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Experiencing Svalbard sustainably? Reflecting on what we can learn about polar cruise tourism from the SEES expedition

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ABSTRACT

What makes an experience sustainable? Can polar cruise tourism in the High Arctic ever be sustainable? If so, under what conditions? These questions guide this report as it explores tensions embedded in the concept of ‘sustainable polar cruise tourism’. These matters are of particular importance in Svalbard, with a rapidly developing tourism sector being an important part of the Svalbard economy. The report is based on a participatory workshop held on-board a recent expedition to the Svalbard archipelago, the so-called SEES expedition (the Scientific Expedition Edgeøya Svalbard). Conducted as a combined scientific and touristic expedition, the SEES expedition offers opportunity to explore the meaning(s) of sustainability among environmentally aware visitors representing key actor groups on Svalbard. The purpose of the report is thus to contribute to ongoing conversations on the paradoxes of sustainable polar tourism by sharing experiences and perspectives on what sustainability can mean from a passenger point of view.

KEYWORDS

Svalbard; Arctic tourism; sustainable; sustainability; expedition cruise; environment

Background

The rapidly developing tourism sector is an important part of the Svalbard economy. Making it sustainable is a key policy priority (Bonusiak 2021). Yet, what sustainable means remains subject to interpretation within a regulatory framework imbued with ambiguities (Hovelsrud, Olsen, Nilsson, Kaltenborn, Lebel 2023). It has been described as a delicate and difficult balancing act of weighing environmental consideration with economic revenue (Hovelsrud, Veland, Kaltenborn, Olsen, Dannevig 2021), essentially providing tourism operators with big responsibilities, challenges, and discretionary power. Guides active in the industry describe it as working in a paradox – witnessing the negative impacts while responding by developing pro-environmental strategies (Andersen 2022). This is particularly relevant for cruise tourism, one of the fastest growing sectors in the global tourism industry (Meng, Li, and Wu 2023). The number

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and size of vessels in Svalbard keep increasing, challenging available port capacity (Olsen, Hovelsrud, Veland, Kaltenborn, Dannevig, 2020). The direct negative impacts of cruise tourism, particularly in the polar region, are well documented. However, qualitative research that addresses experience-based and relational perspectives (e.g. Sokolíčková, Hincapié, Zhang, Lennert, Löf, van der Wal 2023), including visitors' perspectives on their own roles and responsibilities as a part of sustainability equations remains under-researched but is identified as an emerging research hotspot (Meng, Li, and Wu 2023). We enter this conversation by reporting from a workshop held with a set of passengers on-board of the SEES expedition 2022. As we expand below, the group is far from representative for polar cruise in general. However, for an explorative purpose, the participants provide a good fit with the policy ambitions of the Svalbard administration to target environmentally aware tourists (Bonusiak 2021) and the composition of scientists, tourists and guides represent some key actor groups on Svalbard.

Journeying with the SEES expedition of 2022

The SEES expedition, short for Scientific Expedition Edgeøya Svalbard, is a Dutch research initiative first held in 2015, aimed to 'trace the footsteps' of expeditions conducted in the 1970's. A second SEES expedition took place between 13 and 22 July 2022, after being postponed for two years due to the Covid-pandemic. SEES was prompted by rapid change processes in the region and an urgent desire to expand our knowledge on what is actually happening in the parts of Svalbard remaining largely unmonitored (NWO 2020).

SEES seeks to combine multiple purposes and actor groups. Besides the outspoken ambition of environmental monitoring, mapping and measuring of ecological variables and processes in remote areas of Svalbard otherwise difficult to access, a second purpose was to make the less frequently explored Svalbard environments, such as Edgeøya, available to young and new researchers in the field (ibid.), harbouring a particular ambition to increase interdisciplinary collaborations (including the share of social scientists). A third purpose was to foster transdisciplinary collaborations, knowledge co-production and dissemination through the so-called Arctic Academy. The Arctic Academy, operated by Oceanwide Expeditions, offered paying tourists, and lay persons with interest in the region and global change processes, opportunity to be part of the expedition and performing Arctic science (ibid.). In set-up and communicated purpose (Oceanwide-expeditions.com), SEES thus goes far beyond traditional cruise tourism. Paying tourists on the SEES expedition (with fares comparable to 'regular' adventure cruises) provided the economic opportunity to realise the expedition, alongside the NWO research grants.

SEES 2022 attracted around 100 participants of different (mostly Dutch) nationalities. A majority were scientists (52) and tourists (35), accompanied by representatives from the Dutch Research Council NWO (4) and policy actors (3), journalists including a tv-crew from the Dutch national news (7) and artists (1), supported by guides (8) and a large boat crew consisting of 44 members.

The expedition was a high-profile event, cutting across the realms of Arctic science, policy, and media. Over 30% of the science supporters had learnt about SEES through the media attention generated from the previous expedition (Steins,

unpublished data, pre-boarding questionnaire). We, the authors, are all social scientists in different disciplines who came on board the 2022 expedition to study questions and dimensions relating to environmental change, knowledge, and sense-making in the high Arctic. The first author had never visited Svalbard before, while the second author has lived for several years in Svalbard and the third explored the archipelago as a tourist on a sailing ship a decade ago. We collaborated on several joint activities, one of them being the workshop we held on-board, and which is the basis for this report.

Limitations

As noted, SEES is not a regular expedition cruise but a combined scientific and touristic adventure expedition attracting a special kind of tourists (hereafter referred to as science supporters, a term coined by the expedition team per suggestion of the SEES 2015 tourist participants (Steins, unpublished data)). 80% of the science supporters actively chose the SEES expedition over other cruise alternatives (with comparable price levels) (Steins, pre-boarding questionnaire, $n = 31$). Two science supporters were returning guests from the previous SEES expedition, bearing witness of the attraction of the collaboration. However, not everyone had made the deliberate choice of joining a ‘science expedition’.

Judging by a pre-boarding questionnaire, passengers are environmentally well-informed (Steins, unpublished data) and with the combination of scientists and scientific supporters, we argue that the pool of passengers represent particularly aware visitors, precisely the kind of visitors targeted by the developing tourism policy (Bonusiak 2021). Thus, while unrepresentative for polar tourism and cruise tourism at large, we argue that our material is relevant for broader conversations on tourism, sustainability as well as scientific activities on Svalbard and beyond (e.g. Hovelsrud, Olsen, Nilsson, Kaltenborn, Lebel 2023; Van Bets, Lamers, and Van Tatenhove 2017; Taylor, et al. 2020; Viken 2011).

What does it mean to experience Svalbard sustainably – what makes an experience sustainable?

The question holds philosophical, political, ecological, and highly subjective dimensions. We approach it from an experience-based perspective, using the on-board workshop, conducted in focus group format, as our main material. The questions speak directly to academic discussions (Hovelsrud, Olsen, Nilsson, Kaltenborn, Lebel 2023) but were in fact outlined in conversation with expedition staff. The workshop was set up in two parts, both recorded and using post-it notes for interactive purposes. First, we had a plenary session on the helicopter deck (Figure 1) focused on people’s motivations to participate in SEES 2022, what experiences they valued and why. In the second part, we divided into smaller groups and continued with a focused discussion on two related topics; the first reflecting on challenges with competing goals and expectations, and the second concentrating on the future of sustainable cruise tourism. The parts thus focused on different conceptual scales: from the individual to the collective and societal. We present them in the same order.



Figure 1: Workshop on the helideck on board MV Ortelius. Photo: Annette Löff

Conducting the workshop

The workshop, held on July 20th, was well-attended, despite stormy seas, chilling winds, and a compact itinerary. The 35 participants included 27 scientists, 8 science supporters, 1 policy actor, and 1 guide/expedition staff. While scientists were over-represented in the group, roles were not always clear cut. For example, some scientists worked as guides in other settings while some visiting for the first time explained feeling like ‘scientific tourists’ (field notes, Löff, unpublished). Recordings from the session and subgroups (three in English, one in Dutch) were all transcribed. All participants provided written consent to participating in SEES social science research and public use of images.

The analysis proceeded jointly in several steps. Immediately upon the focus group discussions, we met and compared notes and impressions to identify common themes for further inquiry. Based on participants’ post-it notes, where they individually highlighted key points, we developed topical clusters and together with preliminary themes condensed from the group discussions, we distilled major themes for further inquiry. We then revisited all the transcripts, looking for supportive as well as contradictory statements.

The key point in focus group methodology is the joint conversation and exploration – where people together discuss complex or unknown topics. This shared reflection, rather than seeking individual differences, is also our primary focus in this report. We therefore chose not to label quotes to a category of participants (e.g. tourist, scientist); they are instead chosen because they illustrate sentiments expressed by multiple participants and convey the overall discussion. Quotes are highlighted with citation marks.

To invite critical reflection and ensure validity, two final steps were undertaken. A draft report was presented at a SEES scientific meeting on 4 February 2023. Not all SEES 2022 participants were invited, so in addition to comments received orally we also sent out an invitation to all participants (workshop attendees and others) to read and comment on the draft. Eight people expressed interest and five returned comments, questions or suggestions. Two of the readers were science supporters who had *not* participated in the workshop, but we consider their input only positive and opportunity for us to include as many passengers' perspectives as possible. We have integrated their input in the final version of the report.

What makes the experience of Svalbard valuable?

Here we describe common themes and subthemes in how participants experienced value during the expedition. Some are specific for collaborative scientific and touristic operations, such as the SEES, while others are more generic. Workshop participants highlighted three overarching themes: human-environmental connection, human-relational, and the activities and organisation of the expedition.

Human-environmental connection was the major theme of discussion. A specific subtheme concerned the *unique physical environment*, the high Arctic landscape, and its inhabitants (from the smallest of species to large mammals such as polar bears). Another subtheme which participants strongly emphasised was the *emotional connection* developed to, and through being immersed in, the Svalbard archipelago. One participant explained how she 'fell in love with the Arctic' during the expedition. Others highlighted the serenity, the beauty, the remoteness, and the scenery. Being a visitor in Svalbard clearly humbled the participants – making us feel small and connected to the place whilst simultaneously experiencing many contradictions so present in the landscape: 'It is beautiful and intimidating at the same time'.

Another theme focused the *human-relational* and brought to the fore the importance of meeting with people on board, particularly through collaborating and interacting in various ways and with a focus on *sharing knowledge and experiences*.

The richness of perspectives and varied backgrounds of expedition members was specifically highlighted. Participants in the workshop expressed how it helped them to see things differently, notice things they otherwise had overlooked, such as rare plants and the micro-life in lakes on land. Experiencing *learning* through social interaction, accessing scientific expertise and being part of a curious and open-minded atmosphere clearly added personal value for this group of participants. 'On board it's never boring. [...] you have those short lectures [...] and you learn an awful lot...'

It also generated support for, and understanding of the, conditions under which Arctic research is conducted: 'This gives me a very strong motivation to support polar research'. The value of the open culture established on-board also reflected in how frequently participants mixed during meals, in the bar and during landings (Löf, Steins, Sokolíčková, individual field notes).

The final theme related to the uniqueness of the *SEES expedition, the activities and its organisation* (such as landings, set-up and professionalism in navigating challenges along

the way. Due to specificity, we don't go into details here. What we distil, is that the unique combination of scientific and touristic expedition was perceived to add value and several saw it as a 'once in a life-time opportunity'. Yet, the combination of science and tourism was not without friction.

An (impossible?) balancing act of managing multiple needs and expectations

Value or satisfaction connects to one's expectations, as does willingness to accommodate others. The workshop revealed sets of individual expectations that were met while others were left unmet. Combining a scientific and touristic expedition clearly created meaning and value for the participants. But it also entailed a loss of flexibility and activated certain tensions. Here we expand on how the participants reflected on some of these tensions and how they were handled.

Polar bears, together with fog, made landings impossible during the first few days of the expedition. It left several participants with a sense of 'being stuck on board' and losing out. Due to specific research sites needing to be reached, the route was less flexible than a regular tourist cruise, which more easily can be adjusted to such conditions. While seeing polar bears was indeed a key priority among many Arctic Academy members, no one had anticipated their presence to lead to such difficulty, including compromised landings, sampling and difficulties in practical collaboration between scientists and supporters.

You only get tourists on this trip when you say the highlights are polar bears. They never say 'the weather may be bad so we may lose 3 days of landings'. So there is this tension between reality and messaging in acquiring tourists.

The example illustrates, on the one hand, the importance of adjusting marketing or strategic communication (i.e. not promising more than can be kept) but also how difficult it can be to reconcile multiple needs and expectations, particularly under unknown conditions. Another participant reflected:

I didn't expect so much the polar bear time pressure. And because of that, I think I also was maybe too optimistic about involving tourists in my research because I actually have quite a few tasks that would be really nice for tourists.

Several science supporters and researchers thus expected even *more* collaboration and interaction from the expedition than could be realised due to practical circumstances. Some expressed frustration regarding formalities that were perceived as not clearly communicated beforehand (such as specific insurance regulations for Arctic Academy members requiring Oceanwide guards during landings, which made it difficult to join research teams) while others expressed frustration and lack of transparency in terms of how trade-offs were made – if it is not possible to treat all passengers equally, who has priority to go ashore, why and under what conditions?

The polar bear example also illustrates tensions, or paradoxes, in terms of simultaneously adding and limiting value for the participants. Due to the danger polar bears pose to humans and strict regulations on Svalbard, safe landings require armed guards and specific protocols. No one can wander off alone which limits one's sense of freedom.

On the boat you have a lot of freedom; you can go to the bridge, it's very free. But if we go on land we have the restriction. And I like the nature, but I found it like a prison between the guards. That's my experience.

The high polar bear presence was surprising also to more experienced Svalbard researchers, which stimulated deeper reflection on the human-environmental relations of this place:

In the beginning when we saw some polar bears and couldn't land, I was a bit frustrated about this. This creature can ruin this for the whole group. But then I saw the beauty of it and thought 'in this area nature wins', and we have to accept that. We are the visitor, and the bear is the one who is living here.

Is sustainable tourism a contradiction in terms?

Is sustainable cruise tourism in Svalbard possible? Many participants were hesitant and explained how their own perceptions had changed during the trip. It is 'a contradiction in terms' one of the participants stated. Another reasoned:

I might turn into an activist against polar tourism actually. We have to think of thresholds to tourism and to really get the people who are interested and not just thinking, well, I've never been there, so let's go there.

The expedition thus inspired participants to revisit previously held ideas and actively question their own part in what sustainable tourism means. Loosely formulated as 'we're watching the Arctic, and it is watching us back' demonstrates the deep sense of connection some of the participants developed with the place. It prompted discussions around how many visitors these regions can accommodate, on the overall footprints of cruises, and if, and if so how, it is possible to compensate for negative impacts with other actions. For example, one group discussed how to strike a balance between what they saw as 'solid reasons for travel' (such as conducting science or scientific support) with possibilities of creating 'emotional bonds', such as being on the land (physically) in quiet and without rushing. The experiences from SEES however, demonstrate how difficult that can be to achieve in practice. Landings should always be combined with practical use, several participants argued, such as citizen science or practical beach clean-ups. One interpretation is thus that sustainable tourism entails attracting the 'right kind' of tourists while offering meaningful impacts beyond the individual.

While there was broad agreement among participants that current ideas of cruise tourism, with luxurious cruise ships travelling the remote high Arctic, is not sustainable nor desirable, participants differed in how they leaned towards reducing or limiting tourism on the one hand, and legitimising through adapting tourism practices, on the other.

Limiting concerned for example restricting the number and size of ships, and of landings and sites. Some participants noted, however, that this may result in unintended consequences through adding additional pressure on remaining sites, thus shifting the environmental burden from one place to another.

Discussions also focused on the 'life on board', what luxury can mean and reducing the environmental footprints of expeditions. For example, participants questioned 'luxury' in terms large assortments of fresh products and called for emphasising other forms of

values, such as experiencing quiet, cell-free zones and emotional bonding to the environment (Steins, interviews, post-trip questionnaire).

Mirroring sustainability discourses in society at large, some suggestions leaned more towards technical solutions.

If the transport and facilities are sustainable and the visit is CO₂ neutral - maybe a CO₂ passport? – then it is possible, in my opinion, in the future.

Other suggestions included the use of live cams, drones, or other forms of technical equipment to offer less intrusive alternatives to landings. Participants may have been inspired by a project (Huijzer 2022) which centred on making the Arctic accessible from afar using virtual technology.

Tom [Huijzer]'s results of his 3D cameras could also mean a lot [in experiencing the Arctic]. I've seen part of his movie. And it's like you're there. And that's insane. And I think that's also kind of a new technology that can contribute a lot to the experience. So, without having to go somewhere right now.

In line with this, others emphasised the need for new sets of values, doing things entirely differently.

I am very extremist, and I just think we need to think about how to make large parts of the pole tourism-free.

Concluding remarks

Hovelsrud, Veland, Kaltenborn, Olsen Dannevig (2021) describe sustainable tourism as a delicate balancing act between conflicting goals. Participants at the SEES expedition experienced similar difficulties. In practice, it was not possible to reconcile all different goals and expectations. While adding value through its innovative design, the combined scientific and touristic expedition also faced other tensions and difficulties. Many of the participants sought ways how to legitimate their own participation, where contributing to broader purposes – such as supporting science, cleaning beaches, or learning together – seemed to play important functions. In sharing these lessons from the SEES 2022 experience, we are aware that combined tourism-science could also be used as a (false) argument to legitimise tourism development or presence of tourists in vulnerable and remote remote places. While we add some insights from the visitors' point of view, we also see the need to maintain a critical dialogue about this topic.

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