
5 Neolocalism, Revitalisation and Rural Tourism Development

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Abstract

Small rural communities in Iceland have seen a fast-changing economy and have had to come up with different ways to become resilient to these changes. This chapter takes an ethnographic approach to the study of neolocalism to describe how the community of Húnaþing vestra saw the potential to nurture a sense of place using their natural and cultural assets to enhance the local economy and community livelihoods. We will describe how certain community initiative projects have played an active role in fostering the local identity and distinctiveness of a community, and its use as a strategy for crafting authentic tourism experiences. We will discuss examples spanning over 20 years (2000-2019) based on an accumulation of first-hand experiences and research by the authors who live in Húnaþing vestra. There is a need to further investigate neolocalism and craft production in rural tourism development, as it may give insights on how a community may feel empowered by telling the story of their connections to place, and how it may influence revitalization efforts and community resiliency.

Introduction

Local identity and distinctiveness are essential in creating authentic tourism experiences, while community engagement in tourism development is integral in authentically creating these experiences. Involving a variety of local stakeholders helps to not only establish what is unique about a community, it helps to empower a community to strengthen its

own identity and enhances story-making. For example, the stories we tell about our community and the people who live there may have a meaningful impact on establishing a sense of place and enhancing community pride. Stories, created from cultural traditions and personal memories, provide the listener with a deeper understanding of the storyteller's life and have been shown to exert significant influence on destination image and destination choice. This understanding is an important part of the visitor's experiences (Moscardo, 2010), as they want to know the stories of the places they visit. Not only do visitors use storytelling as a way to consolidate and describe their experiences to others (Tung & Ritchie, 2011), these stories are created by the interactions visitors have with other people they meet, i.e., local staff (Moscardo, 2015).

Adger defines 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' (2000: 347). The ability to transform or adjust to external stressors has been linked with innovation and coping strategies that have led to community resiliency (Kokorsch, 2017). The resilience and innovation of Icelandic coastal communities, like Húnaþing vestra, have created a remarkable story about their ability to cope with external stresses, such as socio-economic, environmental, and demographic changes. Coupled with the geographical distinctness of North Iceland, it is easy to see why so many people travel to experience this story for themselves. The goal of this chapter is to communicate key milestones and events and to describe community-based tourism projects that have impacted the community of Húnaþing vestra. Two case studies will be used to highlight key examples of tourism projects (both current and past), to describe the history of tourism development in Húnaþing vestra over the past 20 years, and how neolocalism, although not intentionally, was used as a strategy for place-making, cultural revitalisation, and conservation efforts of local wildlife.

Húnaþing vestra, Iceland

Húnaþing vestra covers 3007 km² (Ráðbarður Sf., personal communication) and contains a total population of 1,181 (Statistics Iceland, n.d.). Concerns for community quality of life continue to be a topic of discussion. There are concerns about outward migration, as young individuals and families move to larger cities for work or education; thus producing a loss of human capital which may affect other community capitals (see

Emery & Flora, 2006, for a list of community capitals). Consequently, smaller rural communities in Iceland face significant challenges in terms of their capacity to cope with change. Strengthening community development programs, with a focus on entrepreneurship and innovation, in Húnaþing vestra has influenced young individuals and families to move back to Húnaþing vestra and to reinvest in their communities.

Northwest Iceland, in general, has seen a slow population decline over the years due to changing economies and other factors, such as better transportation routes. Route 1, also known as the Ring Road because it runs a ring along the Icelandic coast, was completed in 1974 creating what Valsson et al. (2013: 28) called a 'ribbon of habitation'. Most urban areas along the Ring Road have increased in population. Although the Ring Road cuts through the municipality of Húnaþing vestra, travelers on the Ring Road must turn off it to reach the three larger villages. For example, it is ten minutes from the Ring Road to Borðeyri (population around 15), two minutes to Laugarbakki (population 56), and four minutes to Hvammstangi (population 576).

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, Iceland saw an industrial revolution. After the 1970s, both Akureyri and the Capital Region of Reykjavík grew in importance as major population centres (Valsson et al., 2013). While at the same time, advancements in fishing technologies led people to relocate from remote farms to villages and towns with important harbours, which led to overexploitation of natural resources and ultimately led to the Individual Transferrable Quota (ITQ) (Kokorsch, 2017). Developed by the central government and introduced in the early 1980s, the ITQ was an effort to develop a more sustainable fishing management program by creating a quota system of particular fish species aimed at protecting fish stocks. However, after implementation of the ITQ, it was shown that small-boat fishermen and rural coastal communities were at a disadvantage to the dominant interest groups in national politics (Chambers et al., 2017). The 1990 Fisheries Management Act allowed quotas to become freely transferable with minor restrictions (Runolfsson, 1999), which led to quota rights migrating away from small rural communities (Chambers et al., 2017). Over the past 30 years, these coastal communities have seen their fisheries-dependent economies dwindle, leading to economic stress, which resulted in the loss of several community capitals.