

The Ups and Downs of Tourism

■ A trek across Iceland's wilderness, a cruise to admire Svalbard's vistas, and driving a team of huskies across Samiland each represent possible holidays in sparsely populated areas of the Nordic region. They attract tourists, which brings in income and creates livelihoods. But is it all good news here?

People based in the same location often have differing views of the impact of such forms of tourism. These disparities, and tourism-related gains and losses, are particularly poignant in northern locations. This article examines some of the positives and negatives connected with tourism as a livelihood in northern sparsely populated areas.

Many settlements across the Nordic region would have a hard time surviving without tourism. According to Statistics and Research Åland, 35% of the archipelago's Gross Domestic Product came from tourism in 2003. That figure does not include indirect contributions however which are harder to calculate, such as tourist use of petrol stations and supermarkets.

A legitimate question emerging from this boost to livelihoods experienced is the *form* of livelihoods supported by tourism. In Åland, a significant proportion of tourism income comes from selling duty free products on board ferries. This inevitably leads to lively alcohol-fuelled 'party' tourism.

Such livelihoods can nevertheless provide much needed income and the incentive to develop, maintain, and interpret heritage — which, in turn, supports increased tourism. The most famous mountains on the northern Norwegian island of Senja, the *Devil's Teeth*, can now be viewed from a recently built platform and rest area, part of the integration of this road into Norway's National Tourism Route. Similarly, Norrbotten's museum in Luleå offers free

entry, part of the broader strategy to attract tourists and their spending to the area's heritage sites. In many isolated communities seeking to preserve their own heritage, cash income can be generated through the selling of traditional handicrafts.

The natural heritage of an area can however be harmed quite easily by the over-development of the tourist sector. The spectacular bird cliffs of Vestmanna in the Faroes recently experienced declining bird numbers which was attributed to the number of power boats using the surrounding waters to provide tours. A voluntary code of conduct for boat operators had thus eventually to be put in place in the hope that the trend could be reversed without detracting from the overall tour experience.

As regards cultural heritage, building and industrial sites on Svalbard can currently be seen to be suffering from general wear and tear simply from the volume of visitors. Some tourists, moreover, induce direct destruction through the stealing of 'souvenirs' or by dropping rubbish. Potential approaches to counter this, all of which incur costs and create controversy, include roping off sites, hiring monitors independently of tour operators, and limiting the number of tourists either permitted at any particular site or on Svalbard generally.

The danger also exists that such heritage may become overly packaged or 'commodified', especially if such heritage is promoted only to tourists. A fine line thus exists between *supporting heritage* through tourism and *creating heritage* for tourists. On the other hand, is a pair of gloves hand-made using traditional skills diminished in heritage (or monetary) value if it is made solely to sell? Local people are using local resources and their culture to assist their own community by encouraging locally-based income generation, local spirit, and local life.



Duty free aboard a Mariehamn-Stockholm ferry is an important element in Åland's tourism. Photo: Ilan Kelman.

These skills and the sense of community then transcend tourism, especially since seasonality is one of the attractions of tourism as a livelihood in northern sparsely populated areas. The business operators and their employees can focus on specific times of the year, such as summer and winter holiday periods, leaving the rest of the year free to pursue other endeavours. Such additional livelihoods might include subsistence pursuits, such as hunting, or other businesses serving local needs or remote clients.

As with all businesses, one of the major challenges relating to the development of tourism livelihoods is the high level of dependency on external forces. In the past decade, the volume of tourism has dropped in the wake of international terrorist attacks, the rising price of oil impacting on air travel the financial crisis, and in the wake of the health concerns related to the outbreak or threat of various epidemics.

Tourism operators can do little to counter these market vagaries, except to ensure that they never rely on tourism as their sole source of income. While new ideas offering tourists more activities, especially in inclement weather and out of the regular tourist season, can bolster tourist income, to shift towards entirely tourism-based livelihoods would harm the long-term viability of the communities involved.

Similarly, tourism can bring sparsely populated regions to the attention of capital cities where rural development decisions are frequently made. Visitors to remote locales glean an understanding of the beauty and importance of those places, rather than seeing them as 'other' communities where people should not settle. This has the potential to generate a deeper understanding and awareness of the needs, challenges, and opportunities of livelihoods in these areas.

The unique and fascinating nature and culture of the Nordic regions brings forward ample opportunities for tourism, from the summer's midnight sun or the winter's aurora to Inuit carvings from Greenland and Sámi reindeer herding. Yet tourists and locals are not always aware of the challenges and problems brought about by the 'packaging' of this richness.

The key is to neither avoid nor reduce tourism because it might, and frequently does, cause problems. After all, avoiding or reducing tourism could cause worse problems by losing out on its potential benefits. Instead, decisions regarding tourism need to involve honesty in respect of the positives and negatives of different choices, to highlight three aspects.

First, creativity is needed in implementing tourism livelihoods, especially in recognising that bigger and more prominent is not necessarily better or more lucrative over any time scale. Second, a balance of views should be input into every policy and practice, implying that locals deserve full and effective consultation for, and participation in, the decision-making processes that affect them. Third, livelihoods should be supplemented by tourism rather than relying on tourism.



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Tourists near the bird cliffs of Vestmanna on the Faroe Islands were attributed to declining bird numbers. Photo: Ilan Kelman