Tour operators' insight into the Russian nature-based experience market

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Abstract

The understanding of nature and nature-based tourism products might differ according to tourists' nationality. Existing knowledge is often based on Western tourists view and relation to nature-based tourism. Eastern European tourists, however, might not share the same understanding. The Eastern European tourist market is increasing and destinations compete to attain their share, while it is evident that further knowledge is needed to apprehend what this market expects from nature-based experiences. Tour operators play a crucial role in imparting knowledge of destinations and tourism products to potential consumers. This article attends to the issue through interviews of six tour operators in Russia, to inform on how Russian tourists relate to nature-based experiences. The article also addresses intermediaries' influence upon tourists meaning formation through their communication of nature-based tourism experiences. The content analysis reveals four main content areas that relate to the overall objective of the study: 1) Russians' relation to nature, 2) what Russian tourists emphasize as important for nature-based tourism products, 3) the meaning of nature-based experiences to Russians, 4) promoting nature-based experiences to Russians. The analysis demonstrates there is discrepancy in the conception of what nature-based experiences are; hence an understanding of national differences is encouraged.

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Introduction

In order to succeed in an increasing international tourism market, it is essential to know the consumers. Competition currently escalates due to the decline in global economy, so consequences for the tourism industry are

pertinent. Operators compete for their share of the global tourist market while further knowledge is needed to explore and develop new, emerging markets. In this not only experience providers, destination marketers, media and tourist organizations play a part.

Tour operators, too, have a role in the formation of new markets. The experience provider benefit from the knowledge intermediaries have about foreign markets (Brassington & Pettitt, 2007, p. 1134). Intermediaries therefore play a significant role in launching experience products to markets. Despite their position as image creators of destinations and promoters of international tourism products, tour operators' influence on markets is not substantial within tourism literature, although exceptions exist (e.g. Baloglu & Mangaloglu, 2001; Campo & Yagüe, 2008; Medina-Munoz, Medina-Munoz, & Garcia-Falcon, 2003; Pennington-Gray, Reisinger, Kim, & Thapa, 2005). This article addresses the gap in the literature by studying intermediaries' role in promoting nature-based experiences to the Russian market.

Nature-based experiences can only be comprehended in terms of how nature is seen in relation to culture (Gullestrup, 2006); therefore an understanding of people's relation to nature is essential to the process of developing nature-based experiences. The cultural background of producer, seller and consumer determines what constitutes experiences in nature, thus a mutual understanding between the stakeholders is vital to increased tourism activity and satisfaction. The cross-cultural aspect inherent in international tourism is momentous and will here be addressed from a comparative East-West perspective. In 2008, 11.3 million Russians went on holiday abroad (Monacelli, 2009) and 'travelling is becoming a part of new Russian lifestyle' (www.tourism-review.com, 2009), at the same time the interest in attracting these tourist increases.

The aims of this study then are threefold. The first is to ascertain how the Russian tourism market views nature-based experiences. The second aim is to examine tour operators' understanding of nature-based tourism and how this influences their promotion to the target markets. The third aim of the study is to compare Eastern and Western views on nature-based tourism. This contributes to existing literature as it focuses on a part of the international tourism market that is under-

researched when it comes to nature-based tourism.

Literature Review

Essentials in nature-based tourism experiences
Nature-based tourism products are complex constructions of elements that together constitute the total product. An experience 'is a result of the interaction between a subject (the customer) and an object (the experience provider), and the act of co-creation between the two' (Poulsen & Kale, 2004, p. 271), furthermore nature is the setting for the experiences. Studies published to date, provides various definitions and conceptual frameworks for investigating nature-based experiences (e.g. Cater, 2006; Cochrane, 2006; Komppula, 2006; Ladwein, 2007; Lepp & Gibson, 2008; Mehmetoglu, 2007a, 2007b; Pomfret, 2006; Trauer, 2006). A review of this literature brings to a close that nature-based tourism can be understood as an activity-based experience, where sensation seeking and high degree of intrinsic motivation characterize the tourists involved (Vespestad & Lindberg, 2009, unpublished). The motivation is knowledge and increased personal insight. Adding the concepts of adventure- and special-interest tourism, nature-based tourism also means physical fear, thrill activity and risk-dominant behaviour. Risk is a basis of motivation in sensation seeking (Zukerman, 1990); fundamental in some forms of nature-based tourism such as adventure tourism. The concepts of flow and peak experiences are often overlapping in activities and their commonalities are extreme enjoyment and a transcendent or mystical character (Schouten, McAlexander, & Koenig, 2007, p. 358).

Motivation to travel is a central aspect in understanding all forms of tourism. A large body of literature is dedicated to motivation for travel (for a thorough review see Prebensen, 2006), and motivation is somehow related to expectations. An early study (Schreyer & Roggenbuck, 1978) identifies seven categories of experience expectations for recreation river users 1) learning about nature, 2) action/excitement, 3) stress release/solitude, 4) affiliation, 5) autonomy/achievement, 6) self awareness, 7) and status. Similar trip motives

are identified more recently in a study of motivation for travel and interest in nature-based tourism (Mehmetoglu, 2007b): 1) nature, 2) physical activities, 3) novelty/learning, 4) mundane everyday, 5) social contact, 6) ego/status. Mehmetoglu (2007b, p. 659) further classifies visitors into active nature-based attraction visitors and passive visitors; the former type is, to a greater degree, motivated by physical activities, novelty/learning, mundane everyday and social contact. Flucker and Turner (2000) have, in a study of white-water rafters, discovered similar relationships between needs and motivation and prior experience. Furthermore, studies of constraints and motivation indicate a coherence between the two related to mountain tourism (Fredman & Herberlein, 2005). The study found an activity level dimension and concludes that more constrained people actually engage in more leisure, than those who are less constrained, due to their interest in leisure activities (op.cit. p. 189).

Motivation can furthermore be linked to push and pull factors, debated by several scholars (e.g. Beard & Ragheb, 1983; Celsi, Rose, & Leigh, 1993; Crompton, 1979; Galloway, 2002). Push factors are aspects of daily life pushing people away, whereas pull factors entices the tourist to travel. Stilling Blichfeldt (2007) says that vacations are primarily motivated by 'going away' from, rather than by 'going towards' something. Motivation could also depend on the personality or traveller typology of the tourist (e.g. Madrigal 1995; Lee and Sparks, 2007; Mehmetoglu, 2007b). A nature-based tourist may be pulled to a certain activity such as hiking, by the sensation of nature and physical exercise. At the same time a personality that highly values activity may indicate that the activity itself is the main pull factor, rather than the place in which the activity takes place. Hence it is the activity in nature that attracts, and not everyday life that pushes. Based on this realization we might conclude that if a certain activity is the main pull factor, it implies that affective feelings or emotions are valued the most by the consumer. Tourists will be more likely to seek certain feelings that derive from the experiences sought, rather than the physical aspect of the

activity. Push and pull factors can also differ according to tourists' nationality, and will be discussed from an East–West perspective.

Nature-based experiences in a cultural meaning context

The international tourism arena is a cross-cultural setting and demands a comprehensive method of framing the creation and perception of tourism experiences. Although culture is a complex term, for the purpose of this study it can be made synonymous with nationality, based on arguments which suggest that if some meaningful degree of within-country commonality and between-country differences in culture exists, a culture can be validly conceptualized at the national level (Steenkamp, 2001). From a marketing point of view the aim is to study national variations rather than to fully understand all aspects of a culture.

Few studies focus on the influence of culture on nature-based experiences, with some plausible exceptions (e.g. Ng, Lee, & Soutar, 2007). Pomfret (2006) identified key influences of people's participation in and experiences during involvement in mountaineering, but nevertheless fails to include the cultural aspect as a source of influence. Moreover, the influence of distance shows that the greater the perceived cultural similarities of a destination, the more likely people are to visit (Ng et al., 2007). Tourism experience providers, on the contrary, often accentuate the search for new and unknown places. People may claim they want variation from everyday life, but they still want it to be somehow familiar (e.g. Wilson and Richards, 2008). Cultural differences may therefore both serve as an attraction and a disadvantage in encouraging people to travel.

Knowledge about how various cultures perceive nature-based experiences seem to be nonexistent. Furthermore, there is a lack of cross-cultural studies on consumer behaviour and experiential perspectives that include Eastern European countries (exceptions; Hughes & Allen, 2005; Koudelova & Whitelock, 2001; Sojka & Tansuhaj, 1995). Eastern European countries will represent a significant part of the future tourism market and therefore

research into this market is needed (Craig and Douglas, 2001).

Cultural variation in meaning of nature
In order to understand the cultural influence on nature-based tourism experiences, it is necessary to assess it within the broader concept of cultural consumption. Cultural consumption has been debated (e.g. Katz-Gerro, 2004) and 'all consumption builds on culture in the sense of shared understandings and their representations' (Zelizer, 2005). Culture influences tourism experiences through prevailing general relations to nature, likely to be inherent in a culture or as part of a national character. De Mooij (2005, p. 59) refers to three basic types of relationships to nature: 1) mastery over nature, 2) harmony with nature, 3) and subjugation to nature. These three relationships are likely to differ depending on national culture. To understand peoples relation to nature therefore becomes important when communicating products to international markets. Nature and landscape might also take on a new meaning through the participation in activities (Mullins, 2009, p. 239). International marketing of tourism experiences differs from that of consumer products, because in experience production the product is inconsistent, it varies in accordance with to whom it is produced and consumed by. Culture and socio-cultural relations affect both the creation and consumption process of an experience. The range of tourism products are therefore determined by tour operators' apprehension of what potential customers want. A study comparing the United States and China shows that cultural differences influence choice of advertising appeal to a varying degree, depending on whether products are individually or socially consumed (Zhang & Gelb, 1996). This leads to the discussion of how individualist versus collectivist cultures may influence consumer behaviour.

Values are essential in an attempt to understand peoples' relation to nature. The values inherent in a culture as well as individual values, determine people's relation to and understanding of nature. Hofstede's work on culture (1980, 1983, 1994a, 1994b, 2001) has been widely used in international marketing,

even if questions have been raised as to whether it is a viable measure of culture (Holden, 2004). Fernandez et.al (1997), drawing on the work of Hofstede, found that Russia is a collectivist culture with a strong preference for group welfare over individual rewards. High power distance is inherent in the culture, while risk taking is a foreign concept (Fernandez et al., 1997). In a tourism context it may be, on the contrary, that the conventions and limitations that are familiar in a work - home setting might not apply. Collectivist cultures are presumed to prefer socially consumed products, and such preference could apply to tourism products as well. Indeed, it would indicate that group tours and the social aspect of taking part in nature-based experiences, is a significant motivation for Russian tourists.

Communicating nature-based experiences

Experience products offer no possibility of pretesting; hence promotion to target markets is essential. International communication of products furthermore adds to the complexity. Focusing on the interdependence of culture and communication, Hall & Hall (1990) created a model of four cultural categories: time, space, culture and communication. As communication is vital in marketing, the model has gained popularity in this field. Moreover, Hall's concept of context identifying high and low context countries has resulted in a significant body of research on international marketing and advertising. It is evident that differences exist between high- and low-context cultures in terms of preferred advertising styles and creative strategies (Taylor, Miracle, & Wilson, 1997). Nevertheless, studies assessing whether promotion towards the Russian market is high- or low context are not yet available.

Communication preferences can vary across cultures, and whether cognitive or affective attributes of a destination is promoted will affect people's destination image. Promotion of a national scenic area should for example emphasize tangible attributes, such as flora, fauna and the purity of the air, rather than affective attributes (Lin, Morais, Kerstetter, & Hou, 2007, p. 192). Furthermore, international and cross-cultural marketing research has

debated standardization versus adaptation for years, and it has resulted in the classifications of culture-free and culture-bound products (Hermeking, 2006, p. 192). Culture-bound products, such as tourism experiences, are difficult to standardize as opposed to more durable products. In the case of tourism experiences the consumer has to be brought to the place of consumption, the product will not appear without the presence and co-creation of the customer. The product itself changes every time as the consumer is part of the production, therefore the product cannot be fully standardized. Even though one can promote standardized experiences, the outcome of the actual experience will vary due to the tourist's influence.

The study set out to gain more knowledge about the Russian tourist market as it relates to nature-based experiences. The main questions raised then are how Russians relate to nature, what nature-based tourism are, and mean to them, compared to Western cultures. Furthermore, the study assesses how the tour operators communicate with their clients in promotion of nature-based experiences.

Methodology

Based on purposeful sampling a list of Russian tour operators was provided by Innovation Norway (state-owned Norwegian company that promotes nationwide industrial development and markets Norway abroad). The tour operators focusing on outbound Russian tourism were invited to take part in the study. Tour operators are interesting per se, as they influence tourism experiences in their role as intermediaries, moreover they possess valuable information about the Russian market. The advantage of choosing tour operators instead of potential tourists themselves is that the tour operators possess knowledge of their markets, and, what is more, they can give qualified information about the characteristics of particular parts of the market. On the down side information from the tour operators is somehow secondary compared to information attained from potential tourists directly. The chosen approach, however, allowed broader information to be obtained. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with six tour

operators in one of Russia's largest cities. A seventh interview was scheduled to take place, but was cancelled by the tour operator. All tour operators were contacted in advance and arrangements made by a Russian-speaking research assistant. The interviews were carried out in the offices of the tour operators, for their convenience, and they lasted from 30 to 60 minutes. One person from each tour operator participated in the interview, but in one of the interviews there were two informants.

In a cross-cultural study it is essential to be aware that results hinge in part on the respondents' ability to understand the questions being posed (Craig & Douglas, 2001). The interview language was English but a Russian-speaking research assistant present contributed to lowering the language barrier. It gave the informants the possibility to speak Russian if they found it difficult to give a full answer in English. Some informants made use of this, both to confirm that they had understood the question as well as to elucidate further what they had previously said in English. The possibility to use both languages proved valuable and seemed to help respondents who were not entirely comfortable speaking a second language. Furthermore, all interviews were recorded and the research assistant took notes throughout the interviews, to ensure that no information would be lost. When two interviewers are present the risk of misinterpretation is substantially reduced, and the trustworthiness of the interview process is increased. The interviews were finally transcribed verbatim and the analysis carried out according to principles of content analysis.

Content analysis inspired by the works of Krippendorff (2004) and Graneheim and Lundman (2004) was carried out. Krippendorff 'question the validity and usefulness of the distinction between quantitative and qualitative content analyses' as all reading of texts is qualitative, even when it results in quantification (Krippendorff, 2004, p. 16). This view is supported in the sense that content analysis does imply both quantitative and qualitative aspects of analysis, as it draws upon quantitative techniques as well as qualitative interpretation of text. Furthermore 'content

analysis is a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts to the contexts of their use' (Krippendorff, 2004, p. 18). A text always has multiple readings and there is no such thing as *the* content, as the informants and the researcher in this study are of different nationalities this becomes especially pertinent.

This study elucidates how culture might influence experiences from an emic perspective as it 'focuses upon understanding issues from the viewpoint of the subjects being studied' (Luna & Gupta, 2001, p. 46). '*Etic* refers to what is general in cultures, *emic* to what is specific in one or more cultures' (de Mooij, 2005, p. 51). Luna and Gupta (2001, p. 48) 'depict culture as causing consumer behaviour' and their framework can be used to compare the behaviour of consumers from different cultures. Inspired by Luna and Gupta emic and etic philosophies is seen as each complementing the other. The approach chosen is inspired by an emic view as it addresses Russian tour operators who have first-hand information about Russian tourists, additionally the informants themselves are Russian. Moreover, etic concepts are taken into account in the comparative part of the analysis, as the findings are compared to existing empirical research.

Findings

The transcribed interviews were broken down into meaning units and then condensed meaning units. Subsequently codes and abstracted codes (and in some cases categories) were identified within each of the content areas. The content areas and the abstracted codes (or categories) within each are presented in the following section.

1) *Russians' relation to nature*
The tour operators point out that it is difficult to say something in general about Russians' relation to nature - applicable to all Russians, and state they can only speak from city dwellers' perspective. This is important to note as no all-encompassing generalizations can be made from these interviews. The informants' impression is that Russians prefer *untouched nature*, as stated by interviewee 3:

'Difficult to say, probably we can say that Russians like nature and prefer pure nature and nice resorts'.

It nevertheless appears to be somewhat ambivalent as informants also express concerns relating to peoples *indifference to nature*. One interviewee says (interview 2):

'(...) so if we speak about preserving nature or just taking care of it, even minimum, I would say that culture in Russia is not very nature-based so to say. It's hard for me to understand it, because my friends and people whom I know, they have a different approach to this, so I don't understand sometimes who does that, that's why I cannot really answer it'.

Another informant states his concern (interview 1):

'(...) it's different, Russians like nature, they like to spend time in nature, they like to visit national parks and like to visit some natural places, but they do not understand specific problems with ecology, they don't mind this, they don't see nature as a part of life'.

There is also an impression among the tour operators that Russians relation to nature differs somewhat with *age*, suggesting that the elderly have a stronger relation to the countryside, by staying in their dachas (small houses) where they grow their own produce. Whereas '...young people prefer to be active in nature' (interview 5) through activities such as (downhill) skiing, cycling and mountain biking.

2) *What Russian tourists emphasize as important for nature-based tourism products.*
This content area covers various elements of what is important for nature-based experiences. *Infrastructure* appears as a key feature to Russians (interview 2):

'(...) they want to have everything close, let's say within three minutes walk, which is sometimes difficult to find (...)'

Furthermore *facilities* are facets of nature-based experiences and it refers to the fact that the tourists want a certain standard of facilities i.e. high quality accommodation, spa and sauna.

Natural features and contrasts of nature are central, though some informants also say that *nature is not important*. Some informants say that there is not that much interest in nature-based trips, nor do they consider themselves to offer such trips. One interviewee expresses it like this (interview 4):

'I think as for Russians and for our segment of Russian clients, there is not too much interest now in such products, as we are after a period where we need comfort, good service, sea, different ski resorts, sea resorts or sightseeing. Some of them are interested in nature but if they would like to travel and have nature holidays they ask for good accommodation and high level of service, not camp'.

Furthermore, *'sure our clients know about different nature or agriculture programs, someone like to be in nature and to visit different small countries and small cities, like villages, but it's not for Russians'.*

Later on the same informant says that Russians are not the market for nature-based experiences: *'because Russian people during a lot of years live in nature and in very, very simple conditions, especially the elderly, and now they ask for sun, because of our climate, and good service, and food, food, food, food is the next'.* A different interviewee says (interview 6):

'I think that nature tourism will only be interesting for individual tourists at the time'.

Moreover, she says that the interest in nature is new in Russia. Of particular interest is her claim that nature-based tourism is not for Russians, even if they offer vacations by the seaside, to skiing resorts, and bus trips through extraordinary landscapes (e.g. mountains and

fjords). It could imply that these products do not fall into her or the company's definition of nature-based experiences.

According to the informants, the key features of nature which Russians take interest in, is the *extraordinary and uncommon*. *Relaxation* is another frequently emerging theme, most often expressed in relation to staying in cottages and combined with fishing.

3) *The meaning of nature-based experiences to Russians*

According to the informants, the meaning of nature-based experiences for Russians is diverse, both relating to feelings but also physical issues arise as part of such experiences. One informant (interview 1) claims *nostalgia* is part of what it means:

'(..) Maybe this is an element of nostalgia too, for some people, because when in Soviet time it was very popular with nature tourism in Russia, there was hiking and something like this, water sports..... So it is an element of nostalgia to some age of people'.

Furthermore, *fresh and pure nature* is expressed as key components of nature-based experiences. *Activities* are less imperative, although *fun and excitement* are brought up in connection with activity, however, not stressed as a major feature. As one woman says (interview 3):

'Yes nature is the most important, because activities we can do everywhere'.

Informants say that Russians want to go to the seaside in summer, the classic search for sun, warmth and sea. They may take part in some activities but it is not the main motivation for the vacation. This is in accordance with the traditional north-south travel pattern, due to warmer climate in the south. Most of the informants claim that quality *accommodation* is important for Russians. *Infrastructure and facilities* are once more emphasized with reference to the place of accommodation. Along these lines are also the valuation of good

food and services. *Relaxation* is again connected to stays in cottages in natural surroundings.

4) Promoting nature-based experiences to Russians

According to the data a main distinction occurs between *what* to promote and *how* to promote it. Beginning with what is important to promote, the main focus is on *untouched landscape and nature*. Information on weather conditions is also mentioned. The need for promoting a *combination of activity and recreation* is expressed in the following quote (interview 1):

'Perhaps people will be more interested in visiting nature if we can combine recreation type of holidays with active forms, this is important. Because often people get tired of the fact that they sit in one spot, or on the contrary if they have fun all the time'.

Relaxation and *information about infrastructure* are other components informants say should be promoted. *Value for money* is also pointed out as an important feature to promote for Russian tourists. Operators claim ads that include good prices for packaged tours sell best to groups. The tour operators are focused on the product they sell, especially price, time, efficient planning and coordination of the trips. The packaged product and price come more to the fore than promoting experiences, as they believe that is the interest of the customers. According to the informants their main aim is to sell their products, thus the focus on quantity and price is pertinent. One interviewee says (interview 2):

'(...) so the other thing which is really important for the potential client or potential tourist is the price. I would be happy if we would be able to increase our sales by using really beautiful and nice pictures, but as soon as you put Austria one week for 400 Euros, including flight, accommodation and transfer it works better (...). Our company is a tour operator and not a tourist office that promotes the advantages or the beauty of the region

or destination; we have to focus more on why our products and our tours (...) are better than that of the competitors (...)'.

In terms of *how* to promote the products offered, the operators mention the importance of addressing *target groups*, through e.g. special events. There is a strong *product focus* among the operators, with *commerciality and quantity* as significant aspects. The importance and use of *website* promotion is said to be growing and user friendliness is vital. The operators use fewer ads than before and *word of mouth* is a major source of promotion. Loyal customers are important and many have a travel history with the tour operators. *Sales promotion* towards subagents is emphasized as a key task, and catalogues are used towards this group. The value of personal knowledge of the products is mentioned by one informant only.

As far as the physical lay-out of promotion material is concerned, the use of pictures is not brought up by the informants, but when asked specifically about this they say good pictures of nature are carefully selected. The informants suggest that pictures of nature (landscapes and natural attractions) are the most effective; including a few people, however, creates a good atmosphere. As one source states it (interview 5):

'The main of the picture is landscape but if there are a couple of people in this landscape it is more interesting, but they are not the main focus. But when we print catalogues, sometimes we use pictures with people because it helps us to bring in a good and friendly atmosphere. Smiling people create something positive'.

The operators might want to communicate with their potential customers in a certain ideal way, but as they constantly face the question of economic resources, they come to terms with what is seen as optimal. Informant two says it is not as much about 'ideal ways of promoting, rather optimal ways'. An interesting finding is that the tour operators say activity seekers

know what they want so they claim they do not have to promote towards them. This way of thinking can be a reason why they do not attract that many activity seekers. This reasoning can in part explain why they say Russians are not that interested in nature. There seems to be a distinction between group tours and corporate groups, as opposed to the more individualized trips and small groups of so-called VIP clients, the former groups being the ones less interested in nature.

All the interviewees express concerns relating to the financial crisis currently affecting the global markets. They have doubts concerning development of new products at this time, and they find it hard to predict what will happen in the Russian tourist market onwards. They do say, however, that it will not affect the wealthy segment to any degree, whereas the travelling middle class might now be forced to buy less expensive journeys and be particularly attentive to price and good offers. This strong concern may also reflect former research revealing reluctance to risk taking (ref. Fernandez et al., 1997).

Discussion

It now seems pertinent to suggest an understanding of nature-based tourism derived from the data. Judging by the tour operators it looks as if nature-based experiences imply trips to natural areas, seeing beautiful landscapes and special natural sights. Clean, untouched nature and landscape are imperative. The tour operators seem to rule out reputable vacations by the sea, staying in seaside resorts as well as going on cruises. On the other hand they do include staying in cottages by the ocean or lake, for fishing or relaxation purposes, as a part of nature-based tourism. Skiing is also within a grey area, as most informants first seem to exclude this activity from what they see as nature-based tourism products (perhaps due to the focus on skiing resorts). As the interviews move along interviewees say that interest in mountains and mountain-based tourism is nature-based. Skiing and mountain biking are often undertaken in the same places, hence they suggest skiing could be seen as a nature-based activity too.

Furthermore, comparing what Russians delineate as tourism experiences in the above rough definition, to that of the prevailing empirical works based on Western views (ref. Vespestad and Lindberg, 2009), exposes some obvious differences. The activity focus is not as strong, but nevertheless mentioned. Intrinsic reward is not articulated other than relaxation. In relation to Russians' expectations to nature-based experiences, elements of risk, excitement, and sensation are mentioned by the informants, though they do not appear to be vital in what they seek. This is in line with a collectivist culture, where people tend to be risk averse. The comparison shows that the theoretical understanding and the practitioners' understanding of the term nature-based experiences are inconsistent. Whether it can be explained by culture cannot be fully determined based on the sample of this study, it does, however, indicate that differences exist, and that awareness of this is needed when approaching new markets. Thus differing values with respect to nature could be one viable explanation of this variation (e.g. Wilson and Richards 2008).

According to Luna and Gupta (2001, p. 57) values may be the most important of the manifestations of culture, the others being heroes, rituals and symbols (Hofstede, 2001; Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005). These values can be used effectively to distinguish one culture from another, specifically when it comes to marketing purposes. Russians' relation to nature may point to their values towards nature. These values are interesting to determine as one can assume direct influence on the perception of nature-based experiences. At the same time values are difficult to change, hence marketers cannot influence on potential tourists' value set. They may, however, influence through communications that can affect tourism behaviour, independent of culture (Luna & Gupta, 2001). In the current study it is expressed that Russians take interest in pure nature, but the view is not entirely consistent. From a city dwellers perspective there is no typical value set attached to nature, hence an assumption is that urban people do not have as strong a relationship to nature compared to rural

dwellers. The difference is not explained solely by the urban–rural context, rather it has to do with what some interviewees touched upon, namely the earlier communist era that has been part of the value formation in the country (Schwartz & Bardi, 1997). Informants suggest that Russian tourists are now more likely to travel to luxurious destinations, valuing luxury accommodation, high-quality food and good services, as these experiences were previously inaccessible. In this case it refers to both escape and attraction, which encompass both push and pull factors.

Russians' motivation for nature-based experiences, as expressed by the tour operators, is fresh and pure nature, relaxation (often in connection with fishing), break from usual routine, activity, and to a minor extent fun and excitement is mentioned. Stilling Blichfeldt (2007, p. 161) claims that vacations are foremost motivated by 'going away from' - push factors, rather than by 'going towards something' - pull factors. The motivation conveyed in the current study relates to both push and pull factors, as various motivational factors emerge. As an example relaxation is primarily a push factor that signifies escape from daily life. On the contrary, the search for interesting and outstanding places seems to be a pull factor, a quality of the destination that attracts. Also, the emphasis on physical aspects of infrastructure, accommodation and facilities does imply both push and pull, because they can both be attractive qualities of a destination as well as an expression of lack of such in one's home environment. No conclusion can hence be made as to whether push or pull factors are most important to Russian travellers. The main motivation identified in this study (pure nature, relaxation, break from routine, and activity) does not allow for an all-encompassing generalization saying that Eastern Europeans' motivation and Western Europeans' motivation for nature-based experiences are poles apart. Furthermore the differences that appear cannot in any case solely be explained by cultural influence.

Differences in travel behaviour and relation to nature may be ascribed to lifestyle and

personality as well as nationality, thus it is useful to take a look at some existing traveller typologies and compare them to the findings of this study. In a study among Koreans, four segments of travellers are identified: culturally safe travellers, non-sports activity seeking travellers, independent active travellers, and group travellers (Lee & Sparks, 2007). Mehmetoglu (2007b) identified three groups of nature-based tourists 'culture and pleasure activity oriented', 'nature activity oriented' and 'low activity oriented'. Russian tourists at first glance correspond with the former categorizations, based on the tour operators' information. Nevertheless when looking at the profiles of these typologies, some apparent differences occur between the samples. For instance, the informants refer to a group of independent travellers, who often travel by their own car and have no pre-booked activities on the agenda. This group differs from that of independent active travellers in that they do not share the interest in sports activities, they do however seek information from tour operators in advance. The tour operators mention activity seekers, although not a primary target group for most (one emphasize trekking tours for individual VIPs) as they mostly organize everything themselves, apart from the bookings of travel and accommodation. It is evident that this group is underrepresented among those who contact tour operators, as they manage on their own and thus do not seem to need intermediaries. Furthermore, group travellers are a major market for the Russian tour operators, and they are characterized by demanding value for money, good accommodation and facilities. These characteristics may not differ that much from the 'traditional Western mass-tourist'. The popularity of group travel corresponds to collectivist thinking, nevertheless the social aspect that could be expected in a collectivist culture, was not mentioned as important. This synthesizes that even if the labels ascribed to typologies seem to be applicable across nations, there are differences regarding their characteristics, thus one should always look into the characteristics of the groups prior to the categorization of tourists across nationalities. The differences that appear can be ascribed at least partly to nationality as well

as to travel lifestyles. Nevertheless there could be other intervening factors that are not accounted for in the present study.

According to former studies (e.g. Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005), Russia is considered a collectivist culture, with an assumed interest in socially consumed products rather than highly individual products. The intermediaries mainly direct their attention towards a group that resembles the profile of culture and pleasure activity seekers, in line with collectivist thinking. The tour operators also have clients that are more typical activity seekers or nature activity oriented, which are more prone to seeking activities as their main goal for going on vacation. The profile of activity seekers corresponds to the encouraged ideals in individualist societies, where people more often are preoccupied with fulfilling their goals of self-actualization and renewal.

It seems evident that there are some characteristics of the Russian market directed by tour operators; therefore it is interesting to discuss how the tour operators work towards this market. It seems that the preferred way of communicating to the clients is through the internet and through sub-agents. The sub-agents are addressed via brochures and websites, and sales promotion is carried out to stimulate sales of the tour operators' products. To facilitate the understanding of how the tour operators focus their promotion, it is discussed whether promotion is standardized or adapted, and whether a cognitive or affective message is emphasized. None of the tour operators claim a fully standardized or fully adapted way of communication. It does appear that most of the tour operators are inclined to be more standardized than adapted, in the sense that much of their marketing is directed towards the mass-market. One of the tour operators did, however, mention several initiatives directed at skiers. They cooperate with various ski resorts nearby and promote their products there, as well as in specialized interest magazines for skiers. Advertising in newspapers and magazines is considered expensive, therefore other types of media such as the internet is better and more efficient. This is similar to other developed markets and calls for further

development and update of websites. The cognitive prevails over the affective as prices, facilities and value for money, are dominant features.

The communicated content from the tour operators moreover resemble that of a low-context culture, signified by being analytical and action oriented, and they tend to use explicit, clearly articulated messages (Taylor et al., 1997). Furthermore, the promotion tends to be more factual than emotional. The focus is more on information about the actual product rather than on the feelings and emotions that might arise in relation to the holiday offered. It seems that the 'experience economy hub' that can be seen in several European countries, has not yet struck root among Russian tour operators. This does not suggest that Russian tourists are not interested in experiences, but rather that the intermediaries have not yet realized its potential.

Conclusion

This article portrays Russian tour operators' view of the Russian tourism market's relation to nature-based tourism experiences, as well as the tour operators' role in the relation formation. The content analysis demonstrates four main content areas relating to the Russian market: 1) their relation to nature, 2) elements emphasized as important for nature-based tourism products, 3) the meaning of nature-based experiences, 4) promotion of nature-based experiences.

The meaning of nature-based tourism experiences differs between nations and discrepancy may be related to cultural background, tourist typology and personality. Russian tour operators' view of Russians' relation to nature is to some extent ambivalent; Russian tourists take interest in fresh and pure nature, at the same time nature is not seen as a part of life. Values related to nature is part of culture, values can therefore partly clarify any differences or similarities between nationalities. The understanding of nature-based experiences revealed in this study, indicates that there is not necessarily a mutual understanding of such experiences across nations. Peoples' definitions draw upon both

cultural values and relations to nature. Furthermore, a difference in motivation and values seems evident in the comparison of the current study to former studies on other nationalities. The motivation of Russians relates both to push and pull factors and the emphasized motives are relaxation and good accommodation. Stressed as important for nature-based tourism products are good infrastructure, facilities, natural features and contrasts of nature. The tour operators claim that activities and the search for fun and excitement are less imperative. The differences between this study and former ones cannot be fully ascribed to cultural differences, as they may not be directly comparable due to disparity in ways and purposes of collecting data. Comparison of various studies, nevertheless, allows for certain traits in each country to become more visible, without allowing for generalizations to a whole population.

The current focus in many Western European countries on how to create experiences does not come to the fore among the tour operators in this study. Instead, they seem to have a more traditional products approach towards the market. Whether it means that the Russian market is less interested in experiences, or if it suggests that the operators just have not caught up with a growing tourist segment, cannot be established here. The tour operators concentrate on tourist groups' interest in good-value products and well-organized trips. Promotion relies increasingly on websites as the main communication channel. Word of mouth is of importance and returning customers constitute a significant part of the customer group. Promotion from the tour operators is neither fully standardized nor fully adapted as it depends on the customers they are addressing (groups or individuals). The focus seems, more often than not, to be on standardized packages, as they are perceived to sell better and provide the largest quantity of tourists. Nevertheless, the packages that rely on quantity usually will not appeal to those who are willing to pay the most. It shows that the activity-oriented tourists are characterized by willingness to pay more than tourists buying pre-packaged tours.

The tour operators' role and influence on marketing as well as on the viability of nature-based tourism products seems evident from this study. They play an essential role as intermediaries between producer and consumer and have the power to steer the market towards the products chosen for pre-packaged programs. Thus, tourism businesses should acknowledge tour operators' influence on markets. Most of the Russian tour operators in this study do not seem to have their main focus on experiences, as it is not perceived to be sought by the majority of the market. Nevertheless, some tour operators offer individualized tours where experiences are part of the package. Also, the tour operators seem to have a somewhat different understanding of nature-based experiences than most Western experience provides. This implies that the current focus on experiences, held by many tourism business owners, needs to be communicated to the Russian tour operators, in order to reach larger parts of the Russian market.

Limitations and Implications

Interpretation of results from emerging markets may pose challenges for researchers from other socio-cultural backgrounds (Craig & Douglas, 2001), as results are interpreted in terms of one's own culture and experience. To meet this potential researcher bias, an assistant fluent in Russian and who knows Russian culture well was present during the interviews. It allowed for clarification on issues that seemed unclear or could be misunderstood. The potential language barrier may have imposed some restraints on the informants at the beginning of the interviews. They were, however, more relaxed as the interview progressed.

To interview tour operators about the Russian tourist market, instead of addressing potential tourists themselves has both pros and cons. Operators were chosen as they possess a great deal of information about the Russian market, as well as being an easier and more cost-efficient way of obtaining information. At the same time it may be somewhat limiting as the informants base their information on their customers. Thus, the data does not provide

information on the group of tourists that organize trips themselves or choose other tour operators. The limited amount of interviews are not sufficient to generalize the findings to comprise the entire Russian tourist market, it does however provide an insight into it. Further research could benefit from larger samples of informants, comprising companies from other cities, allowing potential regional differences to appear. To study a larger group of the population quantitatively could also be beneficial in order to increase our knowledge of the Russian market, as well as enabling generalization of findings.

For tourism businesses that wish to enter the Russian market, an important issue was brought up by one informant regarding external regulations influencing the decision-making process. Due to visa regulations Russians cannot be that spontaneous about travel and many people perceive this as a barrier to travel. The tour operator, however, accentuates that it is just a formality and it is their job to organize it. This demonstrates that Russian tourists are forced to plan ahead, more so than Western Europeans.

Likewise, destination marketers need to acknowledge tour operators' role in the process of increasing interest and sales to one's destination. The intermediaries impart their knowledge of a destination to either a second intermediary or directly to individuals. The importance of making sure the knowledge about a destination is conveyed is then crucial, as there are in many cases more than one intermediary between the provider and potential consumer. As the number of intermediaries increases, the specified destination knowledge decreases. The study also revealed aspects of how Russians relate to nature, what they may expect from nature-based experiences, and how such experiences are understood in terms of cultural values and cultural background. Knowledge about this area may contribute to the development of more specialized and adaptable tourism experiences aimed at the international market.

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