

104 Nature-based tourism experiences between mobile connectivity and the freedom of disconnecting

Eugenio Conti^{1,2}, Ioanna Farsari¹, ¹Dalarna University, Sweden. ²Mid Sweden University, Sweden

Mobile Internet connectivity is traditionally seen as an experience enhancer in tourism, and extant research in the context of natural and protected areas show a positive attitude towards such technology. On the visitor experience's side, it enhances safety, information retrieval, connectivity to peers and accessibility (Elmahdy, Haukeland and Fredman, 2017). On the destination management's side, it constitutes a resource for visitor planning, monitoring and engagement (Pickering, Chelsey, Barros and Rossi, 2020; Hausmann et al., 2017).

Recent studies are discussing more critically whether ubiquitous connectivity always represents a resource for tourism or conversely a factor that jeopardizes the tourism experience by triggering pressures, discomfort as well as estrangement from local communities and places (Egger, Lei and Wassler, 2020). The issue is particularly important within nature-based tourism, due to its relation to experiential themes of genuineness, detoxification and escapism and its localization in areas where transformational and educational experiences are prioritized (Li, Pearce & Low, 2018).

Most research on the topic examines mobile connectivity and disconnection from it in dichotomizing approaches. However, the reality of the phenomenon is largely subjective. Ambivalent results leave the question of the value of ubiquitous connectivity in nature open (Dickinson et al, 2016). We contend that traditional research approaches are unable to fully grasp the complexity of the connectivity-disconnection dilemma in nature, especially in terms of how tourists negotiate between connectivity and disconnection on-site and the experiential meanings that are attached to such negotiation. We should not assume that ubiquitous connectivity is always a "smart" experiential factor in natural and protected areas, sought or expected by visitors and/or leading to increased visitor satisfaction, engagement, or value (Neuhofer, 2016). At the same time, we dispute the similarly aprioristic association of experiences in nature as in "technology-dead" places, where a total

disconnection from ubiquitous connectivity is sought and where, consequently, the development of an enabling infrastructure should not be pursued by nature-based destination stakeholders (Li, Pearce & Low, 2018; Pearce & Gretzel, 2012). Other than simplistic in experiential terms, we find this notion problematic because it potentially reinforces unequal and dispossessing dichotomies between "smart" hyperconnected urban areas and, specularly, disconnected and underdeveloped rurality.

Having this in mind, this research adopts an interpretive approach and investigate subjective negotiations of connectivity and disconnection through 19 formal field group interviews collected at the visitor centre of Fulufjället National Park, Sweden. In formal field group interviews, the researcher stages a setting on the field to help natural group dynamics to play out. Thus, our groups were not arranged by us and were constituted by tourists touring the park together. Formal field group interviews allow the researcher to be an empathic observer but also a proactive enquirer and are best suited for naturalistic and exploratory research questions (Frey & Fontana, 1991). Groups varied from a minimum of 2 to a maximum of 6 people, with an average of 2-3 participants per interview. Participants encompassed different European nationalities, including Swedish, except for a group from Israel.

Results reflect the necessity to overcome the dichotomy between connectivity and disconnection in nature-based tourism and expand its theoretical understanding by focusing on tourists' interpretations of what connectivity, and by extent dis-connectivity, means in relation to their lifeworld (Gibbs et al., 2015; Verkasalo, Nicolás, Molina-Castillo and Bouwman, 2009). Thus, we introduce the concept of existential disconnection as a way to further characterize the features of disconnection in the tourism experience and its negotiation with connectivity. We characterize disconnection as an existential feeling of freedom and control of mobile-

based connectivity apps and functions, which contrasts with the constraints and pressures associated with the meanings of the same apps and functions as experienced in daily life. Importantly, disconnection in nature is experienced similarly across different visitors ranging from technophobic to technophilic. It can exist even in the absence of an objective detachment from mobile devices, as long as the freedom from connectivity experienced in the urban environment of daily life is experienced. In other words, most tourists experience disconnection when they feel the freedom to enact personal forms of connectivity other than when connectivity itself is absent.

We draw managerial implications for destination stakeholders in rural, natural and protected areas concerned with the role of mobile connectivity in nature-based tourism. Mobile connectivity represents an opportunity for

monitoring visitors of natural areas, but external pressures to encourage visitors to “keep connected” may be harmful. Yet, natural areas should not be treated as “technology-dead” areas, not least because the escapism experienced by disconnecting does not necessarily imply the absence of mobile connectivity. Information retrieval can be encouraged by developing services based on mobile devices without requiring high-speed Internet. Voluntary visitor services and guidelines can be developed centred on the benefits of disconnecting from specific apps in nature while keeping devices ready for emergencies, monitoring or guidance. Non-invasive connectivity, more than the absence of connectivity, can help visitors with health conditions or impairments in feeling safe and free to experience disconnection.

References

- Dickinson J. et al. 2016. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2016.06.005>. Gibbs M. et al. 2015. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2014.987152>. Egger I. et al. 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2020.104098>. Elmahdy YM. et al. 2017. <https://hdl.handle.net/11250/2648159>. Frey, JH. & Fontana, A. 1991. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0362-3319\(91\)90003-M](https://doi.org/10.1016/0362-3319(91)90003-M). Hausmann A. et al. 2018. <https://doi.org/10.1111/conl.12343>. Li J. et al. 2018. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2018.06.027>. Neuhofer B. 2016. 10.1007/978-3-319-28231-2_56. Pearce P. & Gretzel U. 2012. 10.1080/15980634.2012.11434656. Pickering C. et al. 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jort.2019.100252>. Verkasalo H. et al. 2010. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tele.2009.11.001>