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Finnish micro entrepreneurs' perceptions of sustainability issues in rural tourism

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ABSTRACT

Rural tourism enterprises in Finland are often family-owned, micro sized companies utilizing traditional and local food, culturally valuable surroundings and serving experiences in the clean Finnish nature. Sustainability is essential in tourism as well as in rural tourism, because it has been proved that tourism industry has both negative and positive impacts on environment, culture and society. Also customers appreciate more and more companies that are acting sustainable way.

The entrepreneurs' perceptions of sustainability and related actions in their own rural tourism business was studied in four rural regions in Finland as part of interregional project. The regions were: Central Finland, Päijät-Häme, Häme and Southern Savo. The study focused widely on environmental, social and cultural dimensions of sustainability and how those dimensions are visible in enterprises' business idea, operational environment, business operations, product development, marketing and production of services.

First in spring 2013 it was illustrated how ecological, cultural and social sustainability is linked to different parts of business plan with the help of matrix tool. This matrix served a ground for developing an analysis tools

for thoroughly investigating how different dimensions of sustainability are shown in enterprises business operations. Analysis tools were divided in four phases: a preliminary inquiry to entrepreneurs, a content analysis of the company's marketing communications context, the observation on the premises, as well as entrepreneurs' interview. During the summer 2013 the study was conducted in 30 enterprises.

This paper shows entrepreneurs' perceptions of sustainability in their own rural tourism business at the moment. The results reveal that every dimension is visible in some extent in rural tourism companies. However there are issues that need development like for example communicating the sustainability to customers. Ecological issues are the most visible in companies operations in practice.

Keywords: social, cultural and ecological sustainability, micro enterprises, sustainable tourism

Type of the manuscript: Case study

INTRODUCTION

Finland is, even today, the most rural country in the EU (Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, 2007). Rural areas have always been an essential element of Finnish settlement, production and culture. As well it provides strong natural and cultural elements for tourism development.

Rural tourism in Finland includes cottage holidays, farm holidays, bed and breakfast lodging, farm visits and group catering, organized activity services and holiday villages (Finnish Tourist Board, 1994). Rural tourism plays important role in Finland's tourism sector as a whole. For example in Finland an exceptionally high proportion of accommodation "beds" are located in rural areas (Noev, 2013).

The vision of Finnish rural tourism for 2020 includes several aspects of sustainability (Ministry of Economics and Employment, 2006). This is in line with international definitions e.g. WTO's definition and as well as with the UNEP's and NWTO's alignments (2005). WTO's simple definition for the sustainable tourism combines the Brundtland Commission's sustainable development definition with tourism:

"Tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, and the environment and host communities" (UNWTO, 2012).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Rural tourism

Rural tourism is one part of Finnish tourism. It is estimated that there are about 4900 entrepreneurs in rural tourism sector in Finland (Niemi & Ahlstedt, 2013). Typically rural tourism refers to tourism in areas which are sparsely populated. Rural tourism is difficult to define, as there are a variety of terms used to describe tourism activity in rural areas: agritourism, farm tourism, rural tourism, soft tourism and alternative tourism (Carlsen et al., 2010). Rural tourism can take many forms, including bed and breakfasts, self-service accommodation cottages, farm stays or nature activities. The Finnish theme group on tourism defines rural tourism as following: *"The rural tourism is based on the natural resources and reconditions – nature, landscape, culture, human – as well as it is customer oriented tourism business based on the family and small scale entrepreneurship"*. (The Finnish theme group on tourism)

According to a study on the characteristics of rural tourism entrepreneurship in Eastern Finland it seems that the motives for starting a rural business in Finland are in most cases related to existing premises, which make the accommodation or activity services as an opportunity to earn extra income (Komppula, 2004). Frequently the rural tourism business is established to support the main farm business and three fourth of the farmers are part-time tourism entrepreneur (Ryymin, 2008). Only 18% of the businesses use employed workers, whereas 82% operate with family members only (Komppula, 2004).

Sustainability issues in rural tourism

Sustainability is essential in tourism as well as in rural tourism, because it has been proved that tourism industry has both negative and positive impacts on environment, culture and society. Sustainable tourism strives to practices which are for example to be more energy efficient, consume less water, minimize waste, conserve biodiversity, value cultural heritage and traditional values and generate local income (UNEP, 2011).

According to Swarbrooke (1999) small scale rural tourism is type of tourism which is highly compatible with the concept of sustainable tourism. Other type of tourism that Swarbrooke (1999) sees as sustainable is cultural tourism which involves visitors learning about the history and culture of an area. Cultural aspects might be quite easily implemented in rural tourism surroundings. Typically rural tourism entrepreneurs operate in their farm or in old buildings. It is ecologically and culturally sustainable to convert the old farm buildings into tourism usage. In the same time this action may preserve a culturally valuable building and their surroundings. Rural companies can

implement the diversity of local cultural resources in activities for tourists and preserve the heritage for following generations. (Lordkipanidze et al., 2005; Halme & Fadeeva, 2001)

The issues relating to ecological sustainability can be implemented in the rural tourism enterprise in several ways. Conservation in the area may mean protecting the valuable plant or animal species. Efficiency in resources is gained by installing water-efficient fittings in showers and toilets, and using renewable energy. Recycling is achieved ensuring that all recyclable materials are collected and delivered for recycling, and the organic waste is composted. (Lim & McAleer, 2005; Carlsen et al., 2001)

In product development the sustainability can be taken in consideration in many ways. The environmental issues should be considered in activities for customer like fishing, hiking, boating. Particularly in areas of sensitive ecosystem. (Lim & McAleer, 2005) Activities in rural tourism may utilize the cultural elements from rural customs and folklore, or from local and family traditions. Tourists taking part to the cultural activities are informed about the culture. This will strengthen rural community's own traditions, heritage, arts, lifestyles, places, and this all is preserved between generations. The cooperation between rural tourist companies, local enterprises and community in activity and event production increases the commitment to preserve and to provide knowledge on traditions and folklore that in turn helps to enhance the tourist experience. (MacDonald & Jolliffe, 2003) The very essence of rural tourism is local cooperation and community involvement through appropriate forms of networking, arguable one of the most important requirements of rural tourism (Mitchell & Hall 2005).

Some have argued that small tourism organizations face particular constraints upon their ability to respond positively to the environmental challenge for example because of the lack of resources (Bramwell et al., 1996) or interest to prioritize profitability over environmental issues (Middleton, 1998; RDC et al., 1995). Some also support the contention that small business owners may be particularly concerned to ensure that tourism development is sustainable (Dewhurst & Thomas, 2003). However, given that rural tourism relies heavily on environmental attractiveness and healthy outdoor pursuits, it might be expected that tourism and hospitality operators would be especially motivated to adopt sustainable development practices (Carlsen et al., 2001). In some areas the role of rural tourism is to support the preservation of the rural nature and landscape (Fons et al., 2011).

Sustainability in tourism destination is often assessed and monitored by using different kinds of indicators developed for need of global, national and local level tourism industry or certain type of tourism (Jokimäki & Kainanlahti-Jokimäki, 2007; Schianetz & Kavanagh, 2008; Roberts & Tribe, 2008; WTO, 2005; CAPA, 2011). One approach to illustrate and evaluate the sustainability in micro-sized company level is to investigate how different dimensions of sustainability are shown in enterprises business operations.

As Dewhurst and Thomas (2003) stated there remains a need to further investigate the “reality” of the way in which small tourism firms perceive their role in sustainable tourism. This study illustrates the reality among thirty Finnish rural tourism enterprises.

Used methods and implementation of the case study

The aim of this paper is to illustrate by using the analysis done in 30 microenterprises within rural tourism in Finland how cultural, social and ecological sustainability is implemented in the rural tourism enterprises business operations, product development and communications according the entrepreneurs’ own perceptions of sustainability in their own rural tourism business at the moment.

Cultural, social and ecological sustainability in micro companies within rural tourism was studied in four rural regions in Finland as part of ongoing interregional project, KESMA II (2013-2014). Project is funded by the European Agricultural Guidance and Guarantee Fund through the Centre for Economic Development, Transport and the Environment for Central Finland (ELY).

Four regions of the study were: Central Finland (Keski-Suomi), Päijät-Häme Region (Päijät-Häme), Häme-Region (Kanta-Häme) and Southern Savonia (Etelä-Savo) (Figure 1).

In spring 2013 it was illustrated how ecological, cultural and social sustainability is linked to different parts of business plan with the help of matrix tool. The matrix served a ground for developing an analysis tools for thoroughly investigating how different dimensions of sustainability are shown in enterprises business operations. Vertical axis consisted dimensions of sustainability: cultural, social and ecological. Horizontal axis contained different parts of business plan.



Figure 1. The study regions

After demonstrating the sustainability dimensions and their connections to business plan, the questions were framed into four different forms, which served an opportunity to analyze the enterprise and its sustainability. Analysis tools were divided in four phases: a preliminary questionnaire to entrepreneurs, a content analysis of the company's website, the observation on the premises, as well as entrepreneurs' interview.

The interviews were conducted face-to-face at the companies' premises during summer and autumn 2013. Interview was semi-structured and divided into eight sections based on business plan: physical operational environment of the company, cooperation and communality, business idea, customers, marketing, product development, production and control and human resources. At the same visit the observation of the premises was also implemented. The preliminary questionnaire was sent to the entrepreneurs via email before the visit. Content analysis of the company's website was done before the visit by the project group. The data was coded to Digium program, and analysed by

classifying and quantifying method.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Physical operational environment of the companies

Natural environment of the companies is diverse comprising water ways and forests. Half of the entrepreneurs mentioned also that there are swamps in the immediate surroundings and also rare plants have been found. Two of three of the enterprises told that there are protected natural areas and traditional landscape nearby or on the entrepreneurs' land.

The environment/surroundings of the companies make it possible to use renewable energy sources (like wood, water power, ground heat, wind power, solar energy), and quite many also utilize this opportunity.

Entrepreneurs were asked how culture of the region and its special features are shown in their operations. Half of the respondents mentioned that you can see it in the landscape and nature, which is typical for the region. Seven of the respondents mentioned food culture and traditions. Three of the respondents were not originally from that region, so it was hard for them to answer to the question. Three stated that regions culture or other special features are not visible in their operations.

Accessibility in rural tourism enterprises is a challenging part of social sustainability. Accessibility is not so easily implemented because of the fact that the premises that entrepreneurs use in their business operations are quite often old and also valuable culturally, sometimes also protected, so their remodeling to be accessible is not always possible.

Cooperation and communality

Communality is seen as an important part of normal living in the countryside according to the entrepreneurs. In one case, the communality plays big role in company's business idea: *"In our company, the communality is the core of all service products"*. The neighbors and village community are important to most of the entrepreneurs and they participate actively to the events and voluntary work for the community they belong to. It was worth noticing, that entrepreneurs take very actively part in all kinds of development projects: they are both target group and active players. As members of the local community, small firm owners need to feel that they are part of and not separate from the local management of the area (Dewhurst & Thomas, 2003) as it was also indicated with these companies studied.

Networking and cooperation with other companies is very beneficial for micro enterprises. Many of companies interviewed have different types of networks and entrepreneurs were very open for all kind of new cooperation.

Though some enterprises suffered lack of cooperation and found hard to find suitable partners. The entrepreneurs require transparency, good communication, reliability, commitment and effective cooperation from their partners. The most important stakeholders for the investigated companies were customers (22), banks and sponsors (19), other companies and subcontractors (15), environment (13), neighbors and the local community (12), employees (9), experts and consultants (9). Obviously the order of importance of the stakeholders varies in accordance with the company's operations and lifecycle. Almost all of the companies are already cooperating with their competitors somehow, for example by recommending their services to the customers, marketing together, borrowing or lending equipment etc. The commitment to support local suppliers has been connected to business owners responsible to sustainability (Dewhurst & Thomas, 2003). The interviewed companies regarded that they have positive impacts particularly on the community's economic. In literature the small tourism entrepreneurs' ability to create economic growth in the region is generally argued to be constrained (Dewhurst & Thomas, 2003; Ateljevic & Doorne, 2000).

Business idea and sustainability

For the majority of respondents tourism is only one form of business. Most companies have other business operations, like farming, animal husbandry, forestry. Usually entrepreneurs are trying to expand their business operations to accommodation or catering to stabilize their economy. Some of the companies were family farms, which had been handed down over the years from generation to generation. This is very typical characteristic of rural tourism entrepreneurship in Finland (Komppula, 2004). Some of the entrepreneurs had made a fresh start by making investments (construction of cottages, buildings) and planning what kind of business operations buildings and surroundings could offer for them and for their customers. This can be called as lifestyle and locational preferences which has been found to be motives to establish tourism business in rural areas (Carlsen et al. 2001).

Most of the (90 %) respondents agree that different aspects of sustainability are visible in enterprises' business ideas. The examples of the previous were: appreciating the nature and locality, using local food, services and workforce, renovating old buildings, recycling, participating to community building, using local culture, history etc. in tourism products, saving energy and water and making sure that the business itself is economically also sustainable. It seems that the economic goals are not contradict the sustainable action, which has been found to be typical for small tourism owners (Dewhurst & Thomas, 2003).

Customers and seasons

One of the most important customer group almost in each companies was families (21). Half of the companies mentioned especially international tourists as one of the top three customers groups. Companies having meetings are important customer group for 12 of the interviewed enterprises. The main season is summer (May-August) with on average 50 % of the customers. Though winter is very significant season for Finnish tourism industry, the interviewed companies named winter (January-April) as the least important season.

Marketing

Internet is the most important marketing channel for companies, and also the most common channel for customers to find company. Unfortunately, it is common that webpages don't highlight sustainability factors. Also grapevine e.g Facebook, Twitter, is important marketing method; satisfied customers tell to the potential customers about the company and its services.

Entrepreneurs feel that ecological sustainability is quite well seen in their marketing communication, however social sustainability dimension should be more emphasized. Half of the enterprises tell in their website how the energy that they use is generated, almost half tell also where they acquire the foodstuffs they use.

Mostly sustainability is conveyed by the pictures or colors in the webpages. Finnish rural tourism companies use very often pictures of nature (landscape with lake), the farm buildings, cottages, and families, if the services are focused on that segment. The colors are from nature or the surrounding buildings. Rural entrepreneurs bring out the sustainability in the text. They may tell about their values, the history of the farm or the buildings, details about the nature, the use of local food or other resources and the availability of local services.

Product development and production

Almost all of the companies utilize at some extent elements of history and traditions of the farm/village/region in their product development. Also, natural environment and traditional landscapes are utilized as part of companies' services. However, elements could be used much more. Stories and tales are used in some extent but there is a need to implement storytelling as part of the services even more. Stories and tales usually tell about location, buildings and, in some cases, the history of owner-family. These are the same elements as companies use in picturing sustainability. Many entrepreneurs would like to develop this further and see it as important part of cultural sustainability.

All companies use energy conservation lamps in their premises, but the coverage compared to normal lamps vary from company to company. Entrepreneurs are quite active in recycling; all of the companies recycle in some level, and require that also from their customers. The recycling is one of the most often undertook environmental practices in rural tourism businesses (Carlsen et al., 2001). Most of the companies have made ecologically sustainable choices in their buildings, heating systems and waste water systems. They try actively to save energy, water and natural resources but necessarily their customers are not well enough informed how to participate to that. Entrepreneurs are aware that they need to inform and guide their customers better.

Human resources

Most of the companies did not have a lot of external workforce, duties are carried out by the owner couple. Yearly and regular basis companies employ fulltime only 1,07 persons, but they use seasonal workforce and part-time workers. Sustainability policy is important part of the orientation of new employers; they are told about the history of company and of course, sustainable practice. The low use of employed workers is typical feature for Finnish rural tourism companies (Komppula, 2004). For these kinds of companies it is vital that the family members have the possibility also to take time off and relax, because the whole business is mainly carried out by the couple and it is, without a doubt, a challenging situation and requires a lot of commitment, hard work and flexibility.

The issue of sustainability (connected to business plan)	Entrepreneur's perception of the state of sustainability
<i>Physical operational environment of the companies</i>	On entrepreneurs' land or nearby are protected natural areas, traditional landscape, rare plants.
<i>Cooperation and communality</i>	Many companies have different types of networks, and entrepreneurs were very open for all kind of new cooperation even with competitors. They participate actively to the events and voluntary work for the community they belong to.
<i>Business idea and sustainability</i>	In most cases the business is established to support the main farm business. 90 % (27) of the respondents agree that different aspects of sustainability are visible in enterprises' business ideas. Examples: appreciating the nature and locality, using local food, services and workforce, renovating old buildings and keeping them alive, using local culture, history etc. in tourism products.
<i>Customers and seasons</i>	The most important customer group in almost each one of the companies was families. The main season is summer.
<i>Marketing</i>	Internet is the most important marketing channel. The sustainability factors that are mentioned in internet pages most often are energy source, history of the farm, details about nature, use of local food, availability of local services.
<i>Product development and production</i>	Almost all of the companies utilize at some extent elements of history and traditions of the farm/village/region in their product development. Also, natural environment and traditional landscapes are utilized as part of companies' services. Entrepreneurs are quite active in recycling. Most of the companies have made ecologically sustainable choices in their buildings, heating systems and waste water systems.
<i>Human resources</i>	Most of the companies have only little external workforce, duties are carried out mostly by the owner couple.

Table 1. The state of sustainability in 30 micro rural tourism companies according the entrepreneur's perception.

CONCLUSIONS

Rural tourism companies are surrounded by nature and rural landscape, which is clearly one strength of Finnish rural tourism. The companies utilize special features of natural and cultural environment in their business. This is how the companies preserve the special cultural features of the region and their own farm also to the future. In most cases the rural enterprise is owned by family. Family business as a type of ownership exhibits the reverence of continuity, which enhances cultural sustainability. Stories, myths and tales linked to these feature could be used even more in their business and especially in their product development.

It can be concluded that rural tourism micro companies have put effort on the ecological dimension of sustainability. In future companies could put more effort to cultural and social dimension and utilize those dimensions in their business. For example, communality, and service products based on stories could be good marketing advantages for companies.

The companies save the energy, water and natural resources. This could be reinforced by informing and guiding the customers to participate in the saving. If the customers are informed all the advantages which are achieved by saving natural resources, it is likely that they will obey the instructions of saving natural resources. "If you do", you achieve this is better way to inform than "please do not".

Internet is the most important marketing channel for companies. Unfortunately, it is common that webpages do not highlight sustainability factors. The companies could tell much more about the sustainability issues they are contributing. Maybe some of those issues are so obvious that companies are not aware of the value of stating that. It is important that companies will include sustainability in their marketing communication, because in future it customers will pay more attention on sustainability.

Sustainability analysis tools used in this study revealed quite profoundly the present state of cultural, social and ecological sustainability of the rural tourism companies. However, because this tool was used the first time, further development and testing is still needed. Business plan as a framework for analyzing company's sustainability makes it possible to really cover whole business to the analysis and reveals well the development needs of the company.

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