

# 59 Small nature-based tourism firms and their ability to cope with major external changes exemplified through Covid-19

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## Introduction

Within tourism, resilience is often understood as relating to a firm's or destination's ability to be robust in the face of change and the strategies they follow when the framework conditions shift (e.g., Cheer and Lew 2018; Hall, Prayag and Amore 2018; Prayag 2018). As Prayag (2018:133) notes, adapting from Holling (1973), «ideas of resilience are related not only to change but also to stability and response». The Covid-19 pandemic presents one such challenge that has significantly tested the resilience of the tourism sector and places where tourism is important. It has also exacerbated tourism trends established prior to the outbreak, notably a shift away from mass tourism linked to major commercial sites, towards smaller scale, more authentic and unique tourist experiences.

In this paper we discuss, based on interviews with small firms in the nature-based tourism (NBT) sector before the pandemic hit, to what extent such firms might have special advantages in responding to major external challenges like Covid-19. Although these interviews were conducted before the outbreak of Covid-19, they covered topics salient to the issue of resilience to external challenges. These firms were chosen because they have been key actors in creating authentic quality tourist experience which extend beyond the specific nature-based product. This can be illustrated through the theory of performativity (e.g., Edensor 2000; Wang 1999), what Crouch (2012:19) defines as «doing tourism». A performative approach can include both the tourist and the provider, with focus on the moments, the acts, the feelings, and the relationship – both with nature and the people who are involved in «doing» tourism (Ibid.). Several of these small NBT firms are characterized by the presence of managers, guides, and other staff as part of their product. The performative is thus about how the provider facilitates how the tourist encounters different spaces – destinations or sites, and how the provider creates these spaces, which are unstable, shifting and continuously under construction. Knudsen and

Waade (2010:12-13) states that «places are something we authenticate through our emotional [...] relatedness to them», and that it is «a relational quality attributed to something out of an encounter» (ibid.:13). The characteristics and adaptations of these NBT firms – offering more unique and decentralized experiences, are important both as a response to mass tourism and to the challenges posed by Covid-19. In particular the presence of small NBT firms, and their specific business characteristics might improve the resilience of places or regions with limited economic sectors or where other key sectors are impacted by a crisis or downturn.

## Methodology

The empirical data for this paper is taken from 24 semi-structured interviews with managers of NBT-firms carried out in 2017 and 2018 as part of the BIOTOUR-project (2016-2021). Most of the firms can be classified as small, with less than five employees, with several of the managers also being the firms' owners. The informants were from three different geographical regions in Norway; Varanger, Trysil and Hardanger. Each region has a unique socio-economic and tourism context which shaped the different types of NBT-activities that were developing. Varanger is an arctic and relatively new tourist destination in the eastern part of Northern Norway, most known for attracting both national and international birdwatchers over the last ten years. Trysil is a traditional forest and agricultural community in the eastern part of Southern Norway, now one of Norway's largest ski destinations. Hardanger is a fjord and mountain area in the western part of Southern Norway with a history as one of Norway's most profiled tourist regions.

## Results

Our analysis highlights that NBT firms seem to hold qualities that make them well equipped for coping with the changes caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. They have developed a business model, market niche and specific tourist experiences that mean they are

less dependent on a large tourist flow and impacted by external challenges. A number of interlinked strategies contribute to ensuring the economic sustainability and resilience of NBT firms. Firstly, because of the seasonal nature of the work, many of these actors need to combine their NBT-activity with other work and are thus not so vulnerable to sudden changes in one economic sector alone. Secondly, because the NBT-firms are located in rural areas, often with a small and partly scattered population, they are often dependent on collaborating with other actors to offer packages to tourists, contribute to seasonal equalization, keep tourists in the area for a longer period and ensure the quality of the products. These developments have taken place in most tourism regions in the last ten years. Collaboration allows tourist experiences that are richer in content, and a larger range of offers and areas in the regions are used. Thirdly, the firm managers have chosen strategies to avoid «people pollution», which will be negative for the nature experience, by increasing the quality and price by

specializing in one field. Furthermore, this means that the small-scale NBT-firms become a contrast to mass tourism with differentiated offers, and their specially adapted products that reduce group sizes, in the context of Covid-19 also thus reduce the risk of infection spreading. Overall, these factors provide increased economic resilience. The NBT-firms are better prepared to tolerate recession and fewer visitors do not impair the quality of the product, which is based on facilitating the development of the performative – to create relations with the tourists and ensure a unique experience.

For the future development of this paper, we will complement the empirical material through follow-up interviews with a selection of the same firms focusing on their experiences and strategies in coping with the Covid-19 pandemic.

## References

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