

# Observing tour operators' interest in sustainability in Finland

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*The paper assesses how tour operators (TOs) address sustainability at the early stages of product development. TOs have potentially a large role in providing sustainable options for customers, and therefore contribute to sustainable tourism. The research took place during a TO familiarization trip (FAM) to a new destination. Participant observation was used as it allowed researchers unique access to participate in the same programme as the TOs. Altogether 14 tourism establishments were visited and they all provided information about sustainability. The TOs' interest in sustainability was weak, which indicates that sustainability in the early stage is superseded by other significant factors, such as type of product, suitability, seasonality and quality. However, further research in examining when sustainability becomes an issue for TOs would be beneficial for local stakeholders.*

**Keywords:** *sustainability, tour operators, observation, Finland, qualitative case studies, qualitative research, tourism*

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Although the concept of sustainability has existed in tourism for decades it has resumed its position at the core of many tourism activities due to the increasing global concerns of climate change and carbon footprint. Tour operators (TOs) have a large role in promoting sustainability and directing customers towards more sustainable destinations, services and products. They are substantial facilitators between contractors and customers, and can thus influence sustainable development affecting both supply and demand (Zapata Campos et al. 2018). As a result, their potential reach means that the responsibility of a single tour operator in keeping sustainability at the foreground of a tourism customer chain can be significant. However, understanding the TOs' perspective in relation to sustainability is under-researched in comparison with research regarding other tourism stakeholders, mainly tourists, businesses and destinations.

This study focuses on examining tour operators' interests in sustainability in a new destination during a familiarization trip through the participant observation method. The aim of the research is twofold. Firstly, the objective is to see whether the participating tour operators raise sustainability as a concern whilst spending several days in a new potential destination and visiting numerous tourism establishments. This enables us, at least to some extent, to understand the role of sustainability at the early stages of the tour operators' decision-making and product-development process. It may also enlighten us about any discrepancies between the objectives of the destination and TO interests. The article avoids taking a stand on whether the destination and its products and services are essentially sustainable, and instead focuses merely on the tour operators' interest in the matter. The relevance of the study is related to

the strategic development of the destination itself: the destination is trying to promote sustainability in all its actions and become one of the leading sustainable destinations in the world. This means the inclusion of all stakeholders. Therefore, understanding the potential lack of or heightened interest in sustainability among the visiting tour operators and its role at the early stages of product development has the potential to either help or hinder local sustainability efforts.

The second aim is to test whether the observation method is suitable for assessing TOs' perspectives on sustainability. (Participant) observation has frequently been used in tourism studies, mostly with ethnographic design and often in terms of analysing and understanding tourist behaviour. For example, in recent studies by Varnajot (2019) and Zhu et al. (2020) tourist behaviour was examined with the aim of understanding motivations for border crossings, and stress and coping strategies. This approach has been less used in research related to TOs. In short, the main research question can be summarized as follows: Do tour operators show any interest in local sustainability efforts, and are the chosen methods successful and data-effective enough in acquiring such information?

## 2 SUSTAINABILITY, TOUR OPERATORS AND OBSERVATION

We have seen rapid growth in tourism during the past few decades (UNWTO 2019), specifically prior COVID-19, which has created an urgent need to act sustainably in all tourism operations. Tour operators can potentially play a great role in developing sustainability throughout the industry and even act as the agents of social change. In tourism, however, sustainability is largely examined through community- or destination-based research (Alfaro Navarro et al. 2020; Ceron/Dubois 2003; Chen 2015), studies related to business (Font et al. 2017; Moneva et al. 2020) or tourist behaviour (Dolnicar et al. 2008; Juvan et al. 2016) and, to a lesser extent, from the tour operators' perspective (see for example Buckley 2012; Byrd 2007; Jackson 2007).

Although the image of the destination is nowadays less controlled by tour operators, due to the internet, TOs are still largely in charge of promotional activities and product-building (see Carey et al. 1997). Managing package tourism with responsible principles may successfully contribute to the pursuit of sustainable development goals (Goffi et al. 2018) and thus greatly support the objectives of the destinations in reaching sustainability. Furthermore, selecting sustainable service-providers in destinations is an important opportunity to advance sustainable tourism. This research focuses on product selection and development, which are specific aspects of operations among TOs (see Khairat/Maher 2012).

In this study, participant observation allows us to expand our understanding of how tour operators perceive and are interested in sustainability. The social situations in participant observation can be divided into two main issues: to participate in the activities and to observe the people engaging in the activities (Spradley 2016: 54). The observers can take a partial covert role during the exercise, meaning that the insiders are not fully aware of the observers' roles (see Jorgensen 1989). People usually behave differently when they are under observation, which can lead to distortion of the social situation (Głąbiński 2016). For this reason the observers adopted a partial covert role during the study: although the group knew that two sustainability researchers were accompanying them during their trip and gave consent, the participants were not aware that they themselves were the target of observation.

Cole's (2005) discussion about the strengths and weaknesses of the method in relation to her decade-long research highlights some issues that are also covered here: for

example, observation as a research method is sometimes complemented by other methods, such as interviews or questionnaires. In this kind of data triangulation the significance of observations can vary considerably (Reeves et al. 2008). Liu et al. (2020) and Zhu et al. (2020) utilized observation mostly as a secondary source of data that helped in understanding issues brought out in interviews. However, observation can act as a single method of estimating, for example, the impact of tourists on a destination. The suitability and sufficiency of observation depend on several issues and need to be considered thoroughly in each research setting.

The strength of the method lies in the fact it does not disturb the experience or the activity itself, and it can uncover new behaviours and make discoveries as situations are occurring. Of course the method is not without its challenges, which are related to the generalization of results and the researcher's role in the data collection (Mackellar 2013). Regardless of their involvement with the study group, researchers must maintain their primary role as researchers and remain disconnected enough to collect and analyse data (Baker 2006). The relationship established between observer and participants is one of the method's key components. It is desirable that the observer takes multiple roles during the exercise to establish good rapport (Jorgensen 1989: 21).

During the four-day stay, the researchers participated in the same activities as the tour operators, from dinners to programme activities, and stayed in the same accommodation. In order to increase reliability, two observers were used (see Cotton et al. 2010). In addition, the observers followed a template that guided the data collection (including, for example, who takes the initiative concerning sustainability, in which contexts sustainability is brought up); thus, the method can be considered semi-structured observation (Schensul et al. 1999). Observation generates the context in which field-workers take on membership roles in surroundings they want to study (Angrosino/Rosenberg 2011). The observers assumed numerous roles during the field research, ranging from guides and hosts to assistants and travel companions.

### 3 CASE STUDY SET-UP

Altogether eight TOs participated in the familiarization trip to the northeastern part of Finland. As the group was small, and to safeguard the anonymity of those being observed, the region is not named more specifically. The group was a mix of European, Asian and Australian tour operators. The familiarization trip took place in January 2020, during which 14 tourism establishments were visited. The establishments included the accommodation sector, programme activities and restaurant services. Most of the businesses were mixed, offering either all such services or a selection of them.

The destination offers mainly nature-based activities along with some cultural activities. The area is surrounded by several national parks and wilderness areas, and includes a large ski resort, all of which provide the setting for most of the activities. Although winter is considered high season, summers are becoming increasingly popular. Winter activities include downhill and cross-country skiing, reindeer, husky and snowmobile safaris, snowshoeing, ice swimming, sauna experiences and Northern Lights tours. Summer activities mainly involve hiking but also include river rafting, sauna experiences and, increasingly, mountain-biking.

Although most tourists to the region still come from Finland, the portion of foreign tourists is rapidly growing but is very dependent on the season (see Statistical Office

of Finland 2020). Most foreign tourists arrive via tour operators in winter, though individual tourists are an increasing sector.

#### 4 OBSERVED INTEREST IN SUSTAINABILITY

Regarding sustainability, the term was mentioned by the tourism entrepreneurs directly or indirectly during all the visits, providing a potential platform for further discussions. The topics covered all four pillars of sustainability (economic, ecological, social and cultural), varying from waste management, local ownership and food to the carbon footprint, silence, local cultural traditions and social programmes established by local tourism businesses. Some businesses were very keen to convey their sustainability initiatives; however these generated no further questions or interest from the participants. None of the participants raised any questions concerning sustainability during the business visits, and only in one establishment did anyone go to see the small recycling centre on their own initiative.

In order to acquire such information, which lies beyond the formal visits to tourism establishments, the changing roles of the researchers were useful. Acting as assistant guides and photographers, and accepting invitations for coffee between visits, allowed discussions outside the more formal setting. During these external discussions the issue of animal welfare was raised. The comments prompted both positive and negative impressions of the animal programme activities. For example, the cultural traditions of reindeer husbandry raised some further interest. However, this was not specifically related to concerns about the sustainability of the cultural programme, but more about exoticism. Also, the exceptional storytelling skills of the presenter (tourism entrepreneur) potentially influenced and prompted these further questions and dialogue.

Furthermore, climate change was discussed outside the context of the destination at a general level with one participant in an informal setting. This discussion was more related to their personal living conditions in their home country. The participants were informed that two researchers were specializing in tourism and climate change, making it an easy opportunity to ask further questions; but this resulted in no additional dialogue except the one mentioned above.

During the observation it was also important for the researchers to keep the circumstances as undisturbed as possible and not push their agenda. Therefore the researchers never initiated discussions about sustainability, but allowed the visit to run its own course. In this way it was more accurate to detect the true level of concern for sustainability.

Most questions and issues addressed by the participants were related to the accessibility of the products and activities, seasonal aspects and adjustability for diverse customer groups. The topic that received particular interest and prompted the most heated discussion during the FAM concerned the authenticity of the experience. A programme that took place in nature and was based on silence and relaxation was interrupted by another, rather noisy group. Most of the former's participants were disappointed and gave feedback about the negative experience. Even one additional group can overcrowd an experience and thus not promote and convey the essence of Finnish nature: the silence.

Concerning the research method, observation proved promising yet demanding. FAM trips are extremely busy and tightly scheduled occasions, with settings constantly changing. Additionally, interaction between participants, tourism entrepreneurs and

local contacts is vivid and lively. Also, unexpected modifications to the programme seem to be the rule rather than the exception. The researchers were well prepared for these kinds of sudden changes, with both having some previous experience of FAMs.

When the days last for 12–14 hours, success in data collection is dependent on several observers. Having multiple observers also allows splitting up according to the behaviour of the observed group. This could be the case, for example, when the group scatters for any reason. In addition, several observers in the field simultaneously enable the exchange of ideas between the researchers and commenting on the raw data at the very early stage of data processing. During the observation period the researchers followed a template and shared their findings in the evenings after data collection. However, as the template focused mainly on assessing discussions about sustainability, it had to be partly abandoned when the TOs showed no interest in the matter. Modifications to the template were easier to make when two researchers were able to have a constant dialogue about the progress.

## 5 DISCUSSION

This article has combined things in a novel way: understanding sustainability at the early stages of the TOs' product-building process and using observation as a method of acquiring the relevant information. There is some evidence that tour operators who focus on nature and cultural tourism are highly engaged in sustainability (see Goffi et al. 2018). However, the present study shows that TOs that demonstrate interest in nature-based tourism do not necessarily follow this trend. Although the sample size is small, it is noteworthy that there was no great interest shown in sustainability among the participants, except for minor comments on animal welfare, even though there were multiple opportunities to do so. This aligns somewhat with Jackson's (2007) study, which concludes that TOs lack the willingness to adopt ecotourism principles if they interfere with business operations – sustainability is an issue that should not mix with business too much.

There is also some evidence that smaller TOs are more involved in sustainability than larger TOs. This may be since often the socioeconomic initiatives and environmental practices do not necessarily require massive investment, unlike what may be required from larger companies. This can be due to a more philosophical approach, which smaller TOs often have (Goffi et al. 2018). The participating TOs in this study were a mix of small and medium-sized operators suggesting some interest in sustainability issues, but failing to act on it.

In terms of the method and its suitability, the results are twofold. The method itself (participant observation) was found to have potential. It allowed two researchers obstacle-free access to the TOs' product-building process, and this is where the value of the method rests. Having access to this part of tourism product-building was found to be unique. Such an exclusive point of view always requires a facilitator, a person who arranges access for the researchers. In this case the facilitator was part of the destination management. Although a great deal of work was done in advance, perhaps even more background investigation of the visiting TOs could have been beneficial. In addition, a brief regrouping in the middle of the day among the researchers could have been valuable to make short assessments. Possibly, the results could have been verified through a short questionnaire or an interview at the end of the trip to see if the observations were correct. However, the aim here was to test observation as a single method.

The observation generated three lines of thought. Firstly, the lack of interest in sustainability may simply have been due to general fatigue. The participants had already been in Finland for several days attending numerous professional events. It would have been interesting to follow another group to see if the results were different. Secondly, it may well be that sustainability issues will be addressed later in the product-building process. However, as all tourism establishments that were visited brought up sustainability issues, and therefore provided a platform for further discussion, it is surprising that this resulted in no further questions in such an easy context. This brings us to the third point, which leads us to conclude that sustainability is not among TOs' top concerns while getting to know the products initially. Other attributes seem to override initial interests in the product. Based on the observations, these include the seasonality and the type of product (such as price and adjustability), and suitability of the product to the TOs' target customers and quality. This does not mean that the TOs lack interest in sustainability; it merely indicates that it is not their first and foremost concern in this part of the product development. This is supported by Khairat and Maher (2012), who conclude that the main motivation for TOs' sustainability efforts is to build a positive public image rather than reduce environmental impacts, which only ranked fourth. Also, familiarization trips are only one element of the product development. Therefore, jumping to conclusions based on only one perspective would be too hasty; the whole product-development process requires further scrutiny.

As such, it would be highly beneficial for the industry to find out at which point the TOs start to think about sustainability. In terms of assessing TOs' desire to put forward the sustainability agenda in their final products, requires further research. For example, in this case having follow-up questions six months later to see if sustainability has reached the product-development agenda would provide important information. This would allow tourism entrepreneurs to raise their sustainability issues again at the right time, and perhaps with more effect. Of course it can be argued that TOs have already shown interest in sustainability as they have chosen destinations that aim to excel in that. However, research shows that sustainability efforts made by destinations do not affect customer choice. It is the individual products (for example programme services and accommodation) that make a difference when customers think about sustainability (Hedlund 2013).

Nonetheless, in our view, it remains an important part of the process to keep sustainability issues at the forefront when TOs visit tourism establishments. It may be that, in due time, the TOs will also begin to understand what is important for the destination. This could potentially minimize discrepancies between the efforts made by destinations to become sustainable and TOs' other interests. What remains important for a destination is that a more careful choice over the future TOs operating in the area may be needed if that destination is determined to succeed in sustainability and the TOs do not include sustainability higher in their agendas.

## 6 CONCLUSIONS

This paper has provided a brief outlook on tour operators' concerns about sustainability in initial product development. The importance of the paper lies in the fact that destinations are trying to become significant sustainable tourism destinations and that the tour operators have a powerful role in conveying and implementing that message. The paper examined TOs' interest in sustainability issues during a four-day familiarization visit to a destination in Finland. Sustainability issues didn't

raise wide-ranging concerns; nor did they prompt vast dialogues in this initial stage of product-building.

In addition, a new method was tested to see whether it yields additional understanding about the matter. Although the method provided potential and a unique view of the TOs' product-building process, its effectiveness in this context was limited. The fieldwork indicated that other matters were a priority to the TOs during initial product development. Therefore, it would be useful to conduct further research on where in the product-building process sustainability becomes an important issue for TOs. This would provide an opportunity for destinations and entrepreneurs to push their sustainability agenda forward again at the right stage of the product-building process.

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