

2021

## Reflections on Research Relationship-Building and Partnerships in Arctic Tourism

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Hurst, Chris E.; Grimwood, Bryan S.R.; and Lemelin, R. Harvey, "Reflections on Research Relationship-Building and Partnerships in Arctic Tourism" (2021). *TTRA Canada 2021 Conference*. 9.  
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**Title:** Reflections on Research Relationship-Building and Partnerships in Arctic Tourism

**Preferred presentation length:** 20 minutes

**Introduction:** “Culturally Sensitive Tourism in the Arctic” (ARCTISEN) is a three-year, collaborative partnership involving tourism stakeholders from Finland, Sweden, Norway, Denmark/Greenland, and Canada. The aims of the ARCTISEN project are to co-create knowledge about cultural sensitivity and build relationships that support businesses and communities in developing tourism products and services that are respectful of the Arctic’s rich natural and cultural resources (ARCTISEN, 2020). Between 2018 and 2021, project activities focused on management and communications, and three thematic work packages: 1) building understanding of culturally sensitive tourism practices, 2) enhancement of entrepreneurial capacities for culturally sensitive tourism; and 3) development of a culturally sensitive tourism business cluster. The purpose of this presentation is to synthesize and critically reflect on the Canadian ARCTISEN team experiences of co-creating knowledge and relationship-building within this international tourism partnership. Our objectives are to:

- Describe Canadian ARCTISEN activities and lessons learned, focusing primarily on how the partnership supported relationship-building;
- Explain opportunities, challenges, and failures of working within the partnership, including how COVID-19 has required project priorities and activities to be adapted;
- Identify potential strategies and limitations of cultural sensitivity as concept and practice to integrate in Arctic and Indigenous tourism in Canada and future tourism research.

**Literature:** Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, tourism trends indicated a growing international demand for authentic cultural tourism experiences and products, including interpretative contents explaining the traditional, cultural, or place-based significance (Heldt Cassel & Maureira, 2017; Hsu & Nilep, 2015). The growing demand for cultural tourism is an emerging global tourism trend that has garnered the attention of tourism scholars and industry stakeholders alike. The trend is driven by tourist interest in an immersive experience featuring local cultures and lifestyles across a variety of tourism destinations and products (Fang, 2020). In Canada, the growing interest in visiting and interacting with Indigenous peoples in the Arctic and elsewhere represents a potential socio-economic benefit for communities and individuals developing Indigenous (cultural) tourism offerings (ITAC, 2015). Recognizing the potential impact of these trends on tourism hosts and communities, scholars and industry stakeholders have identified a need for cultural sensitivity within Indigenous tourism product development and delivery (ARCTISEN, 2020). Despite various definitions of cultural sensitivity (e.g., Viken, Höckert & Grimwood, 2021; Hurst et. al., 2020; and Olsen et. al., 2019) robust conceptualization and implementation of cultural sensitivity in tourism is needed. Co-creating knowledge around cultural sensitivity within collaborative tourism stakeholder partnerships is a process. It is a process that requires strategies of design and implementation to support and enact responsible and innovative Indigenous tourism products and services in the Arctic Region.

**Methods:** During the project period, the Canadian ARCTISEN team aimed to collaborate with Canadian Arctic communities, business, governments, and industry, while also contributing to ARCTISEN management and communication activities and deliverables, including work packages one and three noted above. Work package outputs included: a systematic review of cultural sensitivity in the Canadian scholarly literature (Hurst et al., 2020a); a review of tourism related guidelines and legal, territorial and cultural challenges to tourism development (Hurst et

al., 2020b); and contributing to a Transnational Baseline Report (Olsen et al., 2019). Relationship-building with Canadian Arctic communities centred on designing and hosting a “benchmarking” experience that would showcase Canadian experiences in culturally sensitive tourism while bringing together domestic and international tourism entrepreneurs, community leaders, decision-makers, and researchers for knowledge sharing. Just prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, team members visited Yellowknife to consult with local operators and industry representatives. As the pandemic set in, the Canadian benchmark experience was postponed and redesigned as a webinar in June 2021, dovetailing with similar webinars hosted by international partners. This paper draws upon a qualitative content analysis of documents, materials, and experiences compiled during the project period. These include meeting minutes, field notes, reports, communication outputs like blog posts and posters, and activity outputs/deliverables. We use this analysis to identify thematic insights that relate and respond to objectives stated above.

**Findings/ Results:** Initial desk study activities identified a lack of definitional clarity for cultural sensitivity in tourism, but also several resonant concepts associated with respectful relationships that would support the self-determination and wellness of Indigenous communities, cultures, and businesses. Experiences and encounters with industry representatives in Yellowknife illustrated a wide range of insensitive and sensitive tourist behaviours, but also limited consensus on whether cultural sensitivity is a useful framework for informing responsible tourism management or practices. The onset of the pandemic seemed to amplify this ambivalence as operators, communities, and other tourism stakeholders grappled with making adaptations that might address decimated tourism demand while also ensure support for cultural livelihoods. Pivoting the benchmark experience to a webinar experience created challenges in terms of coordinating and communicating online, shifting relationship-building activities from “on-the-ground” in Yellowknife to virtual and broader connections across the Canadian Arctic region, and co-designing knowledge sharing activities that would be valuable to both Canadian and International audiences. Ultimately, the webinar showcased culturally sensitive tourism experiences through the perspectives of an Indigenous tourism business owner, operator, and government representative. The group discussed cultural sensitivity in relation to:

- hope (i.e., the potential of sustainable options for a thriving Indigenous culture and economic well-being; opportunities for growing local knowledge and connections to land/culture; and the transformative power of tourism for cultural exchange);
- integrity (i.e., sharing knowledge authorized by community and that belongs to your culture; respecting lands, waters, and animals; recognizing humans as visitors); and,
- adaptability (i.e., leveraging the effects of the pandemic to shift towards more sustainable livelihoods, supporting local cultural knowledge, and revitalizing traditions).

**Conclusion:** Culturally sensitive Arctic tourism involves the co-creation of knowledges, supports, and networks built upon collaborative partnerships and respectful relationships. Strategies for integrating cultural sensitivity in Arctic tourism in Canada should focus less on how cultural sensitivity is conceptualized, more on how it is put into practice. As a core value for tourism development, delivery, and research, cultural sensitivity embodies respect, trust, and mutual understanding in relationships and interactions, and further, needs to support community autonomy and well-being. Culturally sensitive tourism futures based in hope, integrity, and adaptability in the face of adversity provide opportunities to co-create new knowledges within tourism scholarship and industry, while also contributing to reconciliation efforts and the spiritual, cultural, and economic futures of communities.

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