TOURISM STAKEHOLDERS' PERCEPTIONS OF SERVICE GAPS IN ARCTIC DESTINATIONS

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INTRODUCTION

Facing a global warming effect referring to the recent and ongoing global average increase in temperature near the Earth surface (U.S. Environment Protection Agency, 2015), the Arctic has received a growing amount of attention from a variety of interest groups. For example, scientists as well as policy makers have been prompted to understand and respond to the consequences of a warmer climate in the glaciers. Debates on the impact of global warming in the Arctic have prevailed. For example, a report (UNEP, 2010) states that the 600-foot thick iceberg four times the size of Manhattan broke off from Greenland's Petermann Glacier, the largest single shedding of Greenland's ice sheet in fifty years. Further, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) points out that the Arctic set the new record low for sea ice cover in 2013 and record high heat streak in Arctic areas. (RONA Newsletter, 2014). World leaders at the 2015 Davos, Switzerland meeting also consider this a major concern in light of recording-breaking heat of 2014 and the threat the melting of Arctic glaciers pose to the world (Gelles, 2015).

But the trend of global warming also offers a host of new business opportunities that are opened to the Arctic nations as well as those countries with a vested interest, such as developing a navigable Arctic route for ships, and prolonging the tourist season during warmer months (Plumer, 2013). Due to the economic concerns provided therein, the Arctic Council, represented by eight nations (the United States, Canada, Denmark, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia), have agreed to add six new nations as observer states: China, India, Italy, Japan, Singapore, and South Korea (Myers, 2013). In response to a merging interest in Arctic exploration that may result in a new wave of migration, the Arctic Council has convened to set out regulations to strengthen cooperation between the Arctic countries in the face of a new era of exploitation. One of the key objectives of the council is to improving economic and social conditions. For example, the council has acknowledged that:

Arctic peoples are experiencing challenges associated with rapid socio-economic and environmental changes, note the previous work of the Arctic Council to promote mental health in Arctic communities, and decide to undertake further work to improve and develop mental wellness promotion strategies (Kiruna Declaration, Arctic Council, 2013, p.2)

It is unarguable that harsh living conditions, characterized by remoteness, extreme climate, and scarcity in economy, around the Arctic region forms a barrier to economic growth that affects, in part, maintaining a good quality of life among people living in the Arctic. Within several development alternatives proposed such as mining, farming, and fishing, tourism has been regarded as a valuable economic engine not only bolstering the local livelihood but enhancing community pride (Chen, 2015). Indeed, the literature (Uysal, Perdue, & Sirgy, 2012) proposes that increased tourist activities represent a significant concern in terms of socio-economic benefits received and job creation in the host community. However, the extant of literature does not vividly illustrate the pitfalls involved in tourism service delivery that may

present a threat to the stability in tourism operations as these problems can be substantial in the Arctic.

Arctic Tourism

There is no a consistent definition for “Arctic region” which could may defined by climatic or vegetative delineations, latitudinal demarcations, or political territories, including the eight Arctic countries: Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russian Federation, Sweden and the United Sates (Mason, Johnson, & Twynam, 2000). The world’s coldest spot, the Arctic region is covered with ice and snow almost year round. The climate is extremely dynamic in this area with ~~the~~ drastically changes in summer along with climbing temperatures and 24-hour-long daylight, (UNEP, 2007), where in the fall and winter months many tourists view the spectacular Northern Lights. Further, vegetation within the Arctic region can be distinguished by three zones: forest-tundra, true tundra, and polar desert (Stonehouse & Snyder, 2010). The tundra can be seen in several forms including lush growth, with meter-high thickets of shrubs, grasses, and other plants or dense mosses covering the ground. In addition to natural conditions in this area, indigenous populations and their cultures—also makes this region unique. Arctic indigenous populations includes the Inuit (in Greenland, North America, and Asia), Aleut (North America), Saami (Scandinavia and west Russia), and the Samoyed, Yakuts, and Chukchi (northern Siberia) (Stonehouse & Snyder, 2010).

With the uniqueness of weather and nature scenes, the Arctic region has become a relatively attractive tourist destination, where leisure traveling has become the largest human activity in polar region (Stonehouse & Synder, 2010). In the Arctic, diverse tourist markets are engaged: mass tourism (including airborne and seaborne), fishing and hunting, nature and ecotourism market, culture and heritage tourism, and adventure tourism (Stonehouse & Synder, 2010). Due to the increased development of the tourism industry, this region has dramatically grown in the business sectors as well as inquiries from academia (Stewart, Draper, & Johnston, 2005). Tourism thus plays a critical role in the Arctic world in all aspects and countries, where Northwestern Scandinavia has received the largest number of tourists (Mason, 1997). For example, Norway has hosted almost 5 million foreign tourists who stayed overnight in 2013, including Swedes (14%) Germans (11%), and Danes (9%) (Visit Norway, 2015).

Global warming is a serious issue in the Arctic. Scientists and policy makers have been forced to address the severity of this ongoing environmental crisis. Inevitably, this climate phenomenon will affect the health of the environment and humans in the region, that are expected to lead to potential global disasters, notably, rising sea levels due to melting glaciers and ice (UNEP, 2013). This region is also facing some challenges with the expanding human access and economic activities. Some international and regional organizations have raised concern for these potential impacts on the natural environment, wildlife, local residents, and indigenous population. For example, the United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP) held an internal conference “Tourism in Northern Region” in 2011 in Arkhangelsk, Russian to discuss the development of arctic tourism and increasing demand on the global market. In addition to a response to rapid demands posed by tourism opportunities, it is also urgent to develop sustainable agendas in this region. UNEP has promised to focus on sustainable practices in the

Arctic whereas the Arctic Council also declared its intention to protect the environment at its annual meeting in 2013 (Arctic Council, 2013).

As a key economic component in the Arctic, tourism is also one of the defining agents for societal growth. The current literature on Arctic tourism has focused on environmental degradation (e.g. Buckley, 2011; Cloesen, 2003), cultural change (e.g. Anderson, 1997; Hovelsrud, Poppel, Oort, & Reist, 2011), tourist experiences (e.g. Powell, Brownlee, Kellert, & Ham, 2012) and public policies (e.g. Lamers, Liggett, & Amelung, 2012). However, researchers have not adequately addressed the supply side of tourism in this region, especially the issue of service deficiencies.

To mitigate the aforementioned shortcomings, the present study aims to understand what areas of service are needed to be improved in order to grow the tourism industry in the Arctic. By detecting the current service deficiencies in tourism, it allows the government and local businesses to suggest necessary actions to overcome this potential tourism problem transpiring in the Arctic. Besides, it may enable tourism operators to be successful in the long run while supplying benefits to the host community.

STUDY METHODS

Snice Northwestern Scandinavia is the most visited Arctic destination in the world (Mason, 1997), the study selected Norway's Finnmark region as the study site. The study site is Norway's Finnmark region, in its two largest towns, Alta and Kirkenes, along with the four tourist villages of Karasjok, Hammerfest, Honningsvåg and Mehamn. One of the most visited Arctic destinations in the world, Finnmark is also the biggest county in northeastern Norway with a population of 72,000. It has gained its reputation as a destination of spectacular natural scenes with its high sky and wide horizons and unusual climate phenomenon (Visit Norway, 2014). In general, the tourists are attracted by summer activities entailing the Midnight Sun, fishing opportunities, and picturesque landscapes and induced by the Northern Lights and snow-related activities in the winter, such as husky rides and visiting ice hotels (Visit Norway, 2014). In addition to scenic attractions, experiencing the rich indigenous Sami culture that has existed in the Northern Scandinavia region for over 11,000 years has been one of a favorite tourist activity in this region. The field studies for data collection were conducted on cruise ships sailing through Finnmark region, as well as hotels and small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) such as cultural attractions such as museums and visits to the indigenous populations' regions. The study population entails three types of tourism stakeholders: tourists, tourism professionals, and local residents. For data collection, tourism professionals include owners, managers, and frontline employees of the tourism industry. Participating residents live in the Finnmark region.

A qualitative approach—in-depth personal interview and focus group—was adopted in this study. All interviews were audio-taped with the participants' informed consent. Snowball and convenience sampling were used for recruiting volunteer interviewers. A total of three focus group surveys consisted of 6-10 participants were conducted. The informants in the focus groups were selected via the following procedures. For the resident group, the research team invited local residents to participate the focus group survey at a local hotel conference room in the city

of Alta. For the business group, the managers and owners of local tourism businesses entailing hotel, guesthouse, campsite, tour operator, and theme restaurant in the city of Kirkenes were included. For the tourist group, the participants were cruise passengers and interviewed at a conference room of an ocean cruise sailing through the study region. In addition, other 68 participants were interviewed individually to gather opinions on service issues in tourism. It is important to recognize the sufficient number of sample used in the interview. Literature has suggested what the adequate numbers for sampling are. For example, Creswell (1998) suggested a sample number from 5 to 25 as adequate for a phenomenological study while Morse (1994) claimed at least six samples in a phenomenological study. Since this study includes 68 interviews, the sample size for data analysis is deemed to be sufficient.

Participants were asked an open-ended question to obtain their views on what actions can help the local government and tourism businesses to improve their tourism services. The semi-structured interview approach was selected for this exploratory study. Merriam (2009) pointed out that semi-structured interviews are guided by specific issues to be explored. All responses were summarized initially by three researchers to cross-check the interviews. Thematic analysis, one of the most widely used analytical procedure, was applied for emerging themes from different stakeholders' points of view. During this analysis, three researchers made notes and put the resultant data into conceptual categories. Using three judges (researchers) in the data analysis process was a way to enhance the trustworthiness of the analysis. At the end of process, researchers reached consensus for thematic notations.

FINDINGS

The total number of interviewees was sixty-eight (N=68), including local business managers, residents, and tourists. Concerning the number of participants of each stakeholder, tourists (n=27, 39.7%) were relatively larger than tourism professionals (n=21, 30.9%) and residents (n=20, 29.4%).

This study identifies following four themes: (1) infrastructure, (2) government intervention, (3) provision of travel information and (4) plea for sustainability. To further elucidate the emerging foci, the followings sections highlight specific points relevant to the key subject discussed.

Infrastructure

The matter of accessibility was frequently referenced when the participants were asked to offer suggestions to the tourism developers in Arctic areas. For example, Norwegian Arctic destinations are remote with limited accessibility via public transportation. All stakeholders suggested that the tourism infrastructure could be improved, such as roads, sewages systems, and retailing facilities. Considering the weather extremes in Arctic areas that can destroy infrastructures at a faster rate, participants articulated that “better roads” and “more road maintenance” are needed; moreover, delays in snow shoveling could be seen as a safety and accessibility issue (Participant #60). A large number of participants also made comments on the local airport with its outdated building, insufficient space, and limited flight routes. Several

tourism professionals stated that they need a “bigger airport” and “more direct flights” (Participant # 3 & 14).

“.....I want to propose two things: one, infrastructure, such as hiking maps, hiking routes, and maybe cottages to stay overnight. And making all small villages in Finnmark and we can say that we welcome tourists. Tell everyone that we are making a good system for you and please come to Finnmark. Another thing is to have more direct flights, so people from Finland will fly here from Helsinki so we will have a lot of Finish guest. A lot of Finish think it is too far away to drive here..... ” (Participant #14)

Another related accessibility issue brought by the participants was the alternative transportation in this area, such “shuttle services,” “public bus systems” or “boats.”(Participant #4)

Government Intervention

Government involvement plays an important role in the process of tourism development at travel destinations. During the interviews, participants provided valuable opinions regarding the responsibility and oversight of the government in this regard. Four major categories were generated from the interviews: (1) marketing strategy, (2) governmental subsidy, (3) educational programming, (4) tourism related regulation, and (5) resource allocation.

Marketing Strategy. Finnmark has rich natural resources for tourism development, and strategic planning is extremely critical for its travel destinations. Local tourism business owners and professionals provided extensive insights based on their operational experiences. They articulated that they ought to enhance “marketing” and “sales” of the destination, with “more aggressive marketing plans to promote the Arctic destinations. Along with business groups, tourists and local residents also noted the need for better marketing plans:

I think for this nation marketing is important.... to have enough money to go to workshops and go to fairs to promote this destination. Because it has a lot of competition, not just in Norway, but all over the world... You have to make them aware that this is the destination far away up to the North.... which makes us interesting to visit. So that's one thing you have to do to improve this region (Participant #5).

Another suggestion emerging from the interviews indicated that the need to focus more on “heritage tourism” and “nature tourism” instead of massive tourism, where one stated that, “The most important is to show how they live, the way they live in their home country. The government should show the olden-days, and traditional ways of how people lived in this area” (Participant #61). Another said, “Something is unique for this area. They should show it more for the tourists of local history. Not only the history, but also show what is going on in this region now. Maybe like some display.... for tourists to see when they get here.” (Participant #30).

Governmental Subsidy. Tourism professionals pointed out that more “subsidy,” “funding,” or “loans” from government is needed for better tourism development (Participant #23).

Participants also thought that the government should “support local residents to start up tourism businesses” (Participant #17). Expectations or wishes for such governmental support were shown across all stakeholders.

Educational Programming. Tourism professionals also considered a bigger picture in perfecting tourism businesses by delivering more educational programs, such as tourism-related curriculum as well as more diverse foreign languages courses, considering the fact that tourists in majority come from all over Europe, and locals are not trained in their languages outside of German and English:

That is the big impact in the future. Those young people they need travel education in business. There are a few who can speak German, for instance. English is okay. No Italian or Spanish. And also about... how to run a travel business. That's the main thing in the future. If we want to survive here as a travel city, then we have educated people. Not just collect them for two months from other countries. We should do more of that in high school. (FG-P)

Tourism Related Regulation. Some participants thought that government should have more regulations towards tourism development as well as tourists themselves. For example, Norway has an abundance of fish and resources of fishing, and many tourists visit Norway for this particular reason. But some participants expressed viewpoints of the fishing regulation’s impact on tourist activity, where some tourists want increased access:

Fishing is a big interest to Germans so they will come here and rent the boat and fish... then they can bring the fish back to their families and friends. They changed the policy from 25 kilograms to 15 kilograms that you can bring out of the country. After they reduce the amount of fishing for tourists, the Germans will not want to come here because they come all the way from Germany and it is expensive. This is no problem with this... if you come from Finland and fish 15 kilometers a day and drive back across the border, but they might not spend money. But for those who spend here a whole week here, they still have the same limited for 25 kilograms. So I think it should have different quota for tourists who stay longer. (Participant #18)

Moreover, local residents were concerned that some tourist activities might be causing potential hazards, for instance, the “snow scooter” should have a shorter slope or be completely banned in certain areas. (Participant #9)

Resource Allocation. Tourism professionals expounded on how the city should allocate the resources and prioritize their tourism projects, such as developing infrastructure in this area that appeals to a broad tourist sector: “They are building this swimming pool which I don’t understand at all. I think they should spend money on other important things (FG-R).” In a destination away from the action center of economy like the Arctic, local residents and businesses are longing for any forms of financial assistance and economic contribution to their community. Likewise, the tourism business which faces the seasonality problem, with no doubt, is kin to look for government’s support on tourism development, expanding the airport for

instance, more than community development like building a swimming pool. It is imperative that the governments keep an eye on their budget spent and consider the optimal way in allocating their financial resources.

Provision of Travel Information

In addition to the accessibility issue related to infrastructure, as a tourist-friendly destination, the Finnmark region needs to render more convenient access to travel information, as suggested by stakeholders. One business professional suggested that more maps should be available to the tourists, while tourists also agreed that more tourist information is necessary, such as “maps”, “clearer signs” or “English signs”: “I don’t think the signs are too good here... and it could be a problem. It could improve the impression when visiting this town” (Participant #5). Tourists also pointed out that the limited “travel agents” available makes travel more challenging. According to tourism professionals, lodging facilities in this region should be increased to accommodate different segments of tourists.

“I think it should have something to show more (information) to the tourists. Maybe like a display.... When you travel here, you want some to see and take interests to.....it could tell tourists more history and current news in the area.” (Participant # 30)

Plea for Sustainability

Interviewees were concerned with the issue of carrying capacity in the Arctic area. They expressed a positive attitude towards tourism development, but the balance between development and sustaining the “natural environment” should be the priority (Participant #31). Moreover, a specific suggestion from an interviewee was that “numbers of tourists should be limited” and that “They need to control the growth” of tourism. (FG-T) Another stated:

In the future, people will come over here. They are educated and they are searching for local things. And there are more individuals. This is the big change for the bus tour.... so you have to see in the future that you have to balance and how much we take.... what kind of activity we should have here. (FG-P)

The above findings seem to suggest that the local tourism business may have built triple bottom line business models, or that they understand that continued growth might lead to a loss of local control over the industry due to the likelihood of invasion by outside tour operators and investors. It is not surprising to see the tendency of tourists, if not all, requests a limit on tourist numbers since the Arctic is a rather pristine destination sensitive to the environmental changes partly caused by the increase of traffic from the tourists.

To summarize the augmented knowledge derived from the study and render implications for future practice and research, the following section is provided.

CONCLUSION

A qualitative method is employed for the present study to gather stakeholders' perspectives on challenges and suggestions on tourism development to the Arctic region under investigation, as noted by participating tourists, local residents, and tourism professionals.

As indicated in the study, the subjects are prone to look for multifaceted assistance from the government. Truly, in a remote, isolated region like the Arctic, it is expected that government's proactive participation in the development process is essential, particularly for small business owners, as the government could offer a financial leverage (e.g., grants and loans), planning expertise, and updated technology to allow the tourism businesses to blossom. Indeed, in this Arctic region, it is rather challenging to find resources to grow its economy. Because tourism season is very short owing to the weather condition, it is likely that the tourism business could not survive without government supports. For example, from May to August are the peak months in visitation. In the rest of year, the tourist flow is low that may prevent the tourism business from making profits. Consequently, it is worthwhile launching policy-related studies to enable the government and local community stakeholders to prioritize its developmental agendas for tourism, and to wisely use its financial and human resources in response to the diverse needs coming from these stakeholders.

One of challenges of these goals revealed in the study relates to travel information at destinations. In the quickly changing and extensive informatics era, the travelling public may show a propensity to search for needed information online wherever they go, and during the travel events. As a managerial implication, local governments and tourism businesses in the Arctic should regard e-channels as a more valuable venue for travel information delivery (Buhalis & Law, 2008). While most typical tourist activities are nature related, some smaller cultural attractions may not be generally known to tourists. Via the suggested informative e-outlets, local businesses could build collaborative network/partnerships among themselves to cross-sell their services and products within the network, and to keep current with what travelers want to see in tourism offerings. Additional scholarly undertakings on the subject of network building among small and medium sized enterprises in Arctic destinations may be initiated.

The implementation of sustainable development has concerned the participants who comprehend the overdevelopment, as possibly planned in the future, which may sabotage the visiting and living quality at the Arctic destinations. Like other destinations around the world, sustainability has been frequently discussed by stakeholders for decades. Yet each destination may have its unique issues that prevail in these discussions. In the Arctic, due to the effect of global warming, glaciers and ice are melting at an alarming speed. A new shipping route will be opened around the Arctic to accommodate expected travel, as the effect of global warming adds new opportunities as well as threats to the region (Plumer, 2013). If the situation persists, tourism businesses, such as ocean cruises, may quickly take part in the development of new pristine destinations, which is detrimental to the fragile Arctic ecosystem in-route and onsite if the development plan based on sustainability does not exist. It is rather urgent that the Arctic government and host communities should contemplate the consequences of global warming on future tourism development and put forward appropriate policies and regulations to better anticipate and respond to ongoing weather transformations.

Lastly, service and facility deficiencies, however, have created a broad appeal for improved infrastructures (e.g. roads and airports) in the eyes of tourism stakeholders. Constructing and maintaining a functional infrastructure thus emerges as a major point of concern among the stakeholders. This shortcoming may affect tourist's accessibility to the destinations of interest and may limit local residents' opportunity for enjoying an optimal quality of life. Yet a dilemma exists in that the development of modern infrastructures may well lead to potential environmental degradation and the extinction of wildlife, both flora and fauna, since the influx of tourism causes a threat to vegetation and ecosystems in the Arctic tundra. Limited growth (McCool & Lime, 2001) development in tourism may thus be a better solution to the region, following the concept of carrying capacity (e.g. Liu, 2003) that determines the optimal number of visitors to be hosted at given time and space. The future development may be learned from the lesson in developing an alternative form of tourism that leads to minimal impacts on the environment, such as low impact tourism (McCool & Lime, 2001), with a practice of low volume of visitation. Facing public pressure for modern infrastructure improvements, the government would be wise to make a developmental plan capable of sustaining its local livelihood and economy in a long run, while limited damage to the very environment that attracts tourists. This goal of sustainable development has therefore surfaced as one of key suggestions for future tourism development. But such an agenda may elicit a conflict with the stakeholders' aspiration to the construction of modern infrastructures. The government may instigate educational information at destinations and on internet venues (e.g., travel website and social network) to allow the stakeholders to better comprehend the complicity of the tasks in sustainable development, especially in the case of new infrastructure construction, in order to win support from the stakeholders and for the enlargement of optimum manmade environments and services in future.

In short, in reflection to the preceding narrative in service deficiencies, this deductive research seems to suggest viable strategies for service development in the Arctic region under investigation. If the relevant actions, coping with the above four specific areas of service shortcomings, are developed, when considering time and financial constraints, provision of travel information could be quickly attained, followed by governmental intervention and development of infrastructure. Sustainability, a complex agenda encompassing economic, social and environmental benefits, may be considered as the most daunting task to achieve. This path of thinking leads to an innovative framework (See Figure 1). Moreover, in comparison to the needs arising in different stages (primitive, growing, stable and saturated) in tourism development, the resultant continuum in service development seems to depict the most critical task in each developmental stage. For example, in a primitive stage, establishing an effective information conduit is a key to entice the demand and consequently grow the market in prospect; in a growing stage, governments ought to step in and assist the business development so as to manage the constant inflow of tourist; once the development becomes stable, there is a consideration for building various kinds of new infrastructures to meet the demand in future. Lastly, accomplishing the concept of sustainability accentuates the most viable alternative to stop the development from declining. The emergence of this conceptual category may chart new research directions. Nevertheless, it is suggested that further scholarly undertakings in service development refine the derived continuum.

[Figure 1 Inserted Here]

Furthermore, what sustains the thriving of Arctic civilization is a collaborative mechanism propelled by government interventions imbedded with the interests from all stakeholders in consideration of the triple bottom-line (e.g. economy, environment and human capital) for sustainable living. Tourism as a critical actor in community development may gather a fruitful harvest economically and socially. But it could in large, harm the fragile environment and Arctic habitats as the development might go out of control. Should the host community wait for the actions from the government and local business to curb the evil of the development? Who should be more proactive in this matter? The debate may remain in a futuristic term as no imminent threat prevails.

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Figure 1 Model of Service Development Stages