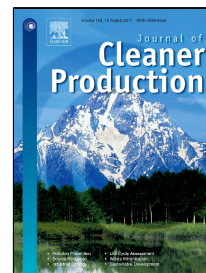


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Sustainable by nature? The case of (non)adoption of eco-certification among the nature-based tourism companies in Scandinavia



Lusine Margaryan, Stian Stensland

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1. Introduction

A decade ago, in a landmark book *Ecotourism in Scandinavia: Lessons in theory and practice* the leading tourism scholars pondered about the meaning of sustainable and/or ecotourism in the Scandinavian context (Gössling and Hultman, 2006). Their insights suggested that the very idea of an environmentally friendly or ecological tourism (ecotourism), as a new and separate branch of nature-based tourism, was perceived as rather artificial and redundant in the region (e.g. Fredman, Gössling, and Hultman, 2006; Gössling, and Hultman, 2006; Gössling, and Alkimou, 2006, Viken, 2006). Consequently, the adoption rates of eco-certification schemes in Scandinavia (here focusing on Sweden and Norway) has remained very limited. This has been linked to the cultural and historical specifics, such as a strong tradition of outdoor recreation (locally known as *friluftsliv*, or open-air life), which is permeated by the ethos of simple and accessible activities, with minimal disturbance to the environment (Fredman et al., 2006; Sandell and Sörlin, 2008). *Friluftsliv*, closely intertwined with the national identity and traditions of harvesting from nature (hunting, fishing, berry and mushroom picking), arguably, did not leave sufficient ideological space for the concepts of sustainability, eco-tourism, and the accompanying labelling and certification schemes. Nevertheless, the national ecotourism labels such as *Nature's Best* in Sweden and *Norwegian Ecotourism* in Norway have been established.

Since the advance of the sustainability agenda, there has been a proliferation of market-based solutions, such as eco-certification, aiming to 'marry' economy and ecology. The fact that 2017 has been proclaimed by the UNWTO as the International Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development indicates the longevity of this agenda. The tourism industry has spawned myriads of eco-certification schemes over the last two decades (Buckley, 2002; 2012; Dziuba, 2016; Font, 2002). Despite a considerable life-span and extensive research on tourism certification, there has been little agreement on the success of this approach (Buckley, 2012; 2013; Gössling and Buckley, 2016; Karlsson and Dolnicar, 2016). This discussion becomes particularly interesting in the context of Scandinavia, home to some of the most affluent but also the most sustainable societies in the world (SDG, 2016).

In Scandinavia, there has been relatively little comprehensive empirical data on this topic, especially pertaining to the perspective of nature-based tourism (hereafter NBT) businesses. The research on NBT has primarily focused on the tourist demand and relied on convenience sampling (Fredman and Tyrväinen, 2010; Lundmark and Müller, 2010; Margaryan and Fredman, 2016). As a result, little has been known about the certification adoption among the NBT companies. Drawing on previous research on the adoption of voluntary sustainability schemes in tourism (e.g. Bansal and Roth, 2000; Berghoef and Dodds, 2013; Delmas and Gergaud, 2014; Kennedy, 2014; Mair and Jugo, 2009; Revell, Stocks and Chen, 2010; Sampaio, Thomas and Font, 2012; Vernon et al., 2013), we look at the associated factors and barriers of this approach in the Scandinavian context. *The aim of this paper, therefore, is to understand the factors associated with the (non)adoption of eco-certification among the NBT companies by looking at Norway and Sweden.* We contribute to better understanding of this sector through a first of its kind region-wide survey. While having certain geographic and socio-economic differences, Norway and Sweden have overpowering similarities in terms of shared history, heritage, culture, economic development, traditions of outdoor recreation, environmental policies and attitudes towards nature in general. In this paper we treat the Scandinavian Peninsula as one region.

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