# Social sustainability at tourist destinations — local opinions on their development and future in northern Finland

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#### **Abstract**

Tourism industry has developed into major economy that utilises the natural resources in western Lapland, Finland. Due to its huge growth, the question of sustainability is increasingly essential. This article focuses on social sustainability from the viewpoint of the local inhabitants at the tourist destinations of Ylläs and Levi. These resorts have grown since 1970s in the surroundings of the old villages of Ylläsjärvi, Äkäslompolo and Sirkka. The study was conducted through telephone interviews. A total of 59 people from all three villages were interviewed and asked about social sustainability issues. Overall, the people were satisfied with the present situation but they were worried about excessively rapid growth in the future. The finds were similar to the results of a study in the early 1990s. One of the key notions was that Ylläsjärvi seemed to differ from Äkäslompolo and Sirkka. The people in Ylläsjärvi thought that they as villagers and individuals had had more influence on the development of tourism than the people in other studied villages had had. In Äkäslompolo, people considered non-local entrepreneurs as the primus motor in tourism development, and they more often reported contradictions between tourism and reindeer herding. The villagers in Sirkka at Levi most often felt that they had no real impact on the development of tourism. One important issue with respect to social sustainability was that local people felt they had the opportunity to affect the physical and cultural environment they lived in; the actions of local outsiders easily created contradictions and conflicts that might harm economical development. The fair allocation of the costs and benefits of tourism industry was also key issue for social sustainability.

Keywords: Lapland, Levi, nature-based tourism, social sustainability, Ylläs

#### 1. Introduction

About 30-40 years ago, rural villages in Finnish Lapland were quiet and remote communities. Tourism was making itself felt, but the volume was low and tourists were minor seasonal phenomena. Tourism as a major industry, as well as large tourist centres with multiple ski slopes, fancy hotels and spas, were just the wild dreams of a few individuals. The construction of tourist destinations and large-scale development really started in the 1980s when the potential of the fells was discovered (Regional Council of Lapland 2007a). In the early 1990s, Finland underwent a severe recession and many entrepreneurs went bankrupt, but at present (2007) there is a huge boom in investment and construction underway in the study areas of Ylläs and Levi in northwest Lapland (Fig. 1). The limits of growth are again being discussed, but the tourist industry seems to be unworried about this issue (Regional Council of Lapland 2007b).

There is no doubt that the tourism industry is crucial for the regional economy. Tourism has created more jobs and new kinds of jobs and services, which means that local people can stay in their home district and still earn a living more often. (Kauppila 2004, Vatanen *et al.* 2006) Meanwhile, the structure of livelihoods has changed and so has the social and physical environment. People have lived through the rapid change that is still going on.

The tourist destinations Ylläs and Levi have three old villages that have met these changes: Sirkka (at Levi; www.levi.fi), Äkäslompolo, and Ylläsjärvi (both at Ylläs; www.yllas.fi, Fig. 1). The common characteristics shared by these villages are that they are old rural communities where the basis of life and the look of the villages have changed. In the sense of social sustainability, on whose terms development is planned and implemented plays a key role (Swarbrooke 2002). If local people are not involved in the progress, there is a reasonable risk that the outcome will not support local cultural practises and features, which can easily lead to the inhabitants feeling they have become outsiders with respect to the tourism economy and vice versa. In this study, we investigated local people's opinions and experiences regarding the development of tourism in the villages of Ylläsjärvi, Äkäslompolo, and Sirkka (Fig. 1). The primary objectives were to estimate the degree to which the local people participated or were heard in the planning processes according to their own experiences and the opportunities and threats those people saw for the future.

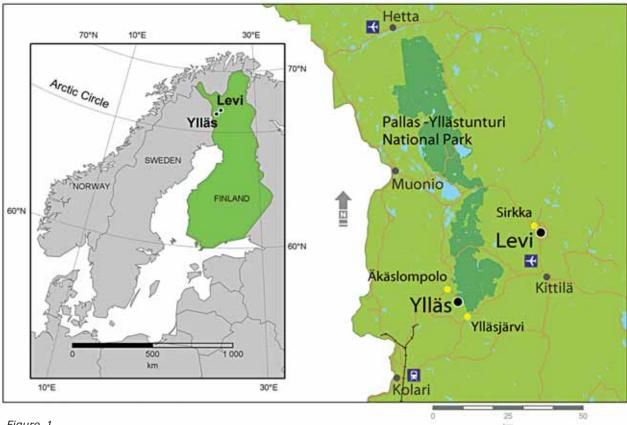


Figure 1.
Ylläs and Levi tourist destinations and local villages Ylläsjärvi, Äkäslompolo and Sirkka.

A practical task was to provide planners and administrators with information concerning the social sustainability of tourism. The study was connected to the work of Mettiäinen (2007) and Tuulentie (2007). This study also took a closer look at some of the topics based on their research and tested them by taking a larger sample. The idea was to assess whether their findings based on focusgroup research could be generalized to larger populations.

#### 2. Material and methods

The data were gathered through telephone interviews that were conducted in the autumn 2006. Questionnaire for telephone interview are given in the Appendix 1. The potential respondents were chosen using simple random sampling (Bernard 1995) from a total population that constitutes the people aged between 18 and 70 living in

the villages of Ylläsjärvi, Äkäslompolo, and Sirkka. The total size of the population was 928, and 120 people (40 per village) were sampled from this population. A pre-interview questionnaire was mailed to these people a few days before the telephone calls, and thus they were able to become familiar with the questions and topics. Many of the respondents also used the form as a backup during the interview. Finally, 57 people were interviewed by telephone, representing 6.1% of the population: there were 21 people from Äkäslompolo, which is 5.3% of the whole population of the village, 20 people from Sirkka, or 4.9% of the village population, and 16 people from Ylläsjärvi, which amounted to 12.2% of the village population. The data were analyzed qualitatively and quantitatively. The qualitative data are presented here as cultural material with shared meanings and interpretations concerning sustainability and the future (D'Andrade 1995, Strauss & Quinn 1997).

#### 3. Results

There was a positive general attitude towards this study. Only three people refused to participate in the telephone interview: in one case, the respondent was finally able to express his opinions. A few of the respondents doubted whether they were the right people to contribute to the study.

## 3.1. Present situation at the tourist destinations

A total of 74% of the respondents were satisfied with the present situation. Satisfaction means better job opportunities and services and bringing more life to a rural village. Around 33% of the satisfied respondents stressed that their village would be dead without tourism. With respect to Ylläsjärvi, the villagers were pleased that the village was still a very peaceful place and had retained its original characteristics. The large potential for growth and co-operation between entrepreneurs and other villagers was seen as positive. However, 32% of all respondents (though pleased) stressed that their opinion concerned the present situation, but that some dark clouds could be seen on the horizon; the excessive growth and high rate of the construction of ski-slopes, hotels and infrastructure could spoil the character and environment of the destination. Many inhabitants of Ylläs considered the development at Levi with its Swiss-style chalets (Fig. 2) and urban infrastructure (Fig. 3) as something that Ylläs should not adopt.



Figure 2. Swiss style chalets do not represent traditional Lappish building style.



Figure 3.
Some see Levi centre too urban.

Those respondents who were unhappy with the situation were of the view that the volumes of tourism and construction are already excessive and that the needs and opinions of the local people as well as the ecological dimensions of tourism and construction have been ignored. The income from tourism was allocated to non-locals and they stressed that the quality of products and services was often replaced by increased volume.

The degree of satisfaction of the villagers varied according to the village. Everyone (16 people) was pleased with the present situation in Ylläsjärvi whereas on the other side of the fell, in Ylläs in Äkäslompolo, only every second villager shared this feeling. The difference was statistically significant (Table 1). At the Levi tourist destination in Sirkka, 75% of the respondents stated that they were satisfied with the present conditions. In Ylläsjärvi, the people stated that the village had remained alive and the genuine village image prevailed. In Äkäslompolo, the positive things included better opportunities for jobs and services while on the negative side, the villagers stressed that the municipality of Kolari (to which Ylläs belongs) was too eager in its policy of striving for limitless growth while not listening to local people's opinions. In Sirkka, the villagers pointed out the same things as in Äkäslompolo, and they were proud of the success of Levi. Nevertheless, rapid growth frightened some of the villagers, who even felt that there might not be enough room for the native population.

Table 1.

Opinions according to village as to whether the respondent was content with the development of the tourist resort.

			VILL	AGE					
Content?	Äkäslompolo		Ylläsjärvi		Sirkka		Total		χ²-test, p-value
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	
No	10	47.6	0	0	5	8.8	15	26.3	0.005
Yes	11	52.4	16	100	15	26.3	42	73.7	0.005
Total	21	100	16	100	20	35.1	57	100	

#### 3.2. Changes in nature and everyday life

Every second respondent reported that he or she had observed tourism-initiated changes in local nature. Most of the changes dealt with the landscape and other negative changes were trampled undergrowth, less peace in nature, and pristine nature being more distant than earlier. People used to be able enjoy nature from their home yard but nowadays, they needed to travel some distance to experience the same thing. However, in some cases, skiing and walking tracks have made it easier to enjoy nature. The fact that the location of trails is being constantly changed due to construction was seen as a problem.

The growth and development of the tourist destinations do have impacts on the everyday life of the villagers. A total of 75% of the respondents mentioned that the growth has affected their life one way or another. The impacts were considered both positive and negative: examples of positive changes included better traffic connections and conditions and that there were more services available.

The negative changes included tourists entering people's private yards and even peeping through windows to get a glimpse of the Lappish way of life. The interviewees also mentioned that the community spirit had lessened in the modern-day situation. There were also social problems: seasonal jobs and relationships and late night shifts caused domestic problems. Motorized activities make the residential environment noisy and the people particularly complained about snowmobiles going along walking routes.

# 3.3. Contradictions between actors and activities

There were contradictions between the tourism industry

stakeholders and other actors, which had been observed by 56% of the respondents. Most of the contradictions were between tourism and reindeer herding (25% of the respondents had made observations) or tourism and nature conservation (21% of respondents). Reindeer pastures and skiing tracks were often located in the same areas and former pastures were now cabin zones. Reindeer often wandered over ski tracks and they entered cabin yards and patios, ate flowers and left their droppings. Reindeer and tourists frequently used the same places, and herders complained that their livelihood was no longer respected. Most of the problems between reindeer herding and tourism were reported by Äkäslompolo villagers (47.6% in Äkäslompolo, 12% in Ylläsjärvi and 10% in Sirkka) and the difference between villages was statistically significant (Pearson  $\chi^2$ -test; P < 0.01).

A total of 21% of the respondents saw contradictions between tourism and nature conservation. Pallas-Yllästunturi National Park, which is located close to both tourist destinations of Ylläs and Levi, has regulations that some respondents considered hampered the opportunities to develop tourism in the area. One of these regulations is a ban on snowmobiling, which is only permitted for reindeer herders and authorities. Some other environmental restrictions were also seen as negative barriers whereas some respondents felt sorry about the transformation of former nature conservation areas into holiday village zones.

#### 3.4. Actors steering development

According to the views of the local people in the studied villages, the foremost actors in the development have been non-local entrepreneurs (Table 2). Every second respondent mentioned such an actor. Opinions varied according to the village: in Ylläsjärvi, only one quarter of

Table 2.

Actors that have had an impact on the development of tourist resorts according to the villagers in Äkäslompolo, Ylläsjärvi and Sirkka. The statistically significant differences are presented in last column.

		TOURIS	TRES	ORT			
		YLLÄS		LEVI	N	χ²-test p-value	
Actor		Äkäslompolo Ylläsjärvi Sirkka		Sirkka			
Non-local	have had no influence %	33.3	75.0	45.0	28	0.000	
entrepreneurs	have had influence %	66.7	25.0	55.0	29	0.038	
	Total %	100	100	100			
	N	21	16	20	57		
Municipality	have had no influence %	57.1	81.3	30.0	31	0.000	
	have had influence %	42.9	18.8	70.0	26	0.009	
	Total %	100.0	100.0	100.0			
	N	21	16	20	57		
Local inhabitants	have had no influence %	47.6	37.5	65.0	29	0.243	
	have had influence %	52.4	62.5	35.0	28	0.243	
	Total %	100.0	100.0	100.0			
	N	21	16	20	57		

the respondents mentioned non-local entrepreneurs whereas in Äkäslompolo, two thirds of the respondents pointed to such actors. The differences between the villages were statistically significant ( $\chi^2$ -test; P < 0.05), and especially Äkäslompolo differed from Ylläsjärvi ( $\chi^2$ -test; P = 0.012).

Ylläsjärvi villagers named themselves most often as actors who had influenced the development of their home district whereas in the neighbouring village of Äkäslompolo just 15 km away, the people stressed the impact of outsiders. In Sirkka, 70% of the villagers mentioned most often the municipality (Kittilä at Levi in the village of Sirkka) as the driving force behind the development: the corresponding figures were 43% in Äkäslompolo and 19% in Ylläsjärvi. The differences were statistically significant ( $\chi^2$ -test, P < 0.01).

#### 3.5. Local people and power

The local inhabitants in Ylläs and Levi did not feel that they had a very good chance of having any major impact on development or the operation of the tourist destinations in general. The Ylläsjärvi villagers stressed that they have had a major impact on tourism as is, but that it presumably referred to the village image and services that were available in Ylläsjärvi. Fewer opportunities were seen in Äkäslompolo and Sirkka, where some of the villagers considered that they had no influence at all.

Although there were great doubts, one third of the respondents felt that they have had at least some sort of impact on development. Again, there were differences between the villages: in Ylläsjärvi, people felt that they have had an impact (50% of the respondents) more often than the villagers of Äkäslompolo (33%) or Sirkka (25%), but the differences were not statistically significant. Men seemed to think that they have had more influence (55%) than women did (12%) which is a statistically significant difference ( $\chi^2$ -test; P<0.01).

Figure 4 shows the reasons why people felt that had had no impact on the development of a tourist destination. *Some other reasons* were the lack of time or the fact that municipality had already made the decisions.

Every second respondent mentioned being interested in becoming involved in the planning. The reasons for disinterest were the lack of time, age or the heavy workload without any compensation. The task is often left to professionals, especially in Sirkka.

The most popular way to participate in the development of tourism was through some regularly assembled council or similar such organ. The people stressed the importance of a broadly based council with representation from every relevant stakeholder. Surveys were also seen (27%) as good tools, especially by busy people, and 20% saw village associations as being good channels of influence.

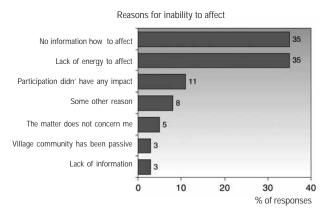


Figure 4.
Reasons for the inability to have an influence.

#### 3.6. The future

The local people considered that the tourist centres had a very or quite positive future. Only 12% of the respondents believe the future was quite bleak; no one considered it was very bleak. The reasons for the positive outlook on the future were beautiful nature, good reputation even abroad, strong competitive position, and good possibilities for growth.

The threats were in excessive and runaway growth, which concerned almost one third of the respondents. The worries were at their peak in Ylläsjärvi and Äkäslompolo; in Sirkka, the villagers were concerned with the possibility of the village becoming a place of wild partying. Other future threats and worries were the ethos of only thinking about money, the social conditions of the employees and worldwide crises such as wars, economic recessions, climate change etc.

The local people were of the opinion that the most important way to develop the tourist centres in the future would be to create new services, better logistics facilities and more facilities related to nature and sport (Fig. 5). Investing in the quality and diversity of products and facilities instead of increasing the volume of existing services was seen as the primary guideline. One example for improving quality was to embody local expressions and content in products.

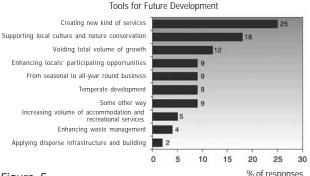


Figure 5.
Tools for future development.

When referring to better logistics, the locals meant better road connections between villages and the closest towns, more sidewalks and crosswalks, a railway line extending to the tourist centres and better coach connections during the low season. The local people expressed their wish for more facilities related to sport and nature, e.g. hiking routes. The current routes needed better interconnections. They also wanted activities to be located along these routes and they proposed a better opportunity for climbing, which was considered as one way of developing tourism from a seasonal into a year-round business.

#### 4. Discussion

According to Järviluoma (1993), the local people in the municipality of Kolari felt particularly positive about tourism. However, they wished for a slowing down in the growth of tourism and for the number of tourists to stay at the level at that time. Among the positive impacts of tourism mentioned by the local people in 1993 were jobs, better living conditions, better logistic connections and better leisure activities. The negative aspects were damage to

the environment. Criticisms also focused on too much money being invested in tourism, which hampered other development within the municipality (Järviluoma 1993).

The results of this study are very similar to a study conducted 15 years ago. The opinions of the locals had not significantly changed. They were still satisfied with the present situation at the tourist centres even though various concerns had emerged over the growth of tourism, which had taken a huge step forward over the intervening years; for example, accommodation capacity had increased by almost 100%.

How is this possible? One slightly cynical answer might be that people are always complaining about change but in the end, they are happy with the results. People just do not know what is best for them. Another point of view is mandatory readjustment. People who do not accept changes in the social and natural environment have to move away or just learn to live with those changes. Those who decide to stay, reluctantly or with a cheerful attitude, will adapt to the new circumstances over the passage of time. The bonds to one's place of birth tend to be strong, but the longing for past days and environments is not a very sound strategy for everyday life.

Globally, the findings of this study are not new. The local people living in the vicinity of the tourist destinations seemed to be always happy with the present conditions. The problem is that the limits of acceptable change seemed to be very elusive. New inhabitants make up for those who have moved away, and they bring different meanings, experiences, and emotions to a particular area. Those who stayed have adapted and readjusted to the new conditions. All this can lead to no limiting forces against change and in the end, the tourist destinations lose the values that they once possessed (Johnson & Snepenger 2006).

Be as it may, the local people in the vicinity of the tourist destinations of Ylläs and Levi seemed to be quite satisfied. There were problems between reindeer herding and tourism, unfortunate changes in landscape, the locals have not always been taken into consideration in the planning processes, and seasonal jobs caused some social problems but in the end, more jobs and a better economy apparently compensated for the losses. Although adaptability is high in these villages, there is no doubt that the course of future development matters in terms of social sustainability. The message from the villagers is clear: "More quality, less

quantity". Quality means new services and content with local culture and tradition playing important roles. The key issues are respect for nature, landscape and culture.

The three villages we studied – Ylläsjärvi, Äkäslompolo and Sirkka – all live off tourism and its accompanying phenomena. According to our results, the people in Ylläsjärvi seemed to be the most satisfied; at least they expressed fewer complaints and concerns. The villagers felt that they had been able to influence the development of tourism and that the village image had been maintained to such an extent that the original could still be seen. They did not feel outsiders. Our data are insufficient with regards a comprehensive analysis as to which way is the best way. More valuable factors and facts should be investigated. However, planning at every level can learn from the findings and good experiences should be taken into account.

The competition between the tourist destinations extends to the villages. The people in Ylläsjärvi and Äkäslompolo, which belong to Ylläs, saw Levi as a scenario that should not be repeated in their localities. By this, they meant the urban-like infrastructure and false village image (Fig. 3) that has nothing to do with the real Lappish countryside. The feeling is mutual. The people of Sirkka (in Levi) also saw the course taken in Ylläs as something to avoid; it was a sleepy tourist destination with no competitive potential. There is no doubt that these interpretations rise from cultural backgrounds where neighbours are always finding something to undervalue or to be jealous of. At best, this cultural model (Shore 1996) can sustain the diversity of tourist destinations, which was something that also our respondents felt important.

Taking care of social sustainability is a challenge when large investments and external financing is the key driving forces that determine development. Changes in the natural and cultural environment are inevitable, and it is a question of the acceptable pace of change and who and what provide the driving forces.

#### 5. Conclusions

Local culture and locals' opinions about development should be taken into consideration more effectively because having outsiders in charge of progress creates contradictions between the actors. The allocation of costs and benefits is a crucial question: if the locals primarily have to bear the costs (i.e. social problems, damaged nature and landscape, "new outsider bosses"), it will evoke conflict at some level or another. The studies by Tuulentie (2007) and Mettiäinen (2007) have shown similar findings and conclusions.

Another point is that local people's satisfaction affects the quality of services, which is not good for the business. Tourists will not return when they feel they are unwelcome or that they are welcome just for their money. A third point is that local people's satisfaction is also to the entrepreneur's advantage. When the local community supports the business, or at least has nothing against it, things will proceed much easier. This applies especially to land-use issues.

Finally, the fourth ethical point is in fact at the core of cultural and social sustainability. Making decisions and implementing operations that have significant impacts on local life involves the responsibility to ask about, study and assess local opinions, hopes and fears indicated through social and cultural meanings.

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## **BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

1. Year of birth	2. Place of birth	
3. How long time you have	lived at your present h	ome municipality?
all my life	years	
4. Do you own land in touris	t resort?	
☐ no ☐ yes		
5. Do you have incomes fro	m tourist business?	
mainly or entirely	some	not at all
6. Who do you consider as village)?		mpolo/Sirkka (your home
DEVELOPMENT AND I	with development of to	ourist resort?
<u></u>		
<ul><li>8. Have you noticed any c</li><li>yes, what?</li><li>no</li></ul>		
9. Has the growth of tourist  yes, how?  no	and the state of t	everyday life in your village?
Questio	onnaire for telepho	ne interview

### In questions 10 – 12 there are several possibilities you can choose from

10. Have you noticed any contradictions between tourist business and other livelihoods?
yes, between tourism and reindeer herding, what kind?
yes, between tourism and forestry, what kind?
yes, between tourism and subsistence use, what kind?
yes, between tourism and nature conservation, what kind?
yes, between tourism and some other use, what kind?
no contradictions observed
11.a What services do you use?
slopes
skiing tracks and nature trails
restaurants and night life
groceries and other stores
health services
buses and taxis
some other, what:
nothing
11.b As a resident of Sirkka do you use also services in Ylläsjärvi and Äkäslompolo?  yes  no
PARTICIPATION IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF TOURIST RESORT
PARTICIPATION IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF TOURIST RESORT
12. What actors have had greatest impact on developments of the region?
12. What actors have had greatest impact on developments of the region?
12. What actors have had greatest impact on developments of the region?    local inhabitants
12. What actors have had greatest impact on developments of the region?    local inhabitants   non-local entrepreneurs
12. What actors have had greatest impact on developments of the region?    local inhabitants   non-local entrepreneurs   tourists

federal authority (Metsähallitus, Finnish Environment Centre, State Provincial Office of Lapland)
some other, what
13. Do you think you have had any impact on development of tourist recent?
13. Do you think you have had any impact on development of tourist resort?
yes, how?
no, why?
14. Would you like to take part more intensively in planning processe
yes, how?
no, why?
FUTURE OF TOURIST RESORT
<b>15.</b> How do you consider the future of tourist resort? (1=very positive, 2=fairly positive, 3=fairly negative, 4=very negative)?
Why, what possibilities/threats?
16. How the tourist resort should primarily be developed?