

PUHEENVUOROT

Matkailututkimus 12 : 2 (2016)
©Suomen matkailututkimuksen seura



Certification of indigenous cultures in tourism - The case of the Sápmi Experience Quality Mark

José-Carlos García-Rosell

University of Lapland, Multidimensional Tourism Institute (MTI)

For the past two decades, labels, certifications and standards have emerged as management and marketing tools for helping companies manage and reduce the environmental and social impacts caused by their products, services and operations. These tools, which are voluntary self-regulations, are used by companies that want to go beyond legal requirements and legitimize their commitment towards responsible business practices in society. Environmental management standards, such as ISO 14001, EMAS and recently launched ISO 26000 guidance on social responsibility, are widely spread in the tourism and hospitality industry (Rodríguez-Antón, Alonso-Almeida, Celemin, & Rubio, 2012). Similarly, tourism-specific environmental certifications can be found in different regions of the world. *Green Start* in Finland and *Nature's Best* in Sweden are good examples of environmental certifications currently used by Nordic tourism companies. Although the management of environmental and social issues through certifications has become widespread in tourism, few certifications focus on promoting responsible ways of using cultures, in particular, indigenous cultures. In this address, I will first draw attention to the consumption of indigenous cultures in tourism with special emphasis on Lapland. Second, I will discuss the certification and responsible management of indigenous cultures by using the case of a Swedish certification called “Sápmi Experience Quality Mark”.

The consumption of indigenous cultures

Indigenous cultures play a central role in many tourism destinations around the world. Indigenous communities, such as the Masai and Maori, for instance, represent a key element of the image of Kenya and New Zealand, respectively. Indigenous cultures provide these destinations with the degree of exoticism needed to attract tourists and succeed in a highly competitive global tourism market. This is also the case of Nordic countries, where encounters with Sámi people and their ways of life are considered by many as one of the most interesting things to do during a visit to northern Norway, Sweden or Finland (Pittja, 2011). This region, which is generally known as Lapland and Sápmi (Sámi Land) among the Sámi people, has long attracted visitors from all over the world, and today, it is visited by millions of tourists every year (Müller, Lundmark, & Lemelin 2013; Pittja, 2011).

Tourism in Lapland is often promoted with images of Sámi people in traditional clothes, reindeers and lavvu. In spite of the bustling tourism industry and the increasing use of Sámi cultural elements in tourism services and marketing initiatives, promoting destinations situated in Sápmi, the number of Sámi tourism companies is relatively low (Pittja, 2011). As a result, the high visibility of Sámi culture in the tourism market does not directly benefit Sámi communities. Furthermore, the use of Sámi culture by destination marketing organizations (DMOs) and non-Sámi tourism companies in an inappropriate way may even contribute to the denigration of Sámi cultural values and identity (Hauks-son, 2008).

While Sámi and other indigenous cultures around the world seem to be continuously consumed by tourists, this kind of consumption does not always take place in conjunction with the interests of the members of the culture being consumed (see García-Rosell, Haanpää, Kyrä, Paloniemi, & Tekoniemi-Selkälä, 2015). Moreover, in the worst cases, indigenous cultures may become so commoditized, that their members may lose their influence over cultural artifacts, performances and rituals that were previously preserved and used exclusively by members of the culture. Although destinations may achieve economic benefits through the massive commodification of indigenous cultures, in the long term, this approach may not only alienate indigenous communities from tourism, but even build resistance to tourism development. Some questions still remain: How can the objectification and abuse of indigenous cultures be prevented? How can we promote the responsible use of indigenous cultures in tourism? These questions have been addressed through the development and implementation of a code of conducts (e.g. Grimwood, 2016) and certifications, as in the example described below.

Sápmi Experience Quality Mark

By certifying tourism companies that respect the integrity of the Sámi culture and offering guidelines to prevent its objectification, the Swedish certification Sápmi Experience Quality Mark offers answers to the questions above (VisitSápmi, 2016). A Swedish tourism company that has been awarded with this certification is both knowledgeable about the Sámi culture and able to take a holistic approach to the Sámi living environment (Pittja, 2011). A holistic approach refers to the ability to develop a sound relationship between tourism activities, Sámi culture and the natural environment. As a result, the criteria for the Sápmi Experience Quality Mark comprises not only a cultural, but also a service and environmental aspect. This emphasizes that culture cannot be addressed apart from the natural environment and the professionalism of service providers.

The relationship between reindeer herding¹ and Sámi in Sweden can serve as a good example of the interrelation of culture, natural environment and tourism services. Reindeers are raised for their meat, hides, antlers, milk and transportation. Reindeers are not only economically relevant, but also one of the most important elements of the Sámi culture. Since reindeers are semi-domestic animals, reindeer herding involves adapting to the environment and a rhythm of life set by the reindeer in harmony with the seasons, weather and grazing grounds (Barentsinfo.org, n.d.). As Lennart Pittja (2011), Sámi tourism entrepreneur and one of the developers of the Sápmi Experience Quality Mark, explains: “Sámi people don’t occupy all of the land all the time. Normally, we are in the

1 In contrast to Finland, the right to reindeer husbandry in Sweden and Norway is exclusively reserved for Sámi.

mountains of western Sápmi during the summer season, and are in the forest areas of the east during the winter.” This kind of knowledge is crucial for tourism planning and development that support the Sámi community and their natural environment in Sweden rather than being a threat to them.

A good understanding of the indigenous cultures and living environment is key to promoting both responsible and high-quality tourism experiences (García-Rosell et al., 2015). As Pittja (2011) points out, in the Sápmi Experience Quality Mark, quality is defined in terms of the ability to present indigenous lifestyles and cultures in credible and trustworthy ways. Such an ability is important in a tourism market with a growing interest in tourism experiences that are genuine, authentic and meaningful.

It is important to note that the development of the Sápmi Experience Quality Mark has not been without challenges. Despite its potential to assist Swedish tourism companies in the promotion of culturally responsible tourism practices, this certification seems to have lacked the proper financial and political support. At this moment, the future of the Sápmi Experience Quality Mark is still uncertain. Hopefully, the value of this certification in promoting a sound dialogue between the Sámi communities, and the tourism industry may gain the recognition it deserves in Sweden, but also Finland and Norway. Indeed, the Sápmi Experience Quality Mark represents an excellent example and learning opportunity for Finnish and Norwegian tourism private and public organizations, which are also looking for innovative ways to promote more culturally responsible and respectful tourism practices.

References

- Barentsinfo.org (n.d.). Reindeer husbandry. Retrieved from <http://www.barentsinfo.org/Content-by-Category/Economy-and-Business/Reindeer-husbandry>
- García-Rosell, J.-C., Haanpää, M., Kyyrä, S., Paloniemi, P., & Tekoniemi-Selkälä, T. (2015). Cultural responsibility as a quality aspect of tourism experiences. Innotour/BEST EN. Retrieved from <http://www.innotour.com/bestenModules/2015/10/cultural-responsibility-as-a-quality-aspect-of-tourism-experiences/>
- Grimwood, B. S. R. (2016). Creating an indigenized visitor code of conduct: The development of Deneso-line self-determination for sustainable tourism. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 24, 1177–1193.
- Hauksson, K. M. (2008). Finland Saami protect their cultural symbols. *Ice News, News from the Nordics*, 18 November 2008. Retrieved from <http://www.icenews.is/2008/11/18/finland%E2%80%99s-saami-protect-their-cultural-symbols/#axzz4GMVXSrIj>
- Müller, D. K., Lundmark, L., & Lemelin, H. (2013). Introduction: New issues in polar tourism. In D. K. Müller, L. Lundmark and R. H. Lemelin (Eds.), *New issues in polar tourism: Communities, environments, politics* (pp. 1–18). Dordrecht: Springer.
- Pittja, L. (2011). *VisitSápmi: Promoting an authentic Sámi experience through sustainable tourism*. The International Ecotourism Society [News]. Retrieved from <http://www.ecotourism.org/news/visits%C3%A1pmi-promoting-authentic-s%C3%A1mi-experience-through-sustainable-tourism>
- Rodríguez-Antón, J. M., Alonso-Almeida, M. M., Celemin, M. S., & Rubio, L. (2012). Use of different sustainability management systems in the hospitality industry. The case of Spanish hotels. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 22(1), 76–84.
- VisitSápmi (2016). Sápmi experience. Retrieved from <https://eng.visitsapmi.org/s-pmi-experience.html>