



NORDIC TOURISM COLLECTIVE GET-TOGETHER #5

SUSTAINABILITY

What will the effects of the Covid crisis mean for the progress of sustainable practices in the Nordics? Is it an opportunity to stop, regroup and rebuild for a better, more sustainable tourism future with a surge towards sustainable products and destinations? Or will the requirement to recover business as soon as possible mean there will be a drive for visitors at any costs and at the expense of sustainability? Will the Covid 19 global crisis put the drive towards Sustainability in the Nordic region on hold as the industry puts emphasis on survival and just attracting visitors back to the region?

Invited participants

Liisa Kokkarinen - Project Manager, Sustainable Arctic Destination at Visit Finland / Business Finland

Signe Jungersted - CEO, Founding Partner, Group Nao

Helena Egan - Co-founder, PlanetEgan

Fabrice Sorin - Independent Consultant and Founding partner, CE360 Alliance

Tim Fairhurst - Secretary General, European Tourism Association (ETOA)

Introductions

HE: Sustainability is very close to my heart and I have been working through my company Planet =Egan on sustainable tourism projects in travel and tourism for many years .

LK: I am responsible to driving the new sustainable tourism programmes and Business Finland and Visit Finland

SJ: Group Nao is focused on people-based growth offering advice on destination recovery and transformations to a sustainable world.

FS: Through CE360, we offer competency services across the Circular economy, focusing specifically on the service industry and tourism

TF: I deal with the policy side of ETOA and on a destination level dealing with the relationships between tourism and host countries and between the private and public sector.



What will the effects of the Covid travel lockdowns mean for the progress of sustainable practices in the Nordics? Is it an opportunity to stop, regroup and rebuild for a better, more sustainable tourism future? Or will the requirement to recover business mean a drive for visitors at any costs and at the expense of sustainability?

LK: We have yet to know although this does give us a perfect platform for the future. Business Finland has been building a sustainable tourism development programme for the past year - so launching this now is just coincidental.



The programme has been well received by the Finnish Travel trade industry and in fact I have never seen such a unified voice in support. Certainly sustainability is the only way forward. People and businesses are adapting to the programme and engaging working towards their own sustainability development. Now is the time to recover from the crisis stronger and more sustainably.

FS: It is a matter of time frame. There will be pressure to go back to normal particularly in the short term. But many tour operators have already started with their own sustainability strategies particularly in procurement and are now very unlikely to renege on this and go back. But financial survival may supersede longer term investment in sustainability programmes. The Nordics have been leading the way, with Scandic hotels in particular a global leader in the hotel sector. So, in the short term there will be opposition to sustainability initiatives but in the longer term there is no way back. Sustainability is the only way forward.

TF: It's not a question of either/or. The answer is that you can have both. We do need a return to normality. It's not just business but an awful lot of jobs in jeopardy. Finding a way to get business moving again in a responsible way is very important from an economic and social perspective. Alongside the debate about people, planet and profit a lot of discussion is taking place about product diversification driven by people's sense of what's safe and what's desirable. So as far as tourism's footprint and how it develops, there is an appetite to have more conversations about what these new products will be.

There is no question that consumers will be thinking differently and its in all our interest to provide products that the client wants - nso I think evolution will continue in that direction. From an EU perspective, it has ambitious Green Deal goals and in fact the EU has already achieved its 2020n goal of being over 20% below 1990 levels. The Green Deal will be highly influential in how tourism develops and sustainability will be 'baked-in' to EU policy. There are lots of possibilities.



SJ: there is a time issue and challenges in what we hope for and what we see happen. But the future doesn't just happen. Its something we create. That's why we must have these discussions and its important to keep having them. How do we build back better? There is a lot of discussion in Denmark about the new normal and a great desire to get back to normal; but we have seen a huge disruption in our industry. We are not going back- we are going forward. Our task is to make the new normal the new possible, the new better.

There is an urgency to rebuild with a lot of campaigning using war rhetoric like 'fighting for the tourists'. But we need to include sustainability back on the agenda as it is getting a little lost in all the urgency. We need to reinvent the business model. Sustainability is the only way forward but now there is a different urgency, it's almost like a limited edition; we can't just maximise the crowds as we did before, there will be different numbers of travellers and we will need to have a different mindset based on value-based and formative travel which will become a thing of the future. How will businesses make money from quality not quantity. We need to invest in innovation and development - building back better.



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HE: There is a need and an urge of travellers to move to more nature based vacations, off the beaten track. Nature will become more important and this will push businesses in the right direction. But there is one thing, in Spain where I live, I'm shocked by the amount of plastic gloves and masks I see on the beach and disposable plastic packaging. We urgently need technology to find solutions. There are new challenges. Everyone has seen the pictures of Venice and of blue skies over India but there is a need for DMOs to work with the smaller suppliers here - small business selling coffee are now asking customers to pay one extra euro per cup to cover the cost of hand sanitiser and other equipment - we need innovation to help us find a balance.

Sustainable travel is no longer a niche. It is the reality and it is the only way we can save our planet in the long run



How does the EU work with the harmonisation across sectors? In transportation for example

TF: There is a lot of discussion going on behind the scenes on end-to-end ticketing and about inter-modal connectivity. But importantly tourism does not sit apart. It is tightly integrated into strategic planning.

If there is one positive to be taken, it's a strong political realisation that tourism is completely integrated and not only with transportation and supply and any plans for the future planning needs a holistic approach.

The EU has great intentions but the devil is always in the detail on how funds are allocated. There are great opportunities in how to spend and apply funds and maximise the benefits.



There are many initiatives by individual cities and destinations in the Nordic's towards sustainable products and experiences. Do you have any specific examples?

LK: We now have over 400 companies registered on the sustainable programme. What is challenging is the communication. Many companies behave sustainable because it is ethically correct, the right thing to do, the challenge is to make people understand that although this is natural for them, this needs to be communicated so that others may follow. The need for sustainability is going to stay and will become more important - travellers will require it.

SJ: We are now at the moment of credibility. We have been talking about the negative aspects of over tourism and the difficulties faced by many destinations for years now. If we don't act on this now - we will have no credibility. It is the moment of truth for us all.

There does not seem to be a pan-Nordic sustainability approach across the region - should there be? How should EU Covid recovery funds focus on those actors and providers who are building greener and more sustainable products?

HE: It would certainly be a good time to have it. Each country seems to have its own approach. The Nordic Council of Ministers have a common programme for the oceans but not one on sustainability? Perhaps they could take good practice from different areas and build on that.

The reputation of the Nordics is high but we don't just need another labelling initiative but a programme for driving the collective good which would be especially helpful in long haul markets - perhaps the Nordic Tourism Collective could help drive this?

FS: Funding depends very much upon what strings are attached. Tourism is so complex and involves so many sectors whereas funding tends to be granted to other sectors with some of the funds slowly dripping down into tourism. The Nordic Council of Ministers works in very close cooperation in many areas but there is no direct competency dedicated to tourism.



If we talk of quality over quantity - are we in danger of making tourism elitist?

TF: This is a demand led industry. We can have a lot of happy ideas but people will choose where to spend their money. As we businesses pivot to domestic tourism we see the unpacking of programmes and the creation of new products for the visitor and the community. It is what many operators like to sell because it's what the locals (in their own country want to do), it's less synthetic and it's better. Products must be dual use - not just for the tourist but for community as well



SJ: Tourism is elitist! But elitism is not the same as exclusive and we have seen new hybrid products that have certainly been more egalitarian.

LK: there is a mindset that sustainability comes with a cost and that it's only high-end programmes that are sustainable. This is not what we have seen in Finland.

Also, regarding a pan-Nordic approach, there has been a lot of collaboration going on - but in the public sector. There is a problem in that we have seen a number of private companies become involved and they do not apply the same criterion and so there is a danger of distortion in the message.

Is there a conflict between a public sector DMO-led drive for sustainable destinations and commercially driven private enterprise? What is the dialogue between destinations and tourism providers?

FS: there is a need for value co-creation. It is a question of framing the issue; the destination has to be valued as an asset and not a commodity. If public and private sectors recognise destinations as an asset with capacity limitations they will then co-create for both public and private sectors alike. It's about coordinating this in the longer term

HE: It's actually shocking that the debate between private and public is still going on - cooperation is absolutely essential for a sustainable future.

TF: If you're looking for conflict, look inside the public sector - one of the obstacles of getting people to appreciate the need for strategic cooperation. It is about framing; tourism has an opportunity to make a contribution that is valued by both visitors and the community

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