

Nature-based tourism firms and community resilience

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Introduction

Adaptation to ecological, economic, and social change is one of the greatest challenges facing society today, and there has been substantial societal, political, and theoretical interest in resilience (Butler 2017; Hall, Prayag, and Amore 2018; Cheer and Lew 2018; Wilson 2012; Houston 2015; Walker and Salt 2012). In rural communities, nature-based tourism (NBT) potentially contributes to resilience. The purpose of this paper is to discuss three aspects of resilience (ecological, economic, and social) with reference to NBT and illustrate this through findings from a study of NBT firms in Norway. The study is part of a cross-disciplinary research project on NBT (BIOTOUR) taking place 2016 to 2020.

Adger (2000:347) defined social resilience as “the ability of groups or communities to cope with external stresses and disturbances as a result of social, political and environmental change.” Hall and Lamont (2013:2) define social resilience as “the capacity of groups of people bound together in an organization, class, racial group, community, or nation to sustain and advance their well-being in the face of challenges to it.” Their focus on sustaining well-being is consistent with Norris et al.’s (2008) inclusion of well-being as one of the outcomes of resilience. Put simply, resilience reflects a community’s ability to thrive in the face of change (Steiner, Woolvin, and Skerratt 2016).

Within tourism, the focus often is on the resilience of tourism firms and/or destinations (e.g., Becken 2013; Butler 2017; Calgaro, Lloyd, and Dominey-Howes 2014; Cheer and Lew 2018; Hall, Prayag, and Amore 2018). BIOTOUR concentrates on the contribution of NBT firms to community resilience, especially in rural communities. The focus is on general resilience, especially in the context of slow-onset changes such as economic and demographic stressors (e.g., sector-specific decline and out-migration). Although much of the community resilience literature concentrates on natural disasters, the challenges posed by economic and demographic stressors are also recognized (e.g., Steiner, Woolvin, and Skerratt 2016; Maclean, Cuthill, and Ross 2013).

Data and methods

There are several strands to the resilience literature, but social science evaluation with primary data is relatively uncommon. As Brown (2016:60) notes, adapting from Levine (2014), “[f]ew of the suggested measures of resilience are derived from theoretical frameworks on resilience [and] at present the frameworks do not really help in finding appropriate measures.”

In this study we apply a mixed method approach to assess NBT contributions. We combine quantitative data from a 2017 nation-wide survey of NBT firms (N=280 to 558, depending on the content) with qualitative interviews with representatives of 24 NBT actors in three areas in Norway: the arctic region of Varanger, the forest area of Trysil and the fjord and mountain area of Hardanger. In Varanger local communities have since the 1990s witnessed downturn in fisheries. NBT, such as birdwatching, started to develop in the 2000s. Trysil experienced a

similar decline related to forestry. However, since the 1960s Trysil has developed into a major ski resort. Here, a growing NBT sector can contribute to more summer tourism. Hardanger differs from the other two areas by having a much longer history of tourism (since the 1800s) and strong integration with farming. In 2009 the tourism strategy was changed from focusing on “blossom and national costumes” to nature based experiences.

Results

Economic resilience

An important economic aspect of small, specialized NBT firms is, beyond establishing jobs, to enhance the package of tourism products. This benefits both guests and more established tourism actors, such as hotels. Also, NBT firms, through differentiated offerings, contribute to better seasonal balance. This is the case in the winter destination Trysil where there is a coordinated action to develop activities such as biking tracks / trails and fly-fishing. In the summer destination Hardanger there is a similar commitment to develop winter activities.

Social resilience

Hardanger Eventyr, established in 2016 is just one of many NBT firms in Hardanger contributing to enhanced “spirit” and awareness in the local community. Another example is the development of bird tourism in Varanger, which has opened the eyes of local people to their unique bird fauna and increased pride in their region because of that. A third example is the conscious work in Trysil to preserve the town center alongside a large-scale ski resort in another part of the municipality.

The nationwide survey included several sets of questions relating to community resilience, including a scale of nine items reflecting the relationship between NBT firms and local communities (see Figure 1 below). Exploratory factor analysis indicates the scale reflects two aspects: business relationship between firm and community and broader relationships, including aspects of social resilience. For example, firms report that they help strengthen community identity, though their perceived contribution to community cohesiveness is less strong.

Ecological resilience

Many of the NBT actors interviewed emphasized ecology. For example, Biotope, a pro-nature architectural practice based in Varanger, has developed small bird watching shelters and dedicated information (books, maps) accessible both for tourists and local inhabitants. To prevent huge traffic on the glacier Folgefonna in Hardanger, the glacier guides there never take groups larger than eight persons. They also are dedicated to teaching the visitors about ecological aspects pertaining to the glacier.

Discussion

The preliminary results from the study support the view that NBT firms and local communities can mutually gain from NBT. The firms view the local community as an important part of the tourist attraction. At the same time the firms may strengthen community identity and person-to-person networks. The interview data confirm and elaborate these findings. Several of the informants express that local inhabitants and local authorities look positively upon the contributions of their NBT, including as catalysts for local jobs, settlement, infrastructure and activity. However, underlying conflicts of interest, such as rights of use, may have to be resolved, preferably through dialogue. Some of the informants are also worried that large scale tourism (such as the arrival of large cruise ships) would have

negative impacts on small communities (affect social resilience) and would deter tourists seeking niche based, “quality” experiences (economic resilience).

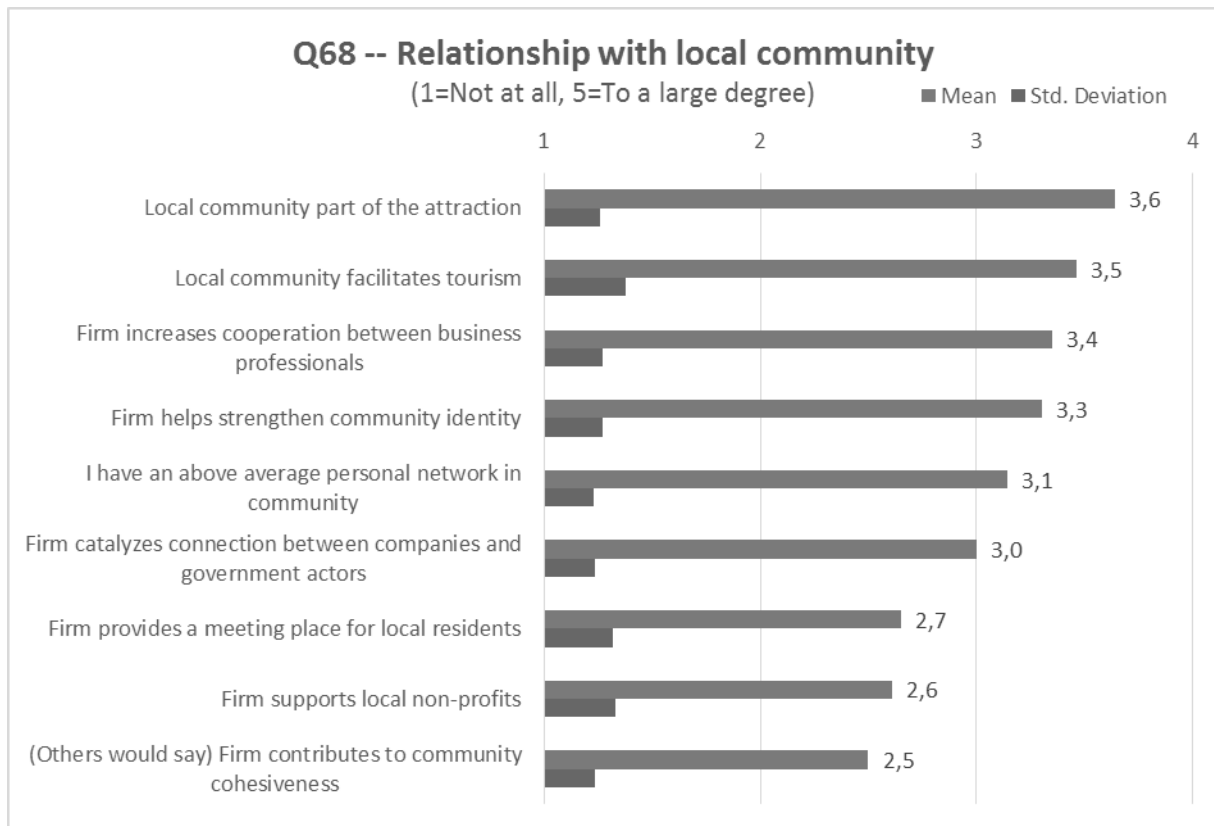


Figure 1. Responses from nature-based tourism firms in Norway to statements about relationship with local community. 2017. N=280

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