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Faculty of Tourism and Hospitality, Imatra
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Sport Tourism in Joensuu and Joensuu Sub-Region

Thesis 2018

Abstract

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The objective of the thesis was to explore the potential of Joensuu sub-region as a sport tourism destination. In order to achieve this aim, an analysis of existing sport tourism facilities, sport products, events, operating companies, their offers and marketing channels was implemented. The commissioner of this thesis was Visit Karelia. This organization manages the marketing of North Karelia region. The objectives of the thesis were developed in cooperation with Visit Karelia representative. Thus, the study was relevant and beneficial.

The information was gathered from literature, newspapers, the Internet, semi-structured interviews and questionnaires. Qualitative research was chosen as a research method for this study and was conducted in October – December 2017. Within this research, sport tourists, providers of sport tourism services and representatives of marketing organizations were questioned. Thus, the current situation with sport tourism in Joensuu sub-region has been analyzed from various perspectives.

The results of the study show that the region has many opportunities for sport tourism, including existing sport facilities, which are in good shape. Nevertheless, sport tourism industry in Joensuu sub-region is still to develop. Sport tourism has to be marketed directly to potential users, and information about sport-related tourism has to be organized.

Keywords: sport tourism, destination development, sport, tourism, special interest tourism

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Abbreviations and acronyms

DKB	Deutsche Kreditbank (German Direct bank)
FA	Football Association
FC	Football club
FIFA	Fédération Internationale de Football Association (International Federation of Association Football)
FIS	Fédération Internationale de Ski (International Ski Federation)
IBU	International Biathlon Union
IFS	Industrial and Financial Systems (software company)
IIHF	International Ice Hockey Federation
ISLO	Itä-Suomen Liikuntaopisto (Eastern Finland Sports Institute)
JOSEK	Joensuun Seudun Kehittämisyhtiö (Joensuu Regional Development Company)
MSSC	Motivation scale for sport consumption
Pokali	Pohjois-Karjalan Liikunta (Sports Federation of North Karelia)
SUP	Stand up paddle surfing
UEFA	Union of European Football Associations

1 Introduction

This research focuses on studying Joensuu sub-region as a sport tourism destination. The Joensuu sub-region is located in North Karelia, Finland, and consists of two towns; Joensuu and Outokumpu, and five municipalities; Juuka, Kontiolahti, Polvijärvi, Liperi and Ilomantsi (Visit Karelia 2017). Existing sport tourism facilities, sport products, events, operating companies, their offers and marketing channels will be examined in order to identify the current situation with sport in the region and its potential as a sport tourism destination. The conclusion will be based on collecting and analyzing primary data from questionnaires and interviews, and on gathering the information from secondary data sources. Findings of this research should present summarized and detailed information about the existing sport tourism products and facilities in Joensuu sub-region, and to find new products options to raise demand on both national and international levels.

We live in a society where people start taking more responsibility for their health. There is an increasing concern regarding human well-being. These days, people are interested in healthy food, healthy lifestyle, healthy body and clean environment. Thus, sport tourism is a fast-growing sector of the global travel industry, and it becomes generally more attractive for the visitors throughout the world.

Global warming trend has a huge impact on sport tourism, which leads to the change in international competition. Therefore, searching new possibilities for its development is relevant as well. Global warming could have both positive impact on the sport tourism in Finland (lack of snow in other winter sport destinations, such as Germany or Italy will lead to reducing competition) and negative impact (for southern regions of Finland, like North Karelia, the lack of snow is possible as well). In negative case region should be able to concentrate on summer sport facilities more (because some existing popular places for summer sport activities might have too hot weather for it, for instance, France). In positive case it could be useful to improve existing winter sport facilities.

Although Joensuu sub-region has been organizing many national and international competitions, there has not been a lot of research concerning this topic. Lahti region, which has been organizing FIS events on cross country skiing and ski jumping, has a much better and well-known reputation as a sport town both in Finland and abroad. Karelia Expert organization, which is responsible for tourism marketing of North Karelia,

does not have much information on sport tourism in particular either. Therefore, getting a full picture of the situation might be beneficial for structuring the product offers and improving them for international visitors.

Interest to this subject arose when I had a personal experience of being a sport tourist in Joensuu sub-region. I participated both in the active sport activities myself (for instance, skiing) and visited sport events (for instance, IBU Biathlon World Championship 2015 and IBU World Cup 2017). In addition, I am personally interested in special interest tourism and consider it as an eligible employment option. Special tourists' needs require special and careful product development and marketing, and it is an interesting challenge. It was also important for me to write my thesis concerning tourism in Finland, because it can be beneficial for my future career. In my opinion, Finland is underrated as a tourist destination country, thus, discovering options to make this country more attractive for foreign visitors is challenging. Healthy lifestyle of the population, full winter season, untouched nature and good environment makes Finland a perfect sport tourism destination.

The main aims of this research were to define Joensuu sub-region's potential as a sport tourism destination and to find out new opportunities and possibilities to make it more noticeable and attractive for both national and international markets. Exploring destination's potential implies defining its capabilities, that may be developed, and readiness. It includes examining condition of facilities and infrastructure, basic amenities, tourism management, safety, accessibility and service quality. In order to achieve these objectives, following research questions were formed:

- What are the existing facilities and products for sport tourism in Joensuu sub-region?
- What is the current situation with sport tourism there?
- What are the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of Joensuu sub-region as a sport tourism destination?
- How to improve existing products and what kind of products must be added in order to make this destination noticeable and competitive for both national and international markets?

This thesis has been divided into four main parts. In the beginning, theoretical part helps the reader better understand the concept of sport tourism in general. The next chapter is

designed to explore the current situation with sport tourism in Joensuu sub-region in particular. Of equal importance would be the research part, which is describing the research process and presenting its results. The final chapter summarizes the findings and proposes possibilities for sport tourism growth in Joensuu sub-region.

2 Sport tourism

This chapter will introduce the concept of sport tourism. In the beginning, it provides definition of sport tourism and explains the link between tourism and sport. In order to track the development of sport tourism, the brief history of its phenomenon will be presented. Then the core elements of the concept of sport tourism will be introduced, including classification, demand groups and sport tourists' motivation. The chapter concludes with introduction of Finland as a sport tourism destination.

2.1. Definition of sport tourism

To understand the concept of sport tourism, it is logical to explore the nature of each parent disciplines separately. This is a challenge, because there are multiple definitions existing for both sports and tourism. Determination of both disciplines highly depends on the context and point of view. However, some consensus concerning the defining parameters does emerge from the respective literature in these fields of study. (Hinch & Higham 2004, pp. 15-16.)

There are arguments about defining which types of activities refer to the term 'sport', as well. Bullfighting, for instance, is often understood more like a performance rather than sport. Despite the fact that bullfighting has many characteristics of a sport, such as competition, required physical skills of the conquistador and presence of spectators, it still has some important features of the performance. For instance, bulls were often deliberately weakened in order to prolong the spectacle and make it more interesting and attractive for the audience, which contradicts the essence of the sport. (Ritchie & Adair 2014.)

Some critics claim, that it is impossible to create an all-embracing definition for sport, because it is a socially constructed activity that has varied across historical eras, societies and cultures. Society has changed dramatically throughout the centuries, and so have peoples' activities and sport in particular.

Other researchers, such as Goodman, Paddick, Rader, in their turn, believe that sport has specific and timeless characteristics similar for all eras, for instance, being goal-oriented and competitive. Coakley (1990) in Hinch and Higham (2004) gives the following definition to sport:

Sport is an institutionalized competitive activity that involves vigorous physical activity or the use of relatively complex skills by individuals whose participation is motivated by a combination of intrinsic and extrinsic factors.

Tourism is also a complex discipline with many different definitions from various perspectives. These definitions share three key dimensions, that occur most often. The most common of these is a spatial dimension, which implies that individuals must leave and eventually return to their home. Murthy (1985) in Hinch and Higham (2004) defines tourism as the travel of non-residents. Although travelling does not automatically make individual a tourist, it is one of the necessary conditions.

A second prevalent dimension involves the temporal characteristics associated with the tourism. These characteristics vary widely according to the context: definitions developed for statistical purposes often distinguish between tourists and excursionists. For statistical purposes, the term tourist is reserved only for those individuals, who stay in the destination for at least 24 hours, while the tourists and media use this term for those, whose visit lasts for less than 24 hours, as well.

A third popular dimension of tourism definition concerns the purpose of the activities during travel. This dimension is characterized by the broad range of views, which are highly dependent on the context. For instance, some dictionaries define pleasure as one of the main purposes for travelling, while definitions for statistical purposes tend to include business travelers. (Hinch & Higham 2004, pp. 17-18.)

Thus, there is a tangible link between sport and tourism. Travel is an essential part of many types of sport, and sport is one of the prevalent activities within tourism. The complex nature of both concepts and its diversity give rise to controversy about the essence of the definition of sport tourism. For instance, there are arguments about whether travelers who claim to have sport as secondary reason for travel be categorized as sport tourists.

Nevertheless, some consensus does emerge from these arguments. Hinch & Higham (2004) define sport tourism as sport-based travel away from home environment for a limited time, where sport is characterized by unique rule sets, competition related to physical prowess and play, and it is recognized as a significant travel activity whether it is a primary or secondary reason for travelling.

2.2. History

Despite the fact that sport tourism is a relatively new phenomenon, people have travelled for sport-related purposes for many centuries. Its development history dates back to 776 BC, when the first Olympic Games were held in ancient Greece. It can be considered as some of the earliest documented examples of sport tourism. Ancient Olympic Games were considered a festival, which were very popular among the ancient Greeks, and its main goal was the entertainment of the spectators. However, athletics was an important part of Greeks' life and the sport was an essential element of Olympic Games. The participants were well-trained professional athletes from different cities, who competed for the prizes and gifts. Sports were becoming increasingly popular, and this is the reason why people were willing to support their athletes at the Olympics. So, thousands of spectators travelled from different parts of Greece to Olympia. On the average, the ancient Olympic Games may have attracted as many as 40 000 visitors. (Weed & Bull 2011.)

There is relatively little evidence of sport tourism examples in the Middle ages and Renaissance period. Medieval sports had much smaller scale, and the biggest sport events of this period simply could not be compared to the competitions in ancient Greece. However, there were some examples of sport tourism. Medieval tournaments attracted knights from different places of Europe, so, the participants often had to travel to compete in the battles. Nevertheless, for the knights the line between tournament and battlefield was thin. Medieval knight battles were unregulated, violent and warlike. In addition, it was not a spectacle: provision for the visitors was missing and the location for viewing was inconvenient. Eventually the tournament was civilized and became less violent and dangerous, and generally became more attractive for the spectators.

Real tennis, in its turn, became popular in the sixteenth century and was the privilege of aristocrats. As transportation development allowed people to travel more easily, opportunities for sport tourism increased as well. (Weed & Bull 2011.)

In nineteenth century, lack of the transport was one of the main obstacles in the way of tourism development. Existing types of transportation were slow and costly. Therefore, the industrialization with the following development of the railways had serious implications for the sport tourism. Implementation of cheaper and more comfortable form of transport made travelling more accessible to the population in general (both for the spectators and participants). As a result, the amount of people, who travelled for sport

related purposes, increased. Football, cricket and horse racing were the main sports that attracted large crowds. (Weed & Bull 2011.)

Improved transport had a significant impact on national sport competitions. Many representatives of new social groups were given an opportunity to travel within the country, which led to the increased number of participants. Larger sport events required careful organization, therefore, the first attempts of establishments of the rules and involving governing bodies were made. Football is the most vivid example of the civilized and organized sport activity during the Industrial Age. In 1863, the Football Association (FA) was established, and it introduced the national code of rules. (Weed & Bull 2011.)

Increased wages of the working classes by the second half of nineteenth century affected their lifestyle and motivations. Significant amount of working people received enough of money to spend their income on leisure, furthermore, their amount of free time increased as well. Thus, the number of spectators at sport events significantly increased. The development of spectator sport, in its turn, was one of the main reasons of sport commercialization. In addition, the number of people, travelling to use facilities for sport (for instance, skiing) also increased. (Weed & Bull 2011.)

The 20th century was marked by tremendous industrial, economic, social and cultural change. While industrialization of the 19th century provided the necessary conditions for further growth of sport tourism, travelling for sport-related purposes still remained exclusive and was intended for upper and middle classes only.

The 20th century marked the beginning for fundamental worker rights and human rights struggle. Workers began to fight for their rights – for holidays with pay, for increased wages and limited working hours. Thus, majority of people could take a normal holiday: the increase in holiday time was combined with general rise in income. As a result, tourism and sport tourism in particular was no longer a privilege for upper and middle classes, and it became much more accessible. Altogether with further development of transportation, expansion of reasonably priced, quality hotel accommodation and development of sports mega-events, all this laid the foundation for dramatic sport tourism growth. (Weed & Bull 2011.)

2.3. Classification

Sport tourism can be classified in several ways, depending on tourists' motivations, needs and type of activity. According to Gammon and Robinson (2003, pp. 21-26), the sports

tourism can be divided into two main categories: hard sports tourism and soft sports tourism. Hard definition refers to passive and active participation at a competitive sport events, such as London Marathon, Olympic Games, FIFA World Cup, Formula 1 Grand Prix, FIS championships. Soft definition, in its turn, applies to primarily active recreational participation in sport activities for health or pleasure, including fun runs, hiking, skiing and canoeing. (Sport tourism 2017.)

Gibson offered a different kind of classification and divided sport tourism into three categories. These are sport event tourism, celebrity and nostalgia tourism and active sport tourism.

Sport event tourism involves travel for experiencing sporting events. Depending on the relationship between participation and spectatorship, sport event tourism, in its turn, is divided into two subcategories: elite and non-elite sport event tourism. When the number of spectators is significantly higher than the number of participants, this is an example of elite sport event tourism. In opposite case, when the number of spectators is significantly lower than the number of participants, it is a non-elite sport event tourism. (Hinch & Higham 2004, pp. 44-47.)

Active sport tourism refers to individuals, who are travelling for physical involvement in competitive or non-competitive sport. Hiking, golf, mountaineering, tennis, fishing, skiing, surfing and skating are just a few examples of the sports, in which people are willing to participate.

Celebrity and nostalgia sport tourism includes travelling to visit sport museums, halls of fame, themed restaurant, sport reunions and places, where famous athletes have lived, or famous sport events were held (Hinch & Higham 2004, pp. 48-49). FC Barcelona Camp Nou Experience is a great example of celebrity and nostalgia sport tourism attraction. It includes stadium tour and visiting FC Barcelona museum with many exhibits, which are very important to the football fans, such as famous players' outfits and trophies (for instance, European Champion Clubs' Cup and Messi's Golden Ball). Camp Nou is the largest football stadium in Europe and one of the most famous landmarks in Barcelona, which attracts many tourists both from Spain and abroad. (Visit to Camp Nou Museum on 7.8.2015.)

2.4. Demand groups

Sports tourism is a complex and diverse market, and it is not possible to define one target group, because sport tourists' motivations and expectations are very different. There are different ways of sport tourism market segmentation and all of them vary depending on selected characteristics. The same marketing strategies cannot be applied to sport events participants and sport events spectators. Professional athletes and amateurs also have fundamental differences in their approach and requirements.

Maier and Weber (1993) in Hinch & Higham (2004, p. 34) divided sport tourism market into four demand groups based on the intensity of the sport activities pursued at the destination. They also describe main visitors' requirements for the destination and required facilities for sport activities for each demand group.

According to Hinch & Higham (2004, p. 35), Maier and Weber (1993) claim that the first demand group is represented by top performance athletes. Their level of sport involvement is very high, as professional athletes are fully concentrated on sport activities and consider it a priority. This demand group mainly does not pay attention to other activities, for instance, sightseeing or shopping, and their interest and possibilities are usually strictly limited by their training schedule. Their requirements for equipment and facilities are extremely high, in addition, some professionals might also have specific dietary and accommodation requirements. Suitable training conditions are main priorities for this group.

The second demand group consists of mass sport participants, who are travelling to preserve health and maintain fitness. The level of their sport involvement is relatively high, and sport is also the priority for their travelling. Representatives of this group mainly consider the accessibility of destination and the quality of sport facilities. They might be interested in sightseeing or other leisure activities as well (since representatives of this group have more free time than professionals athletes), but it is not the reason why they travel. (Hinch & Higham 2004, p. 35.)

The third demand group is represented by occasional sports (wo)men. The level of sport involvement of this group is relatively low, sporting ambitions do not play a big role in their decision-making process. Sport is not an essential part of their life, often compensation and prestige are pursued. Their sport activities are irregular, therefore, this group is interested in less demanding sports, such as recreational skiing or bowling. Sporting

activities receive almost the same priority as sightseeing and other activities. (Hinch & Higham 2004, p. 35.)

And the fourth group, which was identified by Maier and Weber (1993), consists of passive sport tourists. These are the travelers, who do not pursue any individual sports activities. This demand group is mainly focused on mega-sport events and includes spectators, coaches, media reporters and other service staff for top performance athletes. (Hinch & Higham 2004, p. 35.)

2.5. Sport tourists' motivation

Tourist motivation is defined as *a function of self-perceived needs of the traveler, which drive the decision-making process and purchase of tourism products* (Collier, 1999). The stimulus causes physiological response, which, in its turn, constitutes the basis for the further behavior and gives direction to action. Studying tourist motivation is essential for understanding, why people travel, what kind of expectations do they have, what priorities and what were their reasons to choose the destination.

Dann (1981) in Hinch & Higham (2004, p.144) states that there are two types of motivational profile of the tourist consisting of various intrinsic and extrinsic motives. These are push (psychological) factors and pull (cultural) factors. Push and pull model is one of the most popular theories on tourists' motivation, which is widely accepted by many researchers. This concept suggests that people are pushed to travel by internal psychological motives (for instance, willingness to escape from the daily routine, need for social interaction, lack of sun, need for medical treatment) and pulled by external motives, such as price, destination image, marketing and promotion. Push factors drive a traveler away from home and initiate their willingness to travel somewhere in the first place, while pull factors attract a tourist towards a destination and influence tourists' decision-making process on choosing a (specific) destination.

Destination image is one of the key pull factors in destination selection. According to Echtner & Ritchie (1993) in Hinch & Higham (2004, p.144) destination image can be defined as a function of physical and abstract attributes. Physical attributes of the destination include its attractions, resources, activities, sporting facilities and physical landscapes. Abstract attributes are more difficult to measure and include atmosphere, safety, ambience and crowding. Combination of physical and abstract attributes of the

destination creates a destination image, which plays an important role in formulation of tourists' expectation.

Crompton (1979) in his theory identified nine motives that encourage visitors to travel. He divided these motives into two categories: socio-psychological and cultural. Socio-psychological factors include escape from a perceived mundane environment, exploration and evaluation of self, relaxation, prestige, regression, enhancement of kinship relationships, and facilitation of social interaction. The cultural factors, in its turn, were represented by novelty and education.

There are many reasons that motivates people to travel for sport-related purposes. These reasons are unique to each tourist, as they are determined on personality and individual experience. Nevertheless, it is possible to define general preferences and priorities, which are typical for each demand group. For instance, there are different psychological motives behind professional athletes' travel decision and amateurs'. Understanding these motives can help to understand the behavior of different demand groups and the experience which they are willing to get. Defining if sport is the primary or secondary reason for travelling is critical for destination development and marketing. Those motivated by training or participation in sport events mainly focus on their facilities requirements. Tourists, who are motivated by recreation, having fun and relaxing may require other experiences and activities, because sport did not play an important part in their decision to travel. (Hinch & Higham 2004, pp. 144-147)

Different sport motivation scales were proposed to explain the motives and behavior of sport tourists. Trail and James (2001) in Choi et al (2009, pp. 269 – 270) developed the motivation scale for sport consumption (MSSC) which included nine motives: achievement, acquisition of knowledge, aesthetics, drama, escape, family, physical attractiveness of participants, the quality of the physical skill of the participants, and social interaction. Milne and McDonald (1999) in Choi et al (2009, pp. 269 – 270) proposed different theory, which was based on Maslow's hierarchy of needs. They identified thirteen sport motivations constructs, which are physical fitness, risk-taking, stress reduction, aggression, affiliation, social facilitation, self-esteem, competition, achievement, skill mastery, aesthetics, value development and self-actualization.

Gender also plays an important role in motivation process. For instance, for male tourists nostalgia is usually the main motive in nostalgia tourism, while women pay less attention

to this factor and are more concerned about spending time with family or friends. Thus, sport is often the primary reason for nostalgia sport tourism for men, while for women sport is the secondary reasons for travelling. (Gibson 2006, p. 76.)

2.6. Sport tourism in Finland

Physical activities play an important role in Finns' leisure, thus sport and activity tourism are considered as a societal and economically significant phenomenon in Finland. Seventy percent of the Finnish adult population participates in physical activities at least once a week. Over a million of Finns practice sport and physical activities at least five times a week and 90 percent of Finnish children and youth take part in physical activities. Evidently, sport is indeed an integral part of Finnish culture and society. For this reason, Finns pay special attention to the development of sports in their country, which leads to large investments towards infrastructure of sporting facilities. There are approximately 30,000 sports facilities in Finland that are available for tourists, which shows great potential for sport tourism in the country. (Vehmas 2010, p.171.)

Finland is well known as a winter sport country, and it is famous for its winter sport facilities. Even with few mountains, Finland has about 80 ski areas in the North and Lapland (22), the South (26) and in the middle of the country (28). The longest ski trail is located in Lapland (over 3,000 meters long), nevertheless, the average length of a ski run in Finland is between 600 and 800 meters. Finnish lift passes are among the cheapest in Western Europe. The main ski resorts in Finland are Levi, Ruka and Ylläs. (Vanat 2017.) Finland is also known for its ice hockey traditions. In the 2016/2017 season, 268 indoor and 38 outdoor ice hockey rinks were located in Finland according to the International Ice Hockey Federation (7th indicator in the world). (Statista 2018.)

The country has a lot of experience of hosting various sporting events, including major international competitions. The 1952 Summer Olympics Games in Helsinki were the largest sporting event to be held in Finland. It attracted 4,955 participants from 69 countries and 1,136,166 spectators (The Olympic Database 2018).

Finland is also a popular venue for hosting the FIS Nordic World Ski Championships, which includes three disciplines: cross-country skiing, ski jumping, and nordic combined. The FIS Nordic World Ski Championships have been held in Lahti seven times (in 1926, 1938, 1958, 1978, 1989, 2001 and 2017) and once in Rovaniemi (1984) (FIS 2018). The Championships in 1984 were shared with Engelberg, Switzerland and included only those events, which were not held at the 1984 Winter Olympics in Sarajevo.

Other large sport events, hosted in Finland, include Athletics World Championships (1983, 2005, 2018), Men's World Ice Hockey Championships (1965, 1974, 1982, 1991, 1997, 2003, 2012), Women's Ice Hockey World Championships (1992, 1999 and 2009), Biathlon World Championships (1962, 1971, 1981, 1990, 1991, 1999, 2000, 2015) and UEFA Women's Championship in 2009. (Suomen urheilu 2017.)

While sport tourism industry in Finland continues to grow, the government has decided to invest in tourism to ensure continued growth. In January 2017 Visit Finland (2017) presented a new development and marketing project «Sports Travel», which intended to promote sports tourism in Finland to international tourists. The project aspired to increase Finland's visibility as an excellent, year-round destination for sports enthusiasts, families with children, students and school groups. One of the key strategies is Matkailu 4.0 development plan, which aims to offer tourism experiences all-year round. The main placed products included using sport facilities (for instance, skiing centers) and sport events.

The main target group for this project is China. Winter sports in China gain popularity as Beijing was selected as host city of the 2022 Winter Olympics Games. An increasing number of Chinese people are starting to participate in winter sports, and many of them are willing to travel abroad to get acquainted with unusual kinds of sports. And many Chinese tourists seek traditional European winter sports destination for the full experience. Thus, it is crucial to make Finnish sport tourism destinations known to potential Chinese customers.

3 Joensuu sub-region as a sport tourism destination

This chapter will present the analysis of current sport tourism situation in Joensuu sub-region. In the beginning the author presents brief introduction of the region for general acquaintance, which will continue with detailed description of available sport related services. Such aspects as main sport facilities, responsible organizations, main sport products, events and sport tourism marketing will be explored.

3.1. Introduction of Joensuu sub-region

Joensuu sub-region is located on the Eastern part of Finland and borders Central Karelia and Pielinen Karelia sub-regions, Northern Savonia region and Russia. It covers an area of 11,503.77 square kilometers, of which 2,080.84 km² is water (Statistics Finland 2017). The population of Joensuu region was 124,174 inhabitants as of September 2017, of which 75,729 were inhabitants of Joensuu town (Statistics Finland 2017). Joensuu sub-region includes two towns; Joensuu and Outukumpu, and five municipalities, which are Ilomantsi, Juuka, Kontiolahti, Liperi and Polvijärvi. The town of Joensuu is the central town of the sub-region as well as North Karelia's capital. It was founded by Emperor Nicolai I of Russia in 1848. Nowadays Joensuu is the second largest town in eastern Finland and the 12th largest town in the country (University of Eastern Finland 2017).

Nowadays Joensuu is known as the town of students – every third inhabitant is younger than 30 years old. The town of Joensuu is also famous for its big events and variety of cultural activities, such as concerts, shows and festivals. The region in general has positive business environment, pure nature and is surrounded by many lakes and rivers, which provides great opportunities for nature and sport tourism. All these factors altogether with bordering Russia indicates, that Joensuu sub-region has a great potential as a tourism destination.

As can be seen in Figure 1, the town of Joensuu is located 137 kilometers away from Kuopio, 247 kilometers away from Jyväskylä, 390 kilometers away from Petrozavodsk, 395 kilometers away from Tampere, 397 kilometers away from Oulu, 438 kilometers away from Helsinki and 410 kilometers away from Saint Petersburg (JOSEK 2017). It can be easily reached from other parts of Finland by bus and by train, which are operating daily according to the Matkahuolto and VR schedules. Joensuu can be reached via air as well, as Joensuu airport is connected to Helsinki via daily flights. The nearest border crossing at Niirala is situated 75 kilometers away from Joensuu. Recent years have witnessed

tremendous growth: there were 1.3 million border crossings in Niirala in 2011 and tax-free sales in 2017 Eastern Finland grew by nearly 70%. (JOSEK 2017)



Figure 1. Map of the Joensuu sub-region (Josek 2017)

3.2. Sport facilities in Joensuu sub-region

3.2.1. Joensuu Arena

Joensuu Arena is the biggest wooden building in Finland, which is the heart of many sport and cultural activities of the city. This multi-purpose stadium was built in 2004 mainly for sport events. Nevertheless, it is currently used for various concerts, exhibitions, trade fairs, lectures and celebrations as well. The total area of the stadium is 14,600 square meters. The middle part of the arena is divided into three sectors, each with its own entrance. Joensuu Arena has a total capacity of 7,000, expandable to 10,000 people with special arrangements. (Joensuu Events 2017.)

Joensuu Arena offers possibilities for various activities all year round. Multifunctional sports hall includes athletic field with 325 meters running track, artificial turf football and Finnish baseball fields; basketball, volleyball and floorball fields, boxing ring and tatami. Eighteen meters high climbing wall is the second highest climbing wall in Finland, and one of the best indoor climbing centers in the country (Joensuu Arena 2017). Convenient

location near the town center and a range of offered facilities makes Joensuu Arena a perfect venue for sport and cultural events.

Arena is currently used by many sport clubs and events. It is the home arena for Kataja Basket Club (basketball) and Josba (floorball). In addition, it is used by Joensuun Maila Club (Finnish baseball) and Jippo Club (football) for winter training and games. Joensuu Arena held many Finnish championships, such as indoor athletics championships, indoor Finnish baseball championships and Latin dance championship. It is also hosting basketball and floorball regular season games both on national (Korisliiga) and international (EuroLeague) tournaments. (Joensuu Areena 2015; Joensuu Areena 2017)

3.2.2. Mehtimäki Ice Hall

Mehtimäki Ice Hall is a roofed indoor arena located near the town center of Joensuu. It was opened in 1982 and it is primarily used for ice hockey and figure skating. Nevertheless, the arena has also been used for other sports, such as basketball, floorball, tennis and boxing. In addition, Mehtimäki Ice Hall is suitable for concerts, fairs, seminars and conferences. (Mehtimäen jäähalli 2017.)

Mehtimäki Ice Hall is capable of holding 4,800 people, while its maximum seating capacity is 2,500. According to IIHF and Finnish Ice Hockey Association (Suomen Jääkiekkoliitto & IIHF 2014, p.19), ice rink should be 60 meters long and between 26-30 meters wide. The ice rink is 30 x 60 meters; therefore, the arena meets all the requirements for hosting both Finnish league and Mestis league ice hockey games. The arena includes competition hall (1,800 m²) and the training hall (1,456 m²). (Mehtimäen jäähalli 2017.)

Mehtimäki Ice Hall is the home arena for Jokipojat and Joensuun Kiekkokopla ice hockey teams. Jokipojat plays in the Mestis league (second-highest ice hockey league in Finland), while Joensuun Kiekkokopla play in the Suomi-sarja league (third-highest ice hockey league of the country). Thus, both Jokipojat and Joensuun Kiekkokopla play their home games in Mehtimäki Ice Hall. In addition, it is the home arena for Kataja figure skating club. Besides ice hockey games, Mehtimäki Ice Hall held many other sport and cultural events, such as Kataja basketball club final games, rap artist Cheek's concert in 2016, Farmari agricultural exhibition in 2015, Taitaja 2013 (Finnish national skills competition), roller derby games and «Tule joulu kultainen» Christmas concert. (Joensuu Events 2017b.)

3.2.3. Kontiolahti Biathlon Center

Kontiolahti is a cross-country skiing and biathlon venue, which is located 15 kilometers north from Joensuu, 120 meters above sea level. The stadium in Kontiolahti is the only one in Finland, which possesses a valid A licence delivered by IBU (Kestävyyssurveilu 2016). A licence is required for hosting high-level international biathlon competitions, such as World Cups and World Championships. This licence is valid until November 1st 2022 and it allows the National Biathlon Federation of Finland to apply for hosting any IBU events.

Kontiolahti Biathlon Center includes cross-country trails, ski stadium, shooting range, commentators booths, graphic information board, screens, main building and the press center. The shooting range was renewed in 2011 and has 30 illuminated targets. The highest point on tracks is 128 meters, the lowest point on tracks is 88 meters. Track profile allows to train different techniques and includes several biathlon competition courses from 2 to 7.5 kilometers and 10-20 kilometers of training tracks. Figure 2 displays an example for the 12.5 kilometers course, which was organized for men's pursuit competition during Kontiolahti IBU World Cup 2017. It consisted of 5 laps of 2.5 kilometers and had a total course length of 12,628 meters. The maximum climb of this course was 22 meters, while the total climb was 380 meters. (Biathlon results 2017.)

Kontiolahti is famous for its Wall uphill, which is considered to be one of the most difficult uphill of IBU World Cup program. Capacity of the stadium is 15,000 spectators, while capacity of the course is 6,000 spectators, thus, Kontiolahti Biathlon Center can host an event with maximum of 21,000 spectators.

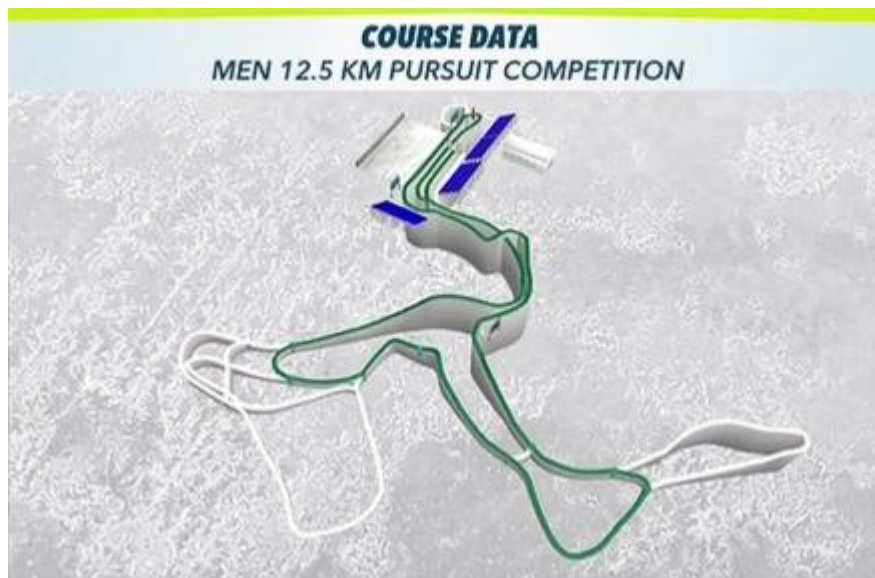


Figure 2. Course data for men's 12.5 km pursuit competition in Kontiolahti 2017 (Eurovision TV)

The facility has hosted various international biathlon events: IBU World Championships in 1990, 1999 and 2015, IBU World Cups in 1990, 1993, 1997, 2003, 2006, 2007, 2010, 2012, 2014, 2017 and 2018, European Championships in 1994 and 2002, IBU Cups (previously known as European Cup), and Masters Biathlon International Championships (1997-2009, 2011-2018). (International Biathlon Union 2017, p.64.)

The stadium was renovated in 2012 - 2014 to host IBU World Championships in 2015. Artificial lighting was improved, which is essential for TV. The following improvements were implemented:

- Expansion of the main building;
- Expansion of the press center;
- Spectators stand capacity was increased from 10000 to 15000 spectators;
- New lighting system;
- Draining system;
- Enhancement capacity of power grid;
- Modification of the courtyard area;
- New parking areas;
- The sauna

(International Biathlon Union 2013, p.112; International Biathlon Union 2014, p. 96).

In 2015, Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture selected Kontiolahti Biathlon Center as the Sport Venue of the year (Yle 2015).

3.2.4. Pärnävaara Sport Center

Pärnävaara is the largest ski resort of North Karelia, which is located in Liperi, 16 kilometers away from Joensuu. It is a perfect venue for cross-country skiing, roller skiing, orienteering, biking, snowshoeing and hiking. It also has facilities for climbing all year round. There is a rock climbing site on a slope, and it is also available for ice climbing during the winter. (Joensuu 2017.)

Pärnävaara Sport Center offers a system of cross-country skiing trails of varying length and difficulty levels. The easy level trails do not have special skills requirements and are perfect for recreational use and for the beginners. The hardest trails, in their turn, give professional athletes great opportunities for intensive and variable training. Pärnävaara Sport Center has 5 kilometers track for roller skiing during the summer, which is also an essential part of top athletes' training. Thus, ski resort attracts both recreational skiers and professionals. The total length of cross-country ski trails is 35 kilometers, of which 5 kilometers are illuminated. In addition, there is a shooting range with 28 targets for biathlon training available. (Joensuu 2017.)

Pärnävaara has hosted Skiing Finnish Championships several times. It also held Jukola orienteering relay in 1982 and 2000, Fin5 Orienteering Week in 2006 and World Mountain Bike Orienteering Championships in 2006. Various open fitness trainings were organized in Pärnävaara by Kalevan Rasti and Liperin Taimen.

3.2.5. Golf courses

Golf is one of the most wide-spread sport activities in Finland, and Joensuu is no exception. Currently there are three public golf courses in the region, which include Kontioniemi Golf, Outokummun Golf and Pilkonpuisto Golf. All of these courses provide coaching services, which allows beginners to understand the basics of the golf and to train under the guidance of professionals. Finnish golf season lasts from May till September.

Kontioniemi golf field is located in Kontiolahti, only 20 minutes away from Joensuu. This 18-hole golf course was designed by Kosti Kuronen, and it is situated in beautiful surroundings of pure nature. Karelia Golf is responsible for its maintenance.

Outokummun Golf is another high-quality golf course, which is situated nearby

Outokumpu, approximately 2 kilometers away from the town center. It was founded in 1990 and has 9-hole golf courses.

Pilkonpuisto golf field is located in Joensuu. It has a driving range attached, where golfers can practise their golf swing. Range is also a popular place among the beginners. The range is equipped with golf ball vending machine. (Outokummun Golfseura 2016; Karelia Golf 2017)

3.3. Responsible organizations and partners

The complex nature of sports tourism makes the tasks of its development, organization and marketing challenging. It involves many parties, who pursue completely different goals and expect different potential benefits from their participation. The tasks of involved organizations vary as well. It may include sport product development, building facilities for sports, taking care of infrastructure, planning, marketing, providing accommodation and transportation.

The government traditionally plays an important role in sport tourism development. It is responsible for the health and tourism, building and renovation of infrastructure, policies development and statistics analysis. The governing bodies define the long-term tourism strategies for the region in general. Sport facilities are quite often owned and subsidized by local government. For instance, Joensuu town owns Joensuu Arena, Mehtimäki Sports Park and Mehtimäki Ice Hall. Joensuu town is responsible for renting these premises for various organizations or needs, for instance, to sport clubs or events. The permission from the land or premises' owner is always required for organizing an event. Besides event permission, the event organizer must fill out other notifications and applications to the regional authorities. Joensuu Events is a governmental organization, which is responsible for renting the facilities and the equipment for the events. It has a very functioning website, which provides full information regarding events' facilities and all the required procedures for its renting. (Joensuu Events n.d.) National sport federations are commonly involved in the process of sport tourism development as well. For instance, Finnish Biathlon Association plays a vital role in IBU World Cup's organization.

However, not only governing bodies are engaged in the development of sport tourism in the region. The Sports Federation of North Karelia (Pokali) is a non-governmental regional sports organization, which is a member of the Finnish Sports Federation. Pokali operates in following directions:

- Health-enhancing physical activity for adults;
- Sports for children and youngsters;
- Support services for the sports clubs;
- Sports policy. (Pokali 2017.)

The providers of sport tourism products include various sport clubs, agencies and organizations. They are responsible for arranging sports events, product planning and development. Joensuu sub-region has many sport clubs, which are focused on different types of sports. The majority of these clubs are located in the town of Joensuu; the largest sport clubs of the town are presented in Table 1 (as for the 31.12.2016).

Sport club	Members	Sport(s)
Joensuun Latu ry	1971	Snow shoeing, skiing, ice skating, hiking, kayaking, cycling
Joensuun Kataja ry	1700	Basketball, athletics, figure skating, synchronized skating, skiing
Joensuun Jääkarhut ry	1306	Ice swimming
Karelia Golf ry	1222	Golf
Joensuun Voimistelu ja Liikunta ry	936	Gymnastics
Joensuun Uimaseura	896	Swimming
Pyhäselän Urheilijat ry	587	Athletics, floorball, volleyball, skiing, physical exercise
Juniori Jokipojat ry	574	Ice hockey
Josba juniorit ry	434	Floorball
Kalevan Rasti ry	380	Orienteering
Mutalan Riento ry	308	Volleyball

Table 1. Largest sport clubs of the town of Joensuu (Joensuu taskussa 2017)

Nevertheless, other municipalities of Joensuu sub-regions have their own sport clubs as well:

- Kontiolahti Sport Club (biathlon, shooting, orienteering);
- Ilomantsin Urheilijat (skiing, volleyball, baseball, orienteering);
- Outokummun Partio (skiing, physical exercise, volleyball, baseball, archery, orienteering, athletics);

- Juuka Ball Sports Club (football, baseball, volleyball).

Joensuun Kataja is a great example of a successful sport services provider and events co-organizer. This multisport club was founded in 1990, nowadays they have departments in basketball, athletics, figure skating, synchronized skating and skiing. Their main goal is promotion of the sports for amateurs and children. Besides providing training opportunities, Joensuun Kataja organizes many sports events and competitions, such as Joensuu Run and Joensuu Games. (Joensuun Kataja 2017a.)

The regional destination marketing organization responsible for the promotion of North Karelia region is called Karelia Expert. It is providing mutual tourism marketing, product development, conference- and congress services and tourist info. It was founded in 1993 for North Karelia tourism marketing. Karelia Expert is the founder of "Visit Karelia" brand, in 2010 the region started offering services to tourists under the "Visit Karelia" name (Karelia Expert). In terms of sport tourism, Visit Karelia mainly focuses on sport events marketing and promotion of several sport products to the tourists.

According to Meenaghan (1983) in Hansen & Scotwin (1994), sponsorship refers to provision of assistance either financial or in kind to an activity by a commercial organization for the purpose of achieving commercial objectives. Sponsorship has a vital role in both sport events organization and their marketing. Sponsorship is defined as a business relationship between the provider of funds, resources or services and an individual, event or organization which offers in return some rights and association that may be used for commercial advantage. Potential sponsors may include individuals, corporations, private companies, government agencies, industry associations, educational institutions and community organizations. Sponsorship may cover many organization expenses, such as media coverage, IT support, telecommunication expenses, physical items, renting and marketing expenses, food and beverages costs and so on. Sponsors, in their turn, use events to promote their brand and to gain media exposure. Outdoor advertising, branded clothing items, publicity activities and extensive signage are the most popular ways for sponsors to promote themselves. (Wagen & White 2010, pp.107-111.)

Examples of sponsoring organizations of 2015 IBU World Championships in Kontiolahti included BMW, Viessmann, DKB, E-on, Erdinger, Bauhaus, Lapua, IFS, Polar, which are supporting all IBU World Cup events. Exclusive Kontiolahti sponsors were Abloy, Eero

Reijonen oy, North Karelia vocational college, North Karelia college for adult education and John Deere. In December 2017, John Deere and Ouneva Group were announced as first main sponsors for the 2018 IBU World Cup in Kontiolahti (Kontiolahti Biathlon 2017a). Sponsorship is often related to the specificities of sport event. For instance, main sponsors of Joensuu Jukola orienteering event in 2017, besides Joensuu town, were the Finnish Defense Forces and the Finnish orienteering federation.

3.4. Main sport tourism products

According to the definition provided by Jefferson & Lickorish (1988, p.59), tourism product is *a collection of physical and service features together with significant associations which are expected to satisfy the wants and needs of the customer*. Briefly, it is a physical and psychological satisfaction provided to tourist at the destination. Tourism products are highly perishable, which means that they cannot be stored. The service is made and delivered on spot and it is only possible, if the customer is actually present. Intangibility is another important characteristic of tourism product – it cannot be seen, touched, smelled or tasted.

From a sport marketing and sport management perspective, sport tourism is represented by two broad categories of products: sport participation products (travel for the purpose of participating in a sport events, recreation, leisure or fitness activity); and sport spectatorial products (travel for the purpose of spectating sports, recreation, leisure or fitness activities or events) (Pitts 1997, p.31).

Sport participation tourism includes providing professional training possibilities, rental equipment, organizing training courses for amateurs, youth sport camps and various types of activities. Joensuu sub-region offers a wide range of these kinds of products both during the summer (water sports, hiking, karting, horseback riding, golf, cycling) and during the winter (cross-country skiing, biathlon, snowshoeing).

Joensuu region is known as the perfect venue for cross-country skiing and has many versatile skiing tracks. Parnaväära Sport Center provides additional services as well, such as equipment rental and skis waxing.

Kontiolahti Biathlon Center is a great example of a high performance training center designed for both elite and recreational athletes. Besides world-class conditions for biathlon and cross-country training, there is modern gym nearby the main building

available for the power training. Many national biathlon teams are travelling to Kontiolahti for professional and quality training during the summer.

Cooled Ski Track, which opens in mid-October, is a popular product among both professional athletes and amateurs. It allows athletes to train on the first snow as soon as possible and to prepare for the winter season more effectively. In October 2017 four groups from Russia, masters skiers from Great Britain and national teams from South Korea and Japan scheduled their training camps on the first snow track in Kontiolahti. Camps lasted from eight days to three weeks (Kontiolahti Biathlon 2017b). Use of Cooled Ski track is under payment until the end of November-December, when the natural snow falls. There is a variety of services offered by Kontiolahti sports club, including equipment rental, use of Cooled Ski track, basic cross-country skiing and shooting courses for the beginners and biathlon competitions for groups (Table 2).

Service	Price for an adult
Single Cooled Ski Track ticket (2 hours)	€17
Single Cooled Ski Track ticket (1 day)	€20
Season ticket (cross-country)	€290
Season ticket (biathlon)	€310
Basic level ski course (skate skiing)	€35 / 75 minutes
Basic level ski course (classic technique)	€35 / 75 minutes
Shooting lesson (suitable for beginners, prone & standing shooting)	€15 / 30 minutes
	€25 / 1 hour
Biathlon competition (for groups of 4-8 people)	€40 / person
Biathlon competition (for groups of 9-12 people)	€35 / person
Skis rental	€10 / day
Ski boots rental	€8 / day
Poles rental	€6 / day
Equipment set rental (skis, boots, poles)	€20 / day

Table 2. Kontiolahti biathlon center services and price list (Kontiolahti Biathlon 2017d)

There is a variety of lakes around the region, which allows many opportunities for water tourism. Canoeing is a good example of the popular water sport products. Enjoy Life

Finland offers basic canoeing courses in Joensuu. With experienced instructor and careful learning of the theory, previous experience is not required, and the service perfectly suits the beginners as well. For the experienced kayakers there is a possibility to rent the kayaks. The price of the Enjoy Life Finland canoeing basic course is €50, and the duration of the activity is 2-3 hours. Renting a kayaker will cost you €20 for 2 hours, €40 for 1 day and €290 for 1 week (Enjoylife 2017).

Stand up paddling (SUP) courses and tours are another great example of water sport activities. It is a relatively new product, which was brought to Joensuu by Arctic Trainers organization in 2014. Figure 3 demonstrates Stand Up Paddling tour in Joensuu. Stand up paddling is originally from Hawaii as an offshoot of surfing. The basic idea is to stand and paddle on a big surfboard and experience the beauty of lakes and rivers. Besides having fun and relaxing, the participant improves his/her aerobic capacity, muscular endurance and balance. It is easy to learn and suitable both for relaxation and active holiday. Arctic Trainers offer four options of SUP courses with various places to see and levels of difficulty:

- SUP for beginners (basics of stand up paddling, 2 hours, €48 / person);
- SUP Six Bridges tour (down the river Pielinen from Karsikko to Jokiasema with six different bridges to pass by, 3 hours, €55 / person);
- SUP Höytiäinen Channel tour (intermediate level tour, 5 hours, €69 / person);
- SUP fitness tour (working out on a SUP board, 1 hour, €25 / person). (Arctic trainers 2017.)



Figure 3. Stand Up Paddling tour in Joensuu (Arctic Trainers 2017)

Sport spectatorial products, in their turn, include spectating sports, recreation, leisure or fitness activities or events. Depending on the type of events, spectators' motivations and expectations from the product may vary. For instance, for major sport events, such as IBU World Cup or regular hockey tournaments, most attendants are fans of the athletes, teams or sport in general, who support their favorites by attending competitions. For smaller scale events (for instance, Pogosta Ski Race) the majority of the spectators is represented by participants' family members and friends. Sport spectatorial products include spectating events of every level, both for professional athletes and amateurs.

3.5. Sport events in Joensuu sub-region

There are many ways of categorizing the sport events. One of the most popular ways is dividing sport events into two subcategories: elite and non-elite sport events. This method is based on relationship between participation and spectatorship. Good example of elite sport event could be IBU World Cup events: its number of spectators is significantly higher than the number of participants. For instance, in 2017 three IBU World Cup competition days attracted altogether 24,300 spectators, whereas approximately 300 athletes had participated in the event (Kontiolahti Biathlon 2017c). Nevertheless, the majority of hosted sport events in Joensuu region (such as Pogosta Ski Race, Joensuu Marathon, Karelia

Rowing Tour) are non-elite events with the number of spectators significantly lower than the number of participants.

Regularly scheduled games contrast greatly with rare major events and requires completely different organization and promotion. Joensuu sub-region annually hosts many regular scheduled games for various sports, such as hockey games (Mestis league and Suomi-sarja league games), basketball games (Korisliiga tournaments) and Finnish baseball games (Superpesis league games).

3.5.1. IBU World Cup

IBU World Cup is a multi-race biathlon tournament, which has been held in Kontiolahti since 1990. It is organized by Kontiolahti Sport Club in cooperation with International Biathlon Union. The World Cup winter season usually lasts from November-December to March. Kontiolahti, as one of the most northernmost venues, traditionally hosts the World Cup in the end of the season. There are 7 types of biathlon races in the World Cup, including individual, sprint, pursuit, mass start, relay, mixed relay and single relay. Commonly, one regular World Cup consists of 6-8 events taking place in the second part of the week (Wednesday – Sunday). Weekends attract the highest number of audience both at the stadium and on TV. Thus, organizers are trying to schedule the most popular races (mass starts and relays) for Saturday and Sunday.

IBU World Cup is one of the biggest and the most popular sport events in Finland and has a huge impact on the Joensuu sub-region. It attracts hundreds of athletes, coaches, personnel and media representatives altogether with thousands of spectators. Thus, there is an increased demand for various forms of accommodation in North Karelia region in general. According to Karelia Expert, in March 2017 overnight stays in North Karelia by foreign visitors increased by 129.7% compared to March 2016. This is a direct result of hosting an IBU World Cup in 2017, while there was no World Cup in 2016. (Pohjois-Karjalan matkailun tunnuslukuja 2017.)

Table 3 shows the correlation between hosting IBU World Cup and the number of nights spent in accommodations of Joensuu and Joensuu sub-region. The data from March 2017 was compared with the same month of the previous three years. In March 2014 regular IBU World Cup was held in Kontiolahti, while in March 2015 the region hosted Biathlon World Championships. Predictably, Joensuu sub-region attracted most visitors during the World Championships: number of nights spent in March 2015 was the highest.

In 2016 Kontiolahti did not host IBU World Cup, and it was not planned as a venue for hosting 2017 World Cup either. However, in January 2017 8th IBU World Cup 2016/2017 was allocated to Kontiolahti after the previous host (Tyumen) lost it over doping in Russian sport (Biathlonworld 2017).

As a result of not hosting IBU World Cup, the nights spent by tourists in March 2016 dropped by 30.96% from the previous year. In contrast, after the relocation of the IBU World Cup, the nights spent in March 2017 increased by 22.87% comparing to 2016.

	Joensuu sub-region	Joensuu
March 2014 (IBU World Cup)	28,102	21,661
March 2015 (IBU World Championship)	28,555	20,988
March 2016 (no IBU World Cup)	19,716	13,147
March 2017 (urgently relocated IBU World Cup)	24,227	18,295

Table 3. Monthly nights spent in Joensuu and Joensuu sub-region in March 2014-2017 (Statistics Visit Finland 2017)

Most international visitors came from Russia, Sweden, Germany, France, United Kingdom and USA (Pohjois-Karjala matkailun tunnuslukuja 2017). The economic impact is mainly represented by direct expenditure of tourists associated with the event. In addition, media coverage of the events plays an important role in promoting the region and the country in general to the international visitors. This helps in developing the destination image of the winter sport town and make it more noticeable and attractive for potential tourists.

3.5.2. Joensuu Games

Joensuu Games is a part of the Elite Games, which is a Finnish athletics competition series. It takes place in five different locations, which include Lahti, Kuortane, Joensuu, Lapinlahti and Lappeenranta. Joensuu has hosted the Elite Games ten times since 2008. Joensuu Games have become a very traditional part of the athletic year of eastern Finland and the whole country. In 2016, athletes from more than 20 countries participated in the event. Over the last few years, Joensuu Games has been broadcast live on YLE channel on prime time. Joensuu Games, which were held in 2016, gathered about 2,500 spectators and nearly half a million viewers watched the TV. (Joensuun Kataja 2017b.)

The competition budget for 2017 was 185,000 euros. The event is organized by Joensuu Kataja sports club. The town of Joensuu is one of the main partners in organization of event and marketing communications. Joensuu town, in turn, has the opportunity to use Joensuu Games for its own marketing: hosting and broadcasting event of this kind have a substantial impact on the image and awareness of host town both in Finland and abroad.

3.5.3. Pogosta Ski Race

Pogosta Ski Race is a cross-country skiing event, which is annually held in Ilimantsi. It is one of Finland's largest traditional skiing events. The first Pogosta Ski Race was organized in 1977, and since then, its participants have skied more than four million kilometers. The most basic forms of two skiing techniques (classical cross-country skiing and freestyle cross-country skiing) are both presented in the event. There are separate races for different age groups as well. Thus, the races are suitable for all kinds of participants. (Pogostan Hiihto 2017.) According to the organizers, Pogosta Ski Race has the following advantages:

- Circle route (starting and finishing points are both in the same area);
- Great level of service;
- Good condition of snow and tracks;
- Versatile route with various hill climbs.

The majority of the participants is coming from Finland. For many Finns, Ilimantsi is known especially for the Pogosta Ski Race and associated with winter sports. Nevertheless, the event attracts foreigners as well: typically, visitors approximately from 20 countries (mainly Germany and Russia) participate in Pogosta Ski Race. According to the statistics, the male proportion of the participants is significantly larger than the female. For instance, in 2017 eighty percent of the participants were male. Although the average age of the participants is between 30 and 50, many elderly people are actively engaged in the event as well. The least participating population group is youths: in 2017, only 2.8% of the participants were under age 25, while 10.5% were over the age of 66. (Pogostan Hiihto 2017.)

3.5.4. Karelia Rowing Tour

Karelia Rowing Tour is the biggest long-distance rowing event in Finland, which has been held annually 32 times since 1985. Each year this rowing event attracts approximately

500-1000 participants. In 1996 there was a record number of participants with over 2,600 rowers.

The event takes place in North Karelia in the middle of beautiful surroundings with forests and lakes. There are four different categories, which are single, pairs, families and teams. Thus, all types of rowers with various levels of experience have the opportunity to participate. There are two routes available: one for small boats (203 km) and the second for so-called Church boats, with a crew of 14 rowers and a cox who paces them (146 km). The average speed of the church boats is 9.2 kilometers per hour. These routes take between four and six days. Karelia Rowing Tour is not a competitive event, its main objective is to give unique rowing experience in a friendly atmosphere.

In 2018, Karelia-Rowing Tour was organized 22 – 27 of July. Traditional wooden small boats and canoes' routes start from Ilomantsi to Joensuu (203 kilometers) on Sunday 22 July, while wooden church boats with 14 rowers and a cox start their journey from Lieksa to Joensuu (146 kilometers) on Tuesday 24 July. (Karelia Soutu 2017.)

3.5.5. Sport events calendar 2017

Date	Event	Sport
21 January 2017	Outdoor hockey tournament in Mäntimäki	Hockey
2 – 5 March 2017	IBU Cup	Biathlon
10 – 11 March 2017	IBU World Cup	Biathlon
16 – 19 March 2017	Biathlon Master Championships 2017	Biathlon
18 – 19 March 2017	Pogosta Ski Race	Cross-country skiing
26 March 2017	Mehtimäki Junior Indoor Games	Athletics
31 March 2017	Finnish cross-country skiing championships 2017	Cross-country skiing
13 May 2017	Joensuu Marathon	Running
10 – 11 June 2017	Ursak adventure sports competition	Running, kayaking, mountain biking
17 – 18 June 2017	Joensuu-Jukola relay	Orienteering
8 July 2017	Suomi Juoksu ultramarathon	Running
12 July 2017	Joensuu Games	Athletics
25 – 28 July 2017	Karelia Rowing Tour 2017	Rowing
15 September 2017	Siltajuoksu	Running
16 – 17 September 2017	Finnish summer biathlon championships 2017	Summer biathlon
4 – 5 November 2017	Kontiolahti SKI international mass ski event	Cross-country skiing
4 – 5 November 2017	Joensuu Night Run	Running
18 – 19 November 2017	International Biathlon Grand Prix	Biathlon
25 – 26 November 2017	International FIS Cross-Country competition	Cross-country skiing

Table 4. Event calendar 2017

3.6. Sport tourism marketing

The main challenge for sport tourism marketing is to create experiences at attractions that fulfill tourists' needs and wants in the best possible way. In the beginning, the marketer should understand what benefits customers look for in the service. Then the marketer should augment the offering to create as meaningful experience as possible.

Marketing tourism products is challenging, because most of destination travel attributes (for instance, nature sites and infrastructure) are permanent and require many efforts, time and money to change. Thus, besides promoting and selling existing features, the main aim of the sport tourism marketers is to find possibilities to deepen or extend the existing experience according to customers' needs and expectations. There is a significant difference between the marketing orientation to sport tourism and simply having the attraction with sport tourism facilities. Creating and selling service packages with additional services is one of the most popular ways to extend the basic sport tourism experience. (Harrison-Hill & Chalip 2005.)

Sport tourism plays an important part in marketing Joensuu sub-region for international visitors. Although the region has not been branded as a sport tourism destination, active lifestyle is one of the main components in marketing strategy for attracting tourists.

As the primary destination marketing organization, Visit Karelia is tasked with promotion of the region. Sport theme is widely used in their marketing materials. For instance, Joensuu visitors guide has dedicated a separate section to activities and services in the town, introducing sport participation products such as golf, swimming, floorball, skiing, rafting, canoeing, stand up paddling, horse riding, hiking, fishing, ice swimming, karting and snowshoeing. This information includes brief description of the activity and available contact information (email, telephone number, address). Brochures also offer the annual event calendar, which is full of various sport events taking place in the region. Adding your event into the calendar is free of costs.

The visual support plays a vital role in attracting customer attention, especially when it comes to tourism marketing. Well-chosen pictures of the service or activity create a positive attitude and increase the willingness of the customer to try pictured experience himself. Thus, Joensuu and Iloanta brochures are filled with the pictures of skiing, canoeing, hiking and experiencing sport events, for instance, basketball and equestrian events. Special attention is paid to picturing nature; most of the photos portrayed sport in surroundings of peaceful lakes or beautiful forests. Thus, one of the main advantages of Joensuu sub-region as a sport tourism destination was emphasized.

Besides physical brochures, Visit Karelia website plays an important part in providing information to the potential visitors. It has convenient searching tool for different activities to do in the region (Figure 4). It is possible to choose a town or municipality, type of activity

(for instance, skiing, golf or hiking), special requests (for instance, equipment rental) and get the list with suitable services.

17 Pcs



➤ Arctic Trainers SUP and water sports center

Come and enjoy our stand up paddling lessons and -tours around the beautiful Joensuu! We also rent SUP-boards, wakeboards, waterskis and wetsuits. Our water sport center is located only 15 min walk from the city center. Address: Länsiviitta 1, Joensuu

Area Joensuun keskusta ja lähialue

[Add to Your Trip](#)

[Show it on a map](#)

Figure 4. Activities searching tool on Visit Karelia website (Visit Karelia)

Social media advertising is not forgotten: Visit Karelia uses different types of social media platforms in its strategy. This includes social networking (Facebook), microblogging (Twitter), photo sharing (Instagram) and video sharing (YouTube). Each platform plays a unique emotional role in customer engagement, which is even more important when it comes to experience marketing. As Gibson states, experience marketing involves adding value through consumer participation and connection. It requires that the customer is engaged on as many levels as possible – physical, emotional, intellectual and even spiritual. (Gibson 2006, p.174.) Social media is the key tool for enhancing customer participation. It is worth noting, that not all of them are effectively used: Visit Karelia Facebook page is one of the main marketing tools with regularly posted materials and 2651 followers, Instagram account is relatively popular with 486 followers, while Twitter has only 269 followers, YouTube 18. Twitter and YouTube accounts are not mentioned

on Visit Karelia website, which makes them practically abandoned. In terms of sport tourism, Visit Karelia mainly uses social media for advertising sport events (Figure 5), sport activities (Figure 6) and promotion of sports and active lifestyle in general.



Figure 5. Advertising IBU World Cup 2018 on Visit Karelia Instagram

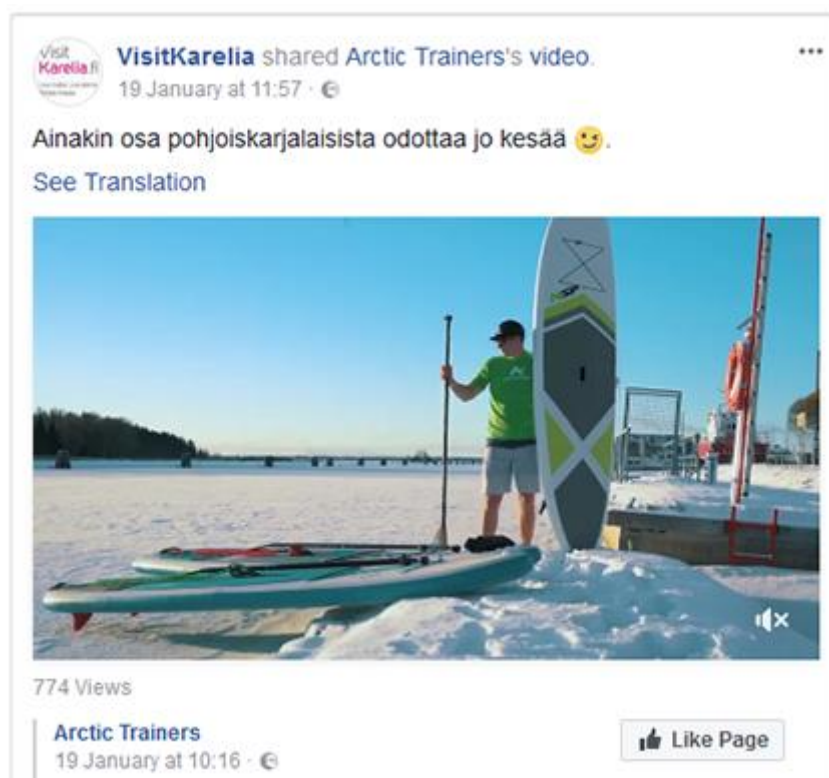


Figure 6. Advertising Stand Up Paddling on Visit Karelia Facebook page (Facebook 2018)

In addition to Visit Karelia, service providers (local sport clubs and agencies) also use their own promotion strategies and marketing channels. In particular, Kontiolahti Sport

Club is a great example of the effective use of different marketing tools. Kontiolahti is using following existing marketing channels for promoting their events and services: official website, VKontakte, Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. With 7,335 followers on Facebook, 1,270 followers on Instagram and 1,177 followers in Twitter the organizers are able to reach the potential visitors in the best way. Figure 7 illustrates the examples of marketing through Instagram page.

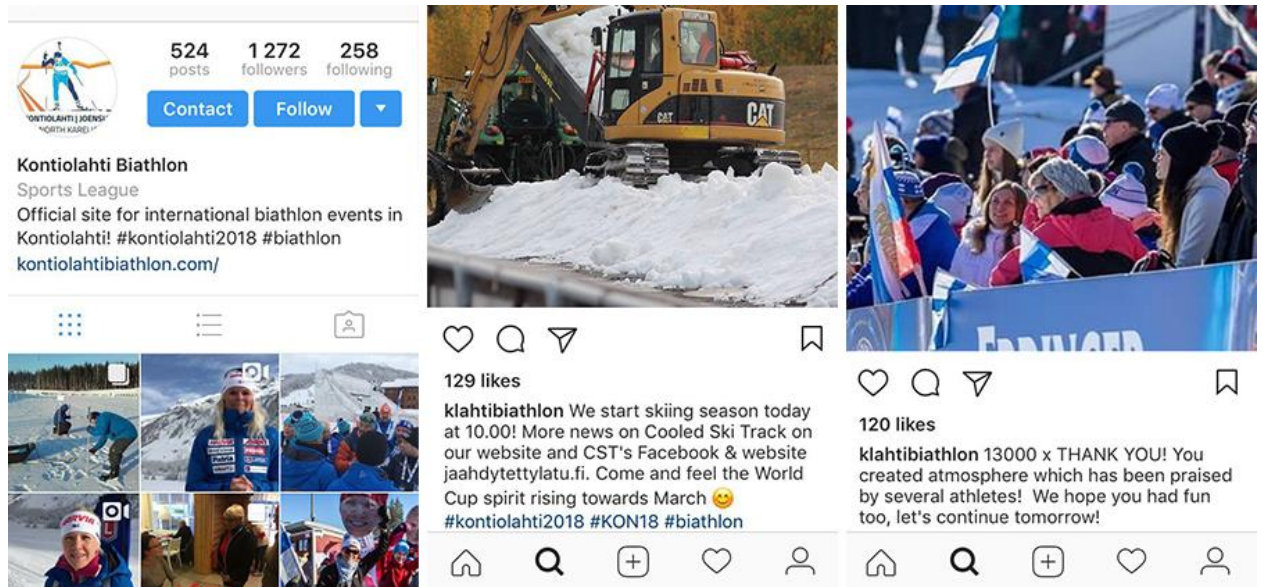


Figure 7. Examples of the content on Kontiolahti Biathlon Instagram page

Using VKontakte as an engagement platform is an illustration of successful marketing segmentation. VKontakte is a Russian-based online social media and social networking service. It allows Kontiolahti to target their messages to potential tourists based on geographical location. Considering the fact that the overwhelming majority of Kontiolahti IBU World Cup's foreign visitors are Russians, it is a particularly wise decision. As for the 23 January 2018, Kontiolahti page on VKontakte had 73,698 followers, which illustrates its effectiveness and relevance. The materials on this page are targeted for Russian-speaking audience and include biathlon news and practical information about visiting marketed event.

Hosting big sport events in itself promotes the region and increases its visibility for both national and international potential visitors. Major events, such as IBU World Cups or Joensuu Games, are able to bring the attention to the region from the potential visitors. Media coverage, such as TV, radio or newspaper mentions, allows more people to find out about the host town or region.

Furthermore, positive word-of-mouth advertising plays an important part in sport tourism marketing of the region. People tend to trust the recommendations of their friends and relatives, thus, word-of-mouth remains most credible source of information.

4 Research

In the following chapter the author presents a step-by-step description of the research process, which was conducted in October – December 2017. It is covering all stages of research, including the selection of a research method, selection of participants, data collection and data analysis. In conclusion, the detailed research results are provided separately for each question.

4.1. Research methodology

Qualitative research was chosen as a research method for this study. Wilson (2012) defines qualitative research as a *research undertaken using an unstructured research approach with a small number of carefully selected individuals to produce non-quantifiable insights into behavior, motivations and attitudes*. This method provides full and descriptive answers and focuses on understanding things instead of measuring them. The main aim of qualitative research is to get below the surface of the complex issues. (Mirola 2015.)

USC Libraries emphasize following main advantages of using qualitative research methods:

- Qualitative research generates rich, detailed data that leave the participants' perspectives intact and provide multiple contexts for understanding the phenomenon under study;
- This method is able to obtain a more realistic view of the lived world that cannot be understood or experienced in numerical data and statistical analysis;
- It provides the researcher with the perspective of the participants of the study through immersion in a culture or situation and as a result of direct interaction with them;
- Allows the researcher to describe existing phenomena and current situations;
- Qualitative research results that can be helpful in pioneering new ways of understanding;
- This method responds to changes that occur while conducting the study and offer the flexibility to shift the focus of the research as a result;
- Provides a holistic view of the phenomena under investigation;
- Responds to local situations, conditions, and needs of participants;
- Interacts with the research subjects in their own language and on their own terms;

- Creates a descriptive capability based on primary and unstructured data. (USC Libraries 2017.)

Flexibility of chosen method allows the respondents to express their own opinions in the best way. Qualitative research method gives the participants more freedom, so they can initiate some issues by themselves and make a conversation more spontaneous (Mirola 2015). It gives more freedom to the researcher as well and offers flexible ways to perform data collection, subsequent analysis and interpretation of collected information.

4.2. Conducting the research

The empirical part of the research was based both on secondary and primary data. According to Mirola (2015), primary data is usually carried out for the specific use by the researcher himself, while secondary data makes use of research carried out by someone else for some other purpose. In this case, relevant secondary data included various publications, tourism strategies, statistical information and webpages concerning the research topic. It was collected and analyzed during the first stage of the research starting from June 2017 for understanding the current situation with sport tourism in Joensuu sub-region. The primary data was gathered through semi-structured interviews and questionnaires.

In the beginning, the target population of the research was defined in accordance with research problem and research question. According to the definition, the population is the total group to be studied (Mirola 2015). Thus, the population of this research included all people who are somehow engaged with sport tourism activities in any possible way: providers, marketers, participants, spectators, organizers. Qualitative samples are usually small, because they require a lot of time and money to spend. In this case, statistical generalizations cannot be made, and individual opinions of certain people were relevant and important. Therefore, non-probability sampling method was chosen and participants were selected by the author in a purposeful way.

Careful selection of the participants is an extremely important stage of the qualitative research process. It began with defining particular categories, from which author was willing to get the answers. Sport tourism is a complex industry with many parties being involved, therefore, this stage of the research was challenging. The following three main categories were defined:

- Sport tourists (people with experience of travelling for sport related purposes);

- Spectators (people with experience of watching the sport events);
- Professional athletes (people with experience of active participation in competitive sport events or professional training);
- People with experience of active recreational participation in sport activities for health, relaxation and pleasure.
- Providers of sport tourism services (responsible for the development and implementation of sport tourism products);
 - Governing bodies;
 - Organizers of sport events (different kind of sports, if possible);
 - Representatives of sport clubs.
- Marketing organizations (responsible for the marketing of sport tourism products).

Then the list of possible respondents with approximately 20 names was written and their personal short profiles were created. Each potential participant's profile included the person's job position (if necessary), reasons why this person is interesting (e.g. participation in sport event or working in this industry), telephone number and email address. Mentioned profiles simplified the process of negotiation with chosen people. Significant proportion of people from the list did not respond, some of them declined to participate for various reasons (lack of time, lack of knowledge regarding the topic).

The author faced subtle problems in finding an active athlete, competing on the top level, who would agree to participate in the study. The majority of professional athletes, travelling to Joensuu for sport-related purposes, participate in winter sports, therefore, their schedule was very tight before the beginning of the season (October – December). Luckily, a foreign biathlete agreed to participate in the research when the author contacted her on social network website. Due to the lack of time caused by upcoming winter season, the conversation about her experiences was very short.

Despite all the difficulties in negotiations process, the author was pleased with responded participants and their answers. The representatives of all categories responded to questions raised, thus, the opinions of all involved parties were received. The topic of the research generally received a positive response and generated interest among both responded participants and those, who declined to participate for various reasons. The author is highly grateful to all the respondents, who, despite the lack of time, have agreed to participate in this research.

4.3. Data collection

The next stage included negotiations and agreement with potential interviewees, questionnaire design and its mailing via email. The preliminary questions were created beforehand, nevertheless, few corrections and changes were needed. The questionnaire included introduction, which explained the aims of the research and tried to persuade the participant to answer; and the body of content with 5–7 open-ended questions. The reason why these types of questions were chosen is that it allows the participant to respond whatever he or she wishes and does not set any restrictions. The main language of the questionnaires was English; and it was translated into Russian as well. Questions sequence was in a logical order – the most general questions about the topic were asked first (for instance, about sport tourism in Joensuu sub-region in general) followed by more specific questions (for instance, about competitiveness of Kontiolahti Biathlon center or impact of the Joensuu Games). (Mirola 2015.) The questionnaires were sent to participants via email during the period of 28 September – 6 October 2017. The deadline for returning the filled questionnaires was 26 of October 2017.

4.4. Data analysis

Analyzing qualitative data might be challenging, because it is chaotic, includes a lot of text and concerns different topics. First step of the analysis was transcription of the audio recorded material. Received transcription of the conversation remained chaotic and includes too many text pages, therefore, it was reduced and organized according to the topics. To organize collected data for simplified further use, the coding method was used. Codes are the different categories of phenomena created by researcher to organize the process of analyzing data. It helps to manage data by labeling, storing and retrieving it according to the mentioned codes. (Savenye & Robinson 1996.)

To start the analyzing process, the data collected from both interviews and questionnaires was printed, carefully read and organized. Each interviewee received a code (I1–I3) as well as each questionnaire respondent (R1-R7). Coding was also important for protecting respondents' confidentiality, because using real names in the report is strictly forbidden, and referring to participants is much easier with codes.

Code	Interviewee	Date	Length	Type of interview
I1	Karelia Expert representative	18 October 2017	58 minutes	Face to face
I2	ISLO representative	15 December 2017		Email
I3	Top-level athlete (biathlon)	30 October 2017		Social network

Table 5. Interview coding

Code	Respondent
R1	Joensuu Kataja sports club representative
R2	Sports federation of North Karelia representative
R3	Joensuu Kataja sports club representative, Joensuu Games organizer
R4	Kontiolahti sport club representative
R5	Sport tourist (travelling for leisure sports)
R6	Pogostan Ski Race organizer
R7	Sport tourist (spectator)

Table 6. Coding of questionnaire respondents

The questions were also coded as Q1-Q11 to simplify the analysis of each specific topic. Table 6 presents the list of questions, while Table 7 shows which questions were asked from each participant. It can be seen, that the first five questions (Q1-Q5) formed the basis of the research and were asked almost from all respondents. Everyone responded to the first question (Q1), it asked to name the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of Joensuu sub-region as a sport tourism destination. The second half of the questions (Q6-Q11) were created individually for each occasion, depending on the role and experience of the respondent. For instance, the question Q7 (concerning the impact of the event) was intended to R3 and R6, who are the Joensuu Games and Pogosta Ski Race organizers. Questions Q9-Q11 were intended for sport tourists and focused on their experience, motivation and reasons to choose Joensuu for sport tourism activities.

Code	Content of the questions
Q1	What are the strengths and weaknesses and the threats and opportunities of Joensuu sub-region as a sport tourism destination?
Q2	How do you evaluate existing sport tourism facilities? What are the possibilities to do sport in Joensuu sub-region? What can be improved/added?
Q3	How do current tourism trends affect Joensuu sub-region?
Q4	What are Joensuu sub-region's main competitors? How can it become a more competitive sport tourism destination for international customers?
Q5	What are the most popular sport tourism products in Joensuu sub-region?
Q6	Who are your main clients?
Q7	What is the impact of organizing Pogosta Ski Race / Joensuu Games on the region?
Q8	How do you evaluate attractiveness of Kontiolahti Biathlon Center compared to international and national competitors? What is the competitive advantages of Kontiolahti?
Q9	What kind of sport tourism experience in Joensuu sub-region did you have and when?
Q10	What motivates you to travel for sport-related purposes?
Q11	Why did you choose Joensuu sub-region for sport tourism? What other options (towns or countries did you consider?

Table 7. Content of the questions

Respondents code	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Q9	Q10	Q11
R1	✓	✓	N/A	✓	✓	✓					
R2	✓	✓	N/A	✓	✓						
R3	✓	✓	N/A	✓			✓				
R4	✓	✓			✓	✓		✓			
R5	✓				✓				✓	✓	✓
R6	✓	✓	N/A	✓	✓	✓	✓				
R7	✓	N/A							✓	✓	✓

Table 8. Answered questions

4.5. Research results

4.5.1. Strengths and weaknesses and the threats and the opportunities

In the first question the participants were asked to define the strengths and weaknesses and the threats and opportunities of Joensuu region as a sport tourism destination. R1 began with weaknesses and emphasized the fact that Joensuu is located far from everything. It is located nearby the Russian border, but in his opinion in the current situation Russia is a challenging marketing target for sport. R3 considered location far from Helsinki and other big towns as the main weakness as well. He also mentioned, that the flight connections are not so good at the present time.

In addition, R3 named lack of big sport events during the summer as one of the main weaknesses. Oppositely, during the conversation about the seasonality I1 claimed that there are enough of summer sport events in the region, but there are no events for the autumn and spring time. March and the beginning of April is still considered as the winter season, but after the snow melts the weather conditions do not allow to practice summer outdoor sports or organize outdoor competitions till May or June. Thus, creating more indoor sport events for this period could be useful.

Both R4 and I1 defined limited accommodation capacity as the main weakness for the sport tourism of Joensuu sub-region. I1 claims, that it is a very relevant problem during the organization of big events. For instance, IBU World Cup participants (athletes, coaches, doctors, officials, media representatives) occupy all hotels in the town, so, there is not enough accommodation for the spectators travelling from other countries or regions of Finland. R4 also noticed, that most of the flights to Joensuu come from Helsinki and not straight to Joensuu, which is uncomfortable for the tourists (unless charters are used). R6 defined diminishing population and the economy as the main weaknesses.

Most respondents (R2, R3, R5, R7, I1, I2, I3) highlighted the importance of nature factor and consider it the main competitive advantage of the region. R2 added that variety of lakes and forests creates many opportunities for water tourism, skiing and hiking. R1 named extremely good sporting conditions as the main advantage for sport tourism and mentioned that sometimes it even creates a useless debate around sport venues. Unlike the participant R1, R4 identified closeness to Russia as a strength and emphasized its huge visitor potential. Under strengths, he also listed the following: Joensuu's own airport, diverse sport opportunities, accessibility and the location of sport facilities, compact size of the Joensuu town and the region.

R6, the organizer of Pogosta Ski Race, named several active operators (sport clubs) that are visible on the national and international level as the main advantage of the region. He claimed that local companies support the event organizers and clubs, and that they need to be grateful for the co-operation. As for the winter sports, R6 considers the guaranteed snow cover as the main competitive advantage.

According to I2, personality factor (honest people and their good language skills) is also important and in attracting the tourists in general. High standard of living, in its turn, creates a positive reputation of the region for the foreigners.

I1, the representative of Visit Karelia, noted that Joensuu sub-region has an excellent reputation as an IBU World Cup host and a strong position in IBU. This was one of the reasons why Kontiolahti was chosen to replace Tyumen as the IBU World Cup venue in 2017. In general, the region is famous for great organization of various events.

Speaking of the threats, R1 thinks that if some big employer (Abloy) or university would end up in Joensuu, it would certainly be a big problem for the whole town. R4 was worried about transportation services and the fact, that in case air traffic decreases, the airport might not operate. I2 was afraid that there will be lack of tourists because of increasing prices and low culture of services. For R2, the main threat is the lack of interest from the businessmen and businesswomen in the future who could risk and make an investment in the region.

For I1 the main threat is the development of sport tourism facilities in other regions of Finland and competition in general. She claimed that Lahti is a very dangerous and strong competitor regarding the sport, and Lahti is willing to win the competition and host IBU World Cup.

For I1 increasing the amount of accommodation providers and accommodation capacity seemed the main opportunity for growth. I2 was optimistic during the conversation regarding opportunities and claimed that increasing number of entrepreneurs among tourism sector in Joensuu sub-region could increase visibility and awareness of Joensuu region internationally.

4.5.2. Facilities

In second question, participants were asked to name the possibilities for sport tourism, evaluate the existing facilities in Joensuu sub-region and possibilities for improvement. R7 (sport event spectator) admitted, that she does not have any knowledge about this topic. All the other participants found the existing facilities for sport very good. R6 paid

attention to the variety of outdoor sports possibilities, such as cross-country skiing, biathlon, kayaking and orienteering. R2 noticed, that Joensuu Areena is in a good condition and allows athletes many possibilities both for competitions and training.

R3 notes that opportunities for skiing are excellent. Besides great ski tracks, he also mentioned good trails for outdoor running and hiking.

R4 agreed that the level of existing facilities is very high and mentioned that there are good facilities for both summer and winter sports. He also noticed that the side services, such as accommodation, need further improvement.

I2 remembered Mehtimäki sports park and claimed, that it is a quite unique area with big variety of sport activities available. Both I1 and I2 noticed, that some of the facilities need improvement. For instance, the swimming hall needs to be enlarged to 50 meters, and other athletes, such as indoor ballplayers and gymnasts, also need more training space. R1 also noticed that some of the sport facilities are too busy and need further expansion. Nevertheless, he claims that for the sport he represents (athletics) the facilities are very good.

Kontiolahti sport club representative (R4) was also asked an additional question (Q8) concerning the attractiveness of Kontiolahti Biathlon Center. Respondent answered that Kontiolahti-Joensuu area is very compact and functional. Kontiolahti Biathlon Stadium is located 120 meters above sea level. R4 emphasized that this fact is very important for the athletes, because it is good for them to compete not only in mountainous arenas. Thus, location only a bit above the sea level can be considered as a competitive advantage. Sport club representative also noted that Kontiolahti's competition tracks are very versatile and tough enough. Among other advantages, R4 listed beauty and peace of the region, air purity, high quality of services and high-level of snow reliability. Skiing possibility already in mid-October was considered as an important competitive advantage as well. Respondent claimed that the stadium originally was built for biathlon purposes, thus, all facilities suit biathlon very well.

4.5.3. Trends

It third question (Q3) the participants were asked how current tourism trends affect Joensuu. Nearly all of those questioned (R1, R2, R3, R6) had difficulty in answering. Thus, it seemed the most challenging and unfamiliar topic for most of the participants. Representative of Karelia Expert (I1) was the only participant who was able to answer this question. According to her opinion, active tourism and nature-based tourism trends

influence the Joensuu sub-region the most. Nowadays more and more tourists are looking for unforgettable experiences and adrenaline, or for peace and quiet in surroundings of beautiful nature. Rapid growth in nature-based tourism and active tourism can lead to increasing interest in Joensuu region as a desirable travel destination.

I1 emphasized the importance of global warming trend as well. She noticed that nowadays it does not significantly affect tourism situation in Joensuu sub-region. Nevertheless, in the future global warming trend might negatively impact one of the most popular tourism products in Joensuu - winter sport. Interviewee also suggested that in this case global warming will harm the winter sport in the whole Finland.

I1 noticed that, although the impact of global warming does not look like a strong threat right now, it already affects Joensuu sub-region on many levels. Winter sport season has shortened – earlier they had good weather conditions for skiing already in the November, December and March, while today it is not possible to guarantee the availability of snow during these months. The weather conditions are very unstable and change easily, which complicates the organization and preparation for the winter sport events. The participant cited cancellation of annual Pogosta Ski Race in 2017 as an example of the global warming's impact on Joensuu sub-region. The race, which was to be held in March, was cancelled due to the lack of snow for the first time in 25 years.

4.5.4. Competitors

The fourth question was about existing competitors and the ways to become a more competitive sport tourism destination on international level.

I1 noticed that Finland's location is a huge competitive disadvantage for tourism in general. For the majority of European tourists travelling to Finland is difficult, expensive and requires a lot of effort and time. The main sport event product for international customer in Joensuu sub-region is IBU World Cup in Kontiolahti, nevertheless, IBU World Cup is hosted in Europe as well (Germany, Italy, France, Norway, Sweden, Slovenia, Czech Republic). These venues are easier to access and cheaper, therefore, many international biathlon fans will prefer these destinations to Finland. The main competitive advantage in comparison with biathlon venues in Central Europe is guaranteed snow from December till March. Lack of snow is a very relevant problem for International Biathlon Union.

As for the national competition, Kontiolahti is the only stadium with IBU A licence in Finland and it is considered as the best biathlon venue in the country. Thus, nowadays

Kontiolahti does not have national competitors in organizing biathlon events. The situation with cross-country skiing is completely different. Besides famous skiing destination like Lahti and Ruka, there is a variety of great venues for cross-country skiing in Finland. Thus, the competition for hosting the national cross-country skiing events (for instance, Finnish Cross-country Championships) is very strong.

R2 mentioned Kainuu and other «wild-nature» regions as main competitors for international customers travelling for hiking, water sports activities, orienteering and so on. South Karelia is one of the main competitors for the Russian clients. He proposed more marketing of the sport activities to make the destination more appealing for the sport tourists.

According to interviewee I2, the competitive advantage can be obtained by developing new sports (for example, wakeboarding) and following the international trends. For instance, taking care of the environment and promoting pure nature of the region is necessary with the increasing popularity of eco-tourism and health trends. Pure nature is an essential element of many sport products, such as hiking, fishing, canoeing, snowmobiling.

4.5.5. Most popular products

In fifth question, participants were asked to name the most popular sport tourism products in Joensuu sub-region. Most of the respondents (R1, R2, R4, R5, R6, I1, I2) named biathlon IBU World Cups in Kontiolahti as the main sport tourism product, offered by the region. I2 listed also other biathlon competitions, orienteering events, swimming, horseracing, wakeboarding, SUB, snowmobiling, canoeing, fishing. I1 added various sport camps for kids and youths. R2 mentioned international sport events, such as Joensuu Kataja tournaments and IBU World Cups. R1 and R6 claimed that Finnish basketball and athletics are quite visible, even though basketball is a relatively small event in Finland. Nevertheless, international tourists are difficult to attract for it.

4.5.6. Existing clients

In this question, the respondents were asked to describe existing sport tourism users in the region and / or their organization, including age, motivation and origin. ISLO representative (I2) claims that international athletes are mainly travelling to Joensuu for biathlon, judo, ice hockey, basketball and swimming. Active sport tourists, who are willing to relax and improve their health, are typically travelling for cross-country skiing, rafting and hiking.

R1 (representative of Kataja sport club) defines children as their largest customer base. They are 9-13 years old, sporty children to whom they organize activities during the whole year. They also have a different group of clients, who participate in major sport events. These events are Joensuu Run (800 spectators) and international athletics competition Joensuu Games (with 4,000 spectators).

R4 (representative of Kontiolahti sports club) considers spectators their main target group. These tourists are motivated to travel to Joensuu sub-region by willingness to be a part of a major event, experience the biathlon on tracks, support their favorite biathletes and see them in real life. They are mainly middle aged or older, nevertheless, R4 noted that there is growth potential in younger generations. Approximately half of the spectators come from inside the North Karelia, other half outside North Karelia and abroad.

4.5.7. Sport tourists' motivation and experience

The last questions (Q9 – Q11) were intended only to those participants, who travelled to Joensuu sub-region for sport related purposes (I3, R5 and R7). They represented different types of sport tourists: sport event spectator (R7), professional athlete (I3) and tourist, who travelled for leisure sports (R5). The main aim of these three questions was to find out, what kind of sport experience in Joensuu they had, what their motivation to travel was, what kind of options besides Joensuu sub-region they had and what was their overall impression about the experience was.

Participant R5 is 26 years old and she has come to Joensuu sub-region for leisure sport tourism from Russia several times. In the beginning she travelled with her parents and they were responsible for the destination choice. Their primary reason for travelling to Finland was skiing. Nevertheless, R5 told that she visited Joensuu during the summer once and experienced kayaking and hiking. Nowadays skiing remains her main reason to visit Joensuu sub-region, but she is travelling with friends instead of family. R5 noticed, that after she stopped travelling with her family she has started using equipment rental services and finds it more comfortable than travelling with her own skis. R5 defines her love for skiing, willingness to enjoy beautiful and peaceful nature and need to stay in shape as the main reasons to travel.

Her other considered options included ski resorts in Ruka (Finland), Toksovo (Russia) and Leukerbad (Switzerland). Among all she liked Leukerbad Ski Resort the best, because besides skiing possibilities they offered spa treatment as well. However, Leukerbad's location was inconvenient for R5, because it requires expensive flight from

Russia to Switzerland. Toksovo, oppositely, has a very convenient location nearby the participant's city, but she was not completely satisfied with the quality of tracks there. Ruka offered a great level of service, but it is also situated too far away. In addition, R5 emphasized that weather conditions in Joensuu are much more comfortable and familiar to her in comparison with Ruka, which was too cold. Respondent R5 concluded, that combinations of features such as location, prices and level of service were the best in Joensuu sub-region.

Participant I3 is a professional biathlete and an Olympic medalist of the biathlon competitions at Sochi 2014 and PyeongChang 2018. She has visited Kontiolahti many times both for training and for participation in the IBU World Cup. Team coaches and national federations are responsible for the training planning; thus, they chose Kontiolahti as a place for the training. Nevertheless, respondent I3 was satisfied with this choice and defines Kontiolahti as a very comfortable place for professional training. According to I3, weather conditions and possibility to ski already in October are one of the main advantages of Kontiolahti. She noticed that the quality of tracks is consistently good both during the trainings and competitions, and it is one of the key features of the stadium for an athlete. Biathletes live in Joensuu, because there is no available accommodation in Kontiolahti itself, but I3 does not consider this a problem. The respondent added that the level of organization of competitions is high.

Participant R7 is approximately 40 years old and she came to Joensuu sub-region to attend biathlon competitions with her family. Her experience of sport tourism in Joensuu included two events: IBU World Cup in 2015 and Biathlon World Championships in 2015. Their main travel motivation was to obtain the emotion from an unforgettable experience at a major sport event. R7 added that attending these competitions is a great relaxation from everyday routine, a possibility to spend time with your family and friends, support your favorite athletes and to see in real life a great show, which you are typically watching on TV. Her additional experience included skiing herself – respondent liked the quality of tracks for cross-country skiing and noticed that the quality of tracks in her country (Russia) was much lower.

Participant R7 emphasized the difficulty to find the accommodation while planning their trip. She claimed that they had started searching almost a year before the competition, but everything was occupied in a radius of 100 kilometers, available options were located too far and were too expensive. This was a major disadvantage and greatly complicated the planning.

Speaking of other options to attend similar competitions, the participant named IBU World Cup in Antholz, Italy and IBU World Championships in Hochfilzen, Austria. The main difference in comparison with Kontiolahti was the accommodation – it was much cheaper in Antholz and Hochfilzen. Also, the accommodation search was not a problem, because the respondent easily found suitable apartments both in Italy and Austria only 1.5 – 2 months before the beginning of the competitions. Thus, lack of accommodation is considered as one of the most important disadvantages of Kontiolahti, which influences the destination choice.

5 Conclusion

The purposes of this thesis were to define Joensuu sub-region's potential as a sport tourism destination and to find out new opportunities and possibilities to make it more noticeable and attractive for both national and international market. In order to achieve these objectives, an analysis of current situation with sport tourism in Joensuu sub-region was implemented. This analysis consisted of two main parts: collecting all relevant information concerning this topic from secondary sources and collecting primary data, which implied information gathering by the author herself. For this purpose, interviews and semi-structured questionnaires were used. The research was conducted in October – December 2017 and involved different parties, such as sport tourists, providers of sport tourism services and marketing organizations.

The research and analysis show that Joensuu sub-region has a great potential as a sport tourism destination. There are a lot of various sport facilities, both for mass sport activities and highly specialized equipment for the professional athletes. These facilities are generally in good condition and are actively used. Nevertheless, a number of sport premises is too small to meet the demand of potential visitors and needs further expansion.

The region offers great possibilities for both summer and winter sports, such as skiing, biathlon, hiking, water sport, athletics, orienteering. There is a wide range of sport tourism products and services, including both sport participation and sport spectatorial products. Sport participation products are represented not only by providing the opportunity to participate in sport activities, but also by equipment rental and training courses. The quality of offered services is excellent and allows Joensuu sub-region to successfully compete on both national and international markets. Destination is accessible by car, train, bus and air, however, a journey to Joensuu sub-region might be problematic and exhausting for the travelers, which has negative impact on the destination choice. Joensuu airport does not have direct flights from abroad, thus, travelling by plane is possible only via Helsinki and requires a lot of time. Safety is one of the region's main advantages in international competition, because Finland in general has a reputation of being one of the safest countries in the world. In current situation, this is an important factor, which can influence the destination choice.

Joensuu sub-region has also created a distinguished reputation for hosting various sport events. The most fundamental sport spectatorial product is IBU World Cup in Kontiolahti, which attracts thousands of spectators from Finland and abroad. International media coverage of IBU World Cups promotes Joensuu and country in general to the international visitors. Regarding sport participation products, skiing seems to be the most commonly noted and well-known sport-related activity.

Lahti is the strongest national competitor of Kontiolahti for hosting IBU World Cup. Currently, Lahti does not have a valid IBU A-licence, which is compulsory for hosting IBU World Cup. However, they might be interested in this in the future. In comparison with Lahti, Kontiolahti does not have such a strong brand of a sport town and has fewer accommodation possibilities. Limited accommodation capacity, altogether with geographical isolation from Central Europe and high prices, is a problem with regard to competition in the international market as well. This problem cannot be solved by simply building new hotels: there will be no such demand for the accommodation for the whole rest of the time, except for a couple of weeks with major events. Thus, simply building new hotels would not be cost-effective. Therefore, in the beginning the region should create and host more large events and create more positive business environment, so the investors will notice the region and would invest money in various projects. Thus, the number of tourists will increase and there will be a demand in new hotels.

With regard to Joensuu sub-region as a skiing resort, there are multiple competitors throughout the country (for instance, Levi, Ruka, Ylläs, Vuokatti). Many of them have ski tunnels, which allow skiing all year round – for professional athletes this is often an essential component for training. Alternatively, Joensuu sub-region has cooled ski track in Kontiolahti.

Tourism management in general performs successfully, nevertheless, sport tourism information services need to be improved. Visit Karelia manages the marketing of North Karelia region in general and Joensuu sub-region in particular. The organization promotes both sport events and sport services, but the information is rather chaotic and sometimes incomplete. Sport tourism products and services are not highlighted anywhere nor separated as a special category in the website, which tremendously complicates information search. Mentioned products should be marketed directly to foreign tourists who are interested in sport activities. In particular, more effective use of social media in marketing would be beneficial.

5.6. SWOT analysis of Joensuu sub-region as a sport tourism destination

In addition, SWOT analysis was conducted as a summary of the conclusions. It was based on analyzing research results and comparing them with the biggest sport tourism trends. A SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) analysis is a useful tool for strategic planning and decision making. It allows to understand the situation better, helps to define the strengths (and promoting them as a competitive advantage), minimize weaknesses and consider all possibilities for further growth.

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pure and beautiful nature; • Location close to Russia; • Existing sport tourism facilities; • Weather (guaranteed snow cover); • Lakes and forests; • It's own airport with connection to Helsinki; • Versatile opportunities for both summer and winter sports; • Compact size of the region; • Active operators (sport clubs) that are visible on national or/and international level; • History of hosting sport events; • Good reputation as a host town; • Best biathlon stadium in Finland (and the only one with IBU A-licence) • Versatile ski tracks; • Existing infrastructure is good. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of accommodation; • High prices; • Limited accommodation capacity; • No direct flights to Joensuu, most flights come through Helsinki, which takes a lot of time; • Restricted amount of resources (money, personnel); • Location relatively far from Helsinki; • Finland in general is located too far from Central Europe; • Not many sport events during autumn and spring (bad weather conditions for outdoor sports); • Not well-known as a sport tourism destination in Finland and especially abroad; • Joensuu is not marketed as a sport town; • Available information about sport possibilities is relevantly chaotic and not organized; • Lack of information; • Websites only in 3 languages; • Low level of cooperation between providers.
Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increasing accommodation capacity; • Implementation of more indoor sport activities for mid-season; • Using safety (of Finland as a country) as an advantage might be effective in current situation; • Huge visitors' potential from Russian visitors; • Creating smartphone apps with tourist information and services; • Introducing new languages for Visit Karelia website (such as Chinese, German, Japanese); • Introducing new sports; • Creating service packages; • Using famous athletes from Joensuu in promotion (e.g. Kaisa Mäkäräinen); • Emphasizing focus on sport to brand Joensuu as a sport town; • Focus on Chinese customers (since their interest towards winter sports is increasing because of Olympics 2022); • Improving communication between municipalities of the region; • Improving cooperation between all the stakeholders; • Improving and organize information about sport products on Visit Karelia website; • Promoting pure nature of the region as a competitive advantage (eco-tourism trend) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Global warming (lack of snow in Southern Finland); • Competition (from Lahti and other regions of Finland); • Dependence on Russia, while Russian visitors are unreliable in current situation: because of doping scandals they might lose the interest towards sports and stop travelling for visiting sport events; • Quantity of accommodation is not meeting the demand; • Unstable economic situation; • Closure of the Joensuu airport would significantly complicate accessing the Joensuu region (especially for international tourists).

Table 9. SWOT analysis

5.7. New possibilities for the tourism growth

In conclusion, I would like to share some ideas concerning sport tourism development in Joensuu sub-region. Those proposals emerged from the analysis of the current situation, research results and upcoming trends in sport tourism industry. To improve sport tourism services in the region, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Improved sport product marketing.

Current Visit Karelia website is a rich source of information, nevertheless, this information is chaotic and partial (information on some services is scattered across different sources). Thus, systematization of information and materials concerning sport participation products can be beneficial. It could be organized in the form of catalogue (both print and online editions) and should include all possible options to do sport in Joensuu sub-region (and organized by groups, for instance winter sport and summer sport). Offered content should be brief, and it should attract the attention of the customer by appealing yet simplified informational images. Visuals help to awaken their interest in the product or service. In addition, adding more languages for Visit Karelia website might attract new potential visitors from other countries.

2. Packages.

Currently, Joensuu sub-region does not offer packages for sport tourists. There are no ready packages for IBU World Cup experience either, while other international IBU World Cup venues have been successfully offering these kinds of packages for a long time (for instance, Ruhpolding, Holmenkollen, Pokliuka). These packages might include accommodation, transportation (from Russia or from other Finnish municipalities), tickets, souvenirs, excursions and different kinds of activities (e.g. skiing or shooting lessons). Reservations can be made either via email or by phone; nevertheless, it is better to develop a separate online platform for these purposes, where customer can create a perfect package for himself independently.

3. Introduction of new sports.

Introducing new sports will help to attract more potential customers and diversify offered services. Bellyak is an option in this respect. It is a boardsport, also known as riverboarding, combination of kayaking and swimming. Water sport is already a popular activity in Joensuu sub-region, thus, bellyak shows considerable promise.

Offering more sport-related services (for instance, ski simulator) might also be beneficial.

4. Promoting golf courses in Joensuu sub-region for attracting Russian customers.

Recently, there is an increasing interest in golf in Russia. It is considered a trendy, new and unusual activity. However, there are not so many facilities and golf culture is lacking. Finland, on the opposite, has strong golf traditions with over 160 courses and more than 140,000 affiliated Finnish golfers (Top100 Golf Courses 2018). Thus, considering Joensuu sub-region's location, its great golf facilities and growing trend of rising interest in golf among Russians, it seems reasonable to turn it into an advantage. Golf clubs and courses of Joensuu sub-region should become visible for potential Russian customers, and it can be achieved through the targeted marketing. For instance, nowadays the majority of information regarding golf courses is available only in Finnish language. This information should be available in English and Russian, and using other social media platforms (Instagram and VKontakte for Russian target group) may be considered as an option as well.

5. Focus on Chinese travelers

As winter sports gain popularity in China after the selection of Beijing as host city of the 2022 Winter Olympics Games, Chinese travelers have become a very promising target group for winter sport destinations in Europe. Thus, it is crucial to make Joensuu sub-region more visible for potential Chinese visitors. Possible steps may include reaching out travel agencies in China and marketing Joensuu sub-region as a perfect sport tourism destination, developing Chinese language versions of sport tourism related websites, hiring Chinese speaking guides and staff, implementation of special packages for beginners.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Questionnaire base.



October 6, 2017

Mr (name):

My name is Khirvonen Irina, and I am a graduate student at Saimaa University of Applied Sciences. For my bachelor's thesis, I am studying sport tourism in Joensuu and Joensuu region. The main aims of my research are to explore the current situation of sport tourism in Joensuu and Joensuu region and to define product development strategy to raise demand on international level.

I am inviting you to participate in this research study by completing the attached questionnaire. By responding, you can help develop current situation with the sport tourism in Joensuu region. Please, return the filled questionnaire by email at the latest 25.10.2017.

Thank you for taking the time to assist me in my research. For further information, please, contact me by email: hirvoir94@gmail.com. I am more than happy to answer any questions concerning the study.

Sincerely,

Irina.

Questionnaire

1. In your opinion, what are the strengths and weaknesses and the threats and opportunities of Joensuu region as a sport tourism destination?

2. How do you evaluate existing sport tourism facilities? What are the possibilities to do sport in Joensuu region? What can be improved/added?

3. How do current tourism trends affect Joensuu region?

4. Who are your main clients? (age, motivation, origin)

5. In your opinion, what are the most popular sport tourism products in Joensuu region?

6. What are this region's main competitors? How can it become a more competitive sport tourism destination for international customers?
