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Narrating the soundscape of coastal tourism

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Abstract

This research letter concerns the soundscape along the Norwegian coastline, but the concepts can be applied to most coastal destinations. We wrote this letter in our roles as scholars of tourism and biology as well as members of a non-profit organisation located in northern Norway that is dedicated to science, conservation and the protection of marine mammals. By contrasting a promotional video with an awareness-raising video, we highlight tourism sector's missed opportunity to foster sustainability and justice and advocate for inclusive storytelling that considers different voices, stories and soundscapes.

Introduction

Stories are central to tourism and offer insights into underlying perspectives on tourism value. Tourism scholars have extensively examined story design and storytelling as complex processes involving multiple stakeholders, narrators, characters and communication modalities (Zhang & Ramayah, 2024). For example, Moin et al. (2020) explored the potential of promotional videos that follow archetypal structures, while Moscardo (2022) highlighted the role of storytelling in promoting sustainability. Several designers emphasise the importance of engaging themes that make tourist experiences coherent and memorable (Ma et al., 2024; Moscardo, 2020). However, at the destination level, not all stories are deliberately designed; some emerge spontaneously, sometimes in contexts unrelated to tourism. This multiplicity of narratives can challenge cohesive themes. As Graham and Dadd (2021) observed in the context of Indigenous communities, certain stories struggle to surface, raising questions about tourism's ability to foster a deep understanding of destinations and their value.

In this study, we – a tourism scholar and a biologist specialising in bioacoustics – explored narratives focusing on sounds and coastal tourism, which encompasses various tourism, leisure and recreational activities that take place in coastal zones and offshore waters (Hall, 2001). Our focus stems from our roles within a non-profit organisation dedicated to science, conservation and the protection of marine mammals (Ocean Sounds, <https://www.ocean-sounds.org/>); the second author is the founder and CEO, and the first author is a board member. We asked: How can narratives about the soundscapes of coastal tourism destinations illuminate critical issues related to these destinations and their tourism value? We began by considering the concept of the soundscape. We then analysed two narratives of the Norwegian coastline's soundscape, which were based on two videos released almost simultaneously. We explored the messages that such stories convey and the implications for the tourism sector to reconsider how to use stories responsibly.

Revisiting the concept of the soundscape in tourism and exploring the Norwegian coastline

The concept of the soundscape – which typically refers to the acoustic environment and the resulting perceptions and emotions of listeners, especially tourists – has been somewhat explored in tourism research (He et al., 2019). Studies have examined not only the impacts of sounds on tourists’ emotions but also their behaviours (Qiu et al., 2018) and destination loyalty (Jiang et al., 2018). However, most tourism studies on soundscapes have adopted highly anthropocentric perspectives. We argue that this perspective is particularly problematic in natural settings, as it reflects a narrow understanding of ecosystems and limits the potential value of tourism by framing it in strictly short-term, human-centred terms.

Thus, we considered the concept of the soundscape, finding Frohlick and Macevicius’s (2023) study particularly valuable in guiding our analysis. They examined media materials to explore how power relations shape the understanding and communication of soundscapes. They highlighted how the language used to describe soundscapes often presents certain interpretations as objective truths despite their being socio-culturally shaped and reflecting the perspectives of privileged groups. In doing so, they linked the study of tourism and sound to broader discussions on colonisation and power dynamics within tourism.

Building on these reflections, we expanded the conventional definition of soundscape in tourism (He et al., 2019) to consider not only human perceptions of sound but also those of non-human subjects, particularly marine wildlife. This perspective stems from our understanding of marine wildlife as central – yet often silenced – stakeholders in any human activity at sea, including coastal tourism. Our approach aligns with calls for more-than-human perspectives on tourism and sustainability, particularly in relation to justice (Rastegar, 2022). It also resonates with the argument made by Bertella and Tomassini (2022), who, through a discourse analysis of media coverage of a music event in natural areas, advocated for a relational approach to sustainability that moves beyond anthropocentrism.

To explore different narratives of coastal tourism soundscapes, we analysed two contrasting stories about the Norwegian coastline’s soundscape. One story comes from a boat company and the other from the non-profit organisation of which we are members. For each, we examined two recently released videos (November 2024 and January 2025), which are described in Table 1 and further analysed in the following section.

Table 1. Information about the two videos

Video title	<i>The Noise Forecast</i>	<i>Drowning in Noise: Sound Waves and Sea Creatures</i>
Length	1'25''	4'36''
Producer	A boat tourism company operating along the Norwegian coast	National Geographic, within the Creative Works section, sponsored by Prada in partnership with UNESCO
Availability	The company's webpage: https://www.havilavoyages.com/noise-forecast	National Geographic YouTube channel: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X_dVQErDQvk
Purpose	Promotional	Awareness raising
Summary	The video mimics a TV news segment, featuring a journalist-style presenter – played by a Norwegian TV weather broadcaster – reporting on ‘high levels of noise [...] measured in major cities around the world.’ The primary characters are the viewers, depicted as potential tourists seeking an escape from busy, noisy urban life in search of relaxation and silence. The narrative's turning point comes with a revelation: ‘Fortunately, there are still quiet escapes left in the world, as you can see here [showing a map] along the coast of Norway.’ Lofoten is presented as an example, illustrated by a brief clip of a cruise boat gliding through a fjord. The video concludes with a suggestion (‘Consider trading noise for a bit of calm every now and then’) followed by an image of a fjord with the text ‘Enter the Northern Calm’ alongside the company's name and website.	The story is narrated by a renowned British actor, who opens and closes the video, alongside an ocean educator. The main characters are a biologist (second author) and her team. The narrative features two turning points. The first highlights human interference in the ocean – particularly from shipping and oil and gas exploration. This interference is emphasised in three segments of the video, including a statement that underscores the vast difference in time scales: ‘Whales have been evolving for millions of years in a very quiet ocean, and then humans came along and introduced machines. All of a sudden, within 50 years, this ocean became a very noisy place.’ The second turning point shifts the focus to solutions, emphasising the potential for positive change through responsible consumption, research and technology. This message is framed as both a commitment and a source of hope for the future.
Visual dimension	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strictly above the water, rather static and indoor focused Mostly takes place in a standard TV studio Images depicting Times Square (dark evening sky) and a fjord being crossed by a cruise ship (sunny weather) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dynamic and outdoor focused (above and under water) Several locations, including a northern Norwegian village, a small boat, a pier, a home and a laboratory Drone images of the ocean, surrounding mountains and beaches, a container ship, an oil platform and a stranded dead whale Close-up shots of waves, marine life (e.g. fish, orcas and humpback whales) and a boat propeller Foggy weather with heavy white-grey clouds
Sonic dimension	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> First part: high-tempo music and traffic noise Second part: calm music, birdsong and the sound of waves Underwater soundscape omitted 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Nature sounds effectively combined with music Sounds include waves and underwater sounds (e.g. the clicks and whistles of marine animals, boat engines and sonic technology used in oil and gas exploration)

The videos present two distinct narratives that differ significantly in length, purpose, narrators, main characters, turning points and visual and sonic elements. These differences likely stem, at least in part, from the videos' primary functions – promotional versus awareness raising – as well as the resources invested in their production. Nevertheless, both videos are easily accessible online and contribute to disseminating different 'truths', each rooted in and emphasising distinct values.

The first story stands out for its simplistic portrayal of nature, primarily as a recreational space for humans. Wildlife is almost entirely absent, except for birds, which are mentioned only for their pleasant songs. Underwater wildlife is ignored. While the issue of noise pollution is acknowledged, its role is limited in both scope and depth; it is framed solely as an urban issue, with no consideration of underwater soundscapes, and measured using a decibel scale calibrated for human perception. The value of the promoted experience is defined exclusively in human terms, centred on well-being, with no emphasis on learning about the destination. Questions of justice, such as the use of natural spaces and coexistence with wildlife, are entirely absent.

By contrast, the second story portrays the coastal soundscape as a contested space where humans and wildlife interact, sometimes in conflict. It highlights the colonisation of the ocean by human activities (Frohlick & Macevicius, 2023) and underscores the urgent need to rethink our approach to the natural environment. This narrative explicitly acknowledges interconnectedness, emphasising that no human activity – including coastal tourism – occurs without impacting non-human life. Consequently, it calls for abandoning anthropocentrism as an applicable approach to activities in natural settings (Bertella & Tomassini, 2022) and addressing issues of more-than-human justice (Rastegar, 2022).

Conclusion

We explored narratives about the soundscape of coastal tourism, adopting a socio-ecological perspective with a particular focus on marine life. Our study centred on the soundscape of the Norwegian coast, a region we know well through our work with a non-profit organisation. We analysed two videos (released almost simultaneously) that tell contrasting stories about this soundscape. These stories differ significantly across multiple dimensions, and their stark contrast exemplifies how radically different stories can coexist within the same destination, shaping and promoting divergent understandings of how humans and their activities, including tourism, interact with the natural world.

Crucially, our study highlights a missed opportunity within the tourism sector to create tourism value in terms of sustainability awareness and justice. Stories designed primarily for promotional purposes tend to be overly simplistic and limited. When placed alongside other narratives – particularly science-based stories crafted and communicated by professionals – the sector's promotional narratives appear shallow and incomplete. This, in turn, can undermine the sector's credibility, especially in terms of its commitment to sustainability. These reflections are essential if tourism storytelling is to move beyond mere promotion or entertainment and instead serve as a tool for education, deeper engagement with destinations, critical thinking and meaningful change.

We conclude this letter by emphasising the need for the tourism sector to move beyond short-term commercial logics and take responsibility for representing destinations in all their complexity. This includes amplifying alternative voices and fostering cross-sector alliances, including partnerships with non-commercial actors. In a time of global ecological crisis, we argue that the tourism must actively contribute to positive change – for example through storytelling – rather than reinforcing superficial and harmful understanding of the natural environment.

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