

# Regenerative nature-based tourism: tour guides and stakeholder dynamics in Arctic Norway

Frida Marie Omma

## Abstract

**Purpose** – The research paper aims to explore how tour guides can contribute to regenerative tourism and the ways in which natureculture guiding practices align with stakeholder interests and the perspectives of tourism futures.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The ethnographic study used a multispecies approach to nature-based tourism in Arctic Norway and Sápmi, incorporating a Sámi methodology and non-human relationality.

**Findings** – The tour guides recognise that they are part of a more-than-human world and practice ethics that are responsible for their relations to non-human actors. Transformative experiences that are active learning opportunities can strengthen a sense of care within the tourists and pose as potential regenerative incomes in local communities, instead of extractive industries. Local knowledge and Sámi ways of being have a vital role in the tour guides' natureculture practices, which can revitalise cultural heritage and strengthen Indigenous empowerment.

**Practical implications** – The article suggests that tourism management and local governments must prioritise the support of tour guide initiatives involving restorative properties for socio-ecological systems. Citizen science and cultural activities are some ways that can generate a thriving ecosystem and create meaningful interactions between local communities and tourists.

**Originality/value** – The research highlights the unique role of tour guides as intermediaries who can translate regenerative principles into action, communicate the essence of place and take part in innovative collaborations. Tour guide practices align with the stakeholder view that tourism futures should benefit the communities and respect ecological limits.

**Keywords** Regenerative tourism, Nature-based experiences, Tour guides, Stakeholder interactions, Nonhuman agency, Indigenous knowledge

**Paper type** Research paper

Frida Marie Omma is based at the UiT The Arctic University of Norway, Alta, Norway.

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## Introduction

In the wake of unprecedented global challenges, the field of tourism stands at a crossroads, teetering on the precipice of transformation as it grapples with the converging pressures of overtourism, the pandemic, climate change and an array of socioeconomic crises. Although sustainable tourism has made strides, it falls short in delivering the radical shift in values and mindsets that is essential for all stakeholders (Higgins-Desbiolles *et al.*, 2019). As Dredge (2022) underscores, it is critical to alter mindsets and practices to ensure community resilience and nature conservation amidst resource extraction and climate change. A paradigm shift is required to achieve an alternative form of tourism that is sensitive to all spheres of society and nature (Dwyer, 2018). One proposed possibility is that of regenerative tourism, a holistic system change that defines growth and success differently than capitalistic models (Pollock, 2019b). The regenerative approach aims to invest in people, places and nature in a long-term perspective for thriving social and ecological systems (Dredge, 2022). In this context, tour guides can be seen as important

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choreographers of immersive nature-based experiences, which serve as drivers for restoration between humans and non-humans (Bellato *et al.*, 2022a). In this sense, tour guides have a key role in mediating the experience of a more-than-human world to guests and facilitating relations between guests and host communities (Cohen, 1985).

This article explores tour guide contributions and stakeholder perspectives in an Arctic context that is comprised of Indigenous and non-Indigenous knowledge systems. Indigenous tour guides use Traditional Ecological Knowledge to perform and teach responsible practices in nature (Butler and Menzies, 2007), and thus foster ecological consciousness within the tourists (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2009). Research on tour guides is extensive and cover a broad spectrum of topics, such as Indigenous tour guiding (Wright *et al.*, 2009), wildlife encounters (Curtin, 2010; Dybsand and Fredman, 2020) and sustainable practices (Pereira and Mykletun, 2012; Rosenberg *et al.*, 2021). However, more knowledge is needed on tour guide contributions to regenerative tourism and how their practices align with stakeholder perspectives of tourism futures. Calls for new research on the tour guide role focus on the cultural characteristics of a place and the guide performance (Galí and Camprubí, 2020), including new ways of imagining tourism futures (Ateljevic, 2020). Therefore, this article explores how regenerative tourism can be understood in an Arctic context, with an emphasis on the dynamics of tour guides and stakeholders.

### Regenerative nature-based tourism

The research presented in this article is situated in nature-based tourism, a broad term for tourism that takes place in nature areas, in which the visitor is away from home and is experiencing nature in a participatory manner (Fredman and Tyrväinen, 2010). Therefore, I use the term *natureculture* (Haraway, 2008) when referring to the tour guides' practices to reflect the view that humans are a part of nature, rather than seeing as culture existing separately from nature (Joks *et al.*, 2020). Heritage attributes are interwoven with ecosystems, which make sense of place and cultural identity. Active outdoor experiences that are ethical, rooted and authentic have potential regenerative properties for people and place alike (Fusté-Forné and Hussain, 2023).

The theoretical basis of this article is grounded in regenerative tourism, developed by practitioners and scholars who build on ideas from agriculture, architecture and planning (Bellato and Pollock, 2023). Regeneration entails the restoration and generation of ecosystems and for human and non-human societies to flourish and thrive together (Pollock, 2019a), identifying stakeholders as having important roles in transforming tourism for regenerative tourism futures (Bellato *et al.*, 2022a). It aims to yield an overall positive impact on individuals, locations and the environment while fostering the rejuvenation and prosperity of social and ecological systems (Dredge, 2022). The perspective of conscious travel and the ecological worldview of seeing tourism as a living system reimagine economies as currents of life rather than as focal points (Pollock, 2019b).

Tourism is "coming-of-age" for new value systems; a shift in the values held by all parties involved is thus necessary to promote collective well-being (Sheldon, 2022). Informed by Indigenous knowledges and Western science, regenerative tourism is a values-based knowledge system involving generative qualities of tourism that "give back" and create connections between people and place (Becken and Kaur, 2022). Indigenous ontologies can be a platform for restoration, protection and resilience for developing regenerative tourism experiences (Matunga *et al.*, 2020), including eco-centric values through the philosophy of deep ecology. This is shown by a case study from Arctic Norway (Mathisen *et al.*, 2022) that examined a tourism firm centred around reciprocal relations to the land and creating well-being for humans and non-humans alike.

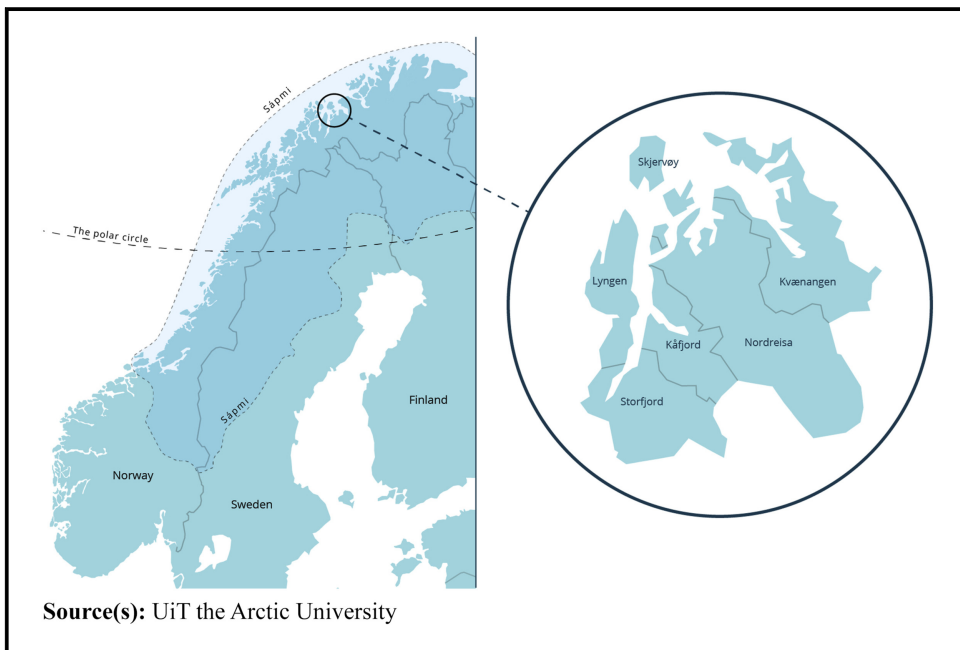
Hence, it is possible that nature-based tourism has a potential to facilitate profound interactions and offer transformative experiences through meaningful encounters with the surroundings. This coincides with notions of regenerative tourism to focus on re-establishing balanced and mutual connections between humans and the natural world, and generate benefits to local areas communities and ecosystems (Bellato *et al.*, 2022b). I am inspired by tourism scholars that outline various approaches to regenerative tourism and acknowledge the context-specific nature of the

concept. It is important to steer clear of rigid definitions of regenerative tourism, which is sometimes reduced to the concept of “leaving a place better than you found it” (Bellato and Pollock, 2023). As such, the analysis in this article does not utilise a specific definition of the term throughout the analysis. Rather, I will explore the empiric data material and follow lines of how the tour guides partake in translating regeneration into practice, while understanding their interactions with stakeholders and place.

## Context and methods

This study is situated in Arctic Norway – a part of Sápmi – the Indigenous territory of the Sámi people. Northern Troms is a region within Sápmi that stretches across 14,476 km<sup>2</sup> and has a long and rich history of several ethnic groups living off the land and sea (Svensson, 2014). The study sites are spread out in five municipalities that consist of many communities along three different fjords, and on multiple islands (Figure 1). Sámi families still use the summer pastures for their reindeer, and there are many sheep farmers as well. Norwegian settlements have been established since 1400, and the Kven people, who had migrated from Finland and Sweden, settled in the valleys. Today, parts of the population identify as Kven, but the lines between being Norwegian, Sámi and Kven are usually blurred and not clearly represented in tourism settings (Olsen, 2021). An increasing awareness and effort to preserve cultural heritage started the revitalisation processes. However, nationalisation policies from the past affect the perception of ethnicity with negative connotations, sometimes causing conflicts with regard to rights in nature (Bjerkli, 2010). The region used to have thriving fishing villages, but the introduction of trawling vessels caused the fish population to decrease dramatically; the cod stock was almost depleted. Some of the coastal communities used to be based on fishing as a livelihood, but there are no more full-time fishers left (Brattland, 2013). Other societal trends in the region include a population decline, as younger inhabitants move to study and work in more urban areas. Migrating workers from other countries have moved here to work in the fishing industry or other production facilities. More recently, other Europeans have started tourism businesses or work as seasonal freelance guides. All these developments point to the need for community revitalisation, such as the regeneration of cultural heritage and the restoration of social relations with each other and the land.

**Figure 1** Map of the geographical area of study



The methods in this research were inspired by an epistemology of transformation suitable for regenerative tourism studies (Bellato *et al.*, 2023), which entails using a decolonising perspective, combining Indigenous and non-Western academic knowledge. I am influenced by Sámi knowledge and ways of being, encompassing respect and care towards non-humans (Guttorm, 2019). Non-human ontology and Indigenous epistemology have previously been combined through ethnography (Abbott, 2021). Multispecies ethnography was salient in dismantling the power dynamics between humans and non-humans (Kirksey and Helmreich, 2010). The fieldwork for this project consisted of visiting six communities, as well as other places along the road, over a period of four years. The main methods were participatory observation of activities with tour guides and in-depth interviews and conversations with tour guides and stakeholders. In this article, their anonymity is protected by using codes, and the study received ethical approval from the Norwegian Data Protection Services for research (Project No. 223425). The data are not held in a repository because of ethical considerations regarding the treatment of personal information.

The tour guides work with nature-based tourism and have varied backgrounds and competences. Some have academic education in outdoor recreation and sports, and course certifications for specific skills, such as dog mushing, marine wildlife, mountain biking and kayaking. Relevant expertise includes vocational occupations, like fishing, hospitality and other professions. All the guides appreciate spending time outdoors during their spare time and have deep knowledge of the local environment and communities.

The recruitment of the tour guides (Table 1) aimed to reach a rich variation of cultural and educational backgrounds, as well as varied activities in multiple communities in the region. Some of the guides identified as Sámi and/or Norwegian, and two guides were originally from other European countries. All the guides had in common that they lived in the community permanently, as opposed to being international seasonal tour guides, and they work with nature-based tourism. Regarding their backgrounds and competences, some have academic education in outdoor recreation and sports and course certifications for specific skills, such as dog mushing, marine wildlife, mountain bicycling and kayaking. Some have relevant expertise in vocational occupations like fishing and hospitality. All the guides appreciate spending time outdoors in their spare time and have deep knowledge of the local environment and communities.

During the fieldwork, contact was established with different types of stakeholders of tourism development in the region of Northern Troms (Table 2) by visiting national park sites, visiting cultural centres with open exhibitions and having encounters with animals on hikes. Since the research is informed by multispecies ethnography, it acknowledges animals as stakeholders with personhood and agency (van Dooren *et al.*, 2016). Stakeholder involvement is central for identifying factors for success in tourism development and their transformative roles for a regenerative future (Bellato *et al.*, 2022a). The ethnographic approach aims to provide rich descriptions of the dynamics between tour guides and stakeholders, and potential contributions to a much-needed journey towards regenerative tourism.

**Table 1** Overview of tour guides

Code	Main role	Guided activities
G1	Dogsledding guide	Dogsledding, husky hike, glacier hiking
G2	Sámi guide	Storytelling with reindeer encounter, reindeer-sledding, sea kayaking
G3	Whale-watching guide	Whale-watching, northern lights, and midnight sun boat tours
G4	Cultural hike guide	Cultural hike, whale-watching, sea fishing
G5	Sea kayak guide	Sea kayaking, winter biking, eco-farming
G6	Mountain bike guide	Mountain biking, hiking, ski touring

Source(s): Author

**Table 2** Overview of stakeholders

Key role and code	Number	Competences
Animals (A)	8+	Orcas, humpback whales, herring, huskies, reindeer, crow, salmon, mosquito
Other tourism actors (T)	3	Food and accommodation, indoor cultural experiences
Expert role (E)	2	Culture-bearer, project management, advisor
National Park staff (N)	2	Visitor management, conservational education
Destination management (D)	2	Marketing and booking for members, product packaging, training events
Cultural centre employee (C)	3	Exhibition curator, event organiser, outdoor museum guide
Outdoor activity volunteer (V)	3	Outdoor leader, hiker, eco-farming participant

Source(s): Author

## Opportunities and issues in Northern Troms

The subarctic climate, with its long, cold winters and short, mild summers, shapes life and opportunities within this region of fjords, mountain ranges and islands. The inner fjords are characterised by large river canyons, birch forests, tundra and wetlands (Reisa National Park, 2023). Meanwhile, the outer parts of the region have different geographical features, with high mountain peaks, glaciers and lush vegetation (Lyngsalpan Conservation Area, 2019). The Arctic flora and fauna make the area an interesting tourist destination, but most tourists stay overnight in the city outside the region. Hence, there is potential for more tourist visitation by providing regenerative tourism experiences and creating job opportunities for local inhabitants (Interview E, D, T). However, extractive industries are threatening the natural and cultural values of the place, decreasing the opportunities for a regenerative tourism approach. Investors and politicians want to build infrastructure to accommodate mass tourism – a cruise ship harbour, a ski resort and an in-mountain hotel (Field Notes D). Other developments that have been met with local resistance are the reopening of an old quarry and a growth in salmon farming.

At the same time, the effects of climate change are threatening subsistence livelihoods, including nature-based tourism. Tour guides and stakeholders have noticed changes in various ways (Field Notes G1, G2, A, D). For example, unstable temperatures are changing snow conditions, making it hard for reindeer, dogs and skiers to move safely in the terrain. The water conditions are causing a growth in unwanted species in the sea and the rivers, which have consequences for the survival of endemic species. Therefore, systemic changes are needed to transform tourism into a regenerative economy; economic and political incentives must be regenerated to support tour guides and stakeholders that offer responsible tourism activities (Interview E, T). However, receiving governmental financing for low-impact tourism activities is challenging. The application processes are not adapted to self-employed tour guides and other tourism entrepreneurs (Interview G2, G4, G5). Despite the unique features of the region, it is hard to create regenerative tourism experiences.

Tourists come to the region to experience some of Europe's last rural environments and Indigenous culture, which points to the potential for development of responsible tourism (Personal Communication D, T, V). The popular tourist activities include mountain ski touring, bicycling and hiking. Whale watching is also an important component of the tourism industry when hundreds of different whale species migrate here to feed on herring from November to January. However, the regional whale watching is controversial and a topic of large debate (Bertella, 2019), with frequent breaches of whale watching guidelines (Interview G3, G4). Many of the boats are not registered in Norway, do not pay national taxes, and lack deep knowledge of the ecosystem and weather conditions. Additionally, a foreign company is buying out smaller actors with promises of self-management, only to change their work conditions and rights. Lack of local ownership and loss of value creation in the communities are barriers for the generation of socio-economic benefits from tourism.

The most common experiences marketed by the destination management organisation are adventure sports, dogsledding, northern lights tours, snowmobile safaris and whale-watching (Visit Lyngenfjord AS, 2023). These experience products predominantly emphasise natural values and adventure tourism, while cultural experiences are less emphasised. Nature is portrayed as an untouched playground for outdoor recreationists, focussing on the physical aspects of nature-based experiences (Høyem, 2020). Although the destination management organisation has a category called “Culture and museums”, the place identities and local practices from Sámi and Kven heritage are underrepresented in the marketing and the guided experiences. There is a potential here to create meaningful and respectful meetings between tourists and hosts, generating positive outcomes from guided tour experiences for human and non-human communities.

## Tour guide contributions to regenerative tourism

### *More-than-human ethics and relations*

The main finding in the research is about tour guides' relation to nonhuman beings and the surroundings landscape in which they live and work. The tour guides' values and behaviours in the tourism experiences are enactments of more-than-human ethics where nonhuman agency is acknowledged (Haraway, 2008). During a guided activity, the tour guides encounter various animals and other non-human actors in the landscape, with whom they co-create the tourism experiences. Several tour guides have values and beliefs that can be interpreted as viewing nature as a more-than-human world, a “sensuous world” shared with nonhumans (Abram, 1996). This is relevant to regenerative tourism, which involves creating and strengthening caring relations between humans and non-humans, fostering respectful interactions and giving legitimacy to all actors (Bellato *et al.*, 2022b). Tour guides have the potential of restoring human relations with the land and practicing a more-than-human ethics that aims for justice for all actors. As such, the tour guides have close relations to the non-humans, and they act with care in their interactions with each other (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017). A more-than-human ethics is about nurturing understanding and practicing respect for peaceful interspecies coexistence (Field Notes G1, G2). Care and mutual relations between the tour guides and nonhumans are central, enacted with acknowledgement of the non-human beings' intrinsic values and with respect for their interests. For example, the kayak guide (G5) made sure that his guests did not trample on the grass or disturb the animals and that they took all the garbage they found with them.

In this way, non-human actors are perceived as stakeholders with their own interests and motivations. A possible outcome is that tour guides contribute to the regeneration of ethical interactions with nonhuman actors, facilitating meaningful learning opportunities from nature (Dredge, 2022). Three of the tourism experiences examined in this study were based on interactions with animals as the main activity: dogsledding, whale watching and encountering reindeer. The dogsledding guide (G1) builds relations with every dog and has learnt to see their personalities and individual needs. The Sámi guide (G2) tends the reindeer with care and uses positive reinforcement to teach them how to pull a sled. Additionally, the whale watching guide (G3) has learnt to interpret the whales' behaviour, so that their boat approaches the whales in a way that does not disturb them. In these experiences, the evaluation of what is “good” or “bad” is grounded in an ethics of care, according to the type of relations they have to the non-human actors (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017).

A more-than-human ethics was also performed towards non-living actors, such as the archaeological heritage and sacred places (Myrvoll, 2017). During a hiking tour to a cultural site, it was clear that material objects like rocks and bones were just as important. The tour guide (G4) knew the historical context and the stories of the landscape, which is necessary for behaving appropriately and respectfully. Experiencing place is “a central tenet of regenerative tourism, especially the more-than-human agency that binds Indigenous and local place knowledges” (Bellato *et al.*, 2023, p. 9). The tour guide (G4) has an experiential knowledge of place, practicing caring relations towards tangible and intangible heritage alike.

A more-than-human ethics underpins the practices of the local tour guides in other ways, including acting and communicating as “conscious creators” of tourism futures (Dredge, 2022). The potential outcomes of offering responsible tourism experiences include the protection of these natural areas from extractive industries such as mining and wind farms. Tour guides can be allies and mediators on behalf of non-humans and restore relations between humans and non-humans for a better future (Bellato *et al.*, 2022a). For instance, the mountain bike guide acknowledges all animals and his relations to them:

My philosophy is, that in some areas, the animals are more developed than us. We are linked to them, and they share their sphere with us. I feel that is huge, and I feel privileged to share the earth with them. And I really hope that we will believe that to a greater extent than we do today. (G6)

The mountain bike guide reflected further on how Norwegian/western ideas of nature practice are centred on performing physical activities rather than fostering human–nature connectedness (Høyem, 2020). In contrast, he thinks that humans have always been a part of nature and are still intertwined with animals in many peculiar ways. The guide (G6) differentiated between *doing* nature practices and *being* a part of the natural surroundings. This is an expression of Sámi approaches to non-human actors and other local knowledge based on long-term observations and learning from a more-than-human perspective. Sámi definitions of nature practices are more relational regarding non-living and living actors, with an inherent sacredness (Joks *et al.*, 2020). Nature practices involve deep listening and learning from the landscape, which can be considered as a prerequisite for fostering caring relations. Tour guides who practice an ethics of care can potentially create wholesome experiences by inviting tourists into a more-than-human world, with all the entangled relations that follow (Abram, 1996).

### *Transformative experiences to foster care*

In exploring the transformative capacity of place-shaping practices, Mehmood *et al.* (2020), have suggested a framework for transformative roles of people and places, consisting of regenerative action, experiencing place and transformative learning. All three elements aim to restore the vitality of locations, allowing both human and natural communities to prosper. In this context, transformative experiences are seen as the tour guides’ potential contributions, which can forge new partnerships and encourage a commitment to nurture care for nature (Dredge, 2022). The tour guides use interpretation and storytelling as pathways for learning about local ecosystems and how they experience climate change. The cultural hike guide (G4) told stories about the sea – how it has changed and the consequences. He explains how the water quality of the fjord has decreased, negatively affected by debris from salmon farming, and how the salmon installations create light pollution (Observations – Cultural Hike). When the temperature and acidity of the water increases, a growing number of predatory species feed on the kelp forest, which has sent the fjord ecosystems into a downward spiral (Verbeek *et al.*, 2021). One of the factors has been overfishing on species that eat sea urchins, so that the urchins are now over-eating the kelp, creating less habitat for fish and other organisms (Personal Communication, G4). In such transformative experiences, the goal is to encourage critical reflection and raise awareness about these topics and provide solutions on how human activity must change (Axelsson and Hansen, 2022). This might increase tourists’ eco-literacy, and influence their future behaviour to benefit the flourishing of ecosystems (Pollock, 2019b).

Participatory activities can initiate a feeling of stewardship to places and involve ethical interactions rooted in the uniqueness of the local environment and cultural heritage (Fusté-Forné and Hussain, 2023). The mountain bike guide (G6) believes that the guests can feel a sense of fulfilment when they master biking up and down the mountain. However, it is when the tourists put their phones away that they can fully immerse themselves in the natural environment and detox their minds. In such moments, there is a potential for more transformative learning to move beyond unsustainable practices and restore relations between human and non-humans (Mehmood *et al.*, 2020). Indeed, most of the tour guides in the study are eager to host tourists who want to participate on

multiple-day trips (G1, G2, G4, G5) and have personal experiences that can be transformative for the body and soul and give something back to the surroundings. This can potentially contribute to regeneration, according to [Matunga et al. \(2020\)](#), who consider tourism that facilitates reciprocal learning, authentic engagement and meaningful interactions as being regenerative. For example, the Sámi guide (G2) wishes to go trekking in the tundra and have a campsite for simple living with slow-cooked food. Three of the guides also spoke of the ideal tourist who prefers longer stays, is willing to participate in harvesting vegetables and preparing traditional dishes. In this regard, one of the guides (G5) offers eco-farming for volunteer visitors and wants to develop health and wellness experiences for the tourists. Travel originally embodied a sense of purpose, meaning, adventure and exploration, while growing small-scale food was seen as a foundational nurturing activity for human health, not merely a commercial product (Kumar in [Ateljevic, 2020](#)).

Transformative tourism experiences should thus be activities that are attached with deep meanings and rooted in eco-centric values. Similar to [Mathisen et al. \(2022\)](#), the dogsledding guide (G1) recognises that tourist interaction can be positive socialisation for the dogs. She always observes and considers the intricate behaviour of the dogs and has personal relations to each of them. For example, the dogsledding guide (G1) always observes and considers the intricate behaviour of the dogs and has personal relations to each of them. In contrast, a human-centred approach views nature as a resource, as a machine that humans can use without interruption ([Pollock, 2019b](#)). For instance, fishing camps for tourists offer boats for rent to attract recreational fishers from Europe. These tourists are often motivated to catch as much as possible to bring home and experience the adrenaline rush of catching the fish (Personal Communication E). Two of the tour guides used to provide fishing experiences, but they feel that it does not align with their values anymore (Interview G3, G4). The fishing tourists are not interested in learning about the area or the local culture. In this context, a cultural centre representative suggested a more holistic fishing experience based on Sámi sea traditions (Personal Communication C). A Sámi approach to phenomena in the landscape entails an openness to what unfolds in encounters with non-human actors ([Joks et al., 2020](#)). A guided tour on a wooden Sámi boat, using traditional fishing gear and telling stories of the sea, is a way to experience how we are all interconnected and can have transformative properties for the participant.

Regenerative tourism aims to restore human connection to the environment, and Indigenous wisdom has a central role in this ([Matunga et al., 2020](#)). According to [Kimmerer \(2011\)](#), “becoming Indigenous to place” is about knowing place and its qualities, learning and listening to the forms, cycles and patterns in nature. The natureculture experiences allow for sensory immersion and unique encounters with the more-than-human world (Observations – Dogsledding Tour). The tour guides are caregivers and can transfer these values to the tourists by providing close and personal encounters. As such, the natureculture practices are reciprocity enacted, through active participation in the well-being of the land ([Kimmerer, 2011](#)).

### *Local knowledge and Sámi ways of being*

Governmental policies have allowed extractive industries in Northern Troms, which have damaged the ecological integrity of the land and the sea. Plans for mining, salmon farming and other changes in the natural landscape are threatening the well-being of ecosystems. Here, nature-based tourism poses as an alternative source of income that is more sensitive to the surroundings, which can be transformed into a regenerative economy ([Dwyer, 2018](#)). The conditions of the tourism industry in Northern Troms are not sustainable; they are causing negative impacts on animals, lack cultural representation and do not benefit local communities. However, the deep-rooted local knowledge and Sámi ways of being woven into the fabric of Northern Troms offer invaluable insights into living in responsible relationships in a more-than-human world. This is wisdom that is essential for the development of regenerative tourism practices that respect local cultures, Indigenous heritage and the land ([Bellato et al., 2022a](#)). Tour guides have a role in activities based on local knowledge and Sámi ways of being, which have developed through close relationships with tangible and intangible



heritage in the landscape. It is especially crucial to integrate local and Indigenous knowledge of the natural surroundings to create environmental consciousness (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2009).

Local knowledge refers to a system of tacit and explicit knowledge of places and conditions, gained through long-term observations and experiences in a specific geographical context and ecosystem (Law and Joks, 2017). Meanwhile, Indigenous knowledge is specific to a particular cultural group, transmitted verbally or practically through generations, and it is holistic and adaptive (Ellen and Harris, 2000). The concept of Traditional Ecological Knowledge was coined by Berkes (1999) to bridge Western and traditional knowledge in conservation management. Indigenous knowledge and Traditional Ecological Knowledge are often used interchangeably in conservation and tourism research (Prasetyo *et al.*, 2020). Traditional knowledge of ecosystems in Arctic Norway and Sápmi, involved a deep sense of empathy and identification with all forms of life, alongside strict norms for proper conduct (Boekraad, 2016). Ecological sustainability has been embedded in the value systems of the Sámi people as a means of survival. The beliefs and rituals that conveyed these values were passed down through storytelling, emphasising connectedness, mutual support and respect.

The North-Sámi word for traditional knowledge is *árbediehtu*, which directly translates to “inherited knowledge”. It is a Sámi concept that has been applied to studies of sustainability and land management (Porsanger and Guttorm, 2011). The knowledge and norms within *árbediehtu* are tied to human relationships with nature, through living within it. The concept of *árbediehtu* is embedded with norms including coexisting *with* nature, not taking more than you need and respecting all non-human actors in the landscape (Guttorm, 2019). Such place-based practices are an integral part of environmental rejuvenation, since extensive biological information is stored in Indigenous knowledge systems developed through long-term relations with the land (Kimmerer, 2011). Sámi traditional knowledge provides the means to understand and interpret the surroundings and survive in all types of weather. *Árbediehtu* encompasses not only knowledge but also the skills to perform the right behaviours towards nature. The Sámi guides (G2, G6) practice *árbediehtu* by interpreting plants and weather and acting on norms to respect all the living actors that they encounter (Observations – Reindeer Encounter and Mountain Bike Tour). Among other things, knowledge of plants and reindeer is restored through storytelling and animal encounters. *Árbediehtu* is a manifestation of both material and spiritual responsibility to the more-than-human world, which should be integrated in a regenerative tourism approach (Bellato *et al.*, 2022b).

Tourism experiences based on local knowledge and Sámi ways of being can have a doubly positive effect by reaffirming traditional skills (Field Notes E, N, D). The fishing experience with Sámi storytelling is an example of a guided tour that upholds local practices that would otherwise be lost. One of the tour guides (G2) learnt about Sámi ways of being from their grandparents. From the start of the family business, they hosted the tourists and taught the other family members how to train sled-reindeer and how to make *duodji* (Sámi handicraft). The youth participate by working as tour guides on the weekends and during holidays. In this way, generational knowledge is kept alive; the youth are given responsibility and become equipped with cultural and ecological competence. This resonates with the argument of Matunga *et al.* (2020) on how regenerative tourism is intrinsically linked to the well-being of both people and places. Tour guides can thus help reproduce and curate practices through tourism and uphold local knowledge, Sámi ways of being and other heritage that has been dormant for a decade or more due to discrimination against minority groups.

## The dynamics of tour guides and stakeholders

### *Community revitalisation and empowerment*

Against a backdrop of population decline and cultural erosion, tour guides can contribute to community revitalisation and empowerment in Northern Troms, fostering a renaissance of local traditions and place-based livelihoods. In this context, community revitalisation refers to several dimensions, including enhancing social well-being, cultural activities and Indigenous

empowerment, which involve creating good places to live, increasing the attractiveness of places and offering an inspiring community with a feeling of companionship (Interview E, C). Community revitalisation is about building competence in place-based livelihoods for regenerative economies and restoring relations to the land (Field Notes N, D). Adopting an ecological perspective and applying a thinking of tourism as complex systems, can help uncover the distinct possibilities inherent in a tourism landscape (Pollock, 2019a). The transformative power of tourism as a complex system involves embracing healing strategies that encourage cultural renewal, relations to land and the cultivation of local perspectives, including the customs of Indigenous and other marginalised groups (Bellato *et al.*, 2022a). Tour guides can play an important role in sharing local and Sámi knowledge, raising awareness of more-than-human ethics and strengthening reciprocal relations between stakeholders.

One Sámi tourism actor (T) offers food and accommodation, souvenirs and cultural experiences. As a family business, it is important to have close relations to other Sámi families who offer tourism experiences. This is not just a professional matter; it is part of the important social structure of Sámi culture in which families on the coast and in the mountains have *verdde* relations (family-friends in North Sámi) to each other (Svensson and Viken, 2017). These relations are clearly visible between tourism actors who learn traditional skills and knowledge from each other. As such, tourism practices can be tools for collaborating, collecting and exchanging stories for preservation, cultural rejuvenation and healing human and non-human communities (Bellato *et al.*, 2023). This aligns with other stakeholder interests who think that experiences based on local identity are necessary for responsible tourism futures (field notes A, N, V). A project manager and business advisor (E) has a vision of how cultural experiences can be carried out in a sustainable manner, in which outdoor activities are combined with local food, in unique setting that respects local heritage and ecosystems.

The stakeholders in the study who represent the cultural centres (C), have multiple ethnic backgrounds. Some of them work in a museum about northern culture, while others work in centres for Indigenous and minority cultures. However, an overall restraint is the lack of monetary and human resources. Often tour guides and other tourism actors who offer natureculture experiences, lack competence to access funds and grant writing (Graci *et al.*, 2021) and consultation services are costly. Tourism actors are also often excluded from participation in tourism networks due to capitalistic criteria and inflexible regimes that prefer larger business models (Interview E). Indeed, Mathisen *et al.* (2022) state that it is challenging for small tourism actors to create regenerative tourism activities within a capitalistic system. One solution for the lack of monetary investment is to create participatory activities for tourists, where tourism actors and local guides can share traditional and Indigenous knowledge (Wright *et al.*, 2009). A cultural centre in the region has an open café and could host activities that serve as social platforms for heritage practitioners, locals and tourists (Field Notes C). Important cultural markers and practices like food and handicrafts can be restored, revitalising Sámi culture. Such initiatives could contribute to creating a feeling of fellowship and active living. Ultimately, they could increase community well-being, regenerating places and helping communities flourish (Pollock, 2019a).

Creating a higher sense of pride in place identity and history is key to community well-being (Interview E, T). Tour guides can represent local cultures to tourists with respect and contribute to community well-being in multiple ways. Representing one's own culture can create a feeling of acknowledgement and pride and boost self-confidence. However, two of the research partners expressed that they do not feel that being Sámi is always regarded as positive (Personal Communication, Anonymous). Other research partners are eager to express their Indigenous heritage and take back their cultural identity that was hidden or lost. Moreover, one stakeholder hopes "that more people will offer cultural experiences and dare to show their own identity as a guide" (E). This aligns with a tourism actor (T) who rediscovered her Indigenous heritage in offering accommodation, food and storytelling, and the core story for her is to "welcome all kinds of people and cultures" (Interview T). As such, presenting Sámi culture creates a community of alliances and facilitates reconciliation. Kramvig and Førde (2020) see a major potential in storytelling practices

between Sámi entrepreneurs and the tourists; they describe it as “‘decolonising spaces’ in which Indigenous resurgence movements can take shape” (p. 13). Hence, processes of revitalisation and the dynamics between tour guides and stakeholders can partake in a system change and reinvent tourism altogether.

### *Collective mindset shift and sense of place*

Pointing towards the complex and adaptive processes of tourism, [Dredge \(2022\)](#) argues that the next step after a system change is a mindset shift in all levels of the tourism system. Here, collaboration is a key principle for regenerative tourism: “In the journey towards a regenerative mindset, the capacity to move from ego to eco, and from an individual competitive mindset to a collective collaborative mindset is paramount” ([Dredge, 2022](#), p. 274). Tour guides’ contribution to regenerative tourism futures, include efforts to collaborate with other nature-based tourism actors, for more resilient organising of their activities. At the moment, there is a lack of broader collaboration between tourism actors and with stakeholders (Field Notes E, D). Tour guides are trying to initiate collaborations with other tourism actors by providing transportation services with boats or electric bikes (Interview G4, T). Their intentions are directed towards collective well-being and mutual benefit by minimising consumption and operating costs. Sharing equipment is one way to incorporate tourism practices into a more circular economy ([Ateljevic, 2020](#)). As such, the tour guides have the potential to be catalysts of change, creating an overall positive impact on individuals, communities and the environment, underpinned by rejuvenation and prosperity ([Bellato et al., 2022b](#)).

However, a regenerative future for tourism in Northern Troms hinges on a collective re-evaluation of values, where the long-term health of the environment and culture takes precedence in decision making ([Dredge, 2022](#)). For instance, the whale watching guide (G3) stated that some whale watching companies share knowledge about the location of the animals, with the aim of spreading out to avoid crowding and to reduce the total pressure on the whales (Observations – Whale Watching Tour). Another potential effect from collaboration is that researchers, local authorities and organisations can together foster responsible behaviour and educate boat drivers and tour guides. Collaboration will generate improved animal welfare, reduce stakeholder conflicts and strengthen a feeling of partnership (Field Notes D). Here, tour guides can challenge other tourism actors, stakeholders and policymakers to reimagine the future of tourism ([Bellato et al., 2022a](#)).

A regenerative mindset includes transformative relations between people and place, where all actors are partners in the co-creation of tourism ([Mehmood et al., 2020](#)). Tour guides, animals and other tourism actors co-create tourism activities and help each other with practical work, promoting products and services and arranging sales markets (Interview T). Markets provide a social meeting place for the community, playing “a role in creating wholesome experiences and settings valued by tourists” ([Dwyer, 2018](#), p. 43). This aligns with stakeholder perspectives of tourism futures, where mutual benefits and capacity building are crucial for improving organisational structures (Field Notes D, E, C, T). However, there is a lack of broader collective thinking and attitudes of sharing space, such as regarding the right to practice diverse activities in nature (Field Notes V, N, D). In one of the villages in the region, there have been conflicts between recreational participants and farmers regarding land use and trails. The mountain bike guide (G6) shared some thoughts on how communication is better, as well as the importance of collaboration. The guide takes his guests to farms where they can look at animals, ride horses and buy cheese products – only to farms that treat the land and animals well. Regenerative tourism initiatives that are eco-centric should be prioritised over capital-centric motivations ([Mathisen et al., 2022](#)).

Another example of a collaborative cross-border project that Northern Troms is part of, is an online map of the Northern Lights Route, a road that goes into neighbouring regions of Arctic Norway to Sweden and Finland ([Söderström, 2019](#)). It encompasses a collection of diverse stories about people and places by artists, musicians, youth and tourism businesses. The project was supported by public institutions, researchers and international organisations, and it is now

managed by an organisation for the neighbouring municipalities across national borders ([Our Stories, n.d.](#)). This could be a potential platform for tourism firms to connect with tourists and communicate Indigenous culture and local place identities. Sharing narratives of place through visual representations can help individuals engage in deep reflections of what place means for them in their everyday lives and restore cultural heritage in the story map that all local inhabitants can contribute to ([Mehmood et al., 2020](#)). A project such as “Our Stories” can increase knowledge exchange between actors, highlight underrepresented stories and help advertise small businesses to tourists.

Furthermore, [Mehmood et al. \(2020\)](#) describe how social innovation through sense-making can initiate place-based sustainable solutions, and reshape how people experience place. In fact, it can become “a catalyst, reinforcing peoples’ collective agency and environmental stewardship to promote and preserve the meanings, values and identity of place” ([Mehmood et al., 2020](#), p. 461). The guides can invite tourists to take part in their sense of place, sharing how to take care of it in the right ways. This aligns with a regenerative approach in which stakeholders have important roles as agents of change who “protect and regenerate culture and nature at home and inspire guests to do the same” ([Dwyer, 2018](#), p. 43). Local communities can experience their place in new ways and feel empowered to create stories that help build innovative solutions for a more regenerative tourism future.

### Envisioning regenerative futures

In terms of practical implications for tourism management, member businesses are encouraged to create innovative cultural experiences and to broaden the visibility of local and Sámi culture in marketing and sales. The findings of the study identified that while tour guides strive for collaboration, there is a fragmentation of collective thinking within the broader tourism network. Instead of working in siloes, all actors need to view tourism as a living system and be willing to learn from each other ([Pollock, 2019b](#)). Therefore, tourism actors should take part in sharing knowledge and customer groups, as well as connecting with various representatives in the local community.

It is important to note that the practical implications of regenerative tourism research depend on the context of tourism places in changing socio-ecological systems ([Bellato et al., 2022a](#)). Real transformation must happen from the ground up, with each community re-establishing their place identity, future aspirations and how they wish to present themselves to tourists ([Pollock, 2019a](#)). Similar to the findings of [Major and Clarke \(2022\)](#), I recognise the regenerative approach as a potential driver for collaboration between people and places, transcending conventional tourism perspectives.

Tourism planning and decision-making must include community members and other stakeholders in establishing a new vision for tourism in Northern Troms. Common sets of goals must be based on generating social and cultural benefits, empowering local communities through stable job opportunities and increasing cultural activities. Suggestions for local governments include supporting regenerative tourism initiatives and employing Indigenous tour guides ([Becken and Kaur, 2022](#)). More attention should be paid to outdoor sites with great historical and environmental significance, such as the remnants of an old mining town in a valley. This could be a meaningful experience for learning about the people who lived there, the conditions they had to work in, and the effects that the mining had (and still has) on ecosystems. In this way, forgotten stories and places can be regenerated in ways that do not degrade cultural and natural values but are instead rooted and honest, fostering a sense of stewardship within the tourists ([Fusté-Forné and Hussain, 2023](#)).

Drawing on the concept of “reciprocal restoration” by [Kimmerer \(2011\)](#), traditional subsistence activities can reconnect humans to the environment, and reforge the bond between humans and nature. Activities based on local and Sámi traditions that rely on the environment for sustenance can be a learning arena for Indigenous youth and make them feel more rooted in their Sámi heritage. Sharing local and Sámi knowledge can potentially contribute to community revitalisation

through positive impacts on well-being and a sense of belonging through social meeting places between hosts and tourists.

In partnership with stakeholders, tour guides can offer tourism experiences that contribute to environmental education through active-learning opportunities for tourists. Citizen science is one way to generate participation in local settings, influencing introspection that can enhance an awareness of environmental and community issues (Axelsson and Hansen, 2022). For example, a non-governmental organisation outside the region collaborates with multiple stakeholders – marine scientists, local governments, schools and tourism actors – in restoring the kelp in Arctic Norway through diving, art installations and educational activities (Wild Lab Projects, n.d.). There is potential to expand these efforts for tour guides in Northern Troms to create regenerative activities for tourists and local inhabitants.

## Conclusion

The article has discussed the empirical findings regarding tour guides who offer natureculture experiences from the lens of regenerative tourism, examining how their contributions align with stakeholders' perspectives of tourism futures. The ethnographic study of tour guides in Northern Troms found that tour guides recognise that they are part of a more-than-human world and practice an ethics of care toward non-humans. Interpretation and storytelling can revitalise local and Indigenous practices, and participation in cultural activities can enhance community well-being. Moreover, the tour guides can provide transformative experiences for tourists to restore human–nature relations, fostering a regenerative stewardship of ecosystems (Bellato *et al.*, 2022a). The potential tour guide contributions align with the interests of non-human stakeholders, local communities and other tourism actors that are dependent on healthy and thriving socio-ecological systems.

The profound local understandings and Sámi ways of being, provide essential perspectives on maintaining respectful connections within the more-than-human world. Such knowledge is critical for shaping regenerative tourism practices that honour local traditions, Indigenous legacies and the environment (Matunga *et al.*, 2020). Sharing knowledge can build social and environmental capacity, and drive a collective mindset shift to establish aspirations for the future (Dredge, 2022). Collaboration with other tourism actors and stakeholders in their communities can also regenerate mutual benefits in terms of a sharing economy and cultural competence. Still, there remains great potential for cooperation with public institutions and non-governmental organisations, for which a paradigm shift is crucial (Dwyer, 2018).

The tour guides can potentially play a pivotal role in translating the principles of regeneration into practical action while also understanding and integrating interactions with stakeholders and the specificities of the place (Bellato *et al.*, 2022b). They can serve as intermediaries who interpret the uniqueness of the environment and communicate the essence of place through original activities (Fusté-Forné and Hussain, 2023). As such, tourism experiences can contribute to a more inclusive and holistic approach that actively contributes to the health and vitality of communities (Pollock, 2019a). This approach requires a deep engagement with place, and a commitment to ongoing learning and adaptation to ensure that tourism supports a dynamic balance that benefits all the actors involved (Bellato and Pollock, 2023). However, more research is needed on how to unleash the regenerative potential in Arctic Norway, and the complex processes and challenges that hinders and threaten a journey towards regenerative tourism.

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## Corresponding author

Frida Marie Omma can be contacted at: [frida.m.omma@uit.no](mailto:frida.m.omma@uit.no)

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