Instagram is proving to be an incredibly rich source of data for the current research intents, there are obvious limitations in relation with the fact that interviews and other kinds of data are being collected after the on-site experience, meaning that the value that participants express through looking back at the pictures and the text they shared is remembered and re-created in the fictional present tense of the interview. This is an obvious limitation of any research method based on interviews. The fact that online interviews are being collected in a photo-elicited way, based on content spontaneously shared by the participant, is of course a strength in relation with a normal interview method. Yet, it is our opinion that an on-site assessment of value creation, conducted through methods of participant observation and/or "walk-along" interview methods during hiking experiences, would constitute a critical addition to what collected on Instagram, and help in shred further light on experience value creation in forest-based tourism experiences. Similar methods have been used to assess the themes of place identity and place attachment, with encouraging results, as they are able to capture the salience of particular moments during the experience real-time, by observing the participant behaviour and asking him/her to elaborate on "what is happening" when required.

4.2. Connection and disconnection in Forest-based Tourism

Finally, as already anticipated previously in this report, the theme of disconnection and its role in the overall tourist forest-based experience is very important to investigate, particularly when it comes, from the supply side, to assess the overall experience planning and mediation. How do tourists engaged in forest-based experiences use their smartphones and other means of digital connectivity? How important is to "stay connected" and, conversely, to "disconnect"? Is connectivity seen as excessively intrusive in nature-based experiences? Or does it facilitate and/or add value to the overall experience? In order to assess these questions, we plan to make use of interviews on-site and personal diaries, methods that are able to bring the tourists to elaborate on their experience without affecting their spontaneity and without providing excessive interference.