Community perceptions to climate change in Finnish Lapland:

Examining vulnerabilities and adaptive responses to the changing characteristics of Arctic tourism

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ACADEMIC DISSERTATION

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The speed of global warming in the Arctic is faster than in the rest of the world. Climate change is increasingly affecting small communities in the Arctic, which are typically resource-dependent. Local communities are progressively relying on more modern livelihoods such as tourism, the economic role of which has rapidly grown in the region. As Arctic tourism is highly nature-based, its characteristics are changing along with communities, which are dependent on the industry. Thus climate change generates both economic transformations and socio-cultural changes.

This thesis focuses on the interplay between tourism development and community-based adaptation, which represents an emerging approach in climate change and tourism research. It aims to assess the current and future vulnerabilities of two communities in Northern Finland. The empirical vulnerability assessment was conducted through 47 semi-structured interviews in two case study communities in Finnish Lapland: Kilpisjärvi and Saariselkä. Qualitative content analysis was used to identify current and future vulnerabilities and adaptation mechanisms. Disaster risk reduction acted as a foundation for developing a selection of participatory tools to visualise vulnerability in terms of space and time. In general, more emphasis should be placed at merging disaster risk reduction with climate change adaptation as they share commonalities in their approach to vulnerability.

The results indicate that the current vulnerability in terms of tourism development arises from a limited coping range and strong seasonality. Additional vulnerability is generated through relatively intangible factors related to social vulnerability such as the effects on place attachment and the role of conflicts. The perceived and expected environmental changes combined with other factors force the communities to reconsider their current development paths. The positive impacts of climate change included having relative snow security compared with other regions as well as warming summers. The perceived negative impacts comprised of shortening winters and impacts on flora and fauna. The differences in vulnerabilities were linked with infrastructure and seasonality.

Both livelihood and intangible vulnerabilities are affected by a variety of external and internal stresses including community characteristics, global economy and development pressures initiated from the outside. Future vulnerability may increase as communities are keen on increasing nature-based tourism however, simultaneously several adaptation mechanisms are being deployed to reduce vulnerabilities. However, more consideration should be placed on sustainability of adaptation responses as not all of the options currently support the idea of environmental and social integrity.