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# Marketing of coastal barrier spits as liminal spaces of creativity

Ramūnas Povilanskas, Aušrinė Armaitienė\*

*Recreation and Tourism Department, Klaipėda University, Herkaus Manto gatvė 84, LT-92294*

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## Abstract

Nowadays tourism draws on many aspects of post-structuralist philosophy, which helps to understand the contemporary fluidity of the social construction. Mass tourist flows are gradually being fragmented into the “tribes” of dedicated individuals pursuing their particular vocations. Barrier spits as art(ist) colonies and tourist destinations are transforming from mono (mass) to multiple tourist destinations. Nida, Lithuania, Ahrenshoop (Fischland-Darß-Zingst), Germany, Hiddensee, Germany, Skagen (the Skaw Spit), Denmark, Provincetown (Cape Cod), the USA are interpreted as artist-tourist landscapes. Liminality is used as the keyword for their critical interpretation. Two key targets for the critical discourse of the Curonian Spit as a tourism destination have been taken: The Grand Story of the Curonian Spit and Nida Art Colony as an artist-tourist bubble. The discourse of its transformation to a more fluid creative liminal space where art and wellness interact is given.

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## 1. Introduction

According to Hannam & Knox (2010), critical tourism draws on many aspects of post-structuralist philosophy because: a) it helps to understand contemporary tourism as a set of complex, negotiated, contingent, blurred and incomplete practices and ideas, and b) it helps to understand the contemporary fluidity of the social construction of realities that include the arenas of tourism. In this paper, we focus on the coastal barrier spits as creative and critical tourism destinations. We analyze the Curonian Spit as a case study since it is one of Europe's largest coastal barrier spits and a World Heritage site. We also try to compare the development of creative tourism on the Curonian Spit

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\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +370-687-35-023; fax: +370-46-398 -567.  
E-mail address: [ausrine.armaitiene@gmail.com](mailto:ausrine.armaitiene@gmail.com)

with parallel tourism development on other coastal barrier spits in Europe and the United States. We argue that liminality is the key word for critical interpretation of coastal barrier spits as artist-tourist landscapes.

We focus on two key targets of the critical discourse on the Curonian Spit as a tourism destination:

1. The Grand Story of the Curonian Spit as iconic shifting sand dune wilderness with fishermen's cabins scattered on the lagoon shore and charismatic elks in the pinewoods.
2. Contemporary Nida Art Colony as an artist-tourist bubble interacting with the landscape and population of the Curonian Spit merely as a backdrop for the process of creation and self-expression.

## 2. Marketing icons and critical tourism on the Curonian Spit

### 2.1. Decline of the Grand Story of the Curonian Spit

Considering the Grand Story of the Curonian Spit as iconic shifting sand dune wilderness, it is remarkable how persistent this iconic image was over the time course of the 20th century and onwards. Nowadays, on the Curonian Spit, the access to the drifting dunes is restricted, except of two sites. The population of elk has declined from 250 in 1900 to 42 in 2003. Most of the authentic fishermen's cabins, boats and tourist hotels were destroyed during the World War II or afterwards. The Curonian Spit experienced a dramatic shift of local population, their culture and habits. Yet, the themes of the tourist photographs in the 2000s remain the same, as on the old postcards (Table 1). Tourists continue looking for and gazing at the remnants of the long-lost Atlantis, i.e., the Curonian Spit from the early 1900s. This weird paradox gaze is typical for heritage tourists that take efforts to resurrect the long-gone iconic heritage features by the means of photography. In this way, they are attempting 'to construct idealised images which beautify the object being photographed' (Urry, J. 2002, p. 128).

The loss of traditional iconic features of the Curonian Spit not only means the decline of the Grand Story, but also raises the need for new anchors and new, less grand, more fluid stories highlighting the appeal of the Spit. The contemporary Nida Artist Colony, its history and symbolic continuity fits well as an anchor and a 'fluid' story for the rebranding of the Curonian Spit. This process is supported by the current revival of the artist colonies' movement worldwide. Nida Art Colony is supposed to merge two 'fluid' stories: of the Curonian Spit as a landscape of creativity and Nida as part of the global artist colonies' movement. Yet, before interpreting and appreciating Nida Art Colony as a new signifier of the Curonian Spit, we need to answer two critical questions:

1. Is the contemporary Nida Art Colony an adequate signifier of the Curonian Spit as a tourist destination and a post-modern re-enactment of the identity myth of the Spit?
2. Are there any specific meanings and connotations beyond taking the name of the long-gone Nida Artist Colony of the late 1800s – early 1900s?

Table 1. Dominant themes of the images of the Curonian Spit on the postcards of the early 1900s and tourist photos of the early 2000s

Themes	Postcards of the early 1900s	Tourist photos of the early 2000s
Shifting dunes + people + lagoon	15%	15%
Fishermen's cabins + lagoon	14%	11%
Forest + animals	11%	11%
Sea + beach	6%	6%
Lagoon + boats	6%	6%
Local people	2%	2%

The next two questions could help answering the above ones:

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