



Sustainability is Cool in Arctic Tourism, Sapporo, 28.6.2018

The Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment organised a seminar Sustainability is Cool in Arctic Tourism at Hokkaido University in Sapporo, Japan, on 28 June 2018. The seminar was a side-event to a meeting of the Arctic Economic Council, and it was organised in cooperation with Hokkaido University, Hokkaido Government, Hokkaido Committee for Economic Development, Team Finland, Business Finland, Visit Finland and the Embassy of Finland in Tokyo. Its aim was to present future prospects for Arctic tourism in Japan and Finland from the viewpoint of tourism operators and discuss the development of the Arctic tourism market. The possibilities and challenges of sustainable tourism in Japan and Finland were discussed from the perspectives of Arctic conditions, cooperation with indigenous peoples, access to the region and seasonality in tourism demand.

The seminar was attended by 80 persons interested in the development of the Arctic region and Arctic tourism. They represented tourism companies in Hokkaido, tourism studies at Hokkaido University, the Hokkaido University Arctic Research Center, and public administration representatives responsible for business development in the region, such as Hokkaido Committee for Economic Development and Hokkaido Government. The seminar participants also included representatives of the Arctic Economic Council, the Embassy of Finland in Tokyo, and Business Finland. Other Finnish participants were Director Mikko Turtiainen from Finnair and Project Director Rauno Posio from the Visit Arctic Europe project, who were among the speakers at the seminar. A more detailed seminar programme and a list of participants are attached.

Seminar discussions

The topics of the seminar addresses and discussions concerned themes that are important for both Finland and Japan with regard to the promotion of sustainable tourism and the development of future business possibilities in the Arctic region. Different kinds of certificates associated with sustainable tourism were also discussed.

Certificates as a tool to strengthen sustainability in the Arctic

The Japanese seminar participants said that the definition of sustainable tourism is more detailed in Finland than in Japan. Seeing sustainability as economic, cultural and social sustainability alongside environmental sustainability opened new perspectives. While representatives of Japanese tourism companies mentioned different dimensions of sustainability, they also said that no measures had been taken to communicate and highlight the sustainability of their activities to today's tourists who are well aware of these matters. In Finland, the marketing of tourism already utilises various sustainability indicators and will be making even more use of them in the future. At the moment, some 800 Finnish tourism companies have at least one domestic or international sustainability certificate, and the aim is to raise this number further in the next few years. Finland is in the process of examining the possibility to introduce a Sustainable Finland umbrella label (not a new certificate) for tourist destinations. Companies that have long-term plans have usually sustainable practices; otherwise they might not be successful in ten years' time. Moreover, foreign travel agencies that bring tourists into Finland often require that Finnish operators hold sustainability certificates. There have been no similar experiences in Japan. However, the seminar showed that the Japanese are eager to learn more about sustainability and discuss the matter further. A representative of the Japan Travel Bureau mentioned that

the Japanese Government have issued a sustainability strategy for 2030 with instructions to all Japanese businesses to adopt sustainable practices. However, large companies that could adopt sustainable practices without any large-scale risks have been reluctant to do so on a voluntary basis, and so far no concrete measures have been implemented regarding the sustainability strategy.

Seasonality in tourism

Both Hokkaido and Finland need to invest more in evening out the seasonal variations in tourism demand. Hokkaido is dependent on domestic tourism in the summer months and international tourism in the winter months. In Finland, the number of overnight stays by foreign tourists has two distinctive peaks; one from July to August and the other from December to March. Late spring and early autumn are less popular seasons. Domestic tourism demand, however, peaks in the summer months in terms of overnight stays. Hokkaido's appeal is that it has a cooler climate than many other Asian regions, and more than 90% of foreign tourists in Hokkaido come from other Asian countries. The cooler climate of Finnish summer, too, is attractive to tourists from Asian and Arab countries, for instance, creating possibilities to develop summer tourism. Both Hokkaido and Finland could increase their appeal by emphasising the positive associations of Arctic summer; the Arctic region is not only about ice and snow. Evening out seasonal variations in tourism demand is also an important sustainability factor.

Tourism and indigenous people's cultures and values

A viable living environment for the indigenous peoples and other people living in the Arctic region is essential for a competitive tourism industry both in Finland's Lapland and in Japan's Hokkaido. The Ainu are an indigenous people in Hokkaido and they have been associated with tourism in the region since the start of the 20th century. In the past, Ainu were presented as a tourism product because they are seen to be different from the majority population. This practice was strongly criticised, and since the first indigenous peoples' organisations emerged in the 1970s, the Ainu too have been given more rights. There have been a similar debate concerning Sámi tourism in the Finnish Lapland and elsewhere in the Sámi homeland in North Norway, North Sweden and the Kola Peninsula in Russia. A key condition for sustainable tourism is that indigenous peoples are involved in the tourism promotion efforts in the Arctic region and their homelands. It was also asked in the seminar to what extent indigenous peoples can be expected to participate in the tourism industry. Finland is in the process of drawing up ethical guidelines for Sámi tourism. The aim is to offer guidance to tourism operators in the Sámi community and outside it regarding the tourism potential of the Sámi culture in terms of products, presentations and marketing.

Overtourism is one of the biggest challenges of sustainable tourism

The tourism industry has seen a rapid global growth in recent years, and this trend will continue in the near future. One indication of this are the growth forecasts for tourism in Lapland. House of Lapland, the Finnish Lapland's official marketing and communications house, estimates that tourism demand in Lapland will grow by half by 2026: the number of registered overnight stays is estimated to grow from 4.4 million in 2016 to as much 10 million by 2026. This would be mean 6.5 million overnight stays by foreigners in Lapland, which is almost as many as in the whole of Finland or Hokkaido at present. Tourism demand is growing rapidly even in Hokkaido. Overtourism is one of the biggest challenges of sustainable tourism, and it is easier to avoid it than recover from it. Evening out the seasonal variations in tourism demand is one means of increasing local

carrying capacity. Traditionally, Finland has been more of a niche destination than a mass tourism destination, which so far has protected Finland against the negative effects of overtourism. However, there are already signs of temporarily excessive pressure on the carrying capacity in some areas either in terms of environment or in social and cultural terms; the locals are not always happy with all the aspects of increased tourism. In Hokkaido, overtourism is not a hot discussion topic yet.

Better access should not jeopardize sustainability

In Hokkaido, direct international flight connections to Europe are seen as an important factor, and the region has worked hard to improve the connections. For Finland, too, international access depends mostly on flight connections. Japanese often make a stop in Finland on their way to other parts of Europe. Finnair has been operating between Finland and Japan for 35 years. Initially, there was only one flight per week, but the number of flights has grown steadily, and now Finnair and its partner airlines fly 38 times a week between Finland and Japan. There is a great interest in Hokkaido to promote Finnair to open a direct flight between Sapporo and Helsinki. In addition to access to Finland and Japan's Hokkaido, access within the regions plays an important role in developing the tourism industry. It is important to develop access towards more sustainability in terms of both flight connections and transport services within the region. Finnair's sustainable development strategy, for example, observes all dimensions of sustainability in the company's operations and strives to develop them based on the idea that "sustainability is part of the company's DNA".

Conclusions and further measures

There is a lot of interest in the Arctic region among tourists and in the world in general, and Finland and Hokkaido in Japan are getting a fair share of this interest. The seminar in Hokkaido demonstrated a number of areas of interest for both Finland and Japan in terms of sustainable tourism in the Arctic region. The next step in the Arctic Economic Dialogue project is to use the seminar discussions as a foundation for further discussions between Finland and Japan regarding the future of the Arctic region especially in terms of tourism and sustainable tourism. Possibilities for cooperation exist even in the efforts to develop a tourism industry that takes into account indigenous cultures and sustainability certificates that promote sustainable tourism. Certificates are a means to monitor and anticipate the sustainability of the industry and develop it in all the dimensions of sustainability. Having certificates that are suitable for the Arctic region and that have the potential to promote climate change adaptation and mitigation will open up new possibilities for cooperation and skills exports. There are clear common factors in research focusing on Arctic tourism as well.

Sustainable tourism is a strategic opportunity to improve the wellbeing of the Arctic peoples, maintain the Arctic nature and culture and develop business opportunities in the Arctic region. Sustainability is good business, and an essential factor in the Arctic tourism industry; indeed, it justifies the existence of the Arctic tourism industry.