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Citation:

Helgadóttir, G and Dashper, K (2020) 20 years of Nordic rural tourism research: A review and future research agenda. *Scandinavian Journal of Hospitality and Tourism*. ISSN 1502-2250 DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/15022250.2020.1823246>

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Document Version:

Article (Accepted Version)

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in *Scandinavian Journal of Hospitality and Tourism* on 26 Sept 2020, available online: <http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/15022250.2020.1823246>

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20 years of Nordic rural tourism research: A review and future research agenda

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Accepted for publication in Scandinavian Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Research, 08/09/20

Abstract

This review focuses on how the concepts rural and rurality have appeared in the context of Nordic tourism and hospitality research published in the Scandinavian Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Research. All publications that contained the term rural or a synonym in one or more of these: title, keywords or abstract were considered. Content analysis was conducted based on the publications that have the term rural or a synonym in their title, keywords and abstract. Furthermore, the review considers the measurable impact of the publications on rural tourism and offers suggestions for fruitful future research directions. A brief theoretical framework is provided to analyse what rural and rurality refer to in the publications.

Introduction

Municipal leaders in rural communities in the Nordic region rarely ask tourists to stay away. This has however been the case in 2020. Before the Easter holidays, several municipal leaders in Norwegian communities with popular skiing destinations and many second homes pleaded for restrictions on domestic travel. This was to protect their ageing resident population from a Covid-19 outbreak and because the municipalities and local governments do not have sufficient health care infrastructure to serve the tourists. The government imposed a ban on travelling to the “hytte”, the second home that is important to many Norwegians, until after the Easter holidays. Even as this is written in August 2020, municipal leaders are asking domestic and international tourists to recognise the risk their arrival may pose to the small rural communities they would like to visit.

The geographical region that falls within the scope of Scandinavian Journal of Hospitality and Tourism, that is the Nordic, Baltic, and North-Atlantic region, is sparsely populated where vast regions are characterised as rural (European Commission, n.d.). Demographic development follows a global pattern of outmigration and an ageing population (Baldacchino, Helgadóttir & Mykletun, 2015, p. 1). Except for a few urban destinations, the main tourism attractions are in rural areas of the region. It would therefore be reasonable to find rural tourism as a theme in the Scandinavian Journal of Hospitality and Tourism (SJHT).

Current state of rural tourism research in a Nordic context

SJHT has published 56 articles that have rural or countryside in the title, as a key word or in the abstract. This accounts for 11% of the 520 articles published since the journal launched in 2001. However only one of these (Fredman & Tyrväinen, 2010) is among the journal’s most read articles, according to the journal

statistics dating back to 2011 (Taylor & Francis, n.d.a), and among those most cited in the last three years (Taylor & Francis, n.d. b). In terms of methodology the split between qualitative and quantitative research design is even; 29 publications can be classified as qualitative whereas 27 are quantitative. The most common data collection methods are surveys, followed by interviews and observations. Only four studies used a mixed method approach and two employed an auto-ethnographic approach.

A content analysis identified what aspects of rural tourism the publications addressed. By looking only at the papers that authors define as being about rural tourism by including the term “rural” in the title, keywords and abstract, we find 20 publications. Interestingly the most cited articles of the 20 are overview articles that do not focus on the rural specifically although the term features in the abstracts (Fredman & Tyrväinen, 2010; Müller, 2007). The 20 publications have 84 keywords, although only 7 are used in more than one publication; rural tourism, rural development, Norway, Sweden, tourism, local food and farm tourism.

Volume 15 issues 1-2 were special issues on rural tourism (Baldacchino, Helgadóttir & Mykletun, 2015). Volume 14 issue 4 is a special issue on tourism and new mobilities in sparsely populated areas. These display a diversity of topics such as tourist experiences of driving highways in sparsely populated areas (Dahl & Dalbakk, 2015) and landscape aesthetics (Vinge & Flø, 2015; Nordbø & Prestholdt, 2015). Tourism development and tourism entrepreneurship were addressed through the topics of identities (Heldt-Cassel & Petterson, 2015; Baldacchino, 2015), destination development strategies (Brouder & Fullerton, 2015; Engeset & Heggem, 2015) and conservation of natural and cultural heritage (Svels, 2015). There are also papers in the 2015 special issue that are not defined by title, key words or abstract as rural tourism, although they do clearly deal with an aspect of rural tourism (Varley & Cater, 2015; Sigurðardóttir & Helgadóttir, 2015; Lemelin, Koster, Bradford, Strickert and Molinsky, 2015; Schmutde, 2015).

Frisvoll, Forbord and Blekesaune (2016) define rural tourism as “the cultural consumption of a rustic and idealised rurality” (p. 77). Baldacchino (2015) writes about local food as a resource for rural tourism development and suggests the key marketing terms: “authentic, grandmother, wholesome, frugal, rustic, genuine, time-honoured, and handed down from generation to generation” (p. 235). Brandt and Haugen (2014) cite Bell (2006) on what qualities constitute the rural idyll; farming, remoteness, wild landscapes, and “a simple life characterised by notions of safety, gentleness and rusticity ... the presence of animals, beautiful vistas, peace and quiet, community, domesticity, tradition and pure foods” (pp 102). Vinge and Flø (2015) and Prestholdt and Nordbø (2015) explore the aesthetic preferences for rural landscape, identifying perceived threats to the idyllic rural landscape such as reforestation and built environment condition respectively. Bocz, Pinzke, and Nilsson (2012) add the element of repurposing traditional agricultural buildings as an attraction in rural tourism, showing that both customers and providers value an authentic, traditional look.

Hjalager, Kwiatkowski, and Larsen (2018) point out that the rural idyll is in a sense a ‘positive backwardness’ and that rural entrepreneurship is caught in “a dichotomy between authenticity and modernization” (p. 1) and their research show a weakness in rural tourism business lack of innovation. Sievänen, Neuvonen and Pouta (2011) question whether rural tourism offers attractive enough services to realize the potential of national park visitation for their business. Engeset (2020) suggests that the way rural tourism is framed in terms of farming and lifestyle entrepreneurship does not adequately capture the rural tourism business management, particularly the accommodation sector. An aspect of rural tourism entrepreneurship that may not be fully compatible with the rural idyll is the role of in-migrants, that is entrepreneurs who are new to the rural community (Iversen & Jacobsen, 2016).

Nordic and international research in rural tourism

Globally rural tourism research published in English language journals can be categorized in various ways but there are four main themes of research that form a useful frame; conceptualization, contextualization, experiencing, and strategy and management (Roberts, Hall & Mitchell, 2017). Conceptualization regards the definition(s) of rural tourism. Contextualization refers to the physical, social and cultural context in which rural tourism takes place, whereas experiencing focuses on the demand side of tourists as customers seeking experiences and how they value these. Strategy and management look at rural tourism from the supply side; business and government planning, development and management of rural tourism.

Conceptualization: There is variation in how administrative bodies at different levels define areas as rural or urban. In addition to population density, the density of the built environment, the proportional share of employment in agriculture, access to infrastructure and services have been used to classify areas as rural or urban (Dijkstra, Hamilton, Lall & Wahba, 2020). The field of health care management has paid particular attention to the concept of rurality in terms of access to health services and an ageing population (Ocaña-Riola & Sánchez-Cantalejo, 2005; UN Statistical Commission, 2020).

However, the definition of a destination as rural is more subjective than categorical. “Social representations of rurality cannot exist without imagining some form of rural locality, whilst the definition of rural localities relies upon the actualization of particular ideas about what rurality should be like” (Woods, 2010, p. 10). Cloke (2006) notes that “the rural” is both an imaginative space, connected to cultural meanings ranging from the idyllic to the oppressive, and a material object of lifestyle desire for many, a place to go visit on vacation, to move to or farm in. Rural tourism builds on these cultural imaginings of rural communities and lifestyles to entice predominantly urban tourists to engage with supposedly simpler and more traditional ways of life (Wright & Eaton, 2018).

Rurality is frequently defined in opposition to urbanity and tourism often plays an important role in challenging or blurring divisions between “rural” and “urban”. In their case study of the Swedish skiing resort of Sälen, Thulemark and Engström (2014) argue that regions that would often be characterized as “rural” in terms of population density, development and environmental characteristics often feel more urban than rural, largely as a result of the changes that tourism bring to these places. Li et al. (2019) also explore the role of tourism in the social construction of distinctions between rural and urban spaces, but in China. Therefore, to capture the complex and nuanced reality, conceptualizing the rural-urban as a continuum rather than a dichotomy may be more useful (Ocaña-Riola & Sánchez-Cantalejo, 2005). Carson, Carson & Lundmark (2014) use eight categories to describe rurality, some of which are rather subjective than objective but deal with geographical distance, dependency on external actors but also on the diversity and local dynamics that make up each community undermining generalizations about “the rural”.

Rurality is a quality that attracts tourism (OECD, 1994). Kordel (2016, p. 205) notes that “what shapes the cultural meaning of rural areas is highly dynamic and repeatedly re-negotiated by various actors, mostly with urban viewpoints”, including tourists. Some papers in SJHT have drawn on the cultural meanings of rural places and landscapes (Tyrväinen et al., 2001; Brandth & Haugen, 2014; Vinge & Flø, 2015; Prestholdt & Nordbø, 2015), but the majority of studies do not engage with the cultural and contested meanings of the rural that form the basis for rural tourism.

Contextualization: “Rural tourism” may thus vary between different contexts and geographic spaces, and not all tourism in rural areas is best defined as rural tourism; to merit consideration as such it needs a rural context and focus. Melsen (2012) starts her discussion of rural tourism by posing it as tourism that takes place outside metropolitan areas and lists a variety of tourism niches or activities as rural tourism before turning to Lane (1994) for a more qualified definition that is widely adopted. This adds four dimensions to the rural localisation; functionally rural - that is based on small-scale enterprise closeness to nature in sparsely populated areas; rural scale of buildings and communities; traditional slow and organic growth

based on family enterprise for the good of the community; and variability due to the complexity of local development and histories.

Roberts, Hall and Morag (2017) place rural tourism in the context of dynamics of rural restructuring, sustainable rural development and image construction and marketing based on natural and cultural heritage. Community engagement and developing tourism to maximise local community benefits is a frequent topic in international research. Su et al. (2019) consider the economic benefits of tourism development to rural residents in Hetu Town, China, whereas Petrović et al. (2018) question the role of tourism in the development of rural communities in post-socialist Serbia and Slovenia.

Research published in SJHT suggests that development in the Nordic context potentially poses slightly different questions to that within the global south or Eastern Europe, as here development may be less about overcoming poverty and post-industrial decline and more concerned with issues of environmental sustainability (Hiltunen, 2007), identifying innovation gaps and opportunities (Hjalager, Kwiatkowski & Larsen, 2018; Yachin, 2019) and integrating tourism into local and regional planning (Müller, 2006). Nicholls and Amelung (2015) base their work on climate change impact on rural tourism resilience on rural geography characteristics that are commonly accepted: physical remoteness, limited access to services, lack of infrastructure, dependency on dominant industries, lack of employment, and a declining population trend.

Experiencing: Argent (2011, p. 184) argues that there are “many different rurals”, and tourism is one important way that rural spaces and communities are imagined, experienced and consumed (Dashper, 2014). Experience is a popular topic of research in relation to rural tourism, and international studies have taken a variety of approaches. For example, Bardone and Kaaristo (2014) draw on the concept of “sensecapes” to explore the embodied experiences of hosts and guests in southern Estonia, while Kastenholtz et al. (2018) consider experiences of rural tourism in Portugal through the concepts of arousal, memory and satisfaction. Jepson and Sharpley (2015) consider the emotional aspects of rural tourism experiences in the English countryside, and Griffiths (2014) offers a more personal insight into the lived experiences of voluntourism in rural India.

The concept of experience has not been the explicit focus for research on rural tourism published in SJHT, but experience is necessarily important to many of the case studies. For example, Frisvoll, Forbord and Blekesaune’s (2016) study of local food consumption by tourists in rural Norway does not centralise the idea of experience in discussion and analysis, but shows that for these tourists, the opportunity to consume local produce is a key expectation of their tourism experiences. Similarly, Baldacchino (2015) positions food as an important part of the experience economy that underpins much rural tourism.

Strategy and management: Globally, rural tourism has long been recognised as a possible strategy to help aid development and fight against poverty in the global south (Asley & Roe, 2001), or to revitalize rural regions suffering population decline and stagnation in the global north (Goulding, Horran & Tozzi, 2014). However, there has been sustained critique of the potential of tourism to transform regions in ways that benefit rural residents, and so much research attention continues to be paid to the ways in which rural tourism can be managed to try and benefit local stakeholders (Müller, 2006). Gao and Wu (2017) consider how more equitable development can be achieved in the context of rural China, while Ezeuduji (2017) identifies risks and contingencies associated with rural tourism development in sub-saharan Africa.

A significant focus of research on rural tourism relates to marketing and product development and identifying the expectations of tourists. Lewis and D'Alessandro (2019) consider motivations of senior tourists in Australia, whereas Chin, Chin and Wong (2019) focus on environmental sustainability and marketing. Understanding visitor expectations has been considered by several contributions to SJHT (Tyrväinen et al., 2001; Sievänen, Neuvonen & Pouta, 2011; Bocz, Pinzke & Nilsson, 2012), although there have been no studies published in this area in relation to rural tourism for eight years.

Rural tourism provides employment opportunities in rural regions, which can be an important contributor to economic sustainability. Tourism is highly seasonal as the tourism offering may rely on appropriate weather conditions. Thulemark (2017) conceptualises seasonal workers in the Swedish mountains as members of an occupational community, whereas Piso (2016) explores the importance of migrant labour to rural tourism in England. In SJHT, Tuulentie and Heimitun (2014) explore seasonal workers' mobilities and place attachment, and Iversen and Jacobsen (2016) have also considered the importance of migrant labour, this time in relation to entrepreneurs in rural Norway. Möller and Amcoff (2018) also argue that tourism has important effects on localised populations in rural areas, focusing on Sweden.

Rural tourism is often positioned as an opportunity for diversification in the face of declining agricultural employment opportunities for rural residents. Li, Mi and Zhang (2020) found that farmers in their research in rural China were willing to diversify into rural tourism, however Xue and Kerstetter's (2019) ethnographic study illustrates how transitioning from agriculture to tourism requires a long learning process. In SJHT, Brandt and Haugen (2014) consider how farm tourist hosts embody ideas about rurality, highlighting the gendered aspects of tourist expectations. Heldt Cassel and Pettersson (2015) also consider gendered expectations and how women in rural Sweden cope with tensions associated with the practicalities of both service (tourism) and agricultural roles, and the performance of gendered farming identities. Engeset (2020) does not focus on gender but considers the importance of family capital and resilience in the survival of rural hotels in Norway.

This discussion illustrates how rural tourism research published in SJHT focuses on many of the same core issues identified in international research. However the specific contexts of Nordic rural regions - in terms of landscape, population and relative wealth, for example - may encourage more focus on some issues, such as environmental impacts and employment, and less on those to do with the potential role of tourism in poverty alleviation which is a key focus for much international research on rural tourism (e.g. Rid, Ezeudji & Pröbstl-Haider, 2014; Gao & Wu, 2017).

The future of rural tourism research

In the publications analysed, the authors describe rural attributes rather than engaging in theoretical definitions of rurality. The absence of a definitional framework around the concept of rurality and the rural is a theoretical weakness in this field. The relatively low impact of the publications may indicate that the term "rural tourism" is not particularly useful, which is evident in that many papers in the journal are about tourism in peripheral areas although the term "rural" does not feature in titles and keywords. On a practical epistemological note, the diversity of keywords used to describe the rural tourism research in SJHT makes it difficult for rural tourism researchers to relate the publications to broader themes, theories and methodologies, which may result in limited impact of the research published.

We suggest that the four themes identified by Roberts, Hall & Mitchell (2017) as used in the previous section provide a useful framework for developing a future research agenda for rural tourism research in the Nordic context.

Conceptualization: To date, most research published in SJHT has not engaged with the concepts of "rurality" and "the rural", which underpin all rural tourism. Kordel (2016, p. 208) argues that "Rural tourism depends on individual perceptions of what is rural" and so greater understanding is needed of how different stakeholders understand rurality and the role of tourism in both reproducing and contesting ideas about the rural. These ideas are historically, culturally and geographically specific and in constant flux. We encourage researchers to engage with broader theories of rurality to enhance understanding of how such discourses shape rural tourism in a Nordic context.

Contextualization: Globally, much research on rural tourism considers if and how it may contribute to poverty alleviation and community resilience. To date, research published in SJHT has not focused on poverty. However, many rural communities in the Nordic region suffer from weak local labour markets, limited public services and shrinking and ageing populations, as younger residents move to urban areas for greater work, education, social and cultural opportunities, meaning that many rural residents in the Nordic area are at risk of suffering relative poverty. Future research could usefully engage with the concept of resilience and consider both the opportunities and challenges rural tourism offers for peripheral Nordic communities to try and attract and retain younger residents and the associated economic, social and cultural benefits this can bring.

Experiencing: As noted above, the concept of experience has with few exceptions not been a major focus for rural tourism research published in SJHT, despite it proving a popular framework in international research. Focusing on the embodied and emotional aspects of rural tourism will enhance understanding about tourist expectations and support the development of more attractive rural tourism experience offerings that can contribute to the success of rural tourism enterprises.

Strategy and management: The (post) Covid-19 era poses many challenges for the tourism sector, yet rural tourism may become more appealing as tourists seek escape to remote areas, engaging with nature and keeping away from densely populated urban centres. At the same time, climate change is a real threat to many rural regions, and the Nordic area is likely to suffer from changes in climate and landscape that may affect rural tourism offerings. Future research will need to consider rural tourism strategy and management to try and mitigate these challenges and capitalize on any opportunities to develop tourism to support rural community resilience.

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