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20 years of Nordic nature-based tourism research: a review and future research agenda

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides a review of research in nature-based tourism in the Nordic region, discuss it from an international viewpoint and provide an outlook for the future research agenda. To do this, we analyze the Scandinavian Journal of Hospitality and Tourism for papers focusing on nature-based tourism from 2010 to 2020, as well as 29 key textbooks representing international scholarship within the last decade. We argue there has been an increase in the number of studies looking at nature-based tourism from the supply side, especially about destination development, lifestyle entrepreneurship and the role of guides. We also notice that many research questions are raised from practical needs, while more theoretically oriented research is rather limited. The international call for new, bold theoretical outlooks, the need to reimagine and fundamentally transform human-nature relationships towards sustainability and co-existence remains relevant for the Nordic context in the future.

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Introduction

There is a trend of recreation in nature, suddenly and unexpectedly boosted by the COVID-19 outbreak in the spring of 2020. Mobile tracking data from Oslo, the capital of Norway, show a 291% increase in outdoor recreational activity during the lockdown (Venter et al., 2020). Swedish national parks have also experienced a drastic growth in visitation in 2020 even before the peak season – some of them up to 75% (Hansson, 2020). This reflects not only the unprecedented ban on international travel, but also a renewed interest towards domestic nature-based tourism and outdoor recreation. New challenges call for new research efforts and nature-based tourism research is not an exception.

The Nordic region has always fascinated and attracted tourists with its magnificent natural assets, and their tourism importance has only been increasing over time. Nature-based tourism (NBT) research, consequently, has been one of the strongholds within Nordic tourism scholarship, an illustration of which is the collection of articles published in the Scandinavian Journal of Hospitality and Tourism (SJHT) discussed here. The aim of this paper is to provide a review of current NBT research in the Nordic region, discuss it...
from an international viewpoint and provide an outlook for the future research agenda. To do this, we analyze the SJHT for papers focusing on NBT from 2010 (issue 4) to 2020 (issue 2), as well as 29 key textbooks representing international NBT scholarship within the last decade.

The third issue in 2010 of SJHT, which marked the 10th year anniversary of the journal, Fredman and Tyrväinen (2010) focused on “frontiers” of NBT, which we take as the point of departure for our review. In this paper, the authors elaborated the principles of the NBT system pointing out the many stakeholders involved – not just those traditionally involved in tourism, but also those associated with the protection, management and utilization of natural resources. The Nordic context is also flavored with the longstanding traditions of outdoor recreation and well as the right of public access which applies to several of the countries.

When it comes to defining NBT, we draw from the work in Sweden by Fredman et al. (2009), which is further contextualized by Fredman and Tyrväinen (2010) and by Margaryan (2017): “activities by humans occurring when visiting nature areas outside the person’s ordinary neighborhood”, from which follows that the NBT sector represents those activities in different shapes and forms, directed to meet the demand of nature tourists. We view the term NBT as an umbrella for many different labels, such as nature tourism, wilderness tourism, adventure tourism, environmental tourism, wildlife tourism, geo-tourism, outdoor tourism and ecotourism. One should also observe that our definition of NBT does not give any guidance regarding sustainability per se – it is a description of tourism taking place in nature areas. However, once we add certain criteria to the operationalization of NBT it becomes normative, and when they guide operations in a more sustainable direction, it makes sense to talk about sustainable NBT development.

In the global perspective, “nature-based tourism is huge” as claimed by Blumstein et al. (2017, p. 2), and according to some estimates at least 8 billion people visit protected areas annually (Balmford et al., 2015). At the same time, many natural environments and wildlife species are currently threatened by global challenges, such as climate change, biodiversity decline, unsustainable resource consumption and other anthropogenic factors (Blumstein et al., 2017; Wearing & Schweinsberg, 2018). High numbers of NBT tourists can be a source of additional pressure on natural areas, since no tourism can occur without creating an environmental impact (Øian et al., 2018). So what can be done to reduce or manage impacts, while stimulating the potential socio-economic and conservation benefits of NBT? How can we continue enjoying the wonders of nature, while obtaining great tourist experiences, wellbeing and new insights? How can small businesses in rural regions deal with the many challenges of contemporary tourism? How can we ensure fair distribution of NBT-generated income and attractive employment conditions for NBT employees? These and many other questions have been subject of NBT research globally and in the Nordic countries, as discussed below.

Current state of nature-based tourism research – A Nordic outlook

We identified 77 papers in the Scandinavian Journal of Hospitality and Tourism focusing on NBT by reviewing titles, keywords and abstracts, using the definitions described above. Full papers, introductions to special issues and research notes were all included
in our analysis. This means that approximately one-quarter of all papers published in the last 10 years focus on NBT. Next, we performed thematic analysis of the article keywords, around which we structure our review. To validate this approach, we also manually re-analyzed all the papers in search of common themes.

First, looking at different types of tourism reflected in Nordic NBT research, two main observations can be made. Most striking is perhaps the large diversity of different outdoor recreation activities studied, ranging from the relatively common, such as animal-based ones (especially equestrian and fishing), or skiing (alpine and backcountry) to more niche activities, such as glacier travel, motoring, mountain biking and Viking tourism. In this context, Iceland seems to be a key place for horse-based tourism where research has focused on customer satisfaction (Sigurðardóttir & Helgadóttir, 2015), environmental and social Impacts (Schmudde, 2015), and development of business clusters (Sigurðardóttir & Steinthorsson, 2018). Studies of recreational fishing have also primarily taken a suppliers’ perspective, focusing on for example landowners’ perception of risk in Norway (Stensland, 2013) and obstacles when developing fishing enterprises in Sweden (Waldo & Paulrud, 2012). When it comes to skiing, published research reflects the popularity of alpine skiing, primarily looking at patterns of demand (Falk & Vieru, 2017; Malasevska & Haugom, 2019) as well as the values associated with back-country skiing experiences (Berbeka, 2018; Rokenes et al., 2015).

It is also obvious that Nordic NBT research has close connections to both the outdoor recreation and adventure tourism research fields, the latter highlighted with a special issue in SJHT (Mykletun, 2018). Consumer-oriented studies looking at environmentalism and tourism preferences (Wolf-Watz et al., 2011) and feelings of immersion in glacier hiking (Løvoll, 2019) illustrates the former, while research along the traditional adventure avenue (Mykletun, 2018) as well as the more recent progress towards softer and slower adventure (Rantala et al., 2018; Varley & Semple, 2015) represents the latter.

Second, observing the different analytical concepts and approaches used in research about NBT, the picture is just as diverse as for the different types of tourism. Economic approaches related to valuation and value creation seems to be one of the main avenues. This includes contingent valuation of hiking trails (Lee et al., 2013), hedonic price examination of ski-lift ticket prices in Norway (Malasevska, 2018) and experience-based brand personality as a source of value co-creation (Seljeseth & Korneliussen, 2015). Segmentation of visitors based on different criteria is yet another prominent approach among research in NBT. This includes studies of national park visitors and their interest in tourism services in Finland (Sievänen et al., 2011), affective and cognitive dimensions of ski destination images in Norway (Andersen et al., 2018), and socio-demographic influences on participation in outdoor recreation activities (Tangeland et al., 2013). The role of place and place attachment is yet another important dimension when looking at NBT, given the many close connections between tourism actors, local resources and communities (Keskitalo & Schilar, 2017). This is reflected in a study by Raadik Cottrell and Cottrell (2015) who found that sense of place influences perceived environmental change and the effects on future holiday experiences to Saaremaa in Estonia. Sense of place can also help better understand the acceptance of, or opposition to, conservation and tourism strategies among local populations (Lemelin et al., 2015). Learning and interpretation are other themes recognized, related to the role of guides as well as tourists’ nature connections. Andersen and Rolland (2018) found that learning (through guides)
relates to both skills and techniques necessary for living and skiing in unfamiliar nature and connecting the participants more closely with nature. Among the many other analytical approaches observed, we also notice applications using ethnography, grounded theory, importance-performance analysis, REP-scales, visitor-employed photography and visitor monitoring techniques.

Looking at Nordic research focusing on the consumer side of NBT, we find a relatively large body of literature about experiences of nature. This includes for example how subjective feelings inform tourists’ experiences during glacier hiking (Løvoll, 2019), extraordinary related to food tourists’ nature-based experience (Goolaup & Mossberg, 2017), and how the Arctic’s unique attraction for skiers can strengthen bonds within a group, heighten the experience and ultimately create value for participants which is reflected in a high willingness to pay (Berbeka, 2018). Experiences of wildlife can also be an important aspect of the NBT product, which is illustrated with a study from Vittangi Moose Park in Swedish Lapland (Grigio, 2015). In this study, the author argues that the experience is an Erfahrung, a set of knowledge that becomes meaningful through its shared nature, created through a bodily and visual transaction between visitors and moose. Another recurrent theme is the study of motivations. This is reflected in the Nordic literature through studies about push-and pull factors among hunters (Suni & Pesonen, 2019), motivational segments for trips along the high coast byway of Sweden (Steen Jacobsen & Antonson, 2017), and tourist’s motivations for purchasing NBT activity products (Tangeland, 2011). In the latter study, the author identified four motivation factors: quality improvement, skill development, new activity and social, which can help managers of NBT businesses to target more profitable segments and develop their products.

Next, turning our attention to the supply side of NBT, we find several research directions. One of the more prominent foci is the role of guides. Guides can play a major role for high-quality interpretation and learning as part of the tourism experience as we noted above (Andersen & Rolland, 2018). Guides can also create values for clients in various ways. Rokenes et al. (2015) show that guides can contribute to prevent conflicts within the client group and decrease the risk of accidents. They also argue that with guides comes a potential for better choreographing of experiences, nature interpretation and learning to behave environmentally friendly. The potential to create monetary values in terms of increased willingness to pay among tourists is only marginally visible in the literature reviewed.

Lifestyle businesses, entrepreneurship and amenity migration are other related topics we identified. This includes studies about international winter tourism entrepreneurs who have moved to a “low-amenity” rural areas in northern Sweden (Carson et al., 2018) as well as the role of place attachment for the lifestyle entrepreneurship (Schilar & Keskitalo, 2017). Findings suggest that the underdeveloped low-amenity character of the place were key factors in migration choices. This takes us to the topics of natural amenities and resources which we also found being a relatively frequent theme of research in NBT. For example, how tourists perceive wilderness versus power production in the highlands of Iceland (Sæþórsdóttir & Saarinen, 2016) or how regional distribution of natural amenities can impact NBT supply in Sweden (Margaryan & Fredman, 2017). From the latter study, we note that natural and human-made amenities are comparable in their power to predict the distribution of NBT operations at a national level, suggesting that the border between NBT and other forms of tourism is not as distinct as is often imagined.
When it comes to development and management the destination is an obvious research unit also in NBT scholarship. This includes studies of experience attributes at winter destinations in Norway, primarily circling around skiing (Andersen et al., 2018), destination branding (Seljeseth & Korneliussen, 2015), destination image of rural landscapes (Prestholdt & Nordbø, 2015), and how to transform an iconic attraction into a more diversified destination (Viken & Aarsaether, 2013). Two key aspects of success in destination development we can observe from these studies are public participation and the small firms’ ability to interact locally and social competence. A key aspect of rural development is of course the dynamics of the economic system and to what extent money spend by tourists stay in the region. The amount of direct expenditure is one key aspect (Fredman & Yuan, 2011), but there is not much research found looking at the impact on local economies from such expenditure in the NBT context in the Nordics.

Finally, a relatively large group of studies have taken on one or more perspectives related to sustainability in NBT, whereof most of them have an environmental focus. A dominating theme in this context is the implications of climate change. Studies by Nicholls and Amelung (2015) suggest the possibility of more desirable climatic conditions in the southern and eastern parts of the region in the future. However, most research is focused on winter tourism where climate effects are more challenging. This is reflected by studies looking at the impact on summer ski visitors in Norway (Demiroglu et al., 2018), links between downhill ski lift revenues and snow depth (Falk & Vieru, 2017), costs of adaptation to climate change in Finnish winter tourism (Kaján et al., 2015) and polar tourists’ weather tolerance on Svalbard (Denstadli & Steen Jacobsen, 2014). Results indicate that small businesses seem to be most affected in terms of financial costs from climate change, and although customers might have high climate change awareness, they show limited climate friendliness. The topic of environmental concern is another theme identified in the Nordic NBT literature (Puhakka, 2011; Wolf-Watz et al., 2011).

A second prominent theme under the sustainability umbrella is tourism in protected areas, manifested with a special issue in the SJHT 2011 (Higham & Vistad, 2011). However, even if protected areas are the research context, the studies do not necessarily related to the issues of nature protection. For example, analyses of inter-year comparisons of hikers’ characteristics in the Swedish mountains (Wall-Reinius & Bäck, 2011) or visitor expenditure at different spatial levels (Fredman & Yuan, 2011). A study about tourism impacts on local communities in Estonian National Parks by Reimann et al. (2011) demonstrates an approach that more directly target the tourism-conservation nexus. Another example is the study by Garms et al. (2017) from Fulufjället National Park in Sweden where travel motives among German visitors are studied. Results show it is the outstanding scenery that provides German visitors with rewarding experiences of the Scandinavian “wilderness”, which can help managers of protected areas to better facilitate visitor experiences.

This research also points at the need for systematic visitor monitoring to underpin appropriate management of protected areas for tourism (Skriver Hansen, 2017). This takes us to the field of landscape research, how landscape is changed and assessed. An interesting example is from the Finnish Lapland where Uusitalo and Sarala (2016) modeled erosion vulnerability of soils and vegetation at two mountain resorts with 3D-terrain models. Such approaches can be used for discussion of acceptable changes to
landscape. A Norwegian study investigates how tourists understand and make sense of landscapes using manipulated photos of the past and probable future development (Vinge & Flø, 2015). Findings show that understandings of landscape change processes are embedded in wider discourses of nature and culture.

**International research in nature-based tourism**

Just like the Nordic context, international research on NBT has significantly matured during the last decade. This is evidenced not only by explosion of the sheer quantity of academic publications on the topics related to NBT, but also in their qualitative properties. In order to understand the main research themes emerging from the international literature we have analyzed textbooks in English language dedicated to NBT and its subsectors (e.g. ecotourism, wildlife tourism, mountain tourism, adventure tourism) published in the period of 2010–2020. Additionally, we refer to the review of 151 research papers published between 1998 and 2017, conducted by Elmahdy et al. (2017), who identify megatrends affecting tourism in general and NBT in particular.

Coming of age for NBT research is displayed in the growing caution, skepticism and critical examination of the promise of tourism and the benefits it was expected to provide to the local communities and achievement of sustainability goals in general (Blumstein et al., 2017; Büscher & Davidov, 2013; Mowforth & Munt, 2015; Nepal & Saarinen, 2016). Withering away of the excessive optimism, typical for the literature of the 1990s and early 2000s on NBT, and especially ecotourism, is catalyzed by the accelerating globalization, imminence of negative global environmental trends and challenges, their inherent complexity and wickedness. Expansion of the literature voicing critical perspectives on NBT, as well as growing attention towards its impacts on various aspects of human and non-human environment, is quite noticeable, echoing trends in tourism research in general.

One of the key overall themes in the international NBT literature is understanding the role of NBT within the context of a complex set of global transformations, also termed Antropocene (Gren & Huijbens, 2015; Mostafanezhad & Norum, 2020), and which, according to the review by Elmahdy et al., include environmental (climate change; land use and landscape change); social (population growth, urbanization, household composition, aging, health and well-being, work-leisure patterns, gender equality, values and lifestyle); economic (economic growth; sharing economy; fuel costs); political (political unrest; changes in border control; health risks; geopolitics); and technological transformations (transportation, high-tech equipment, information and communication technologies). Combination of these interconnected global trends is and will be significantly affecting the demand for NBT experiences, and the way people engage with nature.

Global anthropogenic transformations made striving for sustainability more urgent and prominent in the research literature, which aspires to find ways of harnessing tourism’s positive impacts, as well as exposing and mitigating the negative ones. In this regard, an ongoing theme within the NBT research has focused on the ontological need to rethink, re-evaluate and fundamentally transform human relationships with nature, which, being based on the nature-culture dichotomy, the Romantic traditions of framing nature as a spectacle, idealization of wilderness, and the “tourist gaze”, has brought to unsustainable outcomes (Büscher & Davidov, 2013; Fletcher, 2014; McCool & Bosak, 2016; Mostafanezhad & Norum, 2020).
A key focal area in the quest for sustainability is the examination of tumultuous relationship of tourism and nature conservation, specifically the ever-increasing demand for experiencing wildlife on the one hand and the decreasing wildlife populations on the other (Blumstein et al., 2017; Carr & Broom, 2018; Fatima, 2017; Fennell, 2014; Kline, 2018; Markwell, 2015; Prideaux & Pabel, 2018; Van der Duim et al., 2014). Wildlife, especially the megafauna, is the backbone of NBT in many countries, and understanding the impacts of tourism on various species, finding ways to improve the contribution of tourism to conservation, as well as the surrounding ethical, political, economic, managerial and other perspectives, constitutes a significant part of global NBT research. In contrast, wildlife conservation efforts in the Nordic countries have never had direct existential reliance on tourism, and the link between tourism and conservation is, therefore, less prominent in the Nordic NBT literature. Further, another important theme, especially within the NBT literature stemming from the developing countries is ensuring community participation, democratic governance, environmental justice and fair distribution of NBT benefits and costs. Patterns of colonialism, dispossession, displacement and conflict, often reproduced by NBT, are exposed and criticized in a notable share of NBT literature (e.g. Büscher & Davidov, 2013; Fennell, 2014; Mostadanezhad et al., 2016; Nepal & Saarinen, 2016; Van der Duim et al., 2014; Wearing & Schweinsberg, 2018). In the Nordic context sustainability research take a different shape, which is mostly focused on the mitigation and adaptation to global challenges, such as climate change, rather than, for example, resolution of internal economic conflicts or achieving justice for marginalized social groups. In short, the tight tourism-communities-conservation nexus, which is a focus of a lion’s share of international NBT research, especially in the developing countries, is of less relevance for the Nordic research context.

In line with the tourism research literature in general, the last decade of NBT research has been dominated by the importance of understanding tourism experience as well as managing nature for a desired NBT experience facilitation (Huddart & Stott, 2019; Kline, 2018; Newsome et al., 2013; Prebensen & Chen, 2017). This also suggests the increasing perception of nature as primarily a source of experiences, often coupled with unrealistic expectations of safety and control (Gstaettner et al., 2020), which is driven by the aforementioned global transformations (Elmahdy et al., 2017), exacerbating human disconnectedness from nature and its processes. Understanding tourist experiences has been a prominent theme in the Nordic NBT research, which largely follow the advances of the “Nordic school” of tourism experience research. Finally, an important theme in international NBT research literate is the importance of environmental education, interpretation and learning. Being a key component of ecotourism, offering opportunities for learning through nature interpretation as an indivisible part of NBT is highlighted in the majority of the reviewed textbooks (e.g. Fennell, 2014; Huddart & Stott, 2019; Ramirez & Santana, 2018; Wearing & Schweinsberg, 2018). As noticed above, the importance of guides and guiding has been prominent in Nordic NBT research, even though their role as educators and interpreters has received secondary importance comparing to risk management, conflict prevention and resolution, and overall NBT experience facilitation.

The future of nature-based tourism research

This paper was prepared a few months after the COVID-19 virus brought tourism in much of the world to a sudden stop. At the same time, bans on international travel
have stimulated increasing interest in domestic tourism, which also includes visiting nature areas in one’s own homeland (McGivney, 2020). Apart from giving nature a “breather” in the absence of tourism, COVID-19 exposed profound dependence of conservation of multiple nature areas and wildlife species, especially in developing countries, which are threatened by the plummeting of NBT-generated income (e.g. Mohammed, 2020; Turner-Cohen, 2020). Nature-based destinations have an opportunity to position themselves well for post-pandemic travel, introduce themselves to new travel audiences and even grow and sustain market share (Destination Analysts, 2020). All this supports our belief that NBT will continue to be highly important for visitors, businesses and natural areas that facilitate these experiences also in the future post-COVID-19 world.

In the Frontiers in Nature-based Tourism issue of SJHT 10 years ago, Fredman and Tyrväinen (2010) identified a shortage of studies examining the supply of NBT, including topics about innovation processes, business constraints and economic impact. They also requested more research about public-private cooperation given the many stakeholders involved. Based on the review we did for this paper, we argue there has been an increase in the number of studies looking at NBT from the supply side, especially about destination development, lifestyle entrepreneurship and the role of guides. Just like Fredman and Tyrväinen did in 2010, we also notice that many research questions are raised from practical needs, while more theoretically oriented research is quite limited. To conclude, when comparing Nordic research in the last 10 years with the broader international picture, we highlight the following topics as fruitful avenues for future NBT studies:

(i) Continuing efforts towards more knowledge about the different aspects of sustainable NBT;

(ii) policies to deal with the challenges related to both over- and under tourism, including crowding, visitor management as well as injections for contested destinations;

(iii) how experiences from nature can contribute to health and wellbeing, including restorative effects on humans and means for social distancing in times of pandemics;

(iv) the socioeconomics of NBT, including impacts on local communities, resilience, public-private collaborations and contributions from tourism to nature protection;

(v) use of new technology prior to, during and after the NBT experience, including marketing, product development and visitor monitoring;

(vi) better understand and match the NBT entrepreneurship with an increasingly multifaceted and urbanized demand, including lifestyle motivations, product innovation and market segmentation;

(vii) more emphasis on the development of methods and analytical approaches contributing to the theoretical advancement of the future NBT research agenda.

Finally, the international call for new, bold theoretical outlooks, the need to reimagine and fundamentally transform human-nature relationships towards sustainability and co-existence remains relevant for the Nordic context, especially so in times when visitation to nature areas are increasing as observed in recent years.
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