LAPIN AMK
Lapland University of Applied Sciences

# PERCEPTIONS AND PRACTICES ON ECOTOURISM AND SUSTAINABLE TOURISM CERTIFICATIONS

Case: Finnish Lapland

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Thesis

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Tämän opinnäytetyön tavoitteena oli kartoittaa ekomatkailutoimintaa ja siihen liittyviä kokemuksia sekä kestävän kehityksen sertifikaatteja ja niiden merkitystä Lapin matkailuyrityksissä. Ekomatkailuun liittyvä tutkimus on Suomessa vielä alkutekijöissään, ja varsinkin ekomatkailua Lapissa on tutkittu vähän. Opinnäytetyön toimeksiantajana toimi Lapin viestintä- ja markkinointitalo House of Lapland.

Opinnäytetyössä käytettiin kvalitatiivisena tutkimusmenetelmänä teemahaastattelua. Kvalitatiivinen tutkimusaineisto kerättiin haastattelemalla viittä lappilaisen kestävään kehitykseen sitoutuneen yrityksen tai matkailukohteen edustajaa. Tutkimusaineiston tuloksia voitiin osittain verrata toiseen noin kymmenkunta vuotta sitten Lapin Ammattikorkeakoulussa tehtyyn ekomatkailua käsitelleeseen opinnäytetyön tuloksiin. Näin voitiin selvittää, onko käsitykset ja toimintatavat ekomatkailualan yrityksissä muuttuneet kymmenen vuoden aikana.

Haastatellut matkailun ammattilaiset tunsivat hyvin kestävän kehityksen määritelmän ja kokivat vastuullisuuden ja kestävän kehityksen tärkeinä matkailutoiminnassa. Ekomatkailulla sen sijaan ei näytä olevan vieläkään Lapissa vahvaa asemaa ja ekomatkailua harjoittavia yrityksiä on vähän. Ekomatkailun kehittämisen kannalta suurin haaste on saavutettavuuden ja kulkuyhteyksien parantaminen. Kestävän kehityksen sertifikaatit nähtiin merkittävinä nykyaikaisessa matkailussa ja niiden koettiin auttavan yrityksiä kehittämään toimintansa kaikkia osa-alueita. Sertifikaattien koettiin kuitenkin vievän varsinkin pienten ja keskikokoisten yritysten taloudellisia ja ajallisia resursseja liikaa. Tulevaisuudessa sertifiointijärjestelmiin tulisi kehittää luokitus sertifikaatin saaneille yrityksille, jotta sertifiointijärjestelmä pystyisi ylläpitämään vetovoimansa ja merkityksensä yritysten ja asiakkaiden keskuudessa.

Tämän opinnäytetyön rajoite on, että tämän kvalitatiivisen tutkimuksen tuloksia ei voida yleistää kuvaamaan koko matkailualan kokemuksia. Jotta saataisiin kokonaiskuva koko Lapin ekomatkailutoiminnasta ja siihen liittyvistä näkemyksistä, tulisi tulevaisuudessa toteuttaa kysely koko Lapin luonto-matkailuyrityksille ekomatkailusta ja kestävän kehityksen sertifiointijärjestelmistä.

Avainsanat   ekomatkailu, kestävä kehitys, sertifiointi

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Abstract of Thesis

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The aim of this thesis was to research the perceptions and practices of ecotourism and sustainable tourism certifications in Finnish Lapland's tourism companies. Ecotourism research in Finland is scarce, and especially Lapland's ecotourism field is not widely researched. The commissioner of this thesis is the official marketing and communication house of Finnish Lapland, called House of Lapland.

Qualitative research methodology was used in the research, in which five representatives from sustainable tourism companies and destinations in Finnish Lapland were interviewed using semi-structured interviews. The findings of the interviews could be partly compared to the findings of another study completed approximately ten years ago in Lapland University of Applied Sciences. By comparing the findings of these studies, it could be determined whether the perceptions and practices have changed within the past ten years.

The interviewed representatives were familiar with the definition of sustainable tourism and saw sustainable development as important in tourism. However, ecotourism does not have such a strong foothold in the tourism offer of Finnish Lapland and there are only a few companies which offer ecotourism services. In terms of ecotourism development, the severest identified limitation is accessibility. Sustainable tourism certifications were seen as important in the tourism field, and they help companies to assess all their operations. However, the certifications fail to meet the monetary and temporal resources of small and micro businesses. In the future, certification programmes should develop ranking within the companies that have acquired the certification to maintain their attractiveness and meaning within consumers and companies.

The limitation of this study is that this qualitative research cannot be generalized to describe the perceptions on ecotourism of the whole tourism industry of Lapland. Thus, for further research, a survey should be sent to all the nature-based tourism companies of Finnish Lapland, to acquire a broader understanding of the perceptions of ecotourism.

Key words   ecotourism, sustainable development, certification

CONTENTS

SYMBOLS AND ABBREVIATIONS

STF   Sustainable Travel Finland

ST   Sustainable tourism

1 INTRODUCTION

Ecotourism is a fast-growing trend in the global perspective of tourism sector as the importance of sustainable and responsible tourism is increasing in all sectors of the economy. The Covid-19 pandemic has even further increased the importance for safe, clean, and sustainable tourism development post-pandemic, as travellers' demand shifts towards more sustainable tourism, as stated in the EU Strategy for Sustainable Tourism (2020/2038(INI), point 27). In Finland ecotourism is not highly practised or well-known within the tourism companies (Ikonen 2012, 57). Especially the ecotourism sector in Finnish Lapland is not highly researched nor widely practised, even though Finnish Lapland is known for its nature-based tourism companies.

The objective of this thesis is thus to determine the current perceptions and practices of ecotourism and sustainable tourism (ST) certifications in Finnish Lapland. The thesis aims at identifying the part ecotourism holds in Finnish Lapland's tourism offer, as well as the role of ST certificates and the possible limitations they hold. The thesis also aims to map out the sustainable practices destinations and companies are already undertaking. The findings of the thesis will help the ecotourism development of Finnish Lapland by determining possible inhibiting factors of the sector, as well as by identifying the potential development areas which will help the ecotourism sector to grow. In addition, it will help identify the limitations and possibilities of ST certifications, thus helping the development of these ST certification programmes.

This thesis uses qualitative research methodology in the form of semi-structured interviews. Five representatives from companies and destinations in Finnish Lapland are interviewed and the findings are partly compared to the findings of an earlier study conducted in Lapland University of Applied Sciences approximately ten years ago. By comparing the findings of this thesis and the earlier study, it can be seen whether the perceptions and practices in ecotourism and ST certifications have changed in the past decade. However, as the study only uses qualitative research methodology, the findings cannot be generalized to describe the practices and perceptions of the whole tourism industry in Finnish Lapland.

Initially the thesis process utilised mixed research method, and in addition to the interviews it included a survey, which was sent to the nature-based tourism companies of Lapland and Ruka-Kuusamo, to receive a broader understanding on the perceptions and practices of ecotourism and ST certifications. However, the survey did not receive enough answers to provide credible results, and it was thus omitted from the thesis process. Instead, the scope of the interviews was increased to receive a deeper understanding on the issue under research. The reason why the survey failed to receive a required number of answers was possibly due to the Covid-19 pandemic and the timing of the survey. The survey was sent to the companies in the beginning of the winter season and thus the companies were most likely preparing for the upcoming season in the middle of the pandemic, failing thus to find the time to answer to the survey.

The commissioner of this thesis is a company called House of Lapland. House of Lapland is a publicly owned destination marketing company and the official marketing and communications house of Finnish Lapland. The aim of House of Lapland is to promote Lapland as a business and travel destination, as well as to promote it as a filming location. (House of Lapland 2021.)

House of Lapland also promotes ST as sustainability is one of the core elements in the tourism strategy of Finnish Lapland (see Lapin matkailustrategia 2020–2023). Tourism development goals in Finnish Lapland are aligned with the goals of European Commission's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. (House of Lapland 2021.) To promote ST for travellers coming to Finnish Lapland, House of Lapland has collected information about sustainability and ST on its website. On the website can be found ethical guidelines for Sámi tourism, information on responsible animal tourism, sustainability guide for travellers as well as lists of sustainable companies and eco-companies operating in Lapland (see House of Lapland 2021).

The findings of this thesis will help House of Lapland to identify the current state of ecotourism in its operating area. By identifying the current practices and perceptions of ecotourism in tourism companies, House of Lapland gains knowledge on the factors which might be inhibiting further development of ecotourism in the nature tourism sector, as well as detailed information on the sustainable practices the nature-based tourism companies in Lapland are already

undertaking. In addition, House of Lapland will gain knowledge on how the tourism companies in Finnish Lapland perceive ST certifications, and what limitations they hold.

2   ECOTOURISM AS A CONCEPT

2.1   Defining Ecotourism

Ecotourism is a form of ST which has emerged from alternative tourism because of travellers' dissatisfaction on the way local communities and nature are treated and ignored in the profit-centric tourism sector. The beginning of ecotourism has often been stated to be in the work of Ceballos-Lascuráin, when he first introduced the concept in the early 1980s, but the concept can be traced back to late 1960s and early 1970s when researchers started to become concerned about the inappropriate way natural resources were used in tourism. (Fennell 2014, 17.) However, as described by Fennell (2014, 11) safari tourism in Africa has been practised for decades, and Blangy and Nielson (1993, as cited in Fennell 2014) state that the American Museum of Natural History has conducted tours since 1950s, both being activities which are considered ecotourism. Thus, it can be said that ecotourism has been practised for decades, but the identification of the ecotourism sector and its definition have been formed much later.

One of the most common definitions in literature is by Ceballos-Lascuráin, whose work is often said to be the beginning of ecotourism. They defined the term ecotourism as:

> traveling to relatively undisturbed or uncontaminated natural areas with the specific objective of studying, admiring, and enjoying the scenery and its wild plants and animals, as well as any existing cultural manifestations (both past and present) found in these areas (Ceballos-Lascuráin 1987, as cited in Melchior Figueroa 2016, 86).

Ecotourism definitions have developed quite significantly from the first definitions in 1980s, placing more emphasis on the sustainability and conservation issues. The more recent definitions of ecotourism emphasise sustainability, impacts, local benefits, and ethics more compared to older definitions, showing thus how ecotourism has been conceptualised over time. (Fennel 2010, 416.) One of the most recent definitions comes from The International Ecotourism Society (in the future TIES). They defined ecotourism as:

responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of the local people, and involves interpretation and education (TIES 2015 as cited in TIES 2019).

Also, the World Tourism Organisation (in the future UNWTO) has elaborated on the ecotourism definitions and identified five characteristics of ecotourism. Firstly, UNWTO considers as ecotourism all nature-based tourism with the main emphasis on observation and admiration of nature and traditional culture in natural areas. Secondly, the activities should also have educational and interpretation features. Thirdly, the activities are generally, but not exclusively, organised by specialised companies for small groups of tourists and their operations should minimise the negative impacts on the natural and socio-cultural environment. Lastly, according to UNWTO, ecotourism supports the maintenance of natural areas used in ecotourism by generating economic benefit for stakeholders in charge of managing and conservation of natural areas, by providing alternative forms of income for local communities, and by increasing awareness of locals and tourist related to conservation of nature and culture. (UNWTO 2002, as cited in UNWTO 2021.)

As seen before, during the years of ecotourism research several definitions have been formed, but no consensus on choosing one definition. Fennell (2001, 405–406) conducted a study in which 85 definitions of ecotourism were analysed to form an empirical basis from which to take the discussion of ecotourism definitions further. The study identified five most commonly present variables in ecotourism definitions: reference to where ecotourism occurs, conservation, culture, benefits to locals and education (Fennell 2001, 416). In his later work, Fennell (2014, 15) further elaborated on the findings of the study and defined ecotourism as:

An intrinsic, participatory and learning-based experience which is focused principally on the natural history of a region, along with other associated features of the man–land nexus. Its aim is to develop sustainably (conservation and human well being) through ethically based behaviour, programmes and models of tourism development which do not intentionally stress living and non-living elements of the environments in which it occurs.

The above definition of ecotourism by Fennel emphasises that the observation of natural history is the core aspect in ecotourism products. Fennel further elaborated on this definition by stating that ecotourists are more naturalists rather than ecologists, as the nature of ecotourism is more observational than experimental. Ecotourist are thus interested in observing organisms and their role and function in their surrounding nature. (Fennel 2014, 1–2.)

Even though one conceptual definition for ecotourism is difficult to obtain, it can be said that they key principle in ecotourism practices is that it takes place in a natural setting and through sustainable, educational practices it attempts to increase the benefits of the society, environment, and economy. The educational component in ecotourism takes place from locals to tourists but also vice versa. (Diamantis 2004, 5.)

2.2   Principles of Ecotourism

As mentioned afore, through the different definitions of ecotourism, three principles can be identified which compose ecotourism: the form of tourism needs to be nature-based, it must involve some type of educational components and it needs to be sustainably managed. In the following chapters the principles are further explained.

The first most evident principle of ecotourism is that it is nature-based, which is emphasized in all the ecotourism definitions. Nature-based tourism can be defined as: "activities by humans occurring when visiting nature areas outside one's ordinary residence" (Fredman & Haukeland 2021, xiv). Nature-based tourism is concerned with a wide range of activities in different sectors, to meet the needs of nature tourists (Fredman & Haukeland 2021, xiv).

The key issues in distinguishing ecotourism from other forms of tourism is the problem of determining what qualifies as nature-based tourism. The issue can be divided into three determining factors: the activity component, the duration component, and the attraction component. The activity component defines how immersive the activity is and when is it not immersive enough (e.g., drive past a forest admiring the view versus going for a hike in the forest). The duration component on the other hand deals with for how long the activity needs to be to

become ecotourism (e.g., a small stroll through a park or a weeklong hike). Lastly the attraction component discusses the characteristics of the attraction: whether going to a public beach is considered ecotourism or a hike through a regenerated forest. (Blamey 2001, 8.)

Through these three factors can be raised a question of whether the softest forms of ecotourism where a high level of services are involved, can be distinguished from mass tourism. Also, ecotourism sites where high volumes of customers are present, such as popular national parks, can be critiqued to be mass tourism. Thus, the ecotourists can simultaneously choose products, which are both ecotourism as well as mass tourism, creating a concept called mass ecotourism. (Weaver & Lawton 2007, 1175; Melchior Figueroa 2016, 87.) Ecotourism has been defined to take place in: "...relatively undisturbed or uncontaminated natural areas" (Ceballos-Lascuráin 1987, as cited in Melchior Figueroa 2016, 86) but this has been challenged by several authors. For example, Lawton and Weaver (2001, 315) state that modified spaces can offer higher concentrations of wildlife populations and greater diversity than the natural's habitats and Stronza, Hunt and Fitzgerald (2019, 5.9) identified that through protected areas ecotourism can help conserve and protect wildlife populations.

The second principle of ecotourism is the environmental and cultural education. The educational aspect of ecotourism can be divided into two parts, based on the purpose of the environmental education: personal purposes or societal purposes. Personal purposes for environmental education are concerned with fulfilling the customer's own need for education and information regarding the area's plants, nature, and culture. The purpose of the environmental education is thus to create a satisfying experience for the customer. The societal purpose for environmental education is concerned with changing the attitude and behaviours of travellers, creating thus more environmentally and culturally aware citizens. (Blamey 2001, 8–9.)

The third principle of ecotourism is that the tourism practices need to be sustainably managed, which involves sustainable development. Sustainable development has been defined as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (World Commission on Environment and Development 1987). In

ecotourism, sustainable management is crucial as ecotourism is heavily practised on vulnerable areas, such as fragile nature and old cultural sites. Environmentally sustainable tourism development includes the conservation and sustainable use of resources, reduction of over-consumption and waste, and maintaining biodiversity (Blamey 2001, 10–11).

Sustainable development in tourism also needs to consider the local communities through the promotion of social and economic conditions (Diamantis 2004, 10). This can take place in a variety of forms, such as the development of infrastructure, employment of locals, and supporting economic stability (Lindberg 1991; Wight 1994, as cited in Blamey 2001, 11). To achieve these aims, the local communities should be involved in the tourism sector itself to promote sustainable, high-quality experiences and to promote the wellbeing of the local community. The public should also be consulted in decision making processes, for the tourism industry and the local communities to co-exist beneficially. (Blamey 2001, 13.)

Ecotourism industry's supply consists mostly of private sector businesses: from micro-businesses to transnational corporations. The main distinction which can be made within the ecotourism service providers is the level of specialisation they hold. Ecotourism supply consists of highly specialised ecotourism businesses, such as ecolodges, ecotour operators and mediating attractions, as well as of non-specialised sectors such as hotels, cruise lines and travel agencies. The non-specialised sectors serve ecotourists unintentionally, by providing them services and products, such as accommodation and tours. (Weaver & Lawton 2007, 1171.) The ecotourism companies can be places on a continuum, in which the other end consists of highly specialised eco-companies and the other end consists of companies which are incidentally part of ecotourism offer.

Ecotourists' characteristics are difficult to determine, as the ecotourism sector lacks longitudinal studies, and usually the studies are case studies based on one destination (Fennell 2014, 17). The lack of common definition for ecotourism and thus the differences in ecotourism practices of different destinations also inhibits the identification of common ecotourist profile (Weaver & Lawton 2007, 1171; Wight 2001, 37). Ecotourism demand is not a homogeneous market and ecotourists can have quite wide variety of different dimensions. Thus, ecotourism

demand consists of niche markets which may share similar characteristics based on motivation and preferences but might also differ based on these attributes. (Wight 2001, 59; Fennell 2014, 16.) According to Wight (2001, 59) the ecotourism market cannot be segmented well on a global scale due to these differences within the market.

2.3   Ecotourism in Previous Research

As described earlier, ecotourism sector consists mainly of private companies, from which many are small and highly specialised ecotourism operators. These small ecotourism companies are, however, facing high failure rates within the sector, and the reasons behind the phenomena has been one of the dominating themes in ecotourism research. Parker and Khare (2005, as cited in Weaver & Lawton 2007, 1171) identified that in South African ecotourism, the formation of strong relationships with the local communities was a key factor in successful businesses. The importance of partnerships was also emphasised by Hawkins (2004, as cited in Weaver & Lawton 2007, 1171) when his research findings stated that small Bulgarian ecotourism companies are more successful when aligned into competitive clusters.

Another Bachelor's thesis conducted on Finnish ecotourism sector was conducted by Ikonen (2012) in Lapland University of Applied Sciences. In the context of this thesis, Ikonen's work is used partly to compare the findings to see how the ecotourism sector in Finland has developed within the past decade. In the research, Ikonen analysed the criteria of the most common eco-certifications in Finland, conducted a study about perceptions of ecotourism on nature-based tourism companies, as well as interviewed four sustainable tourism and ecotourism experts. (Ikonen 2012, 25–29.)

The main findings in Ikonen's research were that nature-based tourism entrepreneurs were familiar with the concept of sustainable tourism, but not so familiar with ecotourism. Ecotourism was seen as nature friendly tourism in which nature is preserved for example in the form of recycling, water consumption minimization etc. When asked to define ecotourism, the entrepreneurs' knowledge was limited to the environmental aspect and failed to identify the socio-cultural and educational components. Additionally, 53% of respondents

answered 'yes' when asked if they would define the company they represent as ecotourism. (Ikonen 2012, 39–54.)

2.4 Ecotourism and Other Forms of Alternative Tourism

2.4.1 Ecotourism and Nature Tourism

Ecotourism and nature tourism have a strong connection through the nature aspect, which is a key principle in both definitions, and the terms ecotourism and nature tourism are used quite interchangeably (Mihalič 2005, 113). However, as described by Gale and Jill (2009, 5) and Weaver (2001, 74), ecotourism is described to be a small, specialised sector of natural tourism, as nature tourism only shares some of ecotourism's requirements (Mihalič 2005, 113). This relationship is illustrated in Figure 1. The reason ecotourism is not fully merged into nature tourism in Figure 1, is the recognition of some past and present cultural attractions as part of ecotourism (Weaver 2001, 74). The relationship of ecotourism and cultural tourism is further discussed in Chapter 2.4.2.
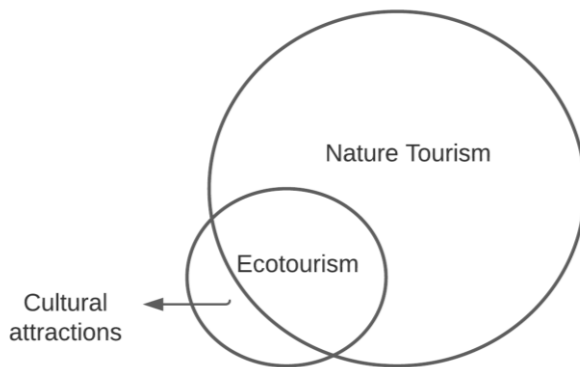
Figure 1. Relationship of Nature Tourism and Ecotourism (based on Weaver 2001, 74)

Thus, nature tourism is concerned with the direct enjoyment of natural phenomena and wildlife whereas ecotourism is more complex, including the conservation of the natural area, the education of locals and travellers as well as sustaining the wellbeing of local people (TIES 2015 as cited in TIES 2019; Mihalič 2005, 113). Ecotourism and nature-based tourism both thus are nature-based but ecotourism is involved also with the educational and conservational aspects

rather than just observation, making it thus more closely related to ST (Mihalič 2005, 113; ACS Distance Education 2022). Nature tourism practices are not necessarily sustainable or responsible in nature (Huddart & Stodd 2019, 6–7).

2.4.2 Ecotourism and Cultural Tourism

As already described in Chapter 2.4.1, ecotourism and cultural tourism are connected, as some definitions acknowledge that past and present cultural attractions can be considered ecotourism. According to Fennel (2014, 17) culture can undeniably be a part of ecotourism but it is most likely to be a secondary motivation for the ecotourists, as if it would be the primary motivation, it would be considered cultural tourism.

The combination of ecotourism and cultural tourism has been called eco-cultural tourism. Eco-cultural tourism is seen as a subset of ecotourism, and it combines the natural and cultural aspects of a landscape to create tourism sites. Eco-cultural destination can also be a site in which both the cultural aspects and ecological aspects are the prime attractions and are considered as key factors in preserving the nature, Indigenous culture and economical sustainability. (Cajee 2014, 2.) Especially within Indigenous communities separating culture from nature can be hard if not impossible, and sometimes even considered artificial (Weaver 2001, 74). Thus, ecotourism can contain aspects from cultural tourism, and through this eco-cultural concept the natural and cultural heritage of the area and its communities can be conserved (Cajee 2014, 2).

2.4.3 Ecotourism and Adventure Tourism

Adventure tourism is described to be any tourism activity which includes at least two of the following elements: physical activity, a connection to nature and environment, and immersive cultural experience (Adventure Travel Trade Association 2022). The concepts of ecotourism and adventure tourism have sometimes been used interchangeably, as they include similar nature activities, which can often be associated with either form of alternative tourism, such as hiking, canoeing and diving (Mihalič 2005, 114; Weaver 2001, 74–75). However, the main differentiating issue between ecotourism and adventure tourism is the motivation of the tourists using the natural settings. Ecotourists are concerned

with the preservation, observation and admiration of nature or some element of it, whereas adventure tourists are interested mostly on the natural elements as a tool to facilitate certain level of risk and feeling of adventure (Mihalič 2005, 114; ACS Distance Education 2022).

Usually, adventure tourism can be differentiated from ecotourism based on the presence of element of risk, higher levels of physical engagement, and the need for specialised skills to for successful participation (Weaver 2001, 75; Adventure Travel Trade Association 2022). However, ecotourists might also take high risks and go through harder physical exhaustion to reach places where they can observe some phenomenon of nature, such as a rare bird species on mountain areas (Mihalič 2005, 114). This describes the overlap between ecotourism and adventure tourism illustrated in Figure 2, but the main differentiating factor is the motivation for the use of nature in the experience and the presence of element of risk.
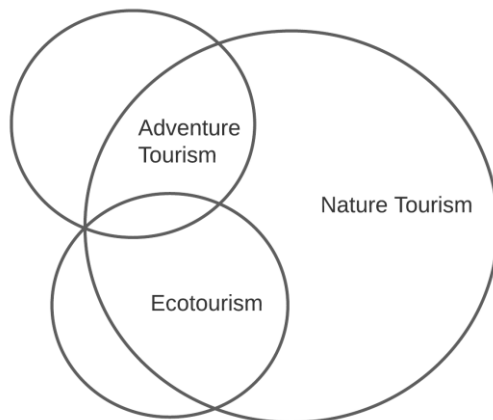
Figure 2. The Relationship of Nature Tourism, Adventure Tourism and Ecotourism (based on Weaver 2001, 74; Gale & Jill 2009, 5)

2.4.4 Ecotourism and Wildlife Tourism

Wildlife tourism is a form of alternative tourism, in which the customers view or interact with wildlife. Wildlife tourism can take place in various settings: in captivity, in semi-captivity and in the wild. Wildlife tourism can take place for example in aquariums, zoos, wildlife centres and nature parks. (Gale & Hill 2009, 5; Ballantyne, Packer & Hughes 2009, 658.) As illustrated in Figure 3, the wildlife

tourism activities which do not take place in captivity or artificial setting, are concerned as nature tourism.
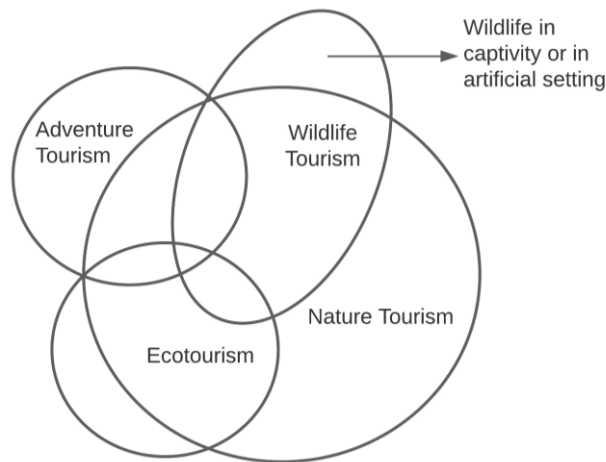

Figure 3. The Relationship of Different Types of Alternative Tourism (based on Weaver 2001, 74; Gale & Jill 2009, 5)

Ecotourism, however, is only connected with the types of wildlife tourism which take place in the wild or otherwise natural setting, as illustrated in Figure 3. In Australia, an activity is only considered ecotourism if it "fosters environmental and cultural understanding, appreciation and conservation" (Ecotourism Australia 2008, as cited in Ballantyne, Packer & Hughes 2009, 658). Thus, it can be deduced that wildlife tourism can be ecotourism if it takes place in a natural setting, it is concerned with the conservation and appreciation of the wildlife, it is sustainably planned and managed, and it educates the customers about the wildlife in question. Fennel (2014, 1–2) has further elaborated on this educational component by suggesting that the main difference in ecotourism and wildlife tourism is the fact that wildlife tourism is mostly observing the wildlife, whereas ecotourist are more interested in zoology, palaeontology and botany. Thus, if wildlife tourism activities are combined with natural sciences and natural history, they can be considered ecotourism activities.

3   TOURISM INDUSTRY IN FINNISH LAPLAND

3.1   Operating Environment

3.1.1   Tourism Sector in Lapland

Tourism is one of the main economic sectors in Finnish Lapland, with GDP of 5,7 percent in 2019 when the GDP of tourism in whole Finland was 2,5 percent (House of Lapland 2021). Finnish Lapland as an international tourism destination consists of the Lapland region and Ruka-Kuusamo area, as well as the ski destination Syöte in northern Ostrobothnia, which is included in the destination's ski centre listings. (Visit Finland 2021a.) Before the Covid-19 pandemic, Lapland hosted 3,1 million overnight stays, from which international stays composed 52 percent (House of Lapland 2021.)

In 2021, during the Covid-19 pandemic, Lapland hosted 2,3 million overnight stays, from which international travellers composed 24%. The number of overnight stays has decreased vastly from 2019 but compared to 2020 the overnight stays have increased 14%. Additionally, in 2021 the domestic travellers were the majority in overnight stays in Lapland, as during the last three years before Covid-19, the number of international stays has been higher than domestic stays. One of the main differences in tourism of Lapland in 2021 was the lack of Chinese travellers as one of the main customer groups arriving to Lapland, as previously they were the fastest growing customer segment. However, signs of recovery have been detected, as middle-sized destinations have seen growth of 25% of even more. (House of Lapland 2022.) In Figure 4 are illustrated the most important statistics of Lapland's tourism field in 2021.
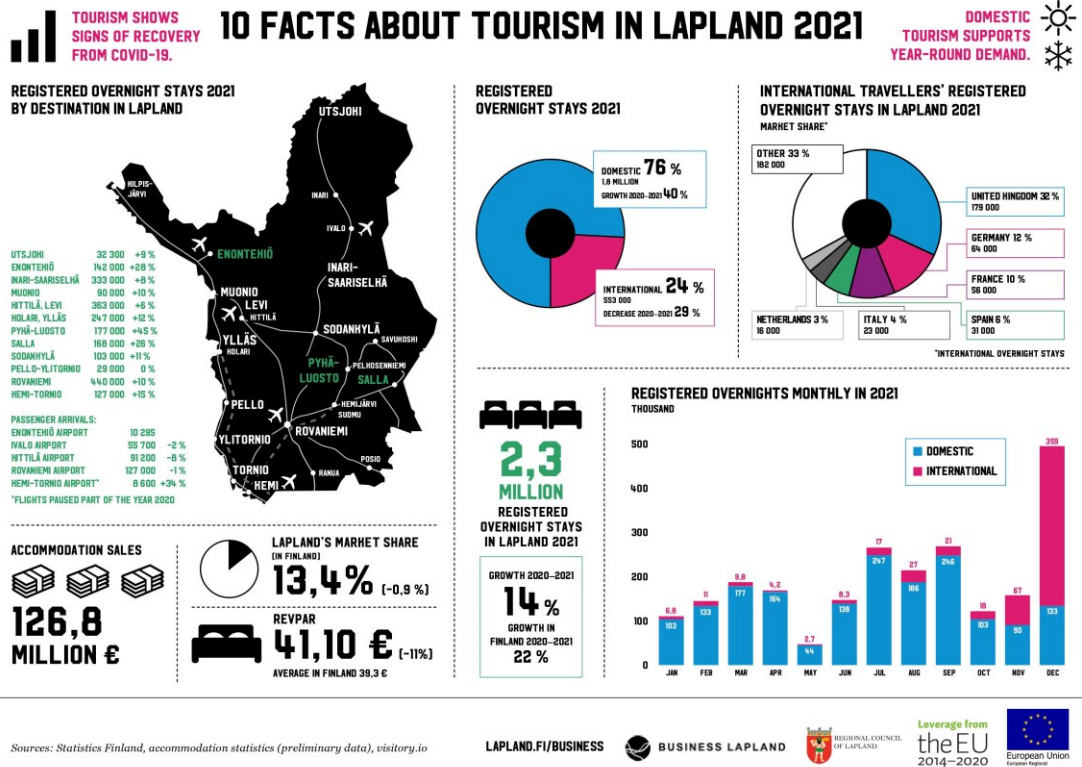
Figure 4. Ten Facts about Tourism in Lapland 2021 (House of Lapland 2022)

The area of the Lapland region is 100 366 square kilometres and the population in 2017 was just under 180 000 residents (Lapin Liitto 2021), making Lapland the region with the lowest population density in Finland with only 1,9 people per square kilometre (Tilastokeskus 2021). Thus, Finnish Lapland is known for its untouched nature, wilderness and unique natural phenomena, such as the Polar Night, Northern Lights, Midnight Sun and autumn colours, making these one of the main attractions for international visitors. The tourism sector of Lapland offers thus a lot of nature-based products, such as safaris with huskies, reindeer and snowmobiles, skiing, hiking, rafting and much more.

Due to the unique nature of Finnish Lapland, many of the tourists arriving to the area are nature tourists. In 2017, Visit Finland conducted a segmentation study, in which were identified the main six customer segments arriving to Finland from China, Germany, United Kingdom and Japan (see Table 1). From these six customer segments, two were identified as segments mostly interested in nature: Nature Explorers and Nature Wonder Hunters. (Visit Finland 2017.) In terms of ecotourism, these two segments would be the most evident ecotourism segments

as they were identified to be interested in for example experiencing local nature, natural forests and Northern Lights. (Visit Finland 2017.) However, also the Activity Enthusiasts and Authentic Lifestyle Seekers might be indirect ecotourists, as adventure tourism and cultural tourism overlap and relate to ecotourism (see Chapters 2.2.2 and 2.2.3). Thus, ecotourism in Finnish Lapland already has potential ecotourists arriving to the area, making it easier to further develop the ecotourism field.

Table 1. The Customer Segments of Finnish Tourism Industry (Visit Finland 2017)

Customer Segment	Top interests
City Breaker	Historic attractions, cultural places and design districts, culinary experiences
Nature Explorer	Natural parks and forests, Northern Lights, enjoying surrounding nature
Nature Wonder Hunter	Northern Lights, natural parks and forests, Midnight sun and white nights
Activity Enthusiast	Experiencing winter, skiing, hiking
Authentic Lifestyle Seeker	Experiencing local lifestyle, museums displaying local culture, local events
Comfort Seeker	Special accommodation, husky/reindeer ride, wellbeing treatment

Additionally, in December 2021 Visit Finland identified the top three megatrends affecting travel to Finland: digitalisation and technology, sustainable travel, and nature and outdoor travel. In its report, Visit Finland describes that travellers will be more conscious of environmental and social issues when travelling and will be rewarding businesses that use their profits for the greater good post-pandemic. (Visit Finland 2021b.) Thus, sustainability, ecotourism and ST certifications are becoming more important to attract the responsible travellers, as well as to promote the sustainable development in the destination.

Visit Finland's report also identified the megatrend of nature and outdoor travel. Visit Finland identified that nature is "the most important touristic attraction for international visitors" (Visit Finland 2021b). According to Visit Finland as the global wealth grows and the significance of nature destinations increases, it

attracts nature-loving luxury travellers to Finland. The meaning of luxury is transforming from having material goods to seeking for authentic, tailored and exclusive experiences. (Visit Finland 2022b.)

In conclusion, Finnish Lapland is already receiving customers to the area which might be potential ecotourists as they are interested in the nature and its phenomena. However, currently the arriving customers are not yet that sustainably aware, or at least do not hold that much importance over sustainability when making travel decisions. However, in the future sustainability will be more important in the customers' travel decisions and they will appreciate nature even more, which creates demand for (eco)tourism in Lapland also in the future. However, the tourism in Lapland should be developed to the direction of these megatrends, by providing sustainable and luxurious nature-experiences.

3.1.2 Fragile Nature and Indigenous Sámi Culture

Conservation of nature is one of the key issues in ecotourism definitions and thus in ecotourism operations. Tourism in Finnish Lapland is heavily dependent on nature-based tourism products, such as husky and snowmobile safaris and northern lights tours, which are primarily taking place in the wilderness. This thus places the flora and fauna of the area under a lot of stress, as the tourism activities cause noise to disturb the wildlife and the use of motorised vehicles in the nature wears the soil and causes erosion.

Finnish Lapland hosts several national and natural parks, which are dedicated to preservation and protection of the nature, and they are important nature-tourism destinations. Finnish Lapland has six national Parks: Lemmenjoki National Park, Urho Kekkonen Natural Park, Pallas-Yllästunturi National Park, Pyhä-Luosto National Park, Riisitunturi National Park, as well as the newest addition, Salla National Park, which was established in January 2022 (Metsähallitus 2022a; Metsähallitus 2022b). The area also has natural parks, such as Kevo Strict Nature Reserve, which is an important hiking attraction (Metsähallitus 2022b). In 2021 was also established a private nature conservation area in Inari, where almost 700 hectares of 200-year-old forest was protected to protect the biodiversity of the area (Ruohonen 2021).

A special character in Finnish Lapland is also its wilderness areas. Wilderness areas are "vast, uninhabited, roadless areas that have remained in a near natural state" and they are protected by the Wilderness Act (Metsähallitus 2022a). The aim of these wilderness areas is to protect the local nature and Sámi culture, which is why only traditional livelihoods are allowed to be practised in these areas, such as fishing, hunting and reindeer husbandry (Metsähallitus 2022a; Metsähallitus 2022b).

The aim of natural and national parks is to protect the nature and its biodiversity, and at the same time give people the chance to enjoy the nature (Metsähallitus 2022b). Due to the short growing season and low rate of growth for plants in the Northern Hemisphere, such as alpine, arctic, tundra and northern boreal forests, the vegetation is especially vulnerable to trampling (Törn, Tolvanen, Norokorpi, Tervo & Siikamäki 2009, 1427). National parks offer marked hiking routes, campfire sites and camping sites, which allow the users to enjoy the nature, while controlling the flow of people in the nature. Marked trails and sites help to guide the flow of travellers to certain areas, which can be modified and constructed to be able to manage the trampling of people, whereas untouched, unenhanced nature will be damaged.

According to Tolvanen and Kangas's (2016, 63) review on recreational tourism activities' effect on Fennoscandian nature, skiing caused the least negative impacts on nature, whereas horseback riding, snowmobiling and camping caused the greatest amount of erosion and vegetation change. Horseback riding was also identified as a significant factor in spreading of alien species to the nature. All these activities are important recreational activities in the tourism offer in Finnish Lapland. In addition, tourism resorts were identified to have the greatest negative impact not only on vegetation, but also on wildlife, as the most sensitive species may avoid tourism resorts for up to 10 km distance.

Huhta and Sulkava (2014, 1009–1011) researched the effects of nature tourism on bird-communities in Pallas-Yllästunturi National Park, located in Finnish Lapland, and identified that urbanised tourism areas such as ski-resorts and accommodation areas influence the assemblage of birds, for example by concentrating urban species, hole nesters, building-nesting species, and corvids in the developed areas, most likely because these species can utilise the built

infrastructures as resources. The study also found out that even though the recreational pressure in the national park is high, it has not yet caused significant changes in the forest bird communities. However, the researchers identified that the methodology is not suitable for measuring the effect of nature-tourism on rare species such as birds of prey, which are especially sensitive to disturbance. (Huhta & Sulkava 2014, 1009–1011.)

Finnish Lapland, as mentioned above, is also habituated by the Indigenous Sámi people. Responsibility and ethical sustainability in the tourism operations in Lapland are thus particularly important, to protect and respect the culture and livelihoods of the local Sámi communities. Sámi tourism can be tourism based on Sámi culture, where the service providers are a part of the Sámi community, or tourism exploiting Sámi culture, where service providers outside of the Sámi community use and exploit aspects of the Sámi culture, without actual connection to the Sámi community (Principles for Responsible and Ethically Sustainable Sámi Tourism 2018). According to the Sámi Parliament, ethically sustainable Sámi tourism is:

> tourism that is socially, culturally, ecologically and economically sustainable but also takes into consideration social, cultural, ecological and economic carrying capacity at local level (Principles for Responsible and Ethically Sustainable Sámi Tourism 2018).

For a long time, symbols of the Sámi culture, such as the Sámi dress, have been commodified and used in tourism businesses. The interpretation of the Sámi culture in these representations is usually not presenting authentic Sáminess and is misleading, insulting and potentially harmful for the Sámi communities. (Sámediggi 2022.) For example, Niskala and Ridanpää (2016, 15–16) identified that even though the representation of Sámi culture in tourism promotion has changed over time, the tourism industry still has not yet managed to get rid of all the stereotypic imaginaries of Sámi people and their culture in their communications.

For this reason, the Sámi Parliament has created ethical guidelines for Sámi tourism (see Principles for Responsible and Ethically Sustainable Sámi Tourism 2018). These guidelines are created for tourism operators outside the Sámi

community, and for travellers coming to the Sami homeland. The aim of these guidelines is to terminate the exploitation of Sámi culture and sharing of incorrect information about the Sámi culture in tourism, as well as to protect the traditions and cultural practices of Sámi people who are not involved in the tourism industry. (Principles for Responsible and Ethically Sustainable Sámi Tourism 2018.)

3.2   Current Ecotourism Practices

The current ecotourism practices in Finnish Lapland are hard to identify and measure, as there is no existing list of companies which identify and pronounce themselves as ecotourism companies. Many of the companies in Lapland are already taking sustainable actions without identifying themselves as ecotourism companies. The following paragraphs compare and summarise statistics of the tourism sector in Lapland to get an overview of the current ecotourism practices.

Green Key is one of the most common eco-certifications in tourism companies, which are completing sustainable practices (see Chapter 4.1.3). In total, Lapland has 45 companies, which are Green Key certified (Going Green Oy 2022a). According to Visitory (2022), in February 2022, Lapland had 190 registered accommodation providers, from which 14 are Green Key certified (Going Green Oy 2022a). This means that out of all registered accommodation companies only 7,4% are Green Key certified. However, this only includes companies that have already been certified, and does not include companies which are in the process of obtaining the certificate.

One of the newest additions to the ecotourism certifications is the Green Activities, which was created for activity service providers (see Chapter 3.4.4). In total, 10 activity service providers in Lapland have acquired the Green Activities certificate (Going Green Oy 2022a). The percentage of Green Activities acquired companies from the total amount of activity companies is difficult to acquire, as the total amount of activity providers in Lapland is difficult to determine, as there is no listing of all the activity providers. To gain a general idea, solely Visit Rovaniemi lists 65 activity service providers operating in Rovaniemi; one of the 21 municipalities in Lapland (Visit Rovaniemi 2022; Lapin Liitto 2021).

The STF programme is also a brand-new certification programme, which has only been in the market for two years. In Lapland, there are altogether already 25 STF labelled companies, and 154 companies which are in the process of acquiring the label. In Lapland the STF label has been established by 11 accommodation companies and 8 activity service companies, as well as two companies in outdoor and sports industry, two attractions, one restaurant and one travel agency. (Business Finland 2022.) From the 190 accommodation providers (Visitory 2022), thus 5,7% are STF labelled.

4 SUSTAINABILITY CERTIFICATIONS IN TOURISM INDUSTRY

4.1 Sustainable Tourism Certifications in Finland

4.1.1 Sustainable Travel Finland

One of the newest recognitions in Finnish tourism sector is the Sustainable Travel Finland mark, which a sustainably operating tourism company can obtain (in the future STF). STF is aligned with International Sustainable Tourism programmes as well Sustainable Development Goals, but it has been designed specifically for Finnish regional and national development needs. STF has been available for companies since June 2020, and already 64 destinations and 700 companies have started the process of obtaining the label, from which 115 companies and one destination have completed the programme and achieved the STF label. For a destination to achieve the label, over half of the travel companies in the destination need to have the STF label, both private and public operators. (STF 2021; Mäkelä 2021).

STF programme is suitable for all travel companies and destinations in Finland, and it acts as a guarantee for consumers that the tourism company is committed to sustainable development. The STF programme takes a holistic approach to sustainable development, considering thus economic, ecological, social, and cultural factors. (Mäkelä 2021.) The programme gives the company tools on how to integrate sustainable practices into the company's and destination's operations more easily. The companies that have obtained the STF label, will get a model on sustainable development, newest information on ST development, as well as marketing support and visibility on Visit Finland's channels. (STF 2021.)

For a company to obtain the STF label, they need to complete a 7-step ST development plan. The 7-step programme includes the commitment to sustainable practices, increasing sustainability expertise in workshops and other education channels, creating a sustainability development plan, and communicating about the sustainability practices to the public transparently. Once these first steps of the programme have been completed, the company obtains a certificate to support sustainable development and once they have provenly executed with sustainable practices for a year, they sign a contract with

Business Finland and Visit Finland to obtain the STF Certificate. The company commits to renewing the STF label by regularly taking part in auditing, filling in self-assessment forms and updating their sustainable development plans. (STF 2021.)

4.1.2 ECEAT Finland Label

The Finnish Eco-Agrotourism Association (in the future ECEAT Finland) is an organisation which belongs to the international network of European Centre for Ecological and Agricultural Tourism (in the future ECEAT) (ECEAT International 2021). ECEAT is an organisation that:

> develops and promotes tourism that supports organic agriculture, sustainable land use, the protection of nature and the environment, and the protection of cultural heritage and traditional rural landscapes (Suomen luomumatkailuyhdistys 2021).

ECEAT Finland's network consists of twenty companies located all over Finland (Suomen luomumatkailuyhdistys 2021).

ECEAT Finland's mark is given to farms, guesthouses, Bed & Breakfasts, and other destinations that offer accommodation and other activities, which are promoting the protection of nature and local culture. For a company to receive the ECEAT Finland Label, the company needs to meet and commit to the ECEAT quality criteria. (Suomen Luomumatkailuyhdistys 2021.) The quality criteria involve for example supporting organic farming, 'green' building policies, responsible use of resources and minimizing waste, informing customers about ecological and socio-cultural issues, supporting local economies, promoting cooperation, and many other actions related to sustainability (Suomen luomumatkailuyhdistys 2021.)

To join the ECEAT Finland network, the companies must fill in two forms, one where they describe their company and their operations, and one in which are evaluated whether their company meets the ECEAT quality criteria. In 2021, the annual company membership fee for ECEAT Finland was 150 euros and for new memberships an additional 200 euros joining fee for new companies. ECEAT Finland also offers an option for smaller companies which have smaller turnover,

which is 80 euros annually and a joining fee of 120 euros. In addition to these ECEAT charges the companies 100 euros for auditing, and in addition the costs of the auditors travelling expenses. (Suomen luomumatkailuyhdistys 2021.)

4.1.3   Green Key Finland

Green Key Finland is an organisation operating under the international Green Key programme, established by the Foundation for Environmental Education (in the future FFE). Green Key is said to be the "leading standard of excellence" within the tourism industry for environmentally responsible and sustainable operations. The Green Key ecolabel can be established by hotels, hostels, small accommodations, campsites, holiday parks, conference centres, restaurants, and attractions and its sustainability criteria have been created specifically for the needs of hospitality industry. Green Key has globally 3200 awarded establishment in 65 countries, with 40 countries with their own national Green Key operators. (FFE 2021a.) The criteria created by Green Key are global, but the national Green Key programmes may add or strengthen the criteria based on their own needs (FFE 2021b). The Green Key programme in Finland started in 2015 (Going Green Oy 2016).

Green Key has created six Green Key categories, to which companies will be divided based on their operations and services. In addition, Green Key has 13 criteria areas, which the companies need to fulfil to obtain the Green Key label. Within the criteria areas there are criteria which are imperative to obtain the label, and some of them are guideline criteria, which the company needs to achieve in an increasing percentage based on the years they have been part of the programme. (FFE 2021b.) Table 2 summarises the categories and criteria areas. Green Key Finland follows now 12 of the criteria areas, but from 2022 all the 13 criteria areas will be required from companies (Going Green Oy 2021a).

Table 2. Green Key Categories and Criteria Areas (FFE 2021b)

Green Key Categories	Criteria areas
Hotels and hostels Campsites and holiday parks Small accommodations Conference centres Restaurants Attractions	Staff involvement Environmental management Guest information Water Energy Washing and cleaning Food and beverage Waste Administration Indoor environment Green areas Green activities Corporate social responsibility

The Green Key establishing process consists of six steps: choosing the right criteria (Green Key categories), filling in and returning the application, auditing, judging, and receiving the Green Key certificate. After establishing the certificate, the company goes through auditing during the first year and the second year, after which auditing will be completed every three years. (Going Green Oy 2021b). The fees for the Green Key programme vary based on the company type and their size, with annual membership fees ranging from 550 euros to 1750 euros (see Table 3). In addition, the auditing fee is 500 euros and the travelling expenses of the auditor. (Going Green Oy 2021b.)

Table 3. The Annual Membership Fees for Green Key Companies for 2021 (Going Green 2021b)

Fee/year (12 months)	Small	Middle sized	Large
Hotels (over 15 rooms)	-	1750	1750
Small accommodation companies (1-15 rooms)	950	-	-
Camp sites and holiday parks	550	850	1250
Restaurants and cafés	750	950	1250
Programme services – attractions	750	750	1250

4.1.4 Green Activities

Green Activities is a sister organization operating under Green Key Finland. Green Activities was established in Autumn 2019, and by May 2021 there were already 17 established Green Activities companies. Green Activities is only operating in Finland, but the goal of the programme is to become international. (Going Green Oy 2021a.) The programme is created for small nature-tourism companies, which take their customers to nature mainly by using animals or other non-motorised equipment and it is based on the criteria of the Attractions-category of Green Key Finland (Going Green Oy 2021a; Going Green Oy 2021b).

The application process for Green Activities label follows the same programme as the Green Key label, but the criteria for Green Activities is different. Green Activities has six criteria areas, which are environmental management, staff, guest information, activities, corporate social responsibility and tourism animal welfare (Going Green Oy 2022b). The Green Activities criteria focus on the utilisation of nature in the activities and getting around, how to instruct and guide the customers, and professional staff. (Going Green Oy 2021a.) Green Activities is also renewing their criteria on the use of animals in tourism services (Going Green Oy 2021b). In 2021 was published specific criteria for the well-being of sled dogs in tourism services (Going Green Oy 2021c) and in January 2022 was published criteria for the well-being of reindeer in tourism services (Going Green Oy 2022c; see Going Green Oy 2022b). The membership fee for companies with over 60 000 euros turnover is 550 euros and the auditing costs are composed of auditing fee of 400 euros and the travelling expenses of the auditor. For companies with turnover less than 60 000 euros the membership fee is 350 euros, and the auditing fee is 300 euros and the travelling costs of the auditor. (Going Green Oy 2022b).

4.2 Eco-Certifications in Previous Research

A study by Margaryan and Stensland (2017, 565) researched the (non)adaptation of eco-certification of nature-based tourism companies in Sweden and Norway. The research identified that companies which acquire eco-certifications tend to be led by lifestyle entrepreneurs, who prioritize altruistic goals, such as educating customers about nature, contributing to sustainability and utilizing local

resources. They also found out that small lifestyle-led companies believe in the competitive advantage and marketing advantage the certifications can bring to the company. (Margaryan & Stensland 2017, 565.) This finding is contrary to the findings of Font, Garay and Jones (2016, 15–16) who found out that lifestyle entrepreneurs tend to dislike marketing and are thus against sustainability communication tools, such as eco-certifications.

The study also identified that many nature-based tourism companies in Scandinavia do not acquire eco-certifications, as they already believe to be sufficiently sustainable and do not feel the need to be legitimized by third parties. The companies also did not see the added value the eco-certifications could bring to their company. In addition, the eco-certifications failed to appeal to small and micro companies, not only in terms of affordability, but also because small companies felt that they are sustainable enough just due to their size, or their sustainable actions' effect on climate change is minimal or non-existent. Some companies also implied that they feel their efforts in sustainability are suppressed by transportation emissions, as customers arriving to the destination are mostly travelling with airplanes. (Margaryan & Stensland 2017, 565–567).

In addition, the response of travellers to ecolabels was researched in Oulanka National Park by an on-site survey completed by 271 respondents, and they identified that only 11% of the respondents knew some tourism ecolabel or certificate. The study also identified that domestic travellers were more likely to be familiar with the PAN Parks ecolabel, but only one respondent stated that Oulanka National Park having the PAN Parks ecolabel affected their decision to travel there. However, even though the respondents were not very familiar with ecolabels at the time of the survey, 70% of them indicated that they would be willing to learn more about ecolabels and 75% stated that ecolabels are necessary or strongly necessary in Finland. In addition, 78% of respondents stated that they would be willing to pay more for products and services that have acquired some ecolabel or certification. (Siikamäki, Puhakka, Cottrell & Kangas 2010, 101; Puhakka 2010, 31–32.)

Furthermore, tourism quality, sustainability programmes, labels and criteria were researched in the Barents region. International sustainability certifications as well as the Finnish national sustainability certifications were identified to focus

primarily on environmental aspects, followed by economical sustainability. The study also identified that most Finnish and Norwegian sustainability certifications failed to address cultural sustainability in their criteria, with the exemption of Green Tourism of Finland ecolabel. (Carcia-Rosell et al. 2017, 20.)

Additionally, the study included a survey sent to tourism entrepreneurs and developers to research programmes, labels and criteria used in sustainable development and quality development in the Barents region. From the Finnish respondents, half described the use of international programmes, labels or criteria in their development processes, and nearly half identified the use of national programmes, labels or criteria. The development of the companies' own operations was identified as the main reason for using these programmes, but also the requirements from consumers were mentioned as reasons to use these programmes and criteria. However, some respondents did not use any programmes or labels in their sustainable development operations. The reason for not using any programmes was stated to be the expenses of the programmes, as well as the great workload the programmes would require. Some respondents also identified that the programmes and labels do not bring any added value for the company. (Carcia-Rosell 2017, 23.)

5   ECOTOURISM AND SUSTAINABILITY CERTIFICATIONS IN FINNISH LAPLAND

5.1   Thesis Process and Qualitative Research

The thesis process took place between August 2021 and May 2022. Initially, the thesis process methodology included interviews with representatives from tourism companies, as well as a survey sent to the nature-based tourism companies in Finnish Lapland. However, the timing of the interview was not favourable for the research as the survey was sent to the nature-based tourism companies in late October. The companies were presumably focusing on the first proper tourism season after two years of the Covid-19 pandemic and thus the survey did not receive enough answers to provide credible results. Thus, the survey was omitted from the thesis process, and instead the scope of the interviews was increased, and the aims of the thesis were adjusted to gain more deep understanding on the issues in ecotourism and ST certifications.

During the thesis process the theory gathering and background research took place in September 2021, as well as preparing the interview questions and the survey. The interviews were conducted between November 2021 and March 2022, meanwhile the theory was further developed. In December 2021 the survey was omitted from the thesis process and the number of interviews was increased. The analysing of the interview results took place in April 2022 and the maturity exam and thesis seminar were completed in May 2022. Table 4 summarises the thesis process timetable.

Table 4. The Thesis Process Timetable

Time frame	Task
February 2021	Creating the topic
30 August– 17 September 2021	Contacting the commissioner, submitting topic proposal to WIHI, project plan, theory gathering
17 September – 28 September 2021	Theory writing, creating the interview questions
28 September – 5 May 2022	Data gathering, data analysis, developing theory
5 May – 30 May 2022	Preliminary version, finalising the thesis, thesis seminar

The research is conducted using qualitative research method. Qualitative research method is used to gain in-depth insights into a phenomenon through a small number of participants (Melkert & Vos 2010, 34). In qualitative methodology, observations, interviews, and open-response questionnaires are used as methods to produce data in a text form. The text is created by the researchers by field notes and written transcripts of interviews, or the text is created by the participants themselves when they answer the questions in the interviews. After gathering the data, interpretive analysis is used to go through the text and group ideas together to discover patterns of behaviour and thinking. (Crocker 2009, 8–9.) Qualitative data is thus useful for situations where little is known about the subject under research and hypotheses cannot be necessarily formulated (Merlkert & Vos 2010, 34–35).

Qualitative research gives thorough and detailed information of a phenomenon or behaviour in a certain setting. However, the limitation of qualitative research is that it only examines a phenomenon in a certain setting and often does not even attempt to explain the phenomenon in another context. (Crocker 2009, 9.) Qualitative research also aims at investigating a certain phenomenon based on a small number of participants or observations (Melkert & Vos 2010, 34). Thus, qualitative research gives the researcher detailed and in-depth knowledge on a certain phenomenon, but the findings of qualitative research are not generalizable.

The use of qualitative research method in this thesis allows for detailed knowledge to be obtained about the ecotourism sector and ST certifications in Finnish Lapland. The semi-structured interviews allow the participants to reveal topics spontaneously, which allows richer data to be obtained. However, the limitation of qualitative research is that the findings cannot be generalised to the whole sector, as the number of participants is limited and thus can be only generalised to a certain degree to certain settings.

5.2   Conducting Research

The study uses semi-structured theme-interviews as its research method. Semi-structured interviews were held with five ST representatives to gain a deeper understanding of the ecotourism practices and perceptions in Finnish Lapland.

The interviewees consist of five representatives from tourism destinations in different parts of Lapland region, as well as one ST entrepreneur from Southern Lapland. The interviewees are stakeholders in sustainable tourism and are representatives from companies and destinations in Finnish Lapland, which are obtaining ST certifications, and are dedicated to ST practices. Through the interviews a deeper understanding is gained of the ecotourism field, as well as the difficulties it faces according to the interviewed representatives. The interviews also help to identify the role ST certifications have in the tourism development of Finnish Lapland's tourism sector, as well as the possible limitations they certifications may hold.

The interviews were held on Teams and the interviews were recorded. The interviewees were asked to talk about a particular theme in question, after which additional questions were presented by the researcher. After the interview, the recordings were transformed into written transcripts to be used in theme analysis. The transcripts of the semi-structured interviews were analysed using an Excel sheet where the answers were collected, and common themes were combined from the answers. The interviews were held either in Finnish or in English, and the interview templates for both languages are presented in Appendix 1 for English and Appendix 2 for Finnish. As some of the interviews were held in Finnish, the answers have been translated by the author.

The findings of the research were also partly compared to the findings of Ikonen (2012), who conducted a study on the perceptions of ecotourism in Finland a decade ago. The comparison of the research findings allows to see how the perceptions on ecotourism might have changed over the past 10 years, or if they are remaining the same. However, the findings could be only compared partially, as Ikonen's research also included a survey sent to the nature-based tourism entrepreneurs and was thus able to provide a broader understanding of the ecotourism field in Finland.

5.3   Current Perceptions and Practices in Finnish Lapland

5.3.1   Sustainable Development in Tourism

One of the aims of thesis was to map out the perceptions and practices on sustainable development in the nature-based tourism industry of Finnish Lapland. All the interviewed ST stakeholders identified the importance of sustainable development, by stating that it is "a requirement" (S5), "a necessity" (S4) and "absolutely necessary" (S3). Also, Stakeholder 1 stated that sustainable development is "starting to cover all operations" and Stakeholder 2 stated that "it is not enough that we preserve the current state for future generations, but we need to do more". All the stakeholders identified that sustainable development is more than just ecological sustainability, and even emphasized the existence of the other dimensions.

Especially socio-cultural sustainability was emphasized by the stakeholders. Tourism is an important economical field in Finnish Lapland, employing thus a lot of locals (see Chapter 3.1.1). Stakeholder 4 stated that for them hiring local personnel is one of the most important goals in their sustainable development goals and developing all-year-round tourism is one key component in supporting the local communities. Also, the stakeholders identified the importance of cultural sustainability when providing services related to Sámi culture and highlighted the significance of using services manufactured by the Sámi people themselves.

> [...] customers would receive correct information on Sámi culture, so that if there are culture related activities, they would be produced responsibly. (S2)

Furthermore, the stakeholders identified that sustainability and responsibility are becoming more and more common topics in the tourism industry, and the actions in them are becoming more visible. They identified that especially the STF programme had increased the interest towards sustainable development. Stakeholder 1 described how snowmobiles have slowly started to disappear from marketing communications and that "junk" has also been removed from souvenir shops. However, Stakeholder 1 and Stakeholder 5 specified that in their area, tourism businesses have been responsible and taking into consideration sustainability for a long time, but it has not been reported before. Also,

Stakeholder 4 stated that they have done sustainable development for a long time, before any certifications were acquired.

Moreover, the stakeholders described how important sustainable thinking is to the entrepreneurs of their areas. According to Stakeholder 2, in their operating area socio-cultural and ecological sustainability are close to the entrepreneurs' hearts.

> [...] they love their surrounding environment so much that it can be seen from their operations, and they also tell their clients how to be there [in the nature]. (S2)

Similarly, Stakeholder 3 stated that "it was in our DNA to do that [sustainable development]". These statements support the findings of Margaryan and Stensland (2017) who identified that companies acquiring eco-certifications tend to be led by life-style entrepreneurs.

To further support the concept of lifestyle entrepreneurs, the stakeholders stated that it is difficult to determine whether demand for sustainable development has grown in their operations. Thus, it suggests that the motivation for sustainable development comes from within or from the surrounding environment. However, some stakeholders stated that they have seen demand for sustainable development from travel agents and individual travellers.

> [...] we have received new travel agents to the area, which concentrate on sustainably developed products. (S4)

The sustainable practices the companies are completing vary from installing geothermal heating, to using local ingredients in food production and communicating to the customer about sustainability. Table 5 summarises all the activities listed in the interviews. Even though recycling was mentioned by many of the stakeholders as one of their sustainable actions, some of them also identified it as a challenge. Also, especially the recycling of biodegradable waste was identified as a challenge, due to the long distances in Lapland and the arctic environment (S4).

[...] for example we do not have the same recycling possibilities, as more Southern [Finland]. (S2)

[...] for cottages and locals collecting biodegradable waste is not possible. It is one of those [things] that it is stopped by the distances. (S4)

Table 5. The Sustainable Practices of Tourism Companies and Destinations Identified in the Research Interviews

– utilising local food and ingredients
– utilising seasonal ingredients in food production
– producing ingredients for food production themselves
– minimizing food waste
– minimizing electricity and water consumption
– thye have stopped using disposable tableware
– redusing the use of plastic
– recycling waste
– utilising LED lighting, also on destination level
– geothermal heating
– communications on sustainable travel development
– communicating the sustainble values of the company to the consumer
– suggestions for customers on how to reduce e.g. water consumption
– educating customers on ecological ways of travel
– paying attention that trekking in nature is controlled
– material choices when building new structures
– minimizing the size of the group
– increasing the number of stays of the customers
– balance out the seasonality
– extend the seasons so tourism would be all-year-round
– improving accessibility to the destination and within the destination

5.3.2 Perceptions on Ecotourism

When it comes to ecotourism, the respondents were not as familiar with the concept, as they were with the concept of sustainable development. All the respondents knew what the concept of ecotourism was, but their definitions were not as detailed as their definitions on sustainable development. Similarly to the findings of Ikonen (2012, 57) the stakeholders were mostly concentrating on the ecological aspect of ecotourism but were missing the aspects of environmental education and socio-cultural development, which have been identified in the most common ecotourism definitions (see Chapter 2.1). For example, Stakeholder 4

defined ecotourism as "ecological travelling" and Stakeholder 1 stated that ecotourism "aims at being carbon neutral".

Stakeholder 5 had a more thorough understanding of the concept of ecotourism and identified it as nature tourism, as well as the presence of environmental education.

> [...] wandering in the nature and the traveller learns a lot about the environment in which they are in. (S5)

> Responsible travelling in every way and trying to learn a lot about the area. By being an ecotourists, how can they preserve the environment as it is, or even improving it, wherever they are wandering or staying. (S5)

In terms of current ecotourism practices, the stakeholders identified that there are some companies in their operating area, which are selling ecotourism products, such as travel packages with dining, accommodation, and activities which use only muscle power, and Stakeholder 5 distinguished that they have noticed ecotourism as a growing trend in their operating area. However, the stakeholders stated that even though many of the companies in their area are already very sustainable, they do not identify themselves as ecotourism companies. This again supports the findings of Ikonen (2012, 53) that tourism companies are ecological and sustainable, but do not identify themselves as eco-companies, possibly due to the dislike for the word 'eco'.

> I cannot now specify, what would be ecotourism specifically from our tourism products, as I perceive that all of our tourism is based on the surrounding nature and is practised as ecologically and sustainably as possible. (S4)

> We maybe talk about sustainable tourism development in general, so we have not categorised separately actual ecotourism. (S4)

> Ecotourism has been a part of tourism for as long as there has been tourism here. (S2)

Thus, the companies in the areas are already quite sustainable, and have committed to sustainable values a long time ago. Stakeholder 4 stated that in the

future, they also wish and expect that new companies arriving to the area also commit to the sustainable strategies and values of the destination, and do not accomplish the company in the area just because the area is attracting customers, partly due to their sustainability programmes.

Furthermore, the stakeholders identified that their operating areas have excellent resources for ecotourism. They identified that the vast, untouched nature and the fact that they are more quiet destinations create strong base for the development for ecotourism and more authentic nature-experiences. According to Stakeholder 2, the lack of superimposed activities enhances the formation of authentic nature experiences for customers. Stakeholder 4 also stated that their destination brand brings the type of customers to the area, who find nature important and thus support its preservation. Stakeholder 4 also identified that the brand has also already guided all the services in the area to the direction in which all the operations are based on the surrounding nature and are thus ecological.

However, as described earlier, one of the greatest limitations in ecotourism development is the lack of well-established, stable ecotourism field in Finnish Lapland. The stakeholders identified that to develop ecotourism further it would have to find its place in the tourism offer of Finnish Lapland. The stakeholders stated that to be able to invest in ecological matters in the company, the company needs to have reliable income and the difficulty in ecotourism is determining who are the customers who are willing to invest their money in ecological companies.

> In Finland its part is somehow very limited, ecotourism's. Or at least in this area it is not really talked about. (S5)

> [...] it has such a small foothold still, or it has not yet been taken into any kind of marketing edge or as a unique selling point. (S5)

> When you think about the customer base, who are those that are willing to pay for it [ecotourism products]. It needs to provide reliable income for the entrepreneur nevertheless, so they can run the operations. (S2)

Another significant limitation in ecotourism is challenges in accessibility in Finnish Lapland. Due to the northern location, international tourists reach Finnish Lapland mostly by airplanes, which causes significant pollution to the environment. The

stakeholders described that even though the companies would do everything to inhibit pollution to the environment, in the end the customers arrive by utilising air traffic, which can be unmotivating for the entrepreneurs. This is similar to the findings of Margaryan and Stensland (2017, 565–567) who found out that entrepreneurs feel their sustainable efforts are supressed by the fact that customers use airplanes to arrive to them.

> But we can try to reach neutral carbon footprint or whatsoever [...] But at the end they took a flight to come to us and we can do almost nothing. (S3)

> [...] a challenge in developing ecotourism is that we are located here in the middle of nowhere, so arriving here. Getting those ecological [transportation] connections here is not always the easiest thing nor is it self-evident. Quite a big portion of the customers arrive by flying. (S4)

The stakeholders suggested developing train connections to improve the accessibility of the destination by more carbon neutral transportation options. However, Stakeholder 4 stated that they have tried to develop train packages for travellers, but due to the extensive travel time and great number of interchanges when travelling by train to Lapland, they have not been successful.

In addition to reaching the destination, the stakeholders also identified that travelling within the destination is inhibiting the development of ecotourism. In Lapland distances are long and public transportation is not always available. Thus, the customers and the companies are dependent on private transportation within the destination, which does not go in line with the goals of ecotourism.

> [...] we have basically three roads [...] Everything else, the vast land areas, how do you reach places? It is so that either you are crazy athlete, or then you go by ATVs or snow mobiles. (S2)

> [...] the ones who sell packages, they do offer transportation, so they transport groups here, but then independent travellers need to resort to for example car rentals. (S1)

Furthermore, the stakeholders described the issues with nature preservation if ecotourism and nature-tourism are even further developed, increasing the

number of visitors in natural areas. The carrying capacity of national parks was raised as a concern if the tourism keeps on developing to the same direction, as well as preserving the untouched nature as untouched. Stakeholder 1 identified that different areas and municipalities should cooperate to balance out the tourist flows in the most over-populated areas. It was also described that the development of ecotourism and nature tourism in general should be done very cautiously, to prevent the formation of mass tourism in nature destinations.

Mass tourism is not the way I think that ecotourism should develop [...] when they go in the nature there are a lot [of guests] [...]. (S3)

[...] the thinking needs to be so that what can tourism give to this place and to this area, and not what this area can give to tourism. (S5)

[...] if suddenly there would be a huge inrush of people, how would we maintain our attraction, and for example would our trail development be able to keep up. (S2)

During the interviews, all the participants identified that ecotourism has strong future in Lapland if the ecotourism industry just finds a foothold in the area's tourism offer. The stakeholders emphasized that as Lapland is mostly a nature-based destination, it gives excellent base for the development of ecotourism products. It was also stated that the development of ecotourism would also give an opportunity to really educate the arriving tourists about the environmental issues, and the significance unsustainable actions have on nature and the local communities.

[...] the traveller would really understand and learn the importance and significance of nature since it is the place where we live and operate here. (S5)

The stakeholders also identified that the future of ecotourism would need organised and supervised development for it to succeed. Stakeholder 1 stated that it would be the ideal that the demand for ecotourism would allow the production and selling of ecotourism products and packages, but unfortunately still travel decisions are not made with ecological issues primarily in the customers minds. However, Stakeholder 3 stated that due to the Covid-19

pandemic, as well as climate change, customers will concentrate more on small and sustainable destinations in the future, which in turn would increase the demand for ecotourism products and destinations. The stakeholders identified that they would need support in the form of for example projects, to be able to materialize ecotourism products and services.

> [...] the development of all sustainable tourism: we need project funding of it. And there needs to be one person in the area who is coordinating the development. It can be noticed immediately if we have a moment that we do not have that kind of a person in the area through some project [...] The coordinated development slows down right away for a moment. (S4)

> [...] support for product development, so that we could productize ecotourism products. (S3)

One of the stakeholders also identified the difficulty in selling guided tours to Finnish travellers. Most of international tourists arrive to Lapland during winter season, and the summer season is occupied by national travellers who use mostly accommodation and restaurant services. The development of all-year-round tourism, such as ecotourism, should thus focus on how to develop products and activities which are appealing to national travellers to support the local community all-year-round also outside of accommodation and restaurant services.

> Finnish people are really bad at buying guided services, so how could we get the Finnish to buy those, and on the other hand what would be the way for companies to approach this. (S2)

5.3.3 Sustainable Tourism Certifications

One of the aims of the research was also to identify the perceptions towards ST certifications in tourism companies of Finnish Lapland. From the interviewed destinations and companies four identified that the companies have ST certifications in the area, and one destination stated that they do not have any certifications yet, but the companies in the area were in the process of acquiring them. According to the interviews, the most common sustainability certifications in Lapland were Green Key, Green Activities and STF. Even though the STF

certificate has only been available since 2020, it had clearly raised the interest of tourism companies and destinations. In addition, the stakeholders identified that their area's companies have also Ekokompassi labels, as well as ECEAT Finland labels. When compared to the findings of Ikonen (2012) the familiarity of sustainable tourism certifications seems to have grown, since in Ikonen's research the entrepreneurs were not familiar with the most common sustainable tourism certifications, which was one of the main reasons why they are not acquiring them.

The stakeholders identified that the interest towards ST certifications has been rising in the tourism companies of Finnish Lapland. The stakeholders identified that the STF programme had clearly raised the interest towards certifications, and even stated that before the STF programme some of the companies did not have any certifications. However, still some companies were identified to be hesitant in acquiring the STF label, as it only has been available only for two years.

> The STF programme is quite new, so it can be seen that [companies] would like to see first what benefits and everything else it brings in other areas first. [...] they are afraid to be the first ones. (S2)

In addition, it was identified that earlier there were such a great number of different certifications that some companies intentionally decided not to acquire any. Through the STF programme the companies decided to start applying for certifications, to be able to receive the national STF label, and Stakeholder 5 stated that the STF programme helps to verify the sustainability in an easier, more combined way. The stakeholders also emphasized that even though the companies have started to apply for certifications only in the recent years, the work in sustainability has begun already a long time before, but the sustainability just has not been verified in any way before.

In addition, the stakeholders stated that because of the companies' long-lasting history in sustainability, the companies seemed to struggle to see the added value the certifications bring to the company, which supports the findings of Margaryan and Stensland (2017, 565–56). Stakeholder 4 described that earlier they intentionally decided not to apply for any labels, as there was such a great number of them, and customers seemed to not recognise any of them. It was also

stated in the future the value of the certifications will decrease because all the companies are acquiring them.

> [...] at some point it appears that the value of this label is decreasing to my point of view. Because if you give every ecolabel to everyone, what is the point to have one if everyone has [one]. (S3)

However, the stakeholders also identified that the certifications are becoming more important, and they are starting to be requirements and not only inducements. It was also stated that through the STF programme, their position is becoming more important. Furthermore, many of the stakeholders described their concerns in terms of 'green washing.' It was described that the stakeholders are concerned that the certificates are becoming the intrinsic value in sustainability rather than the actual sustainable actions taken. Stakeholder 1 stated that hopefully also the certificates will develop in the future, so they will not start to feel like 'green washing'. This supports the findings of Ikonen (2012) where some of the survey participants saw ecotourism just as a hoax and way to sell a better conscience for tourists.

As described above, one of the main issues in certification programmes seems to be the great variety of different labels and certificates. Stakeholder 5 stated it as a positive aspect of the certification programmes as the great variety allows all the companies to find a label which is suitable for their operations. Others however saw it as an inhibiting factor because the lack of common certificates leads to customers not recognising any of them.

> [...] it is still quite varied what certificates there are, so will they hold a certain power or do the consumers think that since there are a hundred of travel certificates, they do not hold value over them. (S2)

> [...] it is an awful jungle with these certificates [...] when we started asking our international travel agents and customers which certificate we should take, which one do they know and so on, everyone gave a different answer. (S4)

The stakeholders identified that to avoid for example the perception of 'green washing' the certification programmes should develop in the future, and

specifically they identified that the programmes should hold some type of ranking for the companies. The stakeholders felt that within one label the companies can be in such different levels of sustainability, but still hold the same label. By ranking the companies within one label it would help to differentiate the companies, avoiding thus customers becoming desensitized to the labels. The ranking would also help motivate the companies to put more effort to the sustainable practices, pushing them towards the next step in the programme.

> [...] the companies that do more would be differentiated more clearly [...] because after all there are companies on very different levels that can have the same certificate. (S1)

> [...] they should more clearly differentiate [...] It just should be very easy to communicate to the consumer. Because at the moment, the same certificate can be acquired by very, very different companies, so it is a bit of a challenge. (S2)

> [...] there is no ranking [...] some of the companies who have exactly the same label, don't have the same level of sustainability [...] And it could push every company to do the maximum to have the higher level for example. (S3)

Furthermore, the stakeholders identified that the certification programmes help the companies in sustainable development by making the development more controlled and by scanning all the aspects and operations of the company, rather than focusing only on certain areas or operations. Stakeholder 4 also stated that the certification programmes help in the development process, because the certifications take the development forward on early basis. In terms of environmental education, Stakeholder 5 identified that the certificates force the companies to the educate all the personnel about the sustainability actions, even though the seasonality and thus turnover of employees would be great. This in turn helps to take the sustainability thinking forwards within the company and within the local community.

In addition, the certificates were perceived as bringing economic benefits for the companies. Marketing and visibility were mentioned the most in terms of economic benefits, but Stakeholder 1 also identified that for example saving

energy and minimizing water consumption will bring savings for the company. Additionally, it was identified that in the future it might be that companies who do not have any ST certifications, will not gain the same recognition and demand as certified companies, losing thus economically.

> [...] travel agents have considered the certifications as important. [...] Then it might be that at some point it will become a norm in certain customer groups that they only choose those [companies] that have those [certificates] in order. (S1)

However, one of the main inhibiting factors identified in the interviews is the lack of economic and temporal resources in the companies to complete and maintain the certificates. It was identified that entrepreneurs do have the will and motivation to complete concrete actions in sustainability, but the paperwork the certification process requires is overly time-consuming for the small companies, in which the sustainability work is often completed by the entrepreneurs themselves. This also supports the findings of Ikonen (2012, 48) who also found out that the lack of time was one of the reasons why companies had not acquired any certifications.

> [...] even though the business operations per se can be very sustainable and it would not require anything else than writing it on a paper and applying for the certificate and that would be it, but if there is no time and no chance to do it. (S5)

As mentioned, financial resources were also identified as inhibiting the certification processes of companies. The certificates were identified as expensive, and not only as a one-time investment, but continuous investments through the yearly audits they need to complete. Stakeholder 4 also criticized the STF programme in terms of costs of the programme, since even though the STF programme itself is free, acquiring the STF certificate requires that the company has some other certificate, which usually requires payment. In addition, Stakeholder 5 identified that as ecotourism and sustainability are sometimes seen just as trends in the tourism industry, the companies might be hesitant to invest time and finances to the certification programmes as the benefits might not be long lasting. It was also identified that some of the companies do not hold

value over the expensive certificates, and rather invest the money concretely, for example to employ locals.

> [...] they [entrepreneurs] also calculate that with these thousands of euros they can for example hire one employee for May, when otherwise the person could possibly be on a layoff. (S4)

The hight costs of the certification programmes was seen as a threat to the future of these certifications. It was identified that in the case where finances are restricted, the certificate is the first aspect from which finances are hold off. Additionally, it was seen that even though the companies would have finances to invest on the certificates, the companies might feel frustrated to maintain them or apply for them, because the costs are high, and they might not see any added value brought to their company. Stakeholder 3 also identified that the lack of help from the programme in the further phases of the certification process might be unmotivating for the entrepreneurs, as the deeper one goes on the sustainable path, the more technical the actions and decisions are becoming.

> [...] we do not have any advice from the label. Because at some point it's... the more I go deeper in this sustainable path, I would say, or way, the more I understand that it is very technical. And at some point, it goes next to a very philosophical or political choice. For example, is it better for me to buy solar panels, which means certain footprint to create those panels, or to use only renewable energy, or even nuclear? (S3)

To support the future of the certification programmes, they should develop to be more supporting for the companies in terms of help and affordability. Stakeholder 4 stated that the certification programmes should develop so that in the future the programmes would provide more help and support for the companies on their sustainable path and especially help them in the concrete actions with as less paperwork as possible. Stakeholder 2 also identified that there should be a certification programme for small companies in rural areas, which would take into consideration the specific characteristics of those areas. The rural areas such as Finnish Lapland are well-known for their long distances and lack of public transportation, so the sustainable practices in those areas can be quite different from those of for example big cities.

5.3.4   Key Findings of the Research

All the interviewed stakeholders were particularly familiar with the concept of sustainable development, and they saw sustainability as an important factor in all tourism operations. The tourism companies of Finnish Lapland were also seen as being already very sustainable, even though they might have not verified it in any way before.

However, ecotourism did not have as strong foot hold in Lapland's tourism sector. The main issue in the development of ecotourism in Lapland was identified to be the difficulties in accessibility, as the arriving tourists mostly rely on air traffic. In addition, the distances within the destination are long and public transportation is not always available, and thus the accessibility within the destination was also seen as inhibiting the development of ecotourism.

Lastly, the significance of ST certifications has grown in the tourism field of Finnish Lapland, and the ST certifications are seen as useful tools to help the companies assess the sustainability of all their operations. However, the most evident limitation of certification programmes was described to be the great amount of financial and temporal resources they require to be acquired and maintained. Table 6 summarises the key results.

Table 6. The Key Findings of the Research

Sustainable development	– Tourism companies in Finnish Lapland are already very sustainable and consider sustainability an important factor in all operations
Ecotourism	– The foothold of ecotourism in Finnish Lapland is still very limited
	– Accessibility is one of the key limitations in developing ecotourism in Lapland
Sustainability certifications	– Sustainability certifications are becoming more important in the tourism sector, and they help the companies to assess all aspects of their operations
	– Sustainability certifications fail to meet the needs and resources of small and micro tourism companies
	– In the future sustainability certifications should develop ranking to maintain their attraction within consumers and companies

6 DISCUSSION

The aim of this thesis was to map out the current perceptions and practices on ecotourism and ST certifications in Finnish Lapland. The findings meet the aims of the thesis, by providing an insight to the restrictions and possibilities the tourism companies in the area see in ecotourism, as well as by mapping out the perception they hold towards ST certifications, and the limitations the certifications programmes hold. Through this research the commissioner, House of Lapland, will further understand the limitations as well as possibilities that might lay within their operating environment, and help identify what kind of support the development and marketing of ST in Lapland needs. The findings of this thesis also further elaborate on the scarce ecotourism research of Finland by providing an insight into Lapland's ecotourism field.

The research method used in this thesis was qualitative research methodology in the form of semi-structured interviews. Five representatives from tourism companies and destinations in Finnish Lapland were interviewed to receive a deep understanding of perceptions and practices of ecotourism and sustainable tourism certifications in Finnish Lapland. The research method was suitable for the aims of this thesis as it allowed the participants to spontaneously mention issues which would have not been discussed by the researcher, and the interviews generated rich material about the issues under research. However, this research was conducted only in Finnish Lapland, and thus the findings are not generalizable to the whole Finland's tourism field. In addition, as the interviews were only conducted to a few representatives from the tourism industry, more thorough picture of the perceptions of all tourism companies was not established.

The active execution of the thesis project lasted from August 2021 to May of 2022. The topic of the thesis stemmed from the personal interest of the author towards sustainability and ecotourism, and the reasons behind the lack of established ecotourism field in Finland. Initially the thesis project also included a survey which was sent to nature-based tourism companies in Finnish Lapland to establish a broader understanding of the issue under research. However, the survey was sent to the companies in the early part of the winter season during

Covid-19 pandemic and the survey did not receive enough answers to provide credible results and it was omitted from the thesis project. Thus, the scope of the interviews was increased, and the aim of the thesis was changed to obtain deeper and more thorough understanding on the perception on ecotourism in Finnish Lapland.

During the interviews, the stakeholders revealed that sustainable development and sustainability are seen as important aspects in the tourism industry of Finnish Lapland and the STF programme has even further increased the interest towards it. Thus, the stakeholders were familiar with the definition of sustainable development, and identified that it consists of economical, ecological and socio-cultural sustainability. In sustainable development, the stakeholders emphasised socio-cultural sustainability, by stating that employing local communities all-year round is important for them, as well as identifying the importance of responsibly produced Sámi tourism products. The stakeholders were also familiar with the concept of ecotourism but did not manage to give as detailed definitions of it and they mostly concentrated on the ecological aspect of ecotourism, not identifying the socio-cultural and educational aspects.

Additionally, ecotourism still does not seem to have a strong foothold in the tourism sector of Finnish Lapland. The companies in Finnish Lapland are very sustainable and are potential ecotourism companies in terms of offered services and sustainability but only a few offer ecotourism products and identify them as ecotourism. In terms of future ecotourism development, the difficulties in accessibility were seen as one of the greatest limitations, as the travelling to and within the destination rely on air-traffic and private motoring. Secondly, the difficulty in creating profitable ecotourism services was seen as one limitation, as ecotourism field itself does not yet have a strong foothold in Lapland. The companies would need to identify and attract the right customers for ecotourism products to make it a profitable business. The development of ecotourism field would thus need controlled and monitored development plans, through for example an ecotourism project in the area.

Lastly, the sustainability certification in Finnish Lapland have gained more interest in the recent years, and more companies have started acquiring them. The certifications help the companies to evaluate and develop their operations

more thoroughly, concentrating on all the aspects of the company, rather than just ecological issues. They certifications also help to guide the development of the companies, guiding them to improve their sustainability on yearly basis. However, the certifications are time-consuming and require great financial investments, making it thus difficult for small and micro companies to find the resources to apply for and maintain them. As the commonness of sustainability certifications increases in the tourism field, the certifications should also develop, for example by creating ranking within the label to maintain the attractiveness of the labels for consumers, as well as to promote companies to push further in their sustainability practices.

The findings of the thesis support the findings of Ikonen (2012), which suggests than within the past decade the perceptions and practices towards ecotourism have not changed to a great extent. The main difference when compared to Ikonen's findings was that ST certifications have become more common and well-known within the tourism field. One of the main findings of Ikonen's research was that nature-based tourism entrepreneurs are not familiar with the biggest ST certifications in Finland and are thus not acquiring them, which has changed quite vastly, as nowadays many companies are acquiring those certifications. However, for example Green Key, which is one of the most common certifications nowadays, was not established in Finland before 2015: three years after Ikonen's research. Thus, the variety of certifications has grown within the past decade, contributing thus to the commonness of those certificates. Furthermore, ECEAT Finland was one of the most common ST certifications researched in Ikonen's study, but in this study, ECEAT Finland was only identified by one of the interviewed stakeholders. However, the findings of these two researches are only partially comparable, as Ikonen's research was conducted on whole Finland's nature-based tourism sector, and this research concentrated on Finnish Lapland. Additionally, Ikonen's study included also a survey sent to the nature-based tourism companies, which allowed Ikonen to make wider conclusions and generalisations of the ecotourism field.

For further research, a survey about ecotourism and ST certifications could be conducted on the nature-based tourism companies of Finnish Lapland to get a broader idea of the perceptions and practices the tourism sector in Finnish

Lapland holds. Additionally, as the STF programme was identified as having raised interest and importance of ST and ST certifications within companies, a similar study could be conducted within a few years to see how the STF programme has continued to define the ST field in Finland. During the realization of this research, STF programme had existed only for two years, which is why it could not be established in this study how the STF programme will affect the ST industry in the course of time.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1.　　　　Semi Structured Interview in English

Appendix 2.　　　　Semi Structured Interview in Finnish

Appendix 1. Semi Structured Interview in English 1(4)

Theme Interview Themes and Related Sub-Themes

You will first ask the interviewee to tell you about the particular theme in question. If he/she does not reveal the sub-themes, then you may ask detailed questions below the theme. Pay attention that that you do not ask the same things he/she has told earlier in the interview. You may also ask other sub-themes if it seems relevant in the conversation.

DESTINATIONS

Sustainable development in the tourism of your area

- How would you define sustainable development?

- How would you describe the significance of sustainable development in modern tourism?

- Has the significance of sustainable development changed in tourism business, for example in the last 5 years?

- Has the demand for companies following sustainable development grown?

- How sustainable development can be seen in your area's companies?

Ecotourism and its development in your area

- How would you define ecotourism?

- How ecotourism sector has changed, for example in the past 5 years?

- What type of ecotourism products are offered in your area?

- What kind of strengths does your area have in terms of ecotourism?

- What kind of weaknesses does your area have in terms of ecotourism?

- What kind of development needs your area's ecotourism sector has?

- What kind of support would the development of ecotourism need?

Appendix 1. Semi Structured Interview in English 2(4)

The future of ecotourism in your area

- What kind of opportunities do you see in the future of ecotourism?

- What kind of threats do you see in the future of ecotourism?

- How do you think ecotourism will change in the future?

Sustainable development certifications in your area's companies

- What sustainable development certificates do your area's companies have?

- How has the popularity of sustainable development certificates changed within companies, for example in the past five years?

- What kind of advantages or disadvantages the certification programs have brought to your area's companies?

- What kind of opportunities or threats the certification programs bring to your area's companies?

- How do you see the future of sustainable development certification programs?

Appendix 1. Semi Structured Interview in English 3(4)

COMPANIES

Sustainable development in tourism business

- How would you define sustainable development?

- How would you describe the significance of sustainable development in modern tourism?

- Has the significance of sustainable development changed in tourism business, for example in the last 5 years?

- Has the demand for sustainable development grown in your company?

- How sustainable development can be seen in your company?

Ecotourism and its development in your company

- How would you define ecotourism?

- How ecotourism sector has changed, for example in the past 5 years?

- What type of ecotourism products your company and other companies in your area offer?

- What kind of strengths do you see in your company and its operating area in terms of ecotourism?

- What kind of weaknesses do you see in your company and its operating area in terms of ecotourism?

- What kind of development needs do you see in your company's ecotourism operations?

- What kind of support would the development of ecotourism need?

Appendix 1. Semi Structured Interview in English 4(4)

The future of ecotourism

- What kind of opportunities do you see in the future of ecotourism?

- What kind of threats do you see in the future of ecotourism?

- How do you think ecotourism will change in the future?

Sustainable development certifications in tourism companies

- What sustainable development certificates does your company have?

- How has the popularity of sustainable development certificates changed within companies, for example in the past five years?

- What kind of advantages or disadvantages you think the certification programs bring to companies?

- What kind of opportunities or threats you think the certification programs bring to companies?

- How do you see the future of sustainable development certification programs?

Appendix 2. Semi Structured Interview in Finnish 1(4)

Theme Interview Themes and Related Sub-Themes

You will first ask the interviewee to tell you about the particular theme in question. If he/she does not reveal the sub-themes, then you may ask detailed questions below the theme. Pay attention that that you do not ask the same things he/she has told earlier in the interview. You may also ask other sub-themes if it seems relevant in the conversation.

DESTINAATIOT

Kestävä kehitys alueesi matkailutoiminnassa

- Miten määrittelisit kestävän kehityksen?

- Miten kuvailisit kestävän kehityksen merkitystä nykyaikaisessa matkailussa?

- Onko kestävän kehityksen merkitys matkailussa muuttunut, esimerkiksi viimeisen 5 vuoden aikana?

- Onko kysyntä kestävää kehitystä seuraaville yrityksille kasvanut?

- Miten kestävä kehitys näkyy alueesi yrityksissä?

Ekomatkailu ja sen kehittäminen alueellasi

- Miten määrittelisit ekomatkailun?

- Kuinka ekomatkailuala on muuttunut esimerkiksi viimeisen 5 vuoden aikana?

- Millaisia ekomatkailutuotteita alueellasi on?

- Millaisia vahvuuksia ekomatkailussa on alueellasi?

- Millaisia heikkouksia ekomatkailussa on alueellasi?

- Millaisia kehitystarpeita alueesi ekomatkailualalla on?

- Millaista tukea ekomatkailun kehitys tarvitsisi?

Appendix 2. Semi Structured Interview in Finnish 2(4)

Ekomatkailun tulevaisuus alueellasi

- Millaisia mahdollisuuksia näet ekomatkailun tulevaisuudelle alueellasi?

- Millaisia uhkia näet ekomatkailun tulevaisuudelle alueellasi?

- Miten näet ekomatkailun muuttuvan tulevaisuudessa?

Kestävän kehityksen sertifiointijärjestelmät alueesi yrityksissä

- Mitä kestävän kehityksen sertifikaatteja alueesi yrityksillä on?

- Miten sertifikaattijärjestelmien suosio yritysten keskuudessa on muuttunut, esimerkiksi viimeisen viiden vuoden aikana?

- Millaisia hyötyjä tai haittoja sertifiointijärjestelmistä on ollut alueesi yrityksille?

- Millaisia mahdollisuuksia tai uhkia sertifiointijärjestelmät tuovat alueesi yrityksille?

- Millaisena näet kestävän kehityksen sertifiointijärjestelmien tulevaisuuden?

Appendix 2. Semi Structured Interview in Finnish 3(4)

YRITYKSET

Kestävä kehitys matkailutoiminnassa

- Miten määrittelisit kestävän kehityksen?

- Miten kuvailisit kestävän kehityksen merkitystä nykyaikaisessa matkailussa?

- Onko kestävän kehityksen merkitys matkailussa muuttunut mielestäsi, esimerkiksi viimeisen 5 vuoden aikana?

- Onko kysyntä kestävälle kehitykselle yrityksessäsi kasvanut?

- Miten kestävä kehitys näkyy yrityksessäsi?

Ekomatkailutoiminta ja sen kehitys yrityksessäsi

- Miten määrittelisit ekomatkailun?

- Kuinka ekomatkailuala on muuttunut esimerkiksi viimeisen 5 vuoden aikana?

- Millaisia ekomatkailutuotteita yrityksesi ja muut alueesi yritykset tarjoavat?

- Millaisia vahvuuksia näet yrityksessäsi ja sen toiminta-alueella ekomatkailuun liittyen?

- Millaisia heikkouksia näet yrityksessäsi ja sen toiminta-alueella ekomatkailuun liittyen?

- Millaisia kehitystarpeita näet yrityksesi ekomatkailutoiminnassa?

- Millaista tukea ekomatkailun kehitys tarvitsisi?

Appendix 2. Semi Structured Interview in Finnish 4(4)

Ekomatkailun tulevaisuus

- Millaisia mahdollisuuksia näet ekomatkailun tulevaisuudelle?

- Millaisia uhkia näet ekomatkailun tulevaisuudelle?

- Miten näet ekomatkailun muuttuvan tulevaisuudessa?

Kestävän kehityksen sertifiointijärjestelmät matkailuyrityksissä

- Mitä kestävän kehityksen sertifikaatteja yritykselläsi on?

- Miten näet sertifikaattijärjestelmien suosion muuttuneen, esimerkiksi viimeisen viiden vuoden aikana?

- Millaisia hyötyjä tai haittoja näet sertifiointijärjestelmien tuovan yrityksille?

- Millaisia mahdollisuuksia tai uhkia näet sertifiointijärjestelmien tuovan yrityksille?

- Millaisena näet kestävän kehityksen sertifiointijärjestelmien tulevaisuuden?